



**UNIVERSITY OF
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Creating Opportunities

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Masters in Sociology Research Report

**Investigating the Sociocultural Integration of International Migrant Students enrolled
in South African Higher Learning Institutions in Mbombela.**

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Declaration

I, Lucious Vuyiswa Shabangu, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled "Investigating the Sociocultural Integration of International Migrant Students enrolled in South African Higher Learning Institutions in Mbombela," submitted for the Master of Arts at the University of Mpumalanga. This is my original work and has not been submitted by me for a degree or diploma at this or any other institution.

Signature: 

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Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the almighty God for his grace and powerful influence in my life. He has given me the strength, courage, and wisdom to complete this study. Through His mercy, I have been guided and have found patience along the way. His love and protection have brought me to this point.

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Dedicaction

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Abstract

In the last two decades, international student mobility has become a significant aspect of higher education, as migration has resulted in various students relocating to host communities during their studies. Numerous scholars have produced a substantial amount of literature; however, the African continent has seen a decline in published studies in this area due to the relatively low number of research initiatives conducted within African nations. This study aims to address the shortage of research in Africa focusing on migration for education and the sociocultural integration of international migrant students. The objective of this study was to examine the complex dynamics and investigate the social patterns resulting from social interactions, explore identities within the diverse cultural landscape, and analyze how cultural backgrounds affect the sociocultural integration of international migrant students in the host community. This study investigates how international students integrate into the sociocultural landscape of tertiary institutions in Mbombela, South Africa, providing an in-depth analysis of their shared experiences and adaptation strategies. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the research employed a case study design to gain a thorough understanding of these students' experiences and challenges while adapting to a new cultural and academic environment. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with a targeted group of international students, aiming to capture their perspectives on integration dynamics, such as social connections, cultural adaptation, and the support provided by institutions. Thematic analysis was applied to systematically identify and interpret the key themes emerging from the data, shedding light on the barriers and facilitators of sociocultural integration. Findings reveal that although international migrant students enrich the cultural diversity and academic vibrancy of the host community, they face significant challenges to completing their sociocultural integration, such as language barriers, cultural difficulties, and limited institutional support. Despite these challenges, many students employ strategies like engaging with the community and participating in cultural exchange activities to enhance their sociocultural integration. Recommendations drawn from this study suggest that higher education institutions in Mbombela can enhance the sociocultural integration of international migrant students by establishing cultural hubs that focus on intercultural exchange, emphasizing the integration of international migrant students.

Keywords: Higher learning institutions, Integration, International students, Social networks, Transnationalism, Migration.

List of Acronyms/Abbreviations

CECE	Culturally Engaging Campus Environments
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
CPO	Collaborative Programming Outreach
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
IEASA	International Education Association of South Africa
IIE	Institute for International Education
IOM	International Organization for Migration
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SADC	Southern African Development Community
TUT	Tshwane University of Technology
UMP	University of Mpumalanga
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO-UIS	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics
USA	United States of America
USCIS	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services
WB	World Bank

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Migrating for education is been a phenomenon that is not new in this country taking into account the academic history has on education. This study will help seek clarity in comprehending the sociocultural integration of international students enrolled in tertiary institutions in Mbombela. Since this city has relatively new institutions of higher learning in the South African academic space, not much research has been done on it and this study will focus on understanding how transnational migrant students socio-culturally integrate in tertiary institutions in Mbombela. This topic is very will delve into how students tackle the sociocultural integration of things instead of focusing only on their academic performance. The city of Mbombela has been the recommended primary research area because it houses many students of diverse cultural backgrounds thus making it the perfect area to conduct this study to get the views and experiences of these transnational migrant students.

South Africa and the rest of the world currently face the inevitable phenomena of transnational migration. This pattern can be traced back to the commercial era, which saw European migration to Africa between 1500 and 1800, according to Golden and Reinert (2006). Through mercantile capitalism, which persisted for more than 300 years, these migrants acquired colonies and occupied huge areas of territory. According to Alonso (2011), the social and economic advantages of the new world were a contributing element in transatlantic migration in the past. According to Riaño and Piguet (2016), South Africa has started to highlight the value of education in the nation by expanding educational opportunities for all students, including international students. The expansion of the educational sector throughout the last 20 years has given both domestic and foreign students new options. There has been a consistent increase in the number of students opting for overseas educational programs. Students are actively encouraged to travel internationally to enhance their talents and acquire new ones. Many nations have recently turned to luring overseas students and providing them with the education and training necessary to compete in global marketplaces as a means of advancing their economies and reputations.

Migration can take many different forms, such as labor and economic migration; family migration (moving to join family members); forced, compelled, and reluctant migration; retirement migration; emigration (moving from one country to another); immigration (moving into a new country); return migration (moving back to your home country); seasonal migration (moving in response to the weather or with the seasons); internal migration (moving within a country); and many more (Barclay, 2010). Only migrants who have crossed national borders will be considered, as this study focuses on international migration. This study focuses on migrants who have migrated from other countries to South Africa to further their studies. Furthermore, the study focuses on those migrants in possession of study visas. Diverse academics characterize international students differently depending on the circumstances. As stated by Verbik and Lasanowski (2007), an international student in Canada is a temporary resident who is living there after receiving approval from an immigration official to enroll in a course for a while greater than six months.

According to Hazen and Alberts (2006), foreign students are those who are studying in the United States of America (USA) on a temporary, non-immigrant visa that permits them to pursue post-secondary education. In the United States, any student who does not possess a permanent residency permit or a long-term status is considered an international or foreign student. Dwyer (2004) asserts that exposure to external events and practices through global education is a fruitful learning experience that typically leaves a lasting impression on the human psyche. Their experiences will probably have an impact on their preconceived notions and attitudes on their education at the host university. They will also help them develop more complex self-realizations regarding their experiences before, during, and following their academic programs. Keown (2009) laments that it has been observed that foreign students encounter challenges when residing in their new countries. The majority of students associate studying abroad with the prospect of meeting new people in fascinating places while also having the opportunity to experience different cultures, languages, and educational opportunities. But there are difficulties along the way, and occasionally they run into the unexpected. This study explores the sociocultural integration experiences of international students in Mbombela, South Africa, through the lens of Giddens' structuration theory, arguing that structural factors such as language barriers, xenophobia, and limited institutional support significantly shape their academic and social adjustment.

1.2 Background

Transnational migrant student studies have been done previously but the majority of those studies have taken into account the academic adaptation of these transnational migrant students and not looked at the broader social issues that these students experience in the host country. This study looks to diminish the doubt cast on the social issues that transnational migrant students encounter in the transition from their home countries to the host country. Conducting a study about the socio-cultural integration of transnational migrant students will enable a better comprehension of how transnational migrants navigate the different social structures in the host country as they start and complete their qualifications.

The internationalization of higher education has resulted in a sharp increase in the number of students leaving their home countries to pursue higher education abroad as a result of globalization UNESCO (2013). Globally, there is a rise in the number of international students. These can be ascribed to various factors, including easier access to travel, youth staying in school longer, improved living standards, and parents who are ready to spend more on education and travel (Glen, 2011).

Beginning in the nineteenth century, when slave labor was imported to the Western Cape to assist the early agricultural development of the then Cape Colony, migration into South Africa is not a recent phenomenon, rather it is ingrained in the economic history of the nation Vandeyar (2010). Higher education has been much more internationalized and is now a market-driven endeavor as a result of industrialization, which gave rise to globalization. More and more students are going abroad for higher education due to the quick growth of international education. In 1996, there were more than 13,000 foreign students enrolled in South African universities; by 2007, that number had rapidly increased to almost 53,000 (IEASA, 2009). There is an increasing number of students studying abroad; in 2013–2014, 4.5 million international students were studying worldwide (IIE, 2015). According to predictions, the number of international students worldwide could reach up to 8 million by 2025 (IIE, 2015).

Since studying overseas is now seen as a chance for professional advancement and a deeper comprehension of diverse cultural and social experiences around the world, the number of

young people looking to travel for academic purposes is rising sharply every day (World Bank, 2009; World Bank, 2009; 2010; UNESCO-UIS, 2010; Song, 2013). Although it has been stated that foreign students move abroad in quest of better educational opportunities, their research findings also help the host nation improve on the material, social, and economic fronts (Knight, 2006; MacGregor, 2015). This aligns with the British Council's (2014) assertion that the integration of international students has a substantial impact on the prospects of an institution and a country, in addition to the students and faculty as a whole.

Balancing the demands of their new surroundings with their cultural heritage is one of the main issues faced by transnational migrant students. Language obstacles, cultural disparities, and different educational systems are frequently involved in this (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014). Due to prejudice or cultural misconceptions, these kids could find it difficult to build social networks, which could harm their general well-being and academic achievement (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). For students who are immigrants from other countries, identity negotiation is a crucial part of sociocultural assimilation. They frequently juggle several identities, such as their ethnic identity and the identity connected to their new nation (Berry, 2005). Family and community support play a critical role in the integration process, according to recent studies. Zhou and Bankston's (2019) research highlights how ethnic groups contribute social capital that supports students' efforts to adjust.

There is serious competition for international students as a result of the impact that an influx of foreign students has on a nation's intellectual, cultural, and financial development over time de Wit (2008). Because of this, a large number of South African institutions have to accommodate students from a diverse range of national and cultural backgrounds. South African institutions are appealing, according to Singh (2013), for several reasons, one of which is because they are situated close to nearby countries. According to Sehoole (2015), students from the SADC which consists of Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland, and Angola often choose it. This is because of the SADC education protocol, which mandates that 5% of higher education slots in South Africa be set aside for citizens of member states (Sehoole, 2015). According to Marko (2009), there are several reasons why higher education services in South Africa are more alluring than in its neighbors, making the nation an educational hub for students from that region. South Africa

is the most sought-after location for African students on the continent, according to MacGregor (2011). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), South Africa is the top choice for several immigrant groups, including those who come for educational purposes. South Africa is a popular destination because of its stable economy, affordable tuition, and promise of an exceptional educational experience (Mudhovozi, 2011).

According to MacGregor (2011), the number of foreign students attending the 23 public universities in South Africa has increased fourfold since 1994, from 12557 to 53733 in 2006. Furthermore, roughly 60,000 foreign students were enrolled in South African postsecondary institutions in 2007 according to Mudhovozi (2011). Every year, the Institute for International Education (IIE, 2008) releases estimates of the number of international students enrolled in each country. South Africa is the ninth-largest exporter of higher education services to international students, based on these figures from 1999 to 2006. International students from all nations, including the United States, increased by 54.55% between 1999 and 2006, selecting South Africa as their study location. 53,738 overseas students attended South African universities in 2006, making up 2.12% of all international students globally. According to Brown (2009), practically all higher education institutions both public and private are currently quickly becoming global players, mirroring a trend observed in numerous other industries. In a similar vein, Enders (2004) highlights how internationalization and globalization have affected the personalities and actions of higher education institutions has become a major focus of recent studies. Due to the recent rise in these two trends, scholars have dubbed the twenty-first century the century of global schooling and educational mobility. According to Lee (2006), internationalization is a noteworthy development in higher education.

1.3 Problem statement

Migratory transnationalism is the term used to describe a process of being simultaneously and persistently embedded in multiple geographic locations. It refers to travel to and settlement in the destination nation along with the development of solid ties back home (Crush and McDonald 2000; Erdal 2013; Erdal and Oeppen 2013; Portes 2003; 2001; Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995). According to Fokkema and De Haas (2015), King and

Skeldon (2010); Ersanilli and Koopmans (2010), the socio-cultural integration process entails the behavioural, cognitive, and attitudinal changes in conformity to the dominant norms of receiving societies (cultural integration or acculturation); social intercourse, friendship, marriage and membership of various organizations (interactive integration); and feelings of belonging, expressed in terms of allegiance to ethnic, regional, local and national identity (identificational integration).

The body of research on international and immigrant students has shown that these students have a very hard time integrating into their academic communities because they have a hard time adjusting to a new setting Lee and Rice (2007). Migration itself is a challenging process, but migrating students also have to deal with the demanding nature of higher education and a new learning environment Hailu and Ku (2014). According to Jaffe-Walter and Lee (2011), pupils who are recent immigrants deal with a variety of challenges associated with language and cultural adjustment. These circumstances have presented several obstacles to these students' academic progress and general well-being Chiu (1995).

One major hurdle that still exists is language. Low language proficiency in the host nation might make it difficult to participate and communicate effectively in social and academic contexts, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and annoyance (Yu et al., 2021). Cultural differences introduce an additional level of complexity, requiring pupils to adjust to new behaviors, attitudes, and social conventions. This can frequently result in miscommunication and a feeling of alienation (Jin and Schneider, 2019). Transnational students may find it challenging to feel accepted and integrated in a hostile environment due to discrimination and prejudice based on nationality, ethnicity, or cultural background (Smith and Khawaja, 2020). Financial hardships are also common, limiting social activities and causing stress due to increased living costs, tuition costs, and financial aid eligibility restrictions (Beaver and Tuck, 2021). Getting and keeping the required immigration and visa paperwork is one of the biggest problems experienced by international students. This procedure can be difficult and time-consuming, frequently needing a lot of documentation and evidence of stable finances. Choudaha and Chang (2012) state that bureaucratic obstacles and strict standards can result in delays and, in certain situations, the refusal of visas, which can cause a great deal of stress and anxiety for students.

There can be a lot of academic strain when adjusting to a new institution system, which leaves little time for social activities which are essential for integration (Zhou et al., 2019). Furthermore, it can be difficult and time-consuming to navigate employment permits, immigration laws, and other bureaucratic processes (Montgomery, 2020). Due to the accumulated burden of these difficulties, mental health concerns are widespread among international students. These conditions might include anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues that impede social integration (Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer, 2019). As students navigate between their home culture and the host culture, they may battle with identity and belonging, frequently feeling as though they do not truly belong to either (Gautam et al., 2021).

The idea that a university gains more exposure on a global scale the more international students is supported by Singh (2013). This suggests that international students must be admitted to higher education institutions in all countries across the world. Despite the benefits of having students who are globally mobile, research from all around the world has demonstrated that these students frequently face numerous obstacles that prevent them from integrating (Mak and Tran, 2001; Wu, 2015; Hopkins, 2012; An and Chiang, 2015; Rosenberg, 2016). International students encounter several challenges when it comes to cultural integration due to several barriers such as language, and cultural differences. Making it challenging, if not impossible, for foreign students to get along with host students at the same university. What is causing the attrition is unclear.

Many studies focus on academic adaptation and acculturation rather than the broader classical issues of the sociocultural integration process. This proposed study unpacked the complexities of how transnational migrant students navigate cultural differences in the host community form social connections, and how this affects the development of a sense of belonging to a host community. The study will contribute to the theoretical insights of the sociology of education and migration studies. It will also offer practical implications for Higher education policy-makers, and student support services in enhancing the inclusivity, multiculturalism, and diversity of higher education institutions in a globalized world.

1.4 Aims and objectives of the study

1.4.1 Aims

The study aims to investigate the sociocultural integration of international students enrolled in tertiary institutions in Mbombela.

1.4.2 Objectives

- i. To examine the intricate dynamics of educational migration and sociocultural integration of international students enrolled in tertiary institutions in Mbombela.
- ii. To investigate the patterns of social interaction and social networks of international students who are registered, at tertiary institutions in Mbombela.
- iii. To explore how international students enrolled in tertiary institutions in Mbombela negotiate their identities within the diverse cultural landscape of the host community
- iv. To analyze how the cultural backgrounds of international students affect their sociocultural integration in various tertiary institutions in Mbombela.

1.5 Main research question

How do international migrant students experience and navigate sociocultural integration within higher learning institutions in Mbombela, South Africa?

15.1 Research sub-questions

- i. What are the intricate dynamics of transnational educational migration and sociocultural integration of international students registered at tertiary institutions in Mbombela?
- ii. What are the patterns of social interaction and social networks of international students who are enrolled in tertiary institutions in Mbombela?
- iii. How do international students enrolled in higher learning institutions in Mbombela negotiate their identities within the diverse cultural landscape of the host community?
- iv. How do the cultural backgrounds of international student migrants affect their sociocultural integration in the city of Mbombela?

1.6 Rationale of the study

Since it affects both individuals and society at large, research on the social integration of international students enrolled in tertiary institutions in Mbombela is crucial. Researchers can determine obstacles these students encounter as well as elements that support effective adaptation by learning how these students negotiate and integrate into new cultural situations. The following are some main ideas emphasizing the importance of this study:

When international student migrants settle in new countries, they bring a variety of cultural backgrounds with them, which enhances the local environment and promotes intercultural understanding. Examining their assimilation procedures illuminates the mechanisms of cultural interchange and can encourage intercultural communication and collaboration Li and Wang (2019). Strong social integration is frequently associated with academic achievement. According to Waters and Brooks (2017), research in this field can identify obstacles to educational attainment that transnational student migrants encounter, such as prejudice or language hurdles, and can also influence policies and initiatives that assist their academic pursuits.

The results of the labor market are strongly correlated with sociocultural integration. According to research, international students who successfully assimilate into their host countries' social and cultural milieus are more likely to be able to obtain employment opportunities and boost the local economy Liang and Zhou (2016). Research on the sociocultural assimilation of international student migrants might provide valuable insights for the creation of policies and initiatives that facilitate this process. This covers programs for employment, education, language learning, and social assistance Ding and Zajda (2018).

Building inclusive communities and promoting social cohesion are two benefits of integrating international student migrants into host nations. Strategies to increase social cohesion and lessen social exclusion can be informed by an understanding of the elements that help or impede their social integration Ibrahim and Khan (2018).

1.7 Definition of key terms

1.7.1 Social integration

Social integration is frequently used in today's policy development to refer to ideas that support just, safe, and stable societies. Human rights are the cornerstone of just societies; these rights include security, solidarity, equality of opportunity, tolerance, and respect for variety (Ferguson, 2008; Jeannotte, 2008). Social integration is seen by Ferguson (2008) and De Alcántara (1994) as a wide notion that is identical to democratic freedom, equality, social justice, and material well-being. Ferguson (2008) goes on to say that nations should encourage social integration by, among other things, redistributing socioeconomic resources, giving political power to marginalized groups, and recognizing social and cultural identities. According to De Alcántara (1994), social integration entails that every person has the same opportunities and rights. Social integration takes into account various factors, including immigration, economic inequalities, and digital inclusion. Researchers such as Portes and Rumbaut (2014) suggest that for integration to be successful, marginalized groups must have access to essential resources like education, employment, and legal rights, allowing them to engage fully in society.

1.7.2 International migrant students

An international student, according to Shapiro, Farrelly, and Tomas (2014), is a student who moves to another country (the host country) to pursue tertiary or higher education. According to USCIS (n.d.), an international student is anyone who is enrolled at an institution of higher education in the United States who is not a U.S. citizen, an immigrant (permanent resident), or a refugee. According to USCIS (n.d., para.), they are categorized as a non-immigrant class of admission, an alien coming temporarily to pursue a full course of study in an approved program in either an academic (college, university, seminary, conservatory, high school, elementary school, other institution, or language training program), vocational or other recognized non-academic institution. In essence, foreign students are outsiders or others who are being allowed entry and study more frequently to serve the political and economic objectives of the nation state. In line with (Merrick, 2013)

1.7.3 Transnational migrant students

Transnational student migrants are students who often relocate to take advantage of improved research facilities, a wider variety of academic offerings, and higher-quality education (Beech, 2018). Due to their renowned educational institutions, nations including the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada are sought-after travel destinations (Beech, 2018).

1.7.4 Sociocultural integration

The term integration is used as a collective name to describe a wide range of elements, from how immigrants adjust to the socioeconomic circumstances of their new "home" to how they interact with the host community. The ability of migrants to integrate into the host society is referred to as socio-cultural integration Gijsberts and Dagevos (2007). It encompasses several topics, including the kinds of networks and interactions made in the host community, perspectives on its cultural aspects, language proficiency, and a feeling of integration (Gijsberts and Dagevos, 2007; Snel and associates, 2006). Sociocultural integration can also be defined as the process through which various cultural and social groups engage, adapt, and blend within a community, promoting unity while preserving diversity. This process encompasses shared norms, values, behaviors, and institutions that allow individuals from different backgrounds to live together peacefully (Berry, 2005). It frequently takes place in multicultural societies shaped by migration, globalization, and social interactions that impact cultural adaptation and the development of identity (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014). In this study, sociocultural integration will focus on how well international migrant students adjust to and engage with the social and cultural aspects of their academic and local host communities.

1.7.5 Transnationalism

A social movement known as transnationalism emerged from the growing interconnectedness of individuals and the erasure of state borders (Harney and Baldassar, 2007). The movement of people, ideas, and things between areas is referred to as transnationalism. Consequently, there appears to be a growing influx of migrant labourers, globalized businesses (Clavin, 2005), global financial flows, and worldwide scientific collaboration creating connections between individuals, organizations, or countries (Metropolis, 2007). In a particular nation-state, these institutions could be either public or private. Moving continuously between two

or more social locations is a manifestation of transnationalism, which goes beyond simple migratory behavioral patterns. An increasing number of migrants have formed close international relationships with many home countries, made possible by advancements in global transportation and telecommunication technologies. According to Mulaudzi (2009), transnationalism also describes international cooperation between people and activities that cross national boundaries without the governments of nation-states having a major or even primary involvement.

1.7.6 Migration

Human migration generally refers to the movement of individuals, especially across national borders, in search of permanent or semi-permanent residency (Dirk, 2012). Migration is defined as the temporary or permanent relocation of an individual or group of individuals from one geographic place to another for a variety of reasons, such as persecution or better work opportunities. This was noticed by Zanker (2008).

1.7.7 Key terms conceptual linkage to the study

The conceptual framework of the study comes together at several interconnected ideas. Migration firstly delves into bringing international students into a fresh sociocultural landscape. These students, who often blend international and transnational traits, face the intricate challenge of fitting into their new environment. Their experience is shaped by social interactions, the institutions they're part of, and their ongoing ties to their home countries. How well these students manage to integrate socially within Mbombela's higher education scene depends on their cultural adaptability, the welcoming nature of the host environment, and the strength of their transnational relationships. Grasping these dynamics not only enriches academic discussions but also guides institutional policies aimed at enhancing student support, encouraging inclusivity, and nurturing intercultural conversations. In the end, weaving together these conceptual threads allows for a comprehensive look at the real-life experiences of international migrant students in Mbombela, shedding light on both the opportunities and hurdles that come with studying across borders.

1.8 Overview of Methodology

This chapter provides a thorough overview of the researcher's approach to conceptualizing this investigation to address the research questions and meet the designated goals. The study

examines the difficulties and experiences faced by transnational migrant students using qualitative data from in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis will be used to analyze the data collected for this study through in-depth interviews. The research design adopted for this study is the case study research design method. The design is suitable for this study since it focuses on a specific case which is the transnational migrant students. The chosen methodology for this study is the qualitative research approach which aligns well with the research objectives, but it also enables data collection much more efficiently with the objectives of this study.

1.9 Outline of the thesis

This dissertation will be divided into five chapters,

Chapter 1 looks at introducing the study by giving the title, problem statement followed by the aims and objectives of the study, key research questions, and then the rationale of the study will be highlighted. The last section of this chapter will look at the theoretical framework that will be adopted to guide the study. Chapter 2 is the literature review chapter which will essentially look at the key concepts that make up the research question. The literature reviewed in this chapter will be aligned with the research objectives and the study topic. This chapter will also present the literature from different scholars on transnational student migrants and socio-cultural integration. The chapter will also discuss the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 focuses on the research methodology, which in essence addresses the selected methodologies that were employed to conduct this study. Chapter 4 will contain the analysis and presentation of data outlined together with the primary conclusions and recommendations which are derived from the research findings. Chapter 5 synthesizes the primary findings and delineates the primary conclusions and recommendations derived from the research findings about the study.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter covered the background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, the rationale of the study, the theoretical framework, and the organization of the thesis. Since most studies usually focus on the academic performance of transnational migrant students and not the social aspect of the students. This study tends to address the socio-cultural aspect of the students and their integration. If the well-being of students is taken into consideration,

then students will acknowledge that host countries care about both their academic performance as well as their life outside academics. Hence this study is ideal to address this research problem. The following chapter will focus on literature, since various studies have been done on transnational migrant students, this chapter will look at what other published scholars are saying about the hurdles faced by transnational migrant students in the host country where they are doing their studies. The literature in the following chapter will provide insight into some of the issues these transnational migrant students come across throughout their study period in the host countries.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Transnational migrant students have standard academic obstacles that center on teaching, learning, and writing, while their non-academic challenges have gotten significantly less attention. A rising amount of literature, however, tackles important topics that go beyond the transnational migrant students' formal academic space. This section offers a summary of various academic research that are essential to the lives of transnational student migrants. This chapter will start by offering a detailed definition of the concepts this research seeks to look in to, which are transnational student migrants and sociocultural integration. Furthermore, the chapter will also be looking at a series of literature on transnational migrant students and sociocultural integration from different scholars across the world. Studies on the difficulties and experiences of international migrant student have not being getting enough recognition in the republic of South Africa recently (Mokau, 2012).

2.2 Organization of Literature

This section of the literature review chapter will delve into firstly providing published literature by various scholars with reference to the conceptualization on the topic of the study to give a thorough understanding of what the study entails to the audience. Also, this section will look at the numerous factors influencing migrant students in choosing a host country. Then go on to provide a section of literature that will indicate the hurdles faced by migrant students and lastly, show the various experiences of migrant students in different institutions of higher learning about historical and recent literature to show the patterns these students are experiencing.

2.3 Integration with Research Objectives

The literature reviewed offers an essential basis for comprehending and tackling the various research objectives. By examining themes such as international educational migration, social interaction, identity negotiation, and the impact of cultural backgrounds, it underscores several key concepts that are pertinent to the lived experiences of international migrant students enrolled in institutions of higher in Mbombela, South Africa.

2.3.1 Social Interaction Patterns and Networks:

Schools have a crucial role in promoting integration, as they not only help children develop essential skills like language and cultural awareness but also impact the integration of migrant children both inside and outside the school setting. However, Vandeyar (2011) argues that the effectiveness of schools in facilitating integration largely depends on their social values and available resources, which can either hinder or enhance their ability to support migrant learners. While some schools may show understanding and support for migrant students, others may exhibit xenophobic attitudes. Such negative attitudes, including racial prejudice and xenophobia, can significantly obstruct migrants' integration into the host society. In their research, Vandeyar (2011) highlighted how race and racism affect black immigrant students, who often find themselves grouped with indigenous black South Africans and face similar challenges related to racial prejudice and discrimination.

The dynamics of social interaction and the formation of networks are extensively studied in relation to migration as well as integration. Research shows that indeed international migrant students often face social isolation at first, but over time, they develop networks that encompass both other international students and local individuals. This finding is reinforced by studies that emphasize the importance of social capital in aiding international students during their navigation process to the challenges of adapting to the new setting in the host community. These studies reveal that social networks not only offer emotional and practical assistance but also facilitate sociocultural adaptation, a concept that is particularly significant when examining the social patterns among international students in Mbombela.

International students typically engage with three main social groups: peers from home country, with other international students, and locals in the host country. The frequency and quality of these interactions can significantly impact their adaptation and academic success. Connections with co-nationals offer emotional support, while interactions with host nationals facilitate cultural adjustment and language learning (Schartner and Young, 2016). International students usually form three primary types of social networks: co-national networks, those networks include the same peers from their home country; multinational networks, where they connect with other international students; and host-national networks, involving interactions with residents. Co-national networks tend to be the most robust

because of shared cultural backgrounds, whereas relationships with host nationals are often restricted to academic or professional contexts, highlighting the difficulties in achieving deeper social integration (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2013; Robinson et al., 2020).

Effective adaptation requires a balance between embracing host cultures and preserving connections to home cultures. This process is influenced by both the amount and the quality of social interactions. Social networks that encompass a variety of groups generally improve wellbeing and academic satisfaction, helping to alleviate stressors like loneliness and the difficulties of cultural adjustment (Demes and Geeraert, 2015; Hofhuis et al., 2023). Migrant students' networks showcase a rich cultural diversity, shaped by their geographical origins and the dynamics of the host country. Students hailing from similar cultural backgrounds tend to create tight-knit communities, whereas those with diverse origins gain wider perspectives within their networks, which enhances their cross-cultural competence (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018).

2.3.2 Negotiation within a Diverse Cultural Landscape:

Research on identity negotiation in transnational and multicultural settings shows that international students often engage in intricate identity work. Studies on identity theory and acculturation suggest that these students strive to maintain home culture elements, then also adapting to the host community's culture, leading to a dynamic and fluid sense of self. This understanding is shaped by research on cross-cultural adaptation, which examines how exposure to various cultural perspectives and practices influences self-perception and intercultural competence. Such research is essential for understanding how students at Mbombela navigate their identities in a culturally diverse environment.

Literature has traditionally viewed intelligence as a linear concept, primarily defined by problem-solving abilities in academic contexts. However, there is a growing agreement that intelligence can manifest in various situations beyond just educational settings (Dyne and Ang, 2015; Hunter and Kurpis, 2016). Cultural intelligence acknowledges the impact of globalization (Ang and Earley, 2003; Budhwar and Malek, 2013) and its connection to enculturation. This form of intelligence specifically focuses on an individual's capacity to understand and effectively navigate situations characterized by cultural diversity (Dyne and Ang, 2015).

According to (Brislin et al. 2006), a key theme in cross-cultural literature is the significance of harmony, cooperation and maintaining positive relationships while being mindful of cultural differences and challenges related to cultural integration. Understanding cultural adjustments is crucial for functioning effectively in a new cultural environment (Callaghan, 2015). People can learn about other cultures in various ways, but some experiences may be more impactful than others. For example, a child relocating with their parents for an international job or a partner joining a traveler may experience greater cultural exposure (Crown, 2008; Lam and Selmer 2004). People with high cultural intelligence show "a strong mastery and sense of emotional display and physical presence" (Earley, Ang, and Tan 2006). Cultural intelligence is made up of four key components: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral (Earley and Ang 2003).

A study focusing on Burmese students in Hong Kong sheds light on the intricate process of identity negotiation that occurs during international education. It highlights how these students actively reconcile their identities as "non-local" individuals while dealing with misunderstandings about their national backgrounds. The results reveal various personal responses in reference to cultural influences, pointing to the importance of a deeper understanding of the experiences faced by international migrant students (Sung, 2023).

Research carried out in multicultural school environments identifies acculturation as a key element affecting the academic self-concept of migrant students. The adaptive strategies employed by teachers and the support provided by institutions were found to be crucial in facilitating cultural transitions and building resilience. The relationship between structural support and individual agency was essential for successful adaptation (Lilla et al., 2022). Another area of research examines how students deal with linguistic and cultural challenges. International students frequently combine different linguistic skills and cultural perspectives to forge connections within their host communities. This process not only requires adaptation but also involves proactive engagement to instill a feeling of identity and belonging (Yao, 2021).

2.3.3 Role of Cultural Backgrounds in Sociocultural Integration:

Research on cultural background and its effects on adaptation shows that students who come from different cultural backgrounds encounter numerous levels of ease or difficulty when integrating into host communities. Theories related to cultural distance and adaptation help us understand how existing cultural norms and values influence students' interactions, social expectations, and their ability to adapt. This research is crucial for exploring how the cultural backgrounds of international students may affect their social integration, providing valuable insights into the unique challenges and supports for students at higher learning institutions in Mbombela.

Several factors influence the social adjustment and academic performance of international students. A person's exposure to different cultures can vary based on the duration of their time spent outside their home country, the number of countries they have visited, the degree of difference between those countries and their cultural background, and their openness to engaging with the new culture while traveling (Crowne, 2013). Through these experiences, individuals come to understand that intercultural interactions are distinct from everyday experiences, and this understanding becomes part of their thinking and perception (Earley and Peterson 2004). People can learn to choose and use the right tools for different situations, adjusting them as needed, when they encounter cultures that differ from their own (Johnson, Lenartowicz and Apud 2006).

Acculturation, the process of adapting behaviors and attitudes through continuous interactions with different cultures, is essential for understanding how migrant students adjust to their new environments. Research highlights a two-way process where both the host communities and the migrants affect one another. For example, schools frequently serve as key agents of acculturation, and elements like bicultural identity and adaptive teaching methods greatly influence students' sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Preusche and Göbel, 2024).

Migrant students often find themselves negotiating their identities to harmonize their cultural heritage with that of the host culture. Research indicates that a strong bicultural identity is linked to greater engagement and academic success. This process also acts as a resilience

strategy against discrimination and poor academic performance (Lilla et al., 2024). Effective communication and language skills are essential for the adaptation of migrant students. A review of language and identity among migrants underscores the significance of language acquisition in promoting integration while preserving connections to their cultural backgrounds. This combined strategy enhances both academic performance and social interactions (Birman et al., 2024). The resilience of migrant students is influenced by a range of individual and social challenges, including discrimination and low economic status, as well as protective elements like strong peer support and inclusive teaching methods.. Programs that emphasize socio-emotional learning and acknowledge students' cultural identities can help alleviate these risks (OECD, 2024).

2.4 Transnational student migrants

Education systems are challenged by the need to support children of immigrants who come from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In Africa, migration has become a widespread issue due to economic difficulties and political instability. Families often relocate to other countries in search of better living conditions, including enhanced education and healthcare for their children. However, for those who are involuntary immigrants—having fled their home countries for reasons beyond their control—the circumstances can be quite different.

Voluntary immigrant families usually have the financial means and literacy skills that enable their children to adjust to the education systems in their new environments (Awokoya 2009; Zong and Batalova 2017). These families often have the resources to enroll their children in private schools, as they typically come from more stable nations. On the other hand, involuntary immigrants are often asylum seekers from regions plagued by political turmoil and conflict (Ukpokodu 2018). Consequently, children of involuntary immigrants encounter a range of challenges in their host countries.

According to King and Raghuram (2013) given the interdependence of global labor markets and educational institutions, transnational student movement is an important phenomenon in the context of globalization. The social networks and multifaceted identities that these students frequently encounter cross national boundaries, fostering intellectual and cultural

interactions King and Raghuram (2013). The reasons behind the movement of international students can be very different. While some students are driven by the possibility of improving their employment chances, learning a new language, or experiencing a foreign culture, others are drawn to better educational facilities and academic programs that are unavailable in their native countries Brooks and Waters (2011). Furthermore, this kind of migration might be aided by international alliances and fellowships between educational institutions (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) state that the migration of international students can have a big impact on both their home and host nations. Through their living expenses and tuition in the host nation, they frequently make a financial contribution, and after completing their education, they might return home with fresh insights and enhanced abilities. But there are also problems associated with migration, like brain drain, which occurs when highly educated people leave their home country and never return (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002).

Students have a major role in the global and South African migration phenomena. Globalization has led to a significant expansion in higher education's internationalization, which is now a market-driven endeavor. According to Gribble (2008), as international education is growing at a quick pace, more students are going overseas to pursue higher education, and many of these students are increasingly thinking about studying abroad as a means of obtaining permanent residency in a foreign nation. The globalized world has played a major role in facilitating the rise in the number of international students. In a comparison of immigrant groups, Bessey (2018) discovered that the group with the quickest rate of growth is international students.

Like other migrants, incoming students go through an acculturation process, learning the cultural norms of their new surroundings. This transition can be quite challenging, especially as they adjust to a different educational environment. Despite differences in language, religion, past experiences, gender, and race, international students are frequently seen as a homogeneous group by their host institutions, which fails to recognize their individual needs (Ballo, Mathies, and Weimer 2019). Moreover, they may experience homesickness, cultural shocks, and discrimination while lacking social support due to being distanced from family, friends, and their social networks back home (Rienties et al. 2012). Their chances to connect with the local community can be restricted, as they often spend the majority of their time with

other international students in isolated learning settings, resulting in what has been termed ‘unintentional segregation’ (Fincher and Shaw 2009). As a result, international students often depend significantly on their universities, which play a vital role in their integration into the host society.

Research has highlighted that many professors and university staff do not fully grasp the challenges of social integration that international students face, which can exacerbate their feelings of isolation (Lee and Rice 2007). As Nada and Araújo (2019) highlight, ineffective institutional practices for addressing diversity can undermine the creation of a positive learning experience. Furthermore, the experiences of social integration or isolation are not uniform among international students. Consequently, universities should adopt various initiatives to promote social integration for international students. This approach can lead to better learning outcomes while also taking into account their academic preparedness and availability of resources (Wang and Moskal, 2019).

Transnational student migrants carve out a distinct niche in the field of migration studies. Traditionally, migration has been viewed through the lenses of economic need, family reunification, or seeking political asylum. However, the rising trend of student mobility challenges these conventional categories. While education is often the primary goal, many student migrants are also looking for long-term settlement, job prospects, or even the chance to gain citizenship in their host countries. This brings up important questions about how we classify these individuals: are they just “temporary” learners, or could they be potential long-term residents.

Additionally, adopting a transnational perspective allows us to explore not just the basic dynamics of migration but also the complex web of relationships, dreams, and institutional frameworks that shape student migration. For instance, students frequently maintain strong connections with their home countries through remittances, digital communication, and cultural practices. This dual engagement adds layers of complexity to our understanding of belonging, identity, and citizenship.

It is also crucial to recognize how this intersects with issues of inequality and access. Not every student has the financial means to migrate for education; as a result, transnational student mobility often reflects disparities related to class, race, and geopolitical factors. This can really help in grasping the main research goals of the study by examining the key challenges that transnational migrant students encounter. For instance, how can we create policies that not only protect their rights but also foster a sense of belonging for these students.

2.5 Sociocultural integration

The research on transnational educational migration highlights why students choose to study outside of their home countries and the difficulties they face upon arrival, such as adjusting to new social norms, educational systems, and cultural expectations. Studies that focus on migration dynamics, particularly in African contexts, reveal the distinct ways international students tackle these challenges to foster meaningful educational experiences. The literature on sociocultural integration shows that this process is intricate and influenced by various factors such as language proficiency, cultural similarities, and social support networks. These elements are essential for comprehending the integration experiences of international migrant students studying at higher learning institutions in Mbombela, South Africa.

Socio-cultural integration, according to Tschannen-Moran et al. (2015), includes acknowledging and valuing cultural variety in addition to the assimilation of minority cultures into the majority culture. This means that it entails fostering an atmosphere of inclusivity in which people from different ethnic backgrounds feel appreciated and respected. Fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness among community members is essential for successful socio-cultural integration. People can grow in empathy and respect for one another's cultural differences by making an effort to comprehend one another's norms, traditions, and practices. According to Cheng (2017), this knowledge can aid in dispelling preconceptions and stereotypes, fostering more cordial interactions between people with different cultural origins. Laudan (2016) states that Effective communication entails the capacity to communicate ideas succinctly and clearly while simultaneously being aware of cultural quirks and variances. Furthermore, effective socio-cultural integration requires good intercultural communication abilities.

The implementation of inclusive policies and practices inside institutions and organizations is a crucial aspect of socio-cultural integration. Businesses and educational institutions can foster an inclusive and hospitable atmosphere for people from many cultural backgrounds by putting diversity and inclusion efforts into practice. For instance, Denny et al. (2019) contend that encouraging diversity in the workplace can boost productivity, creativity, and innovation. Similar to this, promoting a culturally inclusive curriculum in educational settings can aid in students' development of a more expansive viewpoint and an appreciation for various cultures. Organizations can fortify their social fabric and foster a sense of belonging among people from all walks of life by embracing diversity and encouraging inclusion.

Migrant students who recognize similarities between their own culture and the new cultural environment, as well as those who actively participate in socialization, tend to adapt and acculturate more effectively. Basabe and Bobowik (2013) point out that the permeability of boundaries between two cultural groups, along with the connections between those cultures, is shaped by their similarities. Furthermore, new cultural settings encourage students to develop strategies, such as staying connected to their own culture and engaging with members of the host culture, to help them manage stressful situations.

Migrant students face fewer cultural conflicts when they feel supported in their cultural openness. In this regard, Benatuil and Laurito (2009) highlight the significance of the host country showcasing cultural diversity and promoting an inclusive, welcoming atmosphere with minimal xenophobia. While a supportive cultural environment can facilitate intercultural adjustment, it does not guarantee a swift adjustment process, as regular socialization remains crucial. Nonetheless, cultural support can contribute to improved academic performance among migrant students.

International students enter a new and unfamiliar environment when they come to the United States, leaving behind the cultural norms of their native countries. Every culture has its own set of conventions. Culture is "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others," according to Hofstede (2011). The term "culture" can be used to describe a wide range of groupings, including nations, ethnic communities, organizations, and members of these groups. All things considered, studies

show that cultural disparities of any kind can have a big impact on international students on college campuses (Le and Gardner, 2010).

When international students transfer to different higher education institutions and systems, they face the challenge of adapting to their new environment, which includes the city, country, culture, institution, and people (Roberts and Ammigan, 2024). While having support mechanisms from the institution is essential, much of the intercultural transition—especially the interactions among various cultures—occurs outside the classroom and often depends on the individual student's capacity to adapt (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg and Chagnon, 2009). Researchers have noted that international students are frequently expected to conform to American norms to acquire “social capital,” which is defined as “the social relationships that provide access to institutional resources and knowledge of cultural norms” (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2013). By identifying two dimensions of “social capital”—institutional and non-institutional—Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) contend that “social capital” has a broader definition, encompassing “social resources that can be mobilized through the construction and maintenance of institutional and non-institutional social networks.”

Museus and Smith (2016) highlighted how crucial the campus environment is in helping students feel a sense of belonging. To enhance this feeling, they suggest encouraging cross-cultural interactions among international students. The CECE model emerged from Museus's (2014) research, which examined the experiences and outcomes of diverse college students and evaluated the cultural engagement of campus environments. Furthermore, Briggs and Ammigan's (2017) Collaborative Programming Outreach (CPO) model underscores the importance of collaboration between different campus units and the wider community to effectively meet the academic, social, and cultural needs of international students.

Tozini and Castiello-Gutiérrez's (2022) study explored the significance of institutional support during the COVID-19 pandemic. They discovered that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to prioritize clear and timely communication with international students, tailoring their approach to fit the student's academic levels and individual needs. Additionally, HEIs should work on improving support and socialization opportunities to help reduce stress

and combat feelings of isolation (Tozini and Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). Similarly, Lynch et al. (2023) explored the impact of institutional support systems on international students' experiences of trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the difficulties posed by shifting immigration policies. Their research revealed that students who felt their institution offered adequate outreach and support, along with having a trusted friend to confide in, reported experiencing lower levels of trauma (Lynch et al., 2023).

In their important study, Lee and Rice (2007) examined neo-racism about the experiences of international students. The interviews with students revealed that non-white international students encountered racism at an alarmingly high rate (Lee and Rice, 2007). The authors argued that institutions should not just focus on enrolling international students and expecting them to adjust independently. Instead, they called for tailored support and a comprehensive assessment of how inclusive the campus environment is regarding its policies and interactions. A follow-up study by Yao et al. (2019) emphasized that these students faced typical stressors and transitions while also dealing with microaggressions and challenges in forming social connections (Briscoe et al., 2022). They noted that the intersectionality of international students is often ignored in standard university programs or support systems. Frequently, students are seen only as international students, overlooking other crucial aspects of their identities, such as race, religion, or gender (Yao et al., 2019). Thus, higher education institutions need to evolve to better understand and meet the intersectional needs of international students.

The international students in Heng's (2017) study expressed a strong need for better support and resources from the university's academic and student services, especially from the international student office. They were looking for improved academic orientation programs, more diverse course selection options, opportunities for group work and discussions, student mentorship programs, social activities, chances to practice their English, as well as help with immigration and career services, and enhanced housing and dining experiences. Furthermore, research by Gomez et al. (2014) showed that students who engaged in campus groups, particularly those centered around recreational and social activities, reported greater overall benefits.

Savicki (2010) suggests that a person is deemed successfully adapted when they grasp how to act in accordance with the norms of the foreign culture they are residing in. Furthermore, Ward (as cited in Savicki, 2010) emphasizes that sociocultural adaptation hinges on acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to tackle the challenges presented by a different culture. The adaptation process is influenced by several factors, including acculturative stress, sociocultural stressors, elements that facilitate sociocultural adaptation, and the variability of adaptation (Savicki, 2010). Acculturative stress is described as the disorientation that occurs during cross-cultural transitions (Sandhu and Asrabadi, cited in Yakunina et al., 2013), where various practical, cultural, and social challenges emerge (Yakunina et al., 2013). As students adjust to their host cultures, they may face a blend of confusing and exhilarating experiences that can either support or obstruct their adaptation process (Savicki, 2010). Savicki also points out that cultural stressors, including social practices, beliefs, and language barriers, are integral to each individual's experience. The adaptation process is further shaped by factors that can promote sociocultural adjustment, such as having friends from diverse backgrounds or previous travel experiences (Bennett, as cited in Savicki, 2010). Savicki underscores that adaptation processes differ from one individual to another, highlighting the importance of personal experiences and strategies in shaping the adaptation journey (2010).

Sociocultural integration is a multifaceted and often contentious process, influenced by power dynamics, historical inequalities, and institutional frameworks. While many discuss it in a positive light as a means to foster social cohesion, the truth is that its impact is shaped by real-world conflicts. To truly grasp sociocultural integration, we must also consider various aspects of identity, such as race, gender, religion, and class.

The integration process can place additional pressure on minority groups to conform to the dominant culture, raising critical questions about which cultures are being "integrated" and which ones are prioritized. This tension creates a conflict between the concept of integration and the necessity of preserving cultural identities. For example, language policies in schools may emphasize proficiency in the dominant language, often neglecting indigenous or minority languages, which can marginalize those cultural identities under the guise of integration.

Rather than seeing integration as a passive process, it's essential to understand that individuals and communities actively influence how they engage with it. Efforts to preserve culture, organize communities, and maintain transnational connections are all forms of resistance against cultural erasure, illustrating that integration isn't always a simple or one-sided affair. Recognizing this agency is crucial for moving beyond narratives that portray minority groups as needing to "catch up" with mainstream society.

2.6 Factors influencing choosing a host country

Getting to know the city and establishing effective communication can be stressful and challenging for migrant students. While these challenges may slow down the adjustment process, they can also lead to successful academic performance over time, as this success is influenced by the nature of the difficulties faced. Additionally, academic performance is linked to the quality of intercultural adjustment and the time spent adapting. Moreover, the various stressors that migrant students encounter can often be managed with the support of prior travel experiences, along with the student's willingness to be open and flexible.

Wang and Tseng (2011) revealed that choosing a study destination involves a two-stage process. First, students select a country, and then they choose an educational institution. Alternatively, students can independently select both the country and the institution. However, Das and Kochaniewicz (2015) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002, as cited in Farjam and Hongyi, 2015) proposed a different perspective, suggesting that the decision-making process for students consists of three distinct phases. Initially, students decide to pursue education abroad; next, they choose a country; and finally, they select a specific institution or university. Additionally, Marigine (2006), as cited in Farjam and Hongyi (2015), identified three levels of choice: first, at the global level, which explains students' decisions to study abroad; second, at the national level, which addresses why students choose a particular university; and third, the choice of courses, which has received relatively little focus.

Attracting international students presents a challenge that requires the development of effective marketing strategies. Over the past two decades, the options for international students have expanded significantly (Agrey and Lampadan, 2014; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011). This shift has also led to an increase in both the number and diversity of international

students. These trends in international education are evident not only in traditional host countries but also in emerging ones. Many host countries are making considerable efforts to enhance their internationalization programs to draw in more international students. A key aspect of these efforts is understanding the factors that influence students' choices regarding their destination country, higher education institutions (HEIs), and study programs. Numerous studies have explored the factors that affect students' decisions about international education (Ahmad and Shah, 2018), but the findings remain varied. Currently, the choices made by international students are influenced by a range of factors (McCarthy, Sen, and Garrity, 2012). Both personal and external factors, including those related to the countries sending and receiving students, play a role in shaping their decisions about studying abroad.

Numerous factors influence the choice of host country made by international students. Some of the determining elements are the host country's geographic proximity, linguistic similarities, and opinions about the caliber of the educational options or institutions there. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) looked at the variables that influence international students' decisions on which host nation to attend; they gathered data from four nations (China, India, Indonesia, and Taiwan). When choosing to study abroad, international students go through three stages, according to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). Before choosing the university to attend in the host nation, students must first decide that they wish to study abroad. They next choose a host nation based on push and pull factors.

Numerous studies have explored the factors that drive students to seek education overseas, particularly focusing on the concept of push-pull factors (Eder, Smith, and Pitts, 2010). Push factors refer to elements within the home country that affect a student's choice to study internationally (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). These can include the lack of a desired study program, limited access to universities, and subpar educational quality in the home country. On the other hand, pull factors are those aspects of the host country or institution that entice international students (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). These may encompass cultural attractions, living standards, the socioeconomic status of the host country, better career opportunities, and immigration prospects. Additionally, research that does not adhere to the push-pull framework has found similar insights, indicating that the decision to study abroad

can also be shaped by influences from family, teachers, and various socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors in both the home and host nations (English, Allison, and Ma, 2016).

Recognizing the potential socioeconomic and cultural benefits that international students and graduates can bring, many host countries have implemented various strategies to attract them, such as scholarship programs and pathways to permanent residency or work visas (Hawthorne and To, 2014; Scott et al., 2015). In 2012, the Canadian government aimed to boost international student enrollments from 240,000 in 2011 to 450,000 by 2022, striving to position Canada as a prime destination for top talent (Hawthorne and To, 2014). By 2012, approximately 3,983 students had successfully transitioned from international student status to permanent skilled migrant status in Canada (Hawthorne and To, 2014).

International graduates tend to have varied responses to skilled immigration schemes. Typically, they prefer to remain in the host country due to its high standard of living, which can also improve their career opportunities (Lin, Shi, and Huang, 2016). Their social connections and marriages with residents further enhance their chances of staying (Bijwaard and Wang, 2016). Research by Güngör and Tansel (2014) indicates that factors such as economic instability in their home countries, a strong desire to stay abroad, and negative work experiences back home increase the likelihood of international graduates choosing to remain. Conversely, many opt to return to their home countries immediately after graduation or when their post-study visas expire, often due to limited job opportunities in the host country (Bijwaard and Wang, 2016), family obligations, and gender dynamics, with studies showing that females are generally less inclined to return than males (Fenicia et al., 2016; Güngör and Tansel, 2014). Additionally, Bijwaard and Wang (2016) noted that international graduates frequently leave the host country after saving a certain amount of money. Language barriers, feelings of isolation from local communities, and experiences of discrimination or unfair treatment regarding job opportunities can also drive them back home (Tran and Vu, 2016). Lastly, political issues may significantly impact international students' decisions to return (Spinks, 2016). In Australia, international coursework graduates can apply for post-study visas that permit them to work in the country for up to two years, and they are encouraged to depart before their visas expire (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2017).

International education plays a significant role in helping individuals develop a new identity (Pyvis and Chapman, 2006). The experience of studying and living abroad can be profoundly transformative (Qing, 2015). As a result, many factors influencing the choices of international students are largely personal (Singh, 2016). Research has identified various motivations, such as a genuine interest in the subject, a passion for research or teaching, the joy of learning, the emotional toll of quitting, personal fulfillment, self-development, prestige, individual accomplishments, obtaining a degree, and career-related aspirations as key influences on students' decisions to pursue international education (Zhou, 2015). Additionally, factors like access to domestic education, opportunities for international exposure, personal experiences, the desire to immerse oneself in a different culture and student life, personal freedom, prior study or travel experiences, and the pursuit of high-quality research also play a role in shaping students' choices (Bhati et al., 2013). Some studies even suggest that the primary motivation for international student mobility is the students' desire for personal and professional growth (Yap and Axelsson, 2015).

In the African setting, South Africa has grown in popularity as a study destination for several reasons Mudhovozi (2011). Thousands of students from all around Africa and the world have been drawn to South African colleges. Nearly forty thousand of the more than 68,000 foreign students registered in South African universities in 2011 attended classes in person, with the other students completing their studies virtually Monitor (2013). Hughes (2014) argues that the stormy past, vibrant present, and bright future of South Africa's higher education system have greatly influenced its current status.

According to Hughes (2014), the last ten years have witnessed a significant shift following the 2004 legislation that ended years of racial segregation. Universities have also experienced extensive reforms to replace the previous racially based system. As a result, 23 public universities in South Africa combine traditional, vocational, and hybrid teaching methods (Hughes, 2014). According to Macgregor (2006), all institutions currently admit a diverse group of students from all demographic backgrounds. According to Hughes (2014), more and more students are choosing to study in South Africa, where they are in a unique position to participate in history while receiving a top-notch education, and the overseas study experience will boost their competitiveness in the international labor market.

Most of the difficulties encountered are shared by most higher education institutions worldwide, according to literature on international students. According to Mokgwasi (2017), because overseas students must abide by these immigration laws, these issues impact all South African higher education institutions. Applications for study permits and visas are subject to thorough verification; nonetheless, there is no assurance that certain applications will not be turned down if they don't match the requirements of Lee and Rice (2007).

The increasing volume of research on the institutionalization of higher education worldwide directly addresses the rise in foreign enrollment in contemporary universities (Bartram 2008; Kim 2011; Lee and Rice 2007). The contributions made by communities of international students to the generalized teaching and learning processes in host institutions are well outlined in this body of research. The argument put forth is that they "increase our awareness and appreciation for other countries and cultures, add new perspectives to classroom conversations, and increase the diversity of student populations" Lee and Rice (2007).

Based on research by Macgregor (2007), foreign students from all over the world were attending South African universities by 1994, the year apartheid ended. Macgregor reports that the number of foreign students attending South Africa's public colleges rose from 12,557 to 53,733 between 1994 and 2007. According to Higher Education South Africa (HESA) and the International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) (2008), there were roughly 53, 733 international students enrolled by 2007. Of them, 51,717 (85%) were students from other African nations. Except for a tiny percentage from Europe and North America, the majority of these growing immigration inflows into South Africa come from surrounding nations and the remainder of the continent. According to Macgregor (2007), the 15 members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) comprise two out of every three international students, or 36,000. With 18% of all overseas students, Zimbabwe has the highest percentage. Neighboring English-speaking nations Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland are next in line. Macgregor (2007) asserts that several factors, including geographic location, historical ties, the use of English as the primary language of instruction, the cost of education, and internationally recognized qualifications that offer employment

prospects, are responsible for the large number of SADC students. These are some of the points that this research delves into.

In South Africa, challenges such as accessing education due to policies (Buckland 2011; Meda, Sookrajh, and Maharaj 2012), missing school because families flee from violent attacks in their communities, and issues of acculturation (Adebanji, Phatudi, and Hartell 2014) significantly impact students. Other factors include adaptation and identity formation (Vandeyar 2011), bullying (Mohamed 2015), and social exclusion, particularly for those who struggle to communicate in any of the South African languages. Ethnic differences among school children often manifest through their appearance and language, but it is the primary language that underscores their ethnic identities and highlights the distinctions between them and local learners (Lawson-Sako and Sachdev 2013; Suleiman 2013). Consequently, language serves as a barrier to both learning and psychosocial development for these children.

Culture is considered one of the most significant factors influencing the choice of institutions among international students (Wilkins and Huisman, 2014). Previous research has identified cultural compatibility as a key factor affecting the enrollment trends of international students (Tan and Goh, 2014). During their transition, international students face numerous adjustments, requiring them to adapt to the cultural environment of the host country while also learning new values and norms (Rujiprak, 2016). The cultural context of a country and its associated impacts are crucial, as they can significantly contribute to variations in consumer behavior across different nations (Wilkins and Huisman, 2014). A cultural distance may arise when there is a disconnect between an individual's personality and their environment (Lee and Ciftci, 2013). Rientes et al. (2013) identified five major dimensions along which cultures differ: power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientation. Their study revealed that the dimension of 'masculinity-femininity' notably influenced students' educational choices. However, the significant cultural differences observed among international students were largely linked to their countries of origin (Wang and Hannes, 2013). Cultural distance can stem from various cultural differences, primarily arising from language, religion, technology, and national culture (though this is diminishing), as well as course-related attributes, university selections, and future career paths (Wootton and Titov,

2013). When recruiting international students, especially those from Confucian societies, culture should be a primary consideration (Bodycott, 2009). Previous studies have indicated that one of the key factors in school choice for international students is the aspect of acculturation (Rania and Cardinali, 2015). Acculturation is defined as the process of cultural change that occurs through repeated interactions.

The economic factor is one of the two most significant influences on international student mobility (Wei, 2013). Research has shown that the economic conditions of a student's home country, its level of economic development, and the disparities between countries in terms of international student inflow and outflow all play a role in shaping students' mobility and decision-making (Wei, 2013). International student mobility is often viewed as a choice heavily influenced by costs, which include tuition fees, living expenses, travel costs, and other related financial considerations (Coryton, 2014). A key factor for students when selecting international education is the financial aspect (Dora et al., 2009). Many international students are drawn to universities with lower tuition fees. Additionally, the prospect of financial aid, scholarships, and the potential for increased future earnings also motivates students to study abroad (Perkins and Neumayer, 2014). The location of the institution is another crucial factor in international higher education mobility (Singh, Schapper, and Jack, 2014). The size of countries (Wei, 2013) and the distance of the institution from a student's home (Wilkins and Huisman, 2014) have been identified as important factors regarding the geographical location of study destinations. Other economic elements, such as population, climate, and trade relations, can also significantly impact students' choices of institutions (Cao et al., 2016).

International education has often been seen as a process of adapting to the norms and institutions of the host country (Marginson, 2014). Almost all international students encounter numerous changes across various aspects, including acclimatization to a new environment (Malaklolunthu and Selan, 2011). This adjustment is quite complex, making it difficult for international students to feel completely at ease (Chien, 2016). There is a notable prevalence of issues related to social adjustments (Malaklolunthu and Selan, 2011). The socialization and interactions of international students in a new country have been reported as challenging in different contexts (Wang, Andre, and Greenwood, 2014). Nevertheless,

higher education institutions provide an environment that helps students adapt to new ways of life (Sears, 2011), significantly easing the adjustment process for international students. Zheng (2012) highlighted that various social factors are crucial for international students, particularly those from developing nations. Family and friendships play a vital role in the study abroad experience (Ana-Andreea et al., 2013), and recommendations from friends and family can significantly influence the choices of international students (Ozoglu et al., 2015). Additionally, the sense of belonging is often cited by international students as a key factor in their decision-making (Stewart and Ostrove, 2013). They associate support from advisors (Stewart and Ostrove, 2013) and social networks (Beech, 2018) with a heightened sense of belonging. A strong social network can also predict the success of international students' transitions in the host country (Forbush and Foucault-Welles, 2015). Previous research has shown that many students leverage their social networks to navigate the landscape of international education (Beech, 2018). Furthermore, relational ties stemming from historical connections have been recognized as significant influences on international students' decisions regarding their education abroad (Perkins and Neumayer, 2013). The impact of service agents is also a significant factor in the decision-making process of international students (Bhati and Anderson, 2012).

In the context of globalization, the state functions as both a rule-taker and a rule-maker (Pan, 2013). The legal requirements of the host country, such as visa regulations, are significantly correlated with the number of international students in that country (Shih, 2016). Some students are particularly responsive to changes in student visa policies compared to other global options (Rafi and Lewis, 2013). Additionally, international students view safety as a crucial factor when considering studying abroad (Gong and Huybers, 2015). The potential for immigration to the host country is considered the least significant factor (Zwart, 2013).

Environmental factors also play a role in selecting a host community. The quality of the environment (Dora et al., 2009) and the climate of the host country have emerged as important pull factors for international students interested in studying abroad (Cao et al., 2016). Furthermore, social marketing and the demand for social responsibility have been recognized as influential factors in students' decision-making processes (Vrontis et al., 2007).

There is a strong belief that international programs can offer a higher quality of education (Chapman and Pyvis, 2004). This idea is supported by research from Branco Oliveira and Soares (2016) and Zwart (2013), who noted that quality is a key consideration and a major draw for students selecting international educational institutions. Factors such as the university's reputation (Alonderiene and Klimaviciene, 2013), familiarity with the institution's image or prestige (Mazuma-Ndaaba et al., 2016), the quality of education (Branco Oliveira and Soares, 2016; Dora et al., 2009), the programs available (Dahari and Abduh, 2011), the university's popularity (Wilkins and Huisman, 2014), the facilities or features of the university (Alonderiene and Klimaviciene, 2013), and the prominence of the academic staff (Dahari and Abduh, 2011) were also highlighted as important attraction factors. Nevertheless, university ranking is the most frequently mentioned factor influencing decisions to study abroad (Ahmad and Shah, 2018; Gong and Hubbers, 2015). Yeravdekar and Tiwari (2014) point out that the current landscape of international education is marked by an obsession with rankings.

2.7 Challenges faced by transnational student migrants

According to Gribble (2008), students in many developing nations are forced to study overseas because there aren't enough university spots to meet demand. In search of greater educational chances, higher knowledge levels, and new experiences, students who want to study abroad often relocate to nations with more advanced educational systems than their own. According to Hyland et al (2008), International students are also excited about sightseeing and country visits since they get to be introduced to different people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. International students are therefore looked upon with great pride by their friends, family, and the community at large. Gribble (2008) claims that the desire to learn a foreign language is one factor in student migration. Furthermore, according to Gribble (2008), the reason why students migrate from developing to developed nations is frequently their perception that the educational standards provided in their home country are lower and quality education is only provided in member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

While international migrant students bring a distinct flair to university settings, they also face a number of difficulties typical of cross-border human mobility, including unfamiliar

language learning, the need to adjust to a new culture, loneliness, homesickness, prejudices, and more (Bartram 2008; Swami et al. 2010). It's interesting to note that host university staff and students frequently reject international students rather than interacting with them and attending to their needs and difficulties (Kim 2011; Lee and Rice 2007). The linguistic barriers that foreign students frequently face in South Africa can have a big impact on their experience in higher education. For instance, international migrant students' socio-cultural and academic adjustment in this setting is significantly influenced by their self-perceived language competency (Barratt and Huba 1994; Yeh and Inose 2003). In light of this, the student body believes that the two main areas in which they would like assistance are sociocultural and academic Bartram (2008).

According to Rosenberg (2016), behavioral and lifestyle differences make incoming students overseas feel scared when it comes to adjusting and making friends. Hopkins (2012) confirms that many international students are open to forming relationships and friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds, but they frequently lack the drive and approach. Some people prefer to be approached by local students to build a school relationship, while others are indifferent to cultural differences Hopkins (2012).

International students struggle with language, communication, and intercultural integration An and Chiang (2015). Additional aspects include self-efficacy Mak and Tran (2001), ethnic identification Li and Gasser (2005), and uncertainty avoidance (Pritchard and Skinner, 2002). Yeh and Inose (2003), Constantine et al. (2004), Wilcox et al. (2005), and Wei (2007) have pointed out several other factors, such as academic pressures, language barriers, feelings of inferiority, difficulties in adapting to new foods or cultural norms, insufficient support, perceived discrimination, and homesickness. Those issues can lead to feelings of unease, insecurity, sadness, worry, and a sense of loss.

Fokkema and Haas (2015) highlight that discrimination against foreigners negatively impacts the sociocultural integration of migrants in southern Europe, specifically affecting Moroccan and Senegalese individuals in Spain, as well as Egyptian and Ghanaian individuals in Italy, including students. Unfortunately, there is a lack of empirical research on this crucial issue

in Africa, especially in South Africa, as noted by Iwara, Kativhu, and Obadire (2017). However, MacGregor (2014) pointed out that, unlike other regions, significant challenges are facing the socio-cultural integration of international students in South Africa.

According to Coles and Swami (2012), it has long been assumed that international students must adapt to their host countries and acquire the necessary abilities to live and study there temporarily and successfully in what is probably a foreign environment. International students have been found to face more discrimination than their domestic counterparts (Poyrazli and Lopez 2007). The literature on perceived discrimination against international students identifies an important but little-studied research area that is relevant to both the formal university experiences of students and experiences rooted in the host nation's broader social context (Lee and Rice 2007).

Advice from international students in Heng's (2018) study highlighted the importance of preparing linguistically and culturally before arriving on campus. Additionally, students were encouraged to enhance their reading skills and become familiar with both digital and non-digital media to better adjust academically and socially. The way international students from various countries adapt to American culture can significantly influence their educational success, and the challenges they face can often be understood through personal or shared experiences. Building connections with peers who share similar international backgrounds, as well as those with comparable ethnic, racial, or cultural experiences, can help students find their place and thrive (Gomez et al., 2014; Lee and Rice, 2008; Yao et al., 2019).

2.8 Experiences of International Students

According to (Wang et al. 2001; Wang et al. 2012; Zhang-Wu 2018), a variety of factors, including violence, racism, xenophobia, financial hardship, difficulties obtaining a visa and student permit, a lack of social belonging, housing problems, a lack of employment opportunities, victimization, exclusion, and hardships that limited their learning, growth, and development, caused transnational students to face difficulties in their host environments.

These findings are corroborated by O'Reilly, Hickey, and Ryan (2013), who also point out that transnational migrant students face psychological and sociological challenges as well as a lack of enthusiasm for internationalization. This is supported by research by Furnham

(2010) and Brown and Holloway (2008), who found that discrimination and loneliness were common among transnational migrant students. However, Townsend and Huay Jun Poh (2008) claimed that transnational migrant students encountered challenges in the classroom because of the disparities in the host nation's educational, economic, and cultural systems. Similarly, Graycar (2010) discovered that in addition to social and cultural difficulties (Tarry 2010) and a lack of funding (Marginson et al. 2010), students also faced gender violence, racial victimization, and a lack of cross-cultural contacts.

Menzies and Barron (2014) discovered that transnational migrant students' learning was impacted by language hurdles and culture shock. Transnational migrant students in South African higher education institutions have psychological problems like loneliness and low self-esteem, according to Naum Ogwenyi Aloyo and Arnold Wentzel (2011). Furthermore, Vandeyar (2010) and by causing feelings of social isolation, loneliness, and alienation. According to Paola and Lemmer (2013), transnational migrant students in South Africa face difficulties in their education because of the fluidity of their cultural stages. This opinion is backed by Dzansi and Mogashoa (2013), who pointed out that cultural shock and adjustment, culturally insensitive classrooms, a lack of a collaborative learning environment, and communication assessment techniques all contribute to the unique learning challenges faced by transnational migrant students in South Africa.

Research has shown a connection between the interactions of international and domestic students and their sense of belonging, as well as their academic success (Glass and Westmont 2014). The effects of these intercultural interactions extend beyond enriching their experiences; they can also influence future educational and career choices (Jon 2013). The engagement between international and domestic students, along with their intercultural interactions, is believed to be influenced by various factors, including cultural knowledge and awareness, language proficiency, behavioral patterns (such as language use, customs, and communication styles), communication skills, cognitive abilities, and personal attitudes (like tolerance for ambiguity). Conversely, some studies highlight domestic students' reluctance to participate in intercultural groups (Cotton, George, and Joyner 2013) and their lack of motivation to engage with international students as significant barriers to interaction between the two groups. Research by Trahar and Hyland (2011) found that some domestic students

feel positively and ‘personally rewarded’ by participating in cross-cultural group work, as it provides opportunities to form new friendships and enhance their intercultural skills. Similarly, Haines and Bos (2012) studied an international classroom at a Dutch university and found that Dutch students appreciate the benefits of collaborating with culturally diverse peers, as it increases their intercultural contact and understanding of differences, contributing to their personal and professional growth. However, these advantages do not automatically arise when international and domestic students are grouped for projects. Thus, careful planning and instruction are essential to create and foster an environment where both groups can recognize and benefit from these opportunities for their academic and personal development.

Exorbitant international tuition, discriminatory university policies, and a lack of funding and scholarships (both domestic and foreign) for postgraduate students from non-South African Development Community (SADC) countries hindered or limited the learning, development, and growth of transnational migrant students in South Africa, according to Oluwafemi (2012). MacGregor (2014) backed up this claim, stating that the difficulties faced by transnational migrant students studying in South Africa include lack of friends, xenophobia, financial strains, high medical insurance costs, language barriers, support and adjustment difficulties, and housing issues. According to Roseann Rajpal (2012), Moise Majyambere (2012), Elizabeth Frances Caldwell, and Denis Hyams-Ssekasi (2016), transnational students studying in South Africa faced several challenges, including xenophobia, financial hardships, housing problems, a language barrier, a lack of communication with local students, and difficulties obtaining study visas and work permits, all of which had an impact on their learning.

Peer-to-peer support for students has been a fundamental aspect of campus programming at American higher education institutions. Research shows that students learn most effectively from one another, and peer-to-peer academic and social support plays a significant role in both individual and institutional success (Latino and Unite, 2012). These interactions have fostered various forms of support and guidance, including academic, social, and mental health assistance. While campus-supported peer-to-peer programs generally target the entire student body, there has been a growing focus on the interactions among international students, as

highlighted by scholars like Briggs and Ammigan (2017). They have called for campus initiatives that connect international students through activities such as coffee hours, shopping trips, and other social events. However, there is a noticeable lack of organized efforts for current international students to share advice with newcomers, whether formally or informally.

2.9 Review of relevant literature

The body of literature used in this study vividly indicates the different phases migrant students go through. The literature used for the study was firstly subdivided into five parts namely international students, sociocultural integration, factors influencing choosing a host country, hurdles faced by international students, and experiences of international students. International students, often encounter the challenge of balancing two sets of expectations: they must adjust to a new sociocultural environment while also preserving connections to their home culture. Research indicates that effective integration relies on various factors, including language skills, social networks, and the characteristics of educational institutions. Sociocultural integration encompasses both social elements (such as interactions, friendships, and support systems) and cultural components (including values, norms, language, and identity) that influence the experiences of migrants.

The increasing number of international students worldwide can be attributed to the many benefits of studying abroad. Studies indicate that participating in international education helps students become proficient in a foreign language, enhance their academic abilities, foster intercultural understanding, build a network of global friends and professionals, develop personal qualities, and improve their employment opportunities (Dewey, Belnap, and Hillstrom, 2013; Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016). Additionally, recent research highlights that international students also bring advantages to host institutions and countries (Chellaraj, Maskus, and Mattoo, 2005; Deloitte Access Economics, 2015). Economically, international students contribute by paying tuition fees and using services like tourism, accommodation, dining, printing, and language courses (Deloitte Access Economics, 2015). During the 2014–2015 period, international students contributed around AUD 18.8 billion to the Australian economy through tuition and related educational services (Deloitte Access Economics, 2015).

International students are also a significant future source of skilled labor for the host country (Trilokekar and El Masri, 2015). A research paper from the World Bank, authored by Chellaraj et al. (2005), estimated that a 10% increase in international graduates in the United States would result in a 4.7% rise in patent applications, a 5.3% increase in university patent grants, and a 6.7% boost in non-university patent grants. On a socio-cultural level, international students enhance the experiences of residents by introducing diverse cultures, while also sharing the host country's culture when they return home (Kemp and Woodfield, 2013). Politically, these students can strengthen relationships between their home and host countries through post-study support programs or scholar exchange initiatives. Research findings counter the misconceptions that international students are simply seeking...

A significant amount of research on international students tends to concentrate on specific geographic areas, like the U.S. or Western Europe, and often generalizes findings from particular migrant groups, such as those from Latin America or South Asia to the entire migrant population. This approach fails to account for the diverse experiences of various migrant groups, including those from Africa, the Middle East, or East Asia. Furthermore, the experiences of migrant students in non-Western contexts are not well-explored. This results in a lack of understanding regarding how sociocultural integration takes place in regions where the dominant culture is not Western. The current body of research on transnational migrant students and their sociocultural integration offers important insights, especially regarding the difficulties these students encounter while trying to adapt to new surroundings. Nonetheless, there is potential for enhancing the diversity of research, the methodologies used, and the practical application of findings.

The literature reviewed in this study supports these goals by offering empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks that emphasize both the similarities and distinct features of international students' experiences. This, in turn, informs each objective and enhances our understanding of transnational student experiences in South Africa.

2.10 Critical Evaluation

Literature in this field frequently explores how migrant students deal with various social and educational obstacles. It emphasizes their resilience, the strategies they adopt, and how

schools and communities address their needs. This perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties these students encounter, along with the personal and institutional responses to those challenges. As researchers, we may evaluate current policies related to immigration, education, and social services, identifying shortcomings that impede the complete integration of migrant students. This body of work often highlights the necessity for inclusive policies that cater to both the legal and social requirements of migrant families and children in Mbombela, suggesting ways to enhance these systems.

Many studies concentrate on the immediate or short-term experiences of migrant students without following up in the long term, which restricts our understanding of their integration and adaptation over time. For future research longitudinal data would provide insights into whether early challenges continue, lessen, or change as students move through the higher education system in Mbombela. Mbombela is a distinctive city with its dynamics, and findings from this area may not be relevant to migrant students in other urban centers or rural regions of South Africa which limits the study to one geographical location. Some studies might generalize their results to broader contexts, which can be misleading if they overlook Mbombela's unique socioeconomic, political, and cultural environment.

Certain studies may reflect the biases of researchers or funding bodies, potentially affecting the focus of research questions and methodologies. This could lead to an unbalanced representation, either overstating challenges or overlooking successful integration strategies within schools. Some studies address policy issues affecting migrant students but fall short of providing detailed recommendations for policy improvements. This limits the practical impact of the literature, as it does not suggest specific, actionable changes for schools or local governments.

2.11 Theoretical framework

The best approach to explain and understand the research phenomenon examined in the study, the structuration theory was utilized. This section will look at scrutinizing Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, as well as defining key terms aligned with the theory which are namely agency, structure, and duality of structure.

Giddens' structuration theory serves as a valuable analytical framework that enables researchers to grasp the intricacies of human behaviour in social contexts. This makes it an effective tool for exploring topics in social theory and organizational studies. Structuration theory has significantly impacted social science research by providing a means to comprehend the dynamic interplay between individual actions and societal structures.

Anthony Giddens, a sociologist, developed structuration theory in 1984, which provides a thorough framework for comprehending the dynamic interaction between smaller social structures and human behaviour. Structuration theory offers important insights into how transnational migrant students navigate and construct their new sociocultural contexts while being influenced by both their home and host countries when applied to the study of transnational migrant students and their sociocultural integration.

According to Giddens' structuration theory, social existence is neither solely shaped by broader social structures nor as a result of individual acts. Rather, it is an ongoing process in which acts and structures mutually constitute one another. According to Giddens, structures provide the guidelines and tools people need to take action, but they may also be both enabling and restricting. In turn, these acts replicate or modify the structures (Giddens, 1984).

Understanding the sociocultural integration of transnational migrant students requires having an understanding of the concept of the duality of structure. To cope with their unfamiliar surroundings (action), these students make use of their cultural backgrounds (structure). To create a community in the host nation, for example, a migrant student may draw on their native tongue and cultural customs, resulting in the creation of new social structures that combine elements of both cultures (Giddens, 1984).

Structuration theory places a strong emphasis on people's agency inside social systems. Students who are migrants from other countries express their agency in a variety of ways, including founding student organizations, going to cultural events, and using technology to keep in touch with those that they know internationally. These activities not only help them integrate but also change the host nation's cultural foundation (Levitt & Schiller, 2004).

For students who are migrants from other countries, reflexivity is the capacity to observe and consider one's behaviour is essential. Because of their reflexivity, they can modify their tactics and actions in reaction to input from their social surroundings. To improve their intercultural integration, a student could, for instance, modify their communication style to better suit the norms of their new country (Beck, Giddens, and Lash, 1994). According to structuration theory, norms are the guidelines that govern social behaviour. Social activities both influence and are influenced by these norms. Giddens contends that social behaviours continuously create and reproduce norms, which are a component of the larger structures that underpin these practices (Giddens, 1984). Because norms are cyclical, it follows that although they restrict individual behaviour, it is also via human action that norms are maintained and altered.

Giddens's theory addresses the interplay between agency and structure in a social context. According to (Giddens, 1984) structure consists of resources like authority as well as rules, norms, and laws. An agency is an illustration of people's ability to behave freely and on their initiative. Agency encompasses more than just an individual's behaviour (Giddens, 1984), it also refers to their aptitude and understanding for interacting with and influencing systems. According to the duality of structure, social structures are both the product of human agency and the very means by which this constitution is established (Giddens, 1984). Agency and structures are two sides of the same coin; agents' activities shape structures and vice versa. In simple terms, human behaviour shapes, preserves, and modifies social structures. To apply the duality of structure according to this study the University of Mpumalanga will act as a structure and then the agents will be the transnational students. Explaining the duality of structure will be how the norms of the institution influence and shape the transnational students into how they do things in their individual and social space as they maneuver their lives in the host country. Unpacking these concepts will help them comprehend the context of structure and agency.

Research has indicated that students who are transnational migrants frequently go through a process of identity hybridization in which aspects of their home and host cultures are incorporated into their everyday lives. According to structuration theory, this hybrid identity is the result of the ongoing interaction between agency and structure (Nedelcu, 2012).

Additionally, studies show that institutions have a big impact on how migrant students integrate into society. According to García and Wei (2014), educational institutions that offer support structures, such as language courses and cultural exchange programs, help international students adjust to the sociocultural environment of their new country more easily.

Understanding the sociocultural integration of transnational migrant students is made easier with the help of structuration theory. Through emphasizing the intricate relationship between structure and agency, this theory clarifies how these students maneuver through their intricate social situations, adjust to novel surroundings, and augment the cultural richness of their new countries of residence.

After thoroughly elaborating about the structuration theory with supporting literature, the following part of this section will delve into applying the structuration in this study. The explanation will further elaborate how this theory was chosen as the most suitable theory for this study by showing the relationship between agent, agency and duality of structure.

2.11.1 Agency

When addressing agent within the structuration theory, an agent in the structuration theory refers to individuals or groups that can act and impact their surroundings. The international migrant students themselves are primary agents. The choices and interactions of individuals play a significant role in their sociocultural integration. Moreover lectures, classmates, school administrators and members of the local community also serve as important influences in this integration process of the international migrant students in higher learning institutions.

Agency also refers to the ability of individuals to make choices and effect change, even when faced with structural limitations. It involves situations where a person is the one taking action, meaning that at any point, they could have chosen a different course of action. International migrant students demonstrate their agency by adapting to new cultural norms and expectations. They navigate language barriers and face educational challenges. They also establish social networks within the host community and engage in cultural exchange, contributing to a mutual process of integration.

2.11.2 Structure

Structure consists of the rules and resources that influence human behavior. However, in contrast to traditional structuralist views, Giddens contends that structures are not separate from human action. Instead, they are constantly created and recreated through social practices. For instance, in this study, a higher education institution adheres to established rules (such as hierarchies and policies), yet employees (agents) have the ability to challenge and change these over time. A clear example is how remote work policies have evolved in response to employee feedback and adaptation. This illustrates the role and function of structure within Giddens' theory of structuration.

2.11.3 Duality of structure

The idea of the duality of structure is crucial to this theory. It highlights that every human action has a dual structure, where structures both enable and limit agents, while agents also play a role in shaping those structures. In other words, it is simultaneously structured and structuring. Migrant students have the potential to transform current systems by bringing in fresh cultural viewpoints, impacting school policies, and promoting deeper intercultural understanding. Duality of structure can also be accomplished by investigating how the institutional frameworks like university policies, cultural norms and also support services either enable or constrain migrant students' sociocultural integration in the host community. Another factor to consider when applying structuration theory to this study is to explore how students, as active participants, maneuver through these systems and, in turn, shape the sociocultural landscape by doing that we can ensure that duality is explored in this regard.

2.11.4 Complexities of applying the structuration theory in the study

Structuration Theory was developed with a broad sociological perspective, but its abstract nature may not fully capture the specific, localized challenges faced by migrant students in Mbombela. These students often have to navigate the complex sociopolitical landscape of South Africa, which is shaped by the lasting impacts of apartheid, pervasive xenophobia, and institutional cultures that may not always be welcoming to newcomers. Giddens' framework might not adequately address these nuanced local issues unless it's thoughtfully adapted to the context.

While Structuration Theory acknowledges the role of power in the relationship between structure and agency, it doesn't always emphasize the power disparities that impact marginalized transnational migrants. International students often grapple with strict visa regulations, financial constraints, and cultural marginalization, which can limit their agency more than Structuration Theory typically recognizes.

Giddens posits that agents (in this case, students) both reproduce and reshape structures through their actions. However, in practice, the institutional frameworks within South African universities can be quite inflexible, often failing to address the needs and viewpoints of migrant students. This rigidity can hinder the reflexivity and agency that Structuration Theory assumes these individuals possess. For instance, language policies, bureaucratic hurdles, or a lack of tailored support services can restrict how much influence students have in effecting change.

Transnational students often find their experiences to be both time-sensitive and transitional, which significantly influences how they integrate into new environments. While Structuration Theory highlights the continuous creation and recreation of social systems, it might not fully account for the temporary and in-between nature of migrant student identities and their strategies for adapting, which are often influenced by the possibility of returning home or moving elsewhere.

Structuration Theory usually emphasizes the rational and structural elements of human behavior, often sidelining the emotional, affective, or cultural aspects. The emotional challenges that come with displacement, such as homesickness and identity struggles key parts of the migrant student journey might not be thoroughly explored through this theoretical framework. These emotional experiences are vital for sociocultural integration, yet they often get overlooked in a theory that focuses more on social systems and established routines.

This section scrutinized Anthony Giddens' structuration theory by defining key terms aligned with the theory which were agency, structure and duality of structure. The study also considered discussing the complexities and limitations applying to the structuration theory.

The structuration theory analyzed and explained the research phenomenon examined in the study.

2.12 Conclusion

Studying abroad presents a number of obstacles for international students such as prejudice, academic pressure and language barrier and cultural norms just to name a few. Similarly, it appears that these difficulties have an impact on both their academic achievement and well-being. People find it more difficult to adjust when they find it tough to socialize and form friendships. Universities are expected to overcome obstacles like cultural diversity, variations in learning styles, and shifting student demands by offering a wider range of study destinations, educational programs, and study environments. These challenges are brought on by an increase in student mobility around the globe. The aforementioned literature has attempted to fill in the gaps in the little body of research that has been done on the experiences of overseas students, particularly in the setting of South Africa. This knowledge gap highlights the need for additional study to better serve the needs of international students by educating host nations and institutions on what has to be done to enhance their services to accommodate this expanding demographic.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to investigate the sociocultural integration of international migrant students in South African higher education, specifically in Mbombela. The study employs a qualitative research design and conducts in-depth interviews to delve into the students' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. Purposeful sampling was implemented to engage participants who are directly affected by and knowledgeable about the subject matter. Data collection tools were carefully chosen to capture detailed perspectives, and a thematic analysis approach was utilized to identify recurring patterns and themes. Furthermore, the chapter discusses ethical considerations, highlighting the significance of protecting the dignity, privacy, and informed consent of all participants. This methodology lays a strong foundation for examining the relationship between individual experiences and the larger institutional and societal dynamics.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The study is grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism focuses on comprehending how social phenomena are subjectively understood. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), it usually employs qualitative methodologies and views reality as socially produced. Pragmatism combines a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to focus on useful solutions to research challenges. According to Creswell (2014), it is not dedicated to any specific philosophy or reality system. According to MacNaughton, Rolfe, and Siraj-Blatchford (2001): a methodology, validating criteria, and a concept about the nature of knowledge.

Using an interpretive paradigm, researchers can gain insights by viewing the world through the eyes of their subjects. In this approach, the researcher builds and interprets their understanding based on the data collected, drawing from those experiences to find answers to research questions. More specifically, interpretivism has aided scholars in making sense of how people perceive their surroundings (Nguyen Cao Thanh and Tran Thi Le Thanh, 2015). Proponents of interpretivism argue that the interpretation of gathered data is heavily influenced by the context in which the research takes place (Willis, 2007). According to Willis (2007), interpretivism often seeks to understand a particular situation, with the central

tenet being that reality is shaped by social interactions. In contrast, interpretivism involves "moving beyond traditional inductive and deductive methods, fostering participatory and holistic research, embracing diverse perspectives, remaining adaptable, and employing iterative and emergent data collection strategies" (Sabharwal commenting on Willis, 2007).

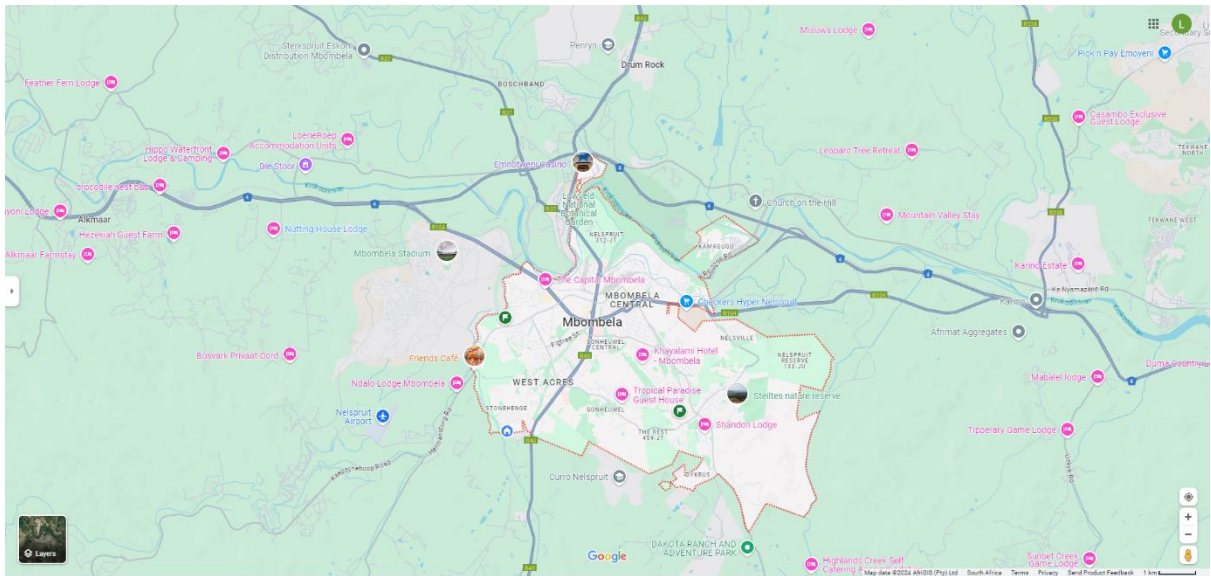
Interpretivists prioritize listening to participants, allowing them to express their needs, interests, and expectations (Wijesinghe, 2011). Qualitative research effectively captures human behavior by focusing on individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Wijesinghe, 2011). It utilizes a multi-method approach, emphasizing an interpretive naturalistic perspective on its subject matter. Gaining a deep understanding of human behavior requires careful consideration of contextual factors such as organizational culture, traditions, beliefs, norms, and roles within the environment. As a result, the findings from interpretive methodology provide valuable insights into the experiences of participants, particularly transnational students in the city of Mbombela, Mpumalanga.

Interpretivism is highly relevant to this study because it allows for a deep exploration of the lived experiences of international migrant students as they navigate sociocultural integration in South African higher learning institutions. By focusing on the students' perspectives, this approach enables the research to capture the subjective meanings they attach to their experiences, such as adapting to a new culture, forming social connections, and overcoming challenges like language barriers or discrimination. Since sociocultural integration is a complex, context-dependent process influenced by individual perceptions and social interactions, interpretivism is well-suited to uncovering these nuances. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which these students are situated, ensuring the study provides a holistic view of their integration journey. This approach aligns with the research aims by prioritizing the voices of the participants and offering insights that are grounded in their unique realities. It is also good to note that this philosophy aligns significantly well with the research objectives for this study because it will delve into understanding the intricate dynamics, patterns, negotiating identities and cultural backgrounds of the international students. The significant aspect of the interpretivism approach is that seeks to reveal the underlying meanings behind human actions and interactions.

3.2 Overview of the site of the study

The data for this study was collected in Mbombela, the capital of Mpumalanga Province in the eastern part of South Africa. The name Mbombela comes from a SiSwati phrase meaning "a lot of people together in a small space," which aptly describes various areas within the Mbombela Local Municipality. Mbombela is nestled close to Mozambique and Eswatini, giving it a unique geographical advantage for students coming from neighboring countries. This close proximity not only promotes regional academic exchange but also makes travel easier for students within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. The educational institutions in Mbombela offer a variety of academic programs, with notable strengths in fields like agriculture, natural sciences, and tourism areas that resonate well with the local economy. While South Africa boasts 11 official languages, English is the main language of instruction in higher education, which is a big plus for many international students. The schools in Mbombela create a vibrant multicultural atmosphere, welcoming students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which enhances cross-cultural interactions and inclusivity. When you compare it to larger South African cities like Johannesburg or Cape Town, Mbombela stands out for its more affordable cost of living, making it an attractive option for international students. Plus, tuition fees here are generally competitive and often lower than what students might pay in their home countries. The city is home to several higher learning institutions like the University of Mpumalanga (UMP), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), and many more technical public and private higher education institutions that cater to a diverse student body, including both local and international students, all striving for their qualifications and academic excellence.

Figure 3.1 Location of the city of Mbombela.



Source: Google Maps, 2024

3.3 Research Design and Methodology

To better understand the nature of the study qualitative research is favored in the social sciences because it can produce detailed, complex, and nuanced insights into intricate social processes (Creswell, 2013). This study utilized a qualitative methodology to delve into the underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations of the participants. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of the lived experiences and challenges faced by international students. By using this approach, the researcher gained insights into the research problem from the perspective of the population being studied (McNeil and Chapman, 2005). Qualitative methods allowed the researcher to investigate and comprehend the lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings of international students regarding their time in South Africa. This approach was chosen as it guided the behaviour and tools used in selecting and developing the research techniques and analysing the data.

The qualitative method was deemed appropriate for this study because, as McNeil and Chapman (2005) noted, it focuses on the direct experiences of individuals as they navigate their everyday lives, aiming for a deep understanding of social phenomena in their natural contexts. The qualitative method was considered suitable for this study because, as McNeil

and Chapman (2005) pointed out, it emphasizes the direct experiences of individuals as they go about their daily lives, seeking a profound understanding of social phenomena within their natural settings.

According to Cooper and Schindler (2008), this approach seeks to thoroughly comprehend human behaviour and the underlying reasons for it. One of the key reasons for choosing qualitative research is its goal of understanding a person's experiences within a specific context and how they cope with various situations (Willig, 2001). The researcher felt that qualitative methodology and its techniques were well-suited for this research, given its emphasis on a detailed and subjective approach. Consequently, this study explored the challenges faced by international migrant students, focusing on their direct experiences to gain a comprehensive understanding of these issues. This methodology also allowed for insights into the experiences of international migrant students from their viewpoints. By employing in-depth interviews and open-ended questions, participants could freely and extensively share their experiences.

According to Yin (2009, 2014), case study research design is the process of doing a thorough analysis of current events in a real-world setting using a variety of evidence sources that point to the same set of problems. This case study design technique aligns with Yin's (2018) definition of a case study, making it appropriate for this research. Which is to say, case studies are helpful because they allow you to closely examine actual occurrences. They can offer comprehensive, nuanced insights that support researchers' concept formulation, hypothesis testing, or information gathering for issue-solving Yin (2018). Examining phenomena in their real-life context (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000) and (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) phenomena that are contextually bounded (Kobel and Lankshear, 1999) and complex, naturally occurring phenomena that take place within a context (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Jacklin, 2011) are additional definitions that are similar.. It is evident from the abundance of definitions that case study research design shared many characteristics, which may be summed up as an in-depth examination of current phenomena that were limited to real-world settings. Compared to the quantitative research approach, these definitions are more in line with the qualitative research technique. Thus, the case study research design was categorized by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) as a unique qualitative research methodology.

The case in this study was transnational migrant students where the study deliberately looked at focusing on the cases of transnational migrant students and the hurdles, they came across daily. Researching the sociocultural integration of international migrant students enrolled in South African higher learning institutions in Mbombela enabled a thorough and sophisticated comprehension of the case and shed light on how these issues would be addressed. The researcher took into account that he was going to be interviewing participants who come from different cultures and backgrounds so he made it necessary to structure the questions of the interviews to get the perspective of what role their respective cultures were playing since they were spending the majority of their time in the host country and a different cultural set-up to what they were familiar with.

In this study, each international migrant student is treated as a unique 'case,' showcasing how sociocultural integration unfolds within the South African higher education landscape. By looking at several of these cases, the research adopts a multiple-case study approach, which strengthens the reliability and applicability of the findings. The narrative of each student will be examined to gain insights into their personal integration journey, focusing on elements such as language challenges, social support networks, cultural and institutional practices that shaped their experiences. Once the individual cases are analyzed, a cross-case analysis will reveal patterns, similarities, and differences in the students' experiences. This process helps to differentiate between factors that are specific to individuals and those that are more widespread or systemic.

The common themes that arise from this cross-case comparison will be synthesized to create a broader understanding of sociocultural integration as it occurs in the Mbombela context. The insights gathered from these collective cases will offer evidence-based recommendations for university administrators, policymakers, and student support services, aiming to enhance the integration experience for future international students. The case study design is perfect for capturing the rich and varied experiences of international migrant students. By anchoring the research in real-life stories and systematically analyzing multiple cases, the study can provide a thorough, nuanced, and contextually relevant understanding of sociocultural integration.

3.4 Target Population and Sampling Strategy

A population is fundamental in research methodology, representing a group of individuals who share common traits within a specific geographic or institutional context (Martínez-Mesa et al. 2016). The idea served as the foundation for research efforts, setting the stage for developing research questions and hypotheses. Understanding the population allow researchers to gain insights into the group being studied, enabling the investigation of different phenomena (Martínez-Mesa et al. 2016). The target population referred to a specific group within the larger population being studied, defined by characteristics or criteria that are relevant to the research question (Alvi, 2016). This group was identified based on factors that corresponded with the goals and scope of the research, enabling researchers to concentrate their efforts on the segments of the population that hold the most interest or importance (Asiamah et al., 2017; Casteel and Bridier, 2021; Willie, 2022). By pinpointing the target population, researchers better tailored their research objectives and sampling methods to align with the aims of the study (Alvi, 2016). The target population and sample size for this study was a total of 20 participants who were international students in public and private institutions of higher learning in the city of Mbombela, which is the capital city of Mpumalanga. The sampling criteria also comprised of both undergraduate and postgraduate students between 19 and 31 years old, irrespective of their qualifications or faculty. This differentiation was critical for this research methodology as it enabled the researcher to tailor the approaches and methods to the characteristics and needs of the population under investigation, thereby enhancing the relevance and applicability of the findings.

This study utilized a non-probability purposive sampling technique. Creswell (2014) defined purposeful sampling as the intentional selection of participants based on certain characteristics or experiences that were relevant to the research question. Creswell (2014) emphasized that researchers should clearly communicate the purpose and selection criteria for participants to guarantee that they contribute to the study's objectives. Purposive sampling, according to Creswell (2014), involved researchers deliberately choosing individuals or circumstances that can provide rich and relevant data about the subjects of their studies. The sample approach enabled the selection of individuals who posed unique perspectives, experiences, or attributes which were crucial to the research. Snowball sampling makes advantage of a chain referral procedure. A fundamental presumption of snowball sampling was that individuals within the intended population were acquainted with one

another. To ensure the chain remained intact, Strydom (2005) advised researchers to constantly ask a responder for multiple referrals. It was significant to remember that the representativeness of these kinds of designs could be contested, and as a result, they were mostly employed in exploratory cases (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used by the researcher to choose participants.

These sampling techniques were used in this study because they made it easier to choose respondents whose characteristics or backgrounds allow for comprehension of the phenomenon under investigation.

Using purposeful sampling, the researcher was able to choose volunteers based on his judgment and determine who will best serve the study's objectives. These were members who had the knowledge or experience with the relevant phenomenon. The snowballing/chain-referral sampling strategy, which involved current subjects referring others to obtain samples needed for the research project, was used to recruit most participants (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Most participants had been recruited using a snowball sampling method, where existing subjects referred others to help gather the necessary samples for a research study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). After selecting the initial participant, the researcher sought their help to identify other students who shared the same trait of interest. The researcher then interviewed those who were willing and continued this process until enough participants had been gathered. Thanks to their referrals, the researcher was able to recruit more participants, as the available subjects had connections with more international students than the researcher did.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

Interviews were the primary method of data collection for this study. In-depth interviews were specifically utilized as a data collection method to gather important information from foreign migrant students. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), in-depth interviewing was typically the foundation of studies that centered on or were concerned with individual life experiences. With this approach, a thorough discussion of the provided phenomenon the difficulties and experiences faced by transnational migrant students took place between the participants and the researcher. By investigating the respondents' thoughts, emotions, and

points of view, the primary goal of these interviews was to gather relevant data from the participants. As a result, the researcher's goal in conducting these interviews was to learn more about the specific phenomenon. Through a well-constructed discussion, the interviewer co-created meaning as an active participant in the research process (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The researcher was able to investigate the circumstances behind the respondents' experiences by conducting in-depth interviews, which served as a valuable tool for data collection.

The interviews allowed the researcher to gain deeper insights into the challenges faced by international migrant students on an individual level. Additionally, these interviews were advantageous as they provided a broad spectrum of data with rich detail (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). The relaxed atmosphere during the data collection encouraged participants to engage openly with the researcher. This approach proved to be more effective than focus groups, where individuals might feel uneasy discussing personal matters in front of a larger audience; here, the setting was one-on-one. As a result, the researcher found it easier to ask probing questions and seek clarification.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 20 international students studying at public and private institutions in Mbombela. These interviews took place on different dates and times, and at various locations based on the participants' availability and preferences. The venues included lecture halls, cafeterias, libraries, residences, and private accommodations. The researcher made prior arrangements through phone calls or emails to remind and confirm the appointments. Participants signed a permission letter with the specific date and time of each interview. An interview guide/questionnaire was used to guide the researcher. The interview guide comprised of a set of 21 questions, the first five questions were demographic questions, and the rest were questions that aligned with the research title of the study. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes to an hour. It was challenging to schedule and secure participants for the interviews, as they were students who were often busy with their academic responsibilities. Occasionally, appointments were delayed or cancelled due to academic deadlines and attendance requirements. The entire process demanded understanding, patience, and perseverance.

A mobile phone was used to record the sessions, and a notebook was also handy for jotting down key details. The interviews were voice recorded with the participants' permission and consent. This voice-recording method benefited the researcher by being much quicker than writing transcripts. It allowed the researcher to capture important details and focus on non-verbal cues without the distraction of taking notes. This approach made it easier to revisit the interviews and analyze the data. Additionally, it ensured the accuracy and validity of the collected information, which was crucial for data analysis. The recordings were later transcribed, and the texts were analyzed for both content and discourse.

3.6 Data Analysis

The study utilized thematic analysis. Thematic analysis highlights that it is an inductive analysis technique that allows researchers to analyze, arrange, and display qualitative data or texts while preserving the text's qualitative character (Baxter and Babbie, 2004; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), "minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail." Manually organizing and arranging data is the goal of data analysis in qualitative research; it is the most important and essential step in the process Govender (2011). Baxter and Babbie (2004) stress that themes that come out of thematic analysis are not only rich, but they also show systems of knowledge and cultural meanings. The researcher will follow the six key steps in thematic analysis. The first step is getting to know the data by typing out the data. The second step is to produce first code, where the entire dataset's noteworthy features should be systematically coded. Finding components that are relevant to the research question. The third step is to look up themes. Examining the codes and start looking for more general themes. The fourth step is to review the main ideas. To check if the themes are applicable to both the full dataset and the coded extracts to refine them. The fifth step is to explain and identify themes. Determine the subject matter of each theme to finalize them. The last step is to compose the report.

The purpose of data analysis in qualitative research is to organize and arrange information manually; it is a fundamental and critical part of the qualitative research process (Govender, 2011). Through data analysis, the researcher examined the collected data to provide insights into the topic. As previously mentioned, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather data. After collecting the data, the writer transcribed it. These transcriptions were essential for

analyzing the findings. It's important to note that transcribing was a time-consuming and sometimes frustrating task, but it was an effective way to become familiar with the data. By transcribing the interviews, the researcher was able to understand the collected data better and identify aspects that had previously gone unnoticed.

After collecting data from the in-depth interviews, thematic analysis was applied to the study, a method commonly used in qualitative research. This approach was deemed appropriate because it emphasizes identifying and organizing themes within the data (Boyatzis, 1998). The researcher utilized the recorded interviews by listening to all 20 of them, along with the written notes, to analyze the data.

In research, data saturation is a key concept in qualitative studies that refers to the stage when no new themes, insights, or information are discovered during data collection (Fusch and Ness, 2015). When researchers achieve saturation, it signifies that the data collected sufficiently reflects the range of participants' experiences or viewpoints on the research topic, thereby validating the sample size and the decision to stop further data collection (Saunders et al., 2018). Attaining data saturation enhances the rigor and validity of qualitative research, as it ensures a thorough investigation of the research questions and reduces the risk of bias from incomplete data (Guest et al., 2006). The researcher reached data saturation on this study by employing detailed data analysis and sampling methods designed to cover all relevant themes related to the study (Hennink et al., 2017).

Once the researcher identified that data saturation was achieved, the next step for the researcher was to focus on data analysis and interpretation. At this stage, the researcher systematically reviewed the collected data, identifying and refining key themes, patterns, and insights that had emerged throughout the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved coding the data thoroughly to ensure that all essential elements were captured and organizing the codes into meaningful categories to build a comprehensive picture of the research findings (Guest et al., 2012).

Using thematic analysis, the writer organized the transcribed data in a meaningful and systematic manner by marking different sections and coding them. After completing the

transcription, codes were created. The coding process involved grouping the data into meaningful tags and labels (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The writer annotated the texts analysed, using highlighters or colored pens to highlight potential patterns and identify segments of data along with emerging themes. This was done meticulously to ensure that the most significant and relevant information was captured. Once all the coding and outlining were completed, she systematically reviewed the entire data set, paying equal attention to each data item and identifying interesting aspects that could indicate recurring patterns (themes) throughout the data set. Codes helped to pinpoint predominant themes from the raw data (Boyatzis, 1998), leading the researcher to identify initial themes. According to Boyatzis (1998), themes are derived from the generated codes, and during the coding process, these themes are further developed.

The researcher made sure that the themes were coherent and distinct from one another. This time, the focus was on aligning the themes with the research questions to maintain context and ensure that the themes were logically connected to the research's main aim. The data was organized according to these themes. Some initial codes evolved into main themes, while others became sub-themes, and some were ultimately discarded. Finally, the themes were reviewed and defined (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3.7 Pilot Study

A pilot study before the actual data collection. According to Arain, Campbell, Cooper, and Lancaster (2010), a pilot study is a tiny feasibility study intended to examine multiple aspects of the procedures scheduled for a bigger, more thorough, or confirmatory investigation. In essence, a pilot study is carried out to prevent the occurrence of a fatal flaw in a study that is costly in terms of both time and money. The main objective of this pilot study was not to answer specific research questions, but rather to stop researchers from starting a large-scale study without sufficient knowledge of the methods proposed (Polit and Beck, 2017). The pilot study helped the researcher ensure that the sample population yielded suitable results for this study and prevented any inaccurate data collection. The target population for this study was 20 participants who were international students in public and private institutions of higher learning in the city of Mbombela, which is the capital city of Mpumalanga. Two

(2) students were targeted for this pilot study to test whether all components of the main study could work effectively together.

3.8 Ethical considerations

For this study, the researcher fully disclosed all relevant information that participants needed to know to make an informed decision about their participation. A written informed consent letter was provided to them before data collection began. In summary, the researcher emphasized that participation is voluntary and that participants can withdraw at any time, ensuring they understand the level of commitment required for the study. Additionally, an overview of the study's overall purpose was shared with them.

Ethical considerations focus on whether behavior aligns with a specific code or set of principles (Bless et al., 2006). The researcher has to ensure that participants are not exposed to any form of harm, including discrimination or abuse (Neuman, 2007). These ethical considerations play a crucial role in preventing research misconduct and help the researcher understand their responsibilities as an ethical scholar (Solomon, 2001). Participants were informed about the general guidelines regarding acceptable and unacceptable practices in this study to prevent any confusion. They were made aware of the potential risks and benefits of their participation and were not pressured to take part; instead, they were informed of their right to decline if they wished. In the event of any harm or the need for psychosocial support, participants will be referred to the nearest public health facility for further assistance, or alternative support will be provided. During the data collection process, which involves interacting with participants, there is a risk of physical or emotional harm (De Vos, 2002). The researcher took all reasonable steps to ensure that participants were not harmed while taking part in the study (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). If any participant did experience harm, whether physical or emotional, the researcher was prepared to assist them in obtaining the necessary help or to refer them to a suitable healthcare facility.

In this study, confidentiality was maintained by safeguarding the information provided by the respondents. Access to the data was restricted to only the researcher and the supervisor. All collected data, including electronic files, was encrypted or password-protected on a flash drive that was exclusively accessible to the researcher and the supervisor. To protect the

identity of participants and minimize the risk of secondary traumatization, their names were kept confidential when using direct quotes. The researcher assigned each participant an identification number for classification purposes. No identifying details about the participants were disclosed. This approach ensured that neither the researcher, the supervisor, or anyone else, could identify the respondents, and any information shared with the researcher would remain untraceable to the individuals who took part in the study.

3.9 Trustworthiness

3.9.1 Credibility

Credibility is essential for readers to fully understand the experiences highlighted in the study, as it relies on how the stories of participants are interpreted (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). Krefting (1991) suggests that this study is credible because it accurately reflects the experiences of international students at the institution, making it easier for others who have faced similar challenges to recognize the phenomena being discussed.

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, the researchers utilized triangulation and member checks, both of which are vital for establishing credibility and boosting trustworthiness (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). With triangulation, the researcher asked the same questions to different participants and collected data from various sources using diverse methods to tackle those questions. On the other hand, member checking, or informant feedback, involved returning to the participants who provided the data, allowing them to review what was gathered and ensuring that the researcher's interpretations accurately captured their experiences. These strategies were particularly effective, especially member checking, as it gave participants the chance to confirm their statements, fill in any gaps from earlier interviews, and enabled the researcher to correct any misunderstandings, ultimately enriching the data collected (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011).

3.9.2 Transferability

Transferability is all about taking what we learn from one study and seeing how it can apply to different situations and contexts. According to Thomas and Magilvy (2011), it refers to the ability to take research findings or methods from one group and apply them to another. Essentially, it is about figuring out how relevant the results of a specific study are in other settings or with different participants. While researchers cannot definitively prove that their findings can be transferred, they can suggest that it is quite possible. To support transferability in this study, a clear description of the population being studied was provided. This included details about demographics and geographic boundaries, which helps show that the research methods could likely be adapted for use in other settings.

3.9.3 Dependability

Dependability comes into play when another researcher can trace the decision-making process of the original researcher (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). To ensure this dependability, the researcher adhered to the audit trail as outlined by Thomas and Magilvy (2011). Right from the start, the study's initial purpose was clearly defined, and the recruitment process for participants was thoroughly explained, including the rationale behind their selection. The researcher also detailed how the data was collected and the timeframe for this collection. Additionally, he elaborated on the procedures for data reduction and analysis. The interpretation and presentation of the research findings were also clearly outlined. Finally, he communicated the specific techniques used to assess the credibility of the data gathered. To further reinforce dependability, a comprehensive description of the research methods was provided.

3.9.4 Confirmability

According to Thomas and Magilvy (2011), confirmability is achieved when three key components are in place: credibility, transferability, and dependability. They emphasized that establishing validity in research requires researchers to adopt a self-critical mindset, recognizing how their own biases can influence the study. Through a process called reflexivity, the researcher examined their own assumptions and biases to ensure confirmability. This involved taking detailed notes after each participant's interview, including personal feelings, biases, and insights, often recorded via audio. Additionally, the researcher made a deliberate effort to let the interviews flow naturally, seeking clarification

from participants on definitions, slang, and metaphors (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). Reflective research provides a broader perspective, leading to interpretations that yield fresh insights. This approach not only enhances the confirmability of the research but also fosters a sense of trust in the credibility and relevance of the findings for the reader (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011).

3.10 Limitations

Although this was a qualitative study that investigated the sociocultural integration of international migrant students enrolled in South African higher learning institutions in Mbombela, the limitation of the study was that the questions administered to the participants were restricted, and the sample size was insufficient to adequately reflect the entire population. Ideally, other foreign students attending different South African universities would have needed to be included. However, incorporating additional universities was highly impractical due to time and funding limitations. Another limitation of this study was that it was supposed to be conducted in one institution, but due to the institution being unable to assist the researcher by with international students the researcher had to change the title to get the total of 20 students he had initially wanted to interview to have enough data for the study of this nature. Another limitation of the study was simply that it was time-consuming.

3.11 Reflexivity

The term reflexivity is typically used to refer to processes in which an observer also takes part in a system, creating a two-way feedback loop between the participant or observer and the system (Soros, 2013). As a researcher focused on the sociocultural integration of international students in tertiary institutions in Mbombela, I recognize the intricate relationship between my own background and the topic I am studying. It's essential to be reflexive in understanding how my personal history, values, and beliefs shape my research approach. I realize that my cultural background, academic training, and life experiences can influence how I perceive and interpret the experiences of international students. Although I am not a local resident of Mbombela, my knowledge of the city and its sociocultural dynamics may aid in grasping certain cultural norms and community practices. However, this familiarity could also lead me to underestimate the significance of integration challenges or miss the more subtle forms of exclusion and adaptation that international students encounter.

If I were an international researcher or someone who has lived abroad, my personal experiences might help me connect with the participants on a deeper level. However, this could also lead me to overgeneralize or impose my own experiences onto others, which might compromise the authenticity of the students' voices. In carrying out this study, I need to be aware of the power dynamics that exist in the researcher-participant relationship. International students might see me as part of the institutional framework they are navigating, which could affect how freely they share their experiences. I will work to foster a safe, respectful, and nonjudgmental atmosphere during interviews and interactions, highlighting their autonomy and ensuring their voices are genuinely represented.

I understand that the sociocultural integration of international students is a complex issue shaped by various individual, institutional, and societal factors. My interpretation of the findings might unintentionally emphasize certain elements, like institutional support, while downplaying others, such as personal resilience or cultural identity, based on my perspective. To address this, I will continuously reflect critically and seek feedback from participants to validate and improve my interpretations. Additionally, I need to be mindful of the implications of my research. By highlighting the integration experiences of international students, my work could influence institutional policies and community practices in Mbombela. I am dedicated to presenting findings that are both detailed and practical, ensuring that the voices of international students play a significant role in creating inclusive and supportive academic environments.

3.12 Fieldwork experience

Assessing the impact of fieldwork on research regarding its effectiveness in enhancing geographical awareness can be challenging. However, we can gain insights into researchers' attitudes toward fieldwork while they conduct their research. As part of the study, extensive fieldwork was carried out to investigate the experiences of international migrant students regarding their sociocultural integration in higher education institutions in Mbombela, South Africa. The institutions highlighted in this discussion are the University of Mpumalanga, Tshwane University of Technology, and various public and private technical colleges located in the city. These institutions were selected due to their large populations of international

students, the variety of academic programs they offer, and their active participation in community engagement efforts.

The first step taken before data collection was participant recruitment. Participants were chosen using a non-probability purposive sampling technique to ensure a diverse representation of nationalities, academic fields, ages, and year levels. Recruitment methods included referrals from other students and a public outreach campaign to explain the study's purpose and objectives. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 20 international students, selected through purposive sampling, to delve into their personal experiences, challenges, and coping strategies related to sociocultural integration. The interviews took place in various settings, including on-campus meeting rooms, public areas, private accommodations of the participants, and online platforms, depending on what was most convenient for each participant. Although throughout the data collection process everything worked out as the researcher had hoped, he did however encounter some challenges for instance the majority of the venues where face to face meetings were conducted sometimes had not been vacant and the researcher and the participant had to halt the proceedings of data collection and wait for the people to leave the occupied auditorium or meeting room. The engagement between the researcher and the participants was very good and some were more comfortable to share their personal stories to the researcher during conversations. Some participants found the interviews challenging as they experienced flashbacks to their arrival in South Africa. These interviews provided valuable qualitative data on issues such as cultural adaptation, language barriers, and social acceptance.

The fieldwork lasted a full month following the issuance of the ethical clearance letter, enabling the researcher to collect all the necessary data for this study. During this time, the researcher also built relationships with the participants, which could be beneficial for any future research on the topic, whether conducted by him or other researchers. This way, he would have the option to reach out to the participants for their involvement. Throughout the process, ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity were carefully maintained. This thoughtful approach allowed the researcher to engage more meaningfully, adjusting the interview style as needed. Ultimately, this method yielded valuable qualitative insights into key issues such as cultural adaptation, language

barriers, and the feeling of social belonging, which significantly boosted the credibility and depth of the study's findings.

3.13 Conclusion

In this chapter, we detailed the research methodology used to explore the sociocultural integration of international migrant students in South African higher education, particularly in Mbombela. By employing a qualitative research design and conducting in-depth interviews, this study delves into the lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of these students. The use of purposive sampling is intentional, as it allows us to engage with participants who are directly impacted by and knowledgeable about the topic. Moreover, the data collection tools were thoughtfully chosen to capture nuanced perspectives, while the thematic analysis approach facilitates the identification of recurring patterns and themes within the data. This chapter also discusses ethical considerations, ensuring that the research upholds the dignity, privacy, and consent of all participants. A comprehensive analysis of the connection between personal experiences and the more significant institutional and societal elements at work is made possible by this foundation.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The study's main objective was to examine the socio-cultural integration of international migrant students enrolled in South African higher learning institutions in Mbombela. This chapter will present the key findings from the detailed in-depth research interviews with international migrant students. The section will start by offering a demographic and economic profile of international students. Following that, the study highlights some of the major themes that emerged from the interviews. The themes identified in this study included language barrier and communication, xenophobia and discrimination, economic barriers and access to resources, social networks, lacking institutional systems, cultural difference and hybridity, and Caution and advice. The findings from this study were derived from a total of twenty participants.

4.2 Demography of the participants

The study consisted of twenty international students with 7 female and 13 male participants. Many of the interviewed participants for the study were male. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-31 years. They came from various institutions with each holding different types of qualifications. Most of the participants were undergraduate; there were 14 undergraduate and 6 post-graduate students. It is also important to note that all international participants are from neighboring countries within the SADC region. A table that shows the demographic and economic characteristics of the twenty international migrant students who took part in the study is provided below. It entails the participation number, gender, age, home country, and their level of education.

Table 4.1. Demographic characteristics of the target population

Participant Number	Gender	Age	Home Country	Level Of Education
1	Female	22	Zimbabwe	Undergraduate
2	Male	23	Zimbabwe	Undergraduate
3	Female	31	DRC	Undergraduate
4	Female	20	Lesotho	Undergraduate

5	Female	20	Kingdom of Eswatini	Undergraduate
6	Female	18	Kingdom of Eswatini	Undergraduate
7	Male	29	Kingdom of Eswatini	Postgraduate (Honors)
8	Male	23	Zimbabwe	Undergraduate
9	Male	21	Mozambique	Undergraduate
10	Male	24	Botswana	Undergraduate
11	Female	23	Zambia	Undergraduate
12	Male	21	Tanzania	Undergraduate
13	Female	27	Mozambique	Postgraduate (Masters)
14	Male	28	Lesotho	Postgraduate (Masters)
15	Male	27	Kingdom of Eswatini	Postgraduate (Masters)
16	Male	22	Zambia	Undergraduate
17	Male	22	Zimbabwe	Undergraduate
18	Male	23	Zambia	Undergraduate
19	Male	24	DRC	Undergraduate
20	Male	22	Namibia	Undergraduate

Note: (PN) - Participants Number.

When we look at the experiences of international migrant students, it is crucial to consider how various demographic factors like gender, age, home country, and education level can shape their sociocultural integration in South African universities, particularly in Mbombela. A notable gender gap was found among the participants, and it is important to recognize this disparity, as gender can significantly impact the integration journey. Female students, for instance, might have heightened worries about safety or face gender-based discrimination, which can affect how they feel about belonging and engaging in campus life. Gender also

plays a role in how peer support systems are formed and accessed, with some students possibly feeling isolated in environments dominated by one gender. Regarding age, younger students, usually undergraduates, may struggle more with adapting to independence, dealing with culture shock, and building new social connections. On the other hand, mature students, often postgraduates, might bring previous international experiences or life skills that help them cope better, but they could also encounter challenges in connecting with younger peers or juggling family responsibilities.

4.3 Themes

This sub-section of the study will provide a detailed description of the development of each of the emerging themes of this study. Themes, which are sometimes referred to as ‘concepts’ or ‘categories,’ can be identified at various stages: before, during, and after the processes of data collection and analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Before identifying data collection themes, a literature review is essential. These themes can be useful for linking your findings back to existing literature to highlight contributions (Mishra and Dey, 2022). Alternatively, they may serve as the foundation for your deductive study. When identified during data collection, themes often represent key expressions, terms, or ideas mentioned by respondents. However, in qualitative research, themes primarily emerge during the data analysis phase, which is where our attention will be directed to contributions (Mishra and Dey, 2022). This sub-section will offer a thorough overview of the data, laying the groundwork for the following discussion and interpretation of the findings.

Table 4.2. Themes and sub-themes

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Description
Barriers to Integration	Language barrier and communication Xenophobia and discrimination Economic barriers and access to resources	Individuals often encounter various challenges when attempting to integrate socially and economically into a new community.
Social Support Systems	Social networks	The influence of personal and institutional networks on either promoting or obstructing integration.

	Lacking institutional systems	
Cultural Negotiation	Cultural difference and hybridity	How people and communities adapt to and integrate various cultural practices, beliefs, and values in a new sociocultural environment.
Institutional Challenges	Lacking institutional systems	Shortcomings or weaknesses in formal institutions such as government, education, and healthcare can significantly affect the integration process.
Emotional and Social Impact	Xenophobia and discrimination Caution and advice	The psychological and social impacts of adapting to a new cultural environment can be significant, often involving feelings of exclusion and the development of various coping strategies.
Strategies and Adaptation	Caution and advice Social networks	Practical advice, strategies, and the significance of social connections play a significant role in successfully navigating sociocultural integration.

4.3.1 Language barrier and communication

One of the biggest challenges for international students can be language issues. These challenges can influence various aspects of a student's life, from social integration to academic success. Students coming from countries where the primary language of the host university differs are particularly affected by this language barrier. Most participants acknowledged that one of their biggest obstacles upon arriving in South Africa was language. This is what some participants had to say about their experiences with language barriers and communication:

“First it is the language barrier, sometimes I don’t get what the lecturer is saying and I have to consult more to have a better understanding because my home language is French” (PN3).

“The biggest challenge was adjusting to the language of instruction, which is mostly in English. Although I studied some English back home, it wasn’t enough for academic work at this level since my home language is Lingala,

but also do speak a bit of French since it's the national language back home in DRC" (PN19).

"Yes, when they speak Swati, I don't understand it properly, and Venda, Tsonga. Pedi and Zulu are okay. Tsonga and Swati are difficult. Swati is not as similar as people like to say it's similar to Zulu. It's not. Okay, I find it hard to understand there. For me, I find it a bit challenging to understand Swati" (PN4).

"Yeah, there have been a few language barriers" (PN2).

Two participants indicated that since they had been from a Siswati-speaking background at home since they were from the Kingdom of Eswatini did indicate that they had little to no problem settling in host institutions in Mbombela, but they did find it difficult to interact with other students who were not speaking Siswati:

"No, I had a challenge when I first arrived when I had to interact with people who spoke other languages besides Siswati" (PN7).

"No. but I am having issues with Tsonga and where I stay the majority are Tsonga, so I do get a hard time interacting with them but I'm learning" (PN5)

Some students did mention that they did however not many struggles with English but have a hard time adjusting to their social institutions outside the formal setting of their institutions this is what they had to say:

"The language barrier hasn't been too severe, as I am fluent in English. However, sometimes, especially in informal settings, I struggle with local South African languages like isiZulu and Setswana. It can make communication a bit challenging, but I try to learn a few phrases here and there" (PN11)

Many international migrant students tend to struggle to adapt to the academic standards and expectations of their host country's institutions. The participants noted that the expectations for assignments, deadlines, citations, workload, paper format, writing style, and overall communication differ significantly from what they are accustomed to. Consequently, their academic performance and learning capabilities are impacted. They often find it challenging to adjust to the new academic structure, and the workload can feel overwhelming. As a result,

it takes some students a while to get used to the academic practices in this new environment.

This is what some of the participants had to say with regard to the above statement:

“Writing assignments because they just give us assignments a lot which will be teaching us the way they want them. So, most of the assignments will return for you to rewrite them, or even if I did okay, like I thought they would teach us and like explain because even the assignment they didn't really explain as they did and they wanted it to be structured” (PN4)

“I didn't know university was like this and I failed one module already and on some modules. I'm also struggling because I'm not familiar with them as I was not used to the university set-up. The university is completely different from high school” (PN6)

“The modules in the course were new to me from my high school. I didn't do some of the things we had to learn in this course, but I managed to pull through. I had to carry some of the modules from the 1st year to the second year, this was a new environment for me, and I had to adapt to it then the different types of people and tribes and all that made my academic life this side a bit stressful, but I managed to pull through” (PN7)

The narratives of the respondents of the study did concur with what Vandevan (2010) and Mudhovozi (2011) found that language barriers hurt the development of transnational migrant students caused by alienated feelings from their social surroundings in the city of Mbombela. Furthermore, the experiences of the students are supported by the study of Wei (2007) that international students struggled with language barriers and as a result they had hurdles adjusting to new cultural norms due to lack of support.

Participants frequently pointed out that language is a major hurdle affecting both their everyday lives and emotional health. While discussions around language issues often paint migrants as lacking skills, the stories I gathered reveal a more intricate situation—language serves not just as a technical ability but also as a gatekeeper for inclusion and engagement. For instance, some participants shared experiences of being misunderstood or treated condescendingly because of their accents, highlighting how communication is deeply intertwined with power dynamics and perceptions. These narratives demonstrate that

language isn't merely an obstacle to overcome; it's a landscape where migrants' legitimacy and intelligence are continually being assessed.

4.3.2 Xenophobia and discriminations

The respondents of this study indicated that xenophobia is not widespread within their respective institutions; however, some students do exhibit hostility towards international students, often through name-calling and negative attitudes, as well as questions and remarks that suggest they are viewed as the 'other' and not like not treated like humans. They also expressed concerns about the situation outside the campuses, noting that there has been a rise in hostility from South African citizens towards foreigners, which makes them fear for their safety. This fear is compounded by the fact that some of their family members have been victims of recent xenophobic attacks in the country. Such incidents significantly impact their well-being, coping mechanisms, and overall functioning. South Africa presents a particularly intimidating environment regarding xenophobia.

“I do encounter discriminations and since I’m an open I turn a blind eye to it, I don’t care. If I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing. Whether you call me words like makwerekwere I don’t care” (PN3).

“Yes, I have experienced discrimination and stereotypes since I arrived” (PN1).

“When there was like xenophobia thing, and they wanted people to go back to their countries. Mostly it was not because they were attacking Sotho’s, most of the time they don’t include Sotho’s they include Zimbabweans, Mozambique’s and Nigerians that are, but those that know that I’m not from here sometimes remind me that yah you must go Back to Lesotho” (PN4).

“There have been a few though, there have been a few. Like I mentioned earlier where they automatically assume just because you're a foreigner, your family is into some illegal stuff or that thing where they just put you all under one umbrella where they assume if you're a foreigner, automatically you're somehow a thief or you're into something bad a bad guy” (PN2).

“I’ve encountered a few stereotypes, particularly when people assume I am struggling financially or that I’m unfamiliar with technology, which is not true. However, the experiences have mostly been neutral and not overtly discriminatory. I think most of it is due to people not understanding the diverse realities of African students” (PN12).

Another student added that:

Unfortunately, yes. There have been moments when I’ve been treated differently because I’m a foreigner. Some people assume that Zimbabweans are here to take jobs or cause trouble, which is frustrating and untrue” (PN17).

Looking at the abstracts above they all do concur with the relevant literature by Fokkema and Haas (2015), which provided more evidence to attest that discrimination against foreigners has detrimental effects on the transnational migrant students which often instills an element of fear, which hinders them to move freely around institutions of the host community which causes a delay in their integration process. The experiences of the respondents also align with what Lopez (2007) had to say about transnational migrant students having to face more cases of discrimination compared to their domestic counterparts. The body of literature by Lee and Rice (2007) vividly states that discrimination against transnational migrant students is a significant issue, yet there is little body of research done to it and researchers need to report more on the experiences of university students rooted in the host nation’s social context.

The experiences of discrimination, both subtle and overt, were a common theme throughout the data. Xenophobia often crept into everyday interactions, whether at work or in public spaces, leaving participants acutely aware of their visibility and differences. This theme ties directly into larger conversations about nationalism and racialization, where being foreign is often linked to feelings of inferiority or perceived threats. One participant shared a story about being suspected of taking jobs since she was a migrant, which underscores how racialized surveillance acts as a means of social exclusion. As a researcher, I see these narratives not as isolated events, but as clear signs of systemic othering that erodes migrants’ sense of safety and self-worth.

4.3.3 Economic barriers and access to resources

The notion of migration for education emanated from several challenges faced by the transnational migrant students from their home country. In numerous African nations, pursuing higher education can be expensive, and opportunities for financial aid or scholarships are often scarce. This poses a considerable challenge, leading many students to seek education in countries where tuition is more affordable or subsidized. When asked about their primary reason for migrating to further their studies in South Africa these are what the participants had to say:

“School fees is very expensive in Eswatini and looking the economic situations we citizens tend to struggle to pay for school fees so that what causes us to migrate to South Africa because the education this side is cheap and free” (PN6).

“The main reason was to access better educational opportunities. Mbombela has reputable institutions, and I felt that pursuing my post-graduate studies here would provide me with a broader perspective and more resources compared to Eswatini because we have less resources that side and the tuition is quite expensive. Not to mention the issue of getting admission at the university is very hard due to high competition and limited funding” (PN15)

“The primary reason for my migration It was for me to get better education because it can be really expensive in Swaziland” (PN5)

As much as some of the respondents expressed their grievances over high school fees of their countries, there were some who attested to their home come not being economically sustain them. This is what they had to say:

“Because basically my parents migrated for greener pastures” (PN2).

“The main reason was to access better educational opportunities. The political and economic situation in the DRC also made it challenging to pursue higher education there” (PN19).

“The primary reason for my migration it was the poor economy of Zimbabwe” (PN1).

“I applied numerous times until I decided to come to south Africa for greener pastures” (PN7)

Despite the numerous factors causing international migrant students to migrate to institutions of higher learning for education particularly institutions Mbombela. It is also good to note that economic instability hinders these students from studying in their home country. Also, these restrictions and policies hinder most scholarships and bursaries in South Africa to be awarded to these transnational migrant students because they are not South African citizens. That often leads to the students having to pay for accommodation and tuition from their own pockets, which often poses a huge problem, considering their home country’s economic state. The respondents lamented their grievances in this manner:

“I do not feel any sense, I don't feel a sense of belonging in this country because when certain opportunities are presented be it bursaries or scholarships even internships they are quite explicit that well they're not really interested with it but they do tell you in person that even though they might have included the a clause on supporting what is it called foreign nationals they would just tell you face to face I remember one time when I applied for a bursary there at UMP they had like a slot for foreign nationals to apply as well but then the man just said that just so you know they are only taking south African citizens so such instances and even for internships as I'm currently doing my final year looking for or finding an internship that caters or accommodates foreign nationals are quite few so that really does remind that really does remind you that you do not belong here so yeah I don't have any form of sense of belonging in this country” (PN1).

“International students are supposed to get first preference when it comes to accommodation on campus because there's off campus residents and they do not accept when you give them paperwork that you're a foreigner they'll expect you to come in the form of a bursary or some sort but then you're just

paying every month because it's from your parent's salary. So, it's kind of like makes you left behind with your studies and all that" (PN2).

Another participant added:

"For an example right now I'm self-funded because I can't get a scholarship, and most scholarships are for South Africans so it's a bit tricky finding a scholarship and yah like at home they are trying and I'm not the only child they have to support. They are also reluctant, and I remember when I came for accommodation, they told me that are you sure you're going to pay so yah it's a bit tricky" (PN4).

What this article retains from participants is that not only do transnational migrant students Have difficulties in securing a bursary or scholarships in the host country due to the institutions casting doubt on their ability to fully pay the entire balance of their accommodation and tuition fees for the academic year. The article concurs with what Oluwafeni (2012) indicated that the lack of funding, expensive tuition and discriminatory policies for both domestic and foreign students from SADC communities hindered the development and learning of transnational migrant students in South Africa. The stance taken by this study varies the significance of the interplay between structure and agency developed by Giddens (1984) on structuration theory. The theory argues that since structures shape the actions of agency in the case of this study, tertiary institutions' decision not to offer scholarships to transnational migrant students. The actions of the institutions then shape the way the students (agents) execute their actions. In essence, the students then know that for them to study in a foreign country, they need to pay for their accommodation and tuition from their own pocket. To sum up, the actions of the structures influence the agency to reproduce, which is what the theory of Giddens adopted in the study entails.

4.3.4 Social networks

The idea of social networks and relationships is essential for understanding how humans interact daily in society. The aim of this study was to highlight how socio-cultural integration is at higher learning institutions. We must understand that social networks are the web of social relationships and interactions connects individuals, groups, or organizations. These

connections can be personal, such as friendships or family ties, or more formal. It's important to understand how these social relationships influence behaviors, how information and resources flow through society, and how social capital is built and maintained. The participants had quite a mouthful to say about this theme and how they initiated and maintained relationships during their integration process. This is what they had to say:

“Well, the people I met here were really godsent because I managed to make friends easily even people from different tribes even though it was my first time with people from those tribes. I managed to get Tsonga and Pedi friends” (PN7).

“I’m hyperactive hence I didn’t have a problem making friends” (PN6).

“Yes, one of my bothers is also this side of the country and he is also a student at the university of Mpumalanga, and I also have made some friends as well especially those attend classes with” (PN5).

Some of the participants did indicate that they did have a hard time adjusting and making friends. This is what they had to say:

“People are not quite um comfortable speaking in English so yeah it's a bit difficult making friends” (PN1).

“At first, yes. It was a bit difficult because people tend to stick to their own social groups. But once I started joining student clubs and attending events, it became easier to connect with others” (PN18).

“It was difficult because I felt like an outsider. Most local students already knew each other from high school, so it took a while to break into social circles. However, attending events helped me make friends eventually, even though I’m introvert” (PN17).

“It wasn’t too difficult to make friends, especially with other international students. However, at first, I felt a little isolated from South African students because of the cultural differences. Over time, though, I’ve gotten closer to a few local students, and it's easier now” (PN8).

From the narratives presented above, there is a significant role socialization among students. Most of the participants indicated that they did however have a hard time when they tried to

initiate new relationships and that may have caused their stay in the host community to move at a slow pace because they were isolated in most cases because of reasons like feeling as outsiders. That is seen to be by what Rossenbourg (2016) as he stated that behavioral and lifestyle differences can make transnational migrant students feel anxious about adjusting and forming relationships. Another body of literature by Hopkins (2012) concurs with the above-represented narratives as it also confirms that many international students are eager to build relationships with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, however they often struggle with motivation at the right approach. The literature proves that indeed the narratives of the of the respondents depict delay for transnational migrant students to initiate any form of relationship in the setting of the host community.

Social networks, whether formal or informal, had a complex impact on the data. On one side, they provided essential emotional support, a platform for sharing information, and practical help. However, many participants also felt trapped within their own ethnic or linguistic groups, largely because there weren't enough inclusive spaces or opportunities for cultural exchange. While the solidarity within these communities acted as a way to cope, it also highlighted the lack of genuine cross-cultural interactions. This insight challenges the oversimplified views of migrant resilience by underscoring the need for inclusive social structures and the dangers of becoming socially isolated.

4.3.5 Lacking institutional systems

The following section discusses the institutional policies that are put in place by the higher learning institution to facilitate the operation of the institutions and also cater for the educational needs of the students both domestic and international. This section looks at how the participants commented on the institutional policies they assumed were in place or policies they assumed would have like the institutions to implement to make their stay in the host community's higher learning institution more accommodating to fill the void of being away from their country of birth. This is what the participants had to say about policies:

“When it comes to schools, I feel like it's not spoken much about this whole thing about having migrant students around and I feel like they should also have offices which cater for those migrant students and also consider the laws

about it when you're a migrant student moving to a different country for education" (PN2).

"An introduction of short course to assist international students" (PN5).

"Universities should open their offices that will be for be interact with the government of the different countries where the students are from" (PN7).

"The university must be open and have policies that support migrant students against discrimination and also teach students to support international students" (PN3).

"Institutions should offer orientation programs specifically for international students and create mentorship opportunities. Language classes or cultural exchange events could also help bridge the gap between local and foreign students" (PN16).

"Schools could offer more programs that focus on helping migrant students understand the local culture, academic expectations, and life in the city. I think universities could also create more opportunities for cultural exchange, so students from different countries can learn from each other. Having more mentorship programs would also be helpful, where senior students guide newcomers through the early stages of their studies because it would be great experience having someone who has been here a bit longer can make a big difference" (PN10).

According to the responses by the respondents it is safe to say that students feel a sense of void in the institutions as not a single participant has indicated a sense of appreciation by acknowledging any structure or policies within their respective institutions that has been playing a significant role to foster their initial and current adaptation in the institutions of higher learning. These findings are not new in this network of research, it confirms the studies done by Laudan (2016) which state that the implementation of inclusive policies and practices inside institutions and organizations is a crucial aspect of socio-cultural integration. Another body of literature by Garcia and Wei (2014) confirms the findings as it vividly states that if

educational institutions offer support structures like language courses and cultural exchange programs can help international students adjust to the sociocultural environment of their new country more easily. The literature concurs with the responses of the respondents. To sum up this section, the institutions inability to implement effective support structures for transnational migrant students made or makes their sociocultural integration process slow in the host community's institution. In response to despondence's plea, institutions of higher learning should cater the needs for of transnational migrant students, regardless of whether they are minority group or not.

A lot of participants shared that they felt lost or unsupported in the bureaucratic systems that are supposed to help them. Common frustrations included delays in paperwork, a lack of translation services, and agencies that just didn't respond. These gaps in the system highlight not only inefficiencies but also deeper issues of systemic neglect and exclusion. The data indicates that institutions often operate under the assumption that everyone shares the same cultural background or can manage on their own, which ends up sidelining those who don't meet these typical expectations. From the researcher's viewpoint, this raises serious questions about the very support frameworks that are meant to promote integration and justice.

4.3.6 Cultural differences and hybridity

Cultural differences between different countries exist. In some cases, some countries share similar cultural practices with other. For international students, the idea of cultural hybridity holds significant importance as they frequently navigate the intersection of various cultural identities balancing their home culture with that of the host country. International students often change their identity as they encounter various cultural norms, values, and lifestyles. Many find themselves blending elements of their home culture with that of their new environment. This journey can result in a hybrid identity, where elements from both cultures blend into their personal and social experiences. Since the study comprised of all international students, they all experienced different cultural shift when they first arrived in the country. Some had good cultural changes and others did not when they first had to South African cultural practices. This is how the participants expressed themselves when asked of cultural differences:

“The most noticeable difference is the relaxed and laid-back lifestyle in South Africa compared to Zimbabwe. South Africans are generally more outspoken and direct, which was something I had to adjust to. Additionally, I observed that the food culture varies, there's a strong emphasis on meat while in Zimbabwe, we tend to have more starch-based meals like Sadza” (PN8).

“The only difference is that here we have a variety of tribes where each tribe has its own cultural practices and in Swaziland we have only one tribe” (PN7).

“Um, South Africa has a lot of rights compared to where I'm from. Like young people, ok no, people in South Africa have more rights. We have a king, but it's democratic. But we don't have as many rights and stuff as you do in South Africa” (PN4).

“I would say the type of dressing that females wear, the ladies decide they wear quite explicit clothing if I can say that, yeah” (PN1)

“There are some noticeable differences in the way people live. In Mozambique, life tends to be a bit slower, and people are generally more relaxed. Here, in South Africa, everything feels more fast-paced, especially in the cities. I also noticed the difference in food; in Mozambique, we eat more rice and seafood, while here, the food culture is centered around meat, especially during braais” (PN9).

“In Zimbabwe, we eat more maize-based dishes, while here I've had to adapt to different foods. The most noticeable difference is the language. Although English is widely spoken, the use of local languages like Siswati and isiZulu in daily conversations can be challenging. Also, the food and social customs are different” (PN17).

“There are several differences, particularly around social customs. In Tanzania, we have a more communal way of interacting, and family and community play a large role in daily life. In South Africa, I noticed that people tend to be more individualistic, and socializing is often more formal, particularly when meeting new people” (PN12).

When asked whether they had adopted new cultural practices or retained the one from back home this is what the participants had to say:

“I will never adopt any cultural practice. I still practice the very same identity that I practiced before I migrated.

” (PN7).

“I haven't adopted any. I've actually retained the ones from back home and my cultural identity It is still the same” (PN2).

“I've retained the ones from home, I've already adopted them” (PN4).

“I would say I have retained my practices, I'm very much Shona I'm quite solid still solid Zimbabwean” (PN1).

There were some participants who indicated that they did adopt new cultural practices but however they indicate that they practiced hybrid cultural method where they also retained their home cultures as much as they tried to practice their home cultures. This is what they had to say:

“My cultural identity has become more complex. I've started to embrace some South African practices, such as greeting people with a handshake or a hug, which aren't as common in Lesotho. While I remain proudly Basotho, I've also woven elements of South African culture into my daily life. Living here has expanded my understanding of what it truly means to be African” (PN14).

“Before moving, I was deeply connected to my Zambian identity. However, my time in South Africa has expanded my perspective on what it means to be African. I take pride in being Zambian, but I've also gained a greater appreciation for the similarities and differences that both unite and distinguish us as Africans” (PN11).

“I've certainly embraced some new cultural practices. Before relocating here, I lived my culture without giving it much thought. However, since arriving, I've become more conscious of it, particularly when engaging with students from various backgrounds. I take pride in being Tswana and have developed a deeper appreciation for our traditions. I've also noticed how my culture relates to others, especially those from

different Southern African nations. This experience has enhanced my understanding of our diversity and interconnectedness” (PN10).

“I’ve picked up a few South African greetings and even learned some Tsonga, as it’s more commonly spoken back home alongside Portuguese. However, I feel more connected to my Mozambican roots now that I’ve experienced other cultures in a different African country” (PN13).

One participant affirmed that they had completely adopted the South African way of living completely, this is what they had to say:

“I have adopted any new cultural practices I can pretty say that I can pass since I came here when I was 9 years so I have adopted the South African way of living, especially here in Mpumalanga just like I said that the cultures between the two countries of Swaziland and South Africa is almost the same, here and there you can find people with different assumptions about people from Eswatini” (PN5).

Culture plays a significant role in shaping the lives of the individuals on a daily basis. The narrative above by the transnational migrant students accounts to the studies by different scholars. Not only do the narratives of the study concur with the literature. King and Raghuram (2013) attest to the second set of narratives from the respondents that the reasons behind the movement of international students can be very different, some are driven by the possibility of improving their experience of a foreign culture. Tschannen-Moran et al. (2015) implied acknowledging and valuing cultural variety in addition to the assimilation of minority cultures into the majority culture. Fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness among community members is essential for socio-cultural integration. By striving to understand each other's norms, traditions, and practices, individuals can cultivate empathy and respect for the diverse cultural differences that exist within their community.

People's actions are shaped by their cultural backgrounds, but they are not completely limited by them. They interpret, negotiate, and sometimes push back against cultural norms. Giddens suggests that in modern society, individuals are becoming more reflexive; they recognize cultural differences and use this understanding to guide their behavior. This reflexivity fosters a dynamic interaction among various cultural frameworks. The emergence of hybrid cultural

forms can be viewed as a product of the duality of structure. Individuals rely on their existing cultural repertoires (structures) while also blending elements from different cultures (agency), resulting in new hybrid practices. Cultural hybridity often arises as people navigate various cultural influences. Structuration theory indicates that while individuals are shaped by prevailing cultural norms, they also possess the agency to reinterpret and alter these norms, leading to the formation of hybrid identities. In our globalized world, people frequently create identities that are inherently hybrid, incorporating aspects from multiple cultural traditions. Giddens' idea of reflexive modernity is essential here, as it implies that individuals actively shape their identities through self-reflection, drawing from a range of cultural influences.

Participants found themselves navigating the tricky waters of complex identities, often feeling caught between different cultures. Instead of trying to completely fit in, many shared their experiences of cultural negotiation and hybridity—embracing new customs while still holding onto parts of their heritage. These blended identities weren't always met with open arms; they sometimes led to feelings of discomfort or even rejection from both the communities they moved into and their own ethnic groups. This situation challenges the simple ideas of cultural belonging and sheds light on the fluid, and often contentious, process of forming identity in the context of migration. It emphasizes the importance of understanding integration in a way that allows for cultural diversity.

4.3.7 Caution and advice

Moving to a new country means adapting to a different culture, language, and education system. These changes can bring about various challenges. By recognizing these obstacles and preparing for them, international students can better manage their academic and personal experiences, leading to a more rewarding and fulfilling journey. During the process of the interviews with the respondents, the constant urge from the respondents to warn or advice other transnational migrant students and the public about the potential hurdles they will go through when they migrate for education. Some of the respondents offered words of encouragement, while some lamented on the struggles that come with being an international student. The researcher noticed that a substantial number of the respondents looked quite happy to be getting a chance to highlight some of these cautions and advice to future transnational migrant students. This is what they had to say:

"I would encourage them to take an active approach to their studies. The education system may be quite different from what you're accustomed to. I found it beneficial to meet with my professors during their office hours to clarify any assignments. In many countries, they appreciate student initiative and independent learning, so don't hesitate to participate and ask questions in class. Additionally, take the time to learn about the local culture while also sharing your own. It's a mutual exchange. Understanding the customs, norms, and social etiquette of the new country will help you adjust and prevent misunderstandings. At the same time, remember that you offer a unique perspective and experience. People here are often interested in different cultures, so sharing elements of your background can be a wonderful way to connect" (PN14).

"I would say what can I say I would say take your time we take your time and allow yourself to get familiar with the way and the culture of the new country that you are stepping into. Don't lose yourself in the process of trying to fit into the culture um yeah just remain true to yourself don't deny your identity embrace your nationality um its more peaceful that way, you might receive some stereotype or discrimination but at the end of the day you're being honest with yourself and that feels good" (PN1).

"When you arrive here you get to experience different things there's the political, grove lifestyle you tend to forget about your roots and purpose of being here and my advice to migrants students is that must not be distracted by such because you'll find yourself doing a 3 year course over 5 years due to the distractions you get this side, there's too much freedom this side compare to home and there is a sense of being a jungle this side because you're on your own whereas in Swaziland everywhere you go you feel a sense of being at home because you might meet someone who will act as a parent to you, they will give you that parental hand and guidance everywhere you go even in a rental property you'll find those people who will take care of you as a child not because you're not their child they will parent you like any other child of the community. In Swaziland they live by the words "It takes a village to raise

a child" is a proverb that means that an entire community of people must provide for and interact positively with children for those children to experience and grow in a safe and healthy environment" (PN7).

"My advice for the students is that they must be open-minded and patient. The initial months can be tough, but as you find your rhythm, things will start to improve. Don't hesitate to seek help, whether it's for academics, making friends, or adjusting to life in a new country. People here are usually friendly, and there are support systems available" (PN12).

One respondent emphasized with caution that student must bear in mind that international migration for education is financial demanding. This is how they responded to the questions:

"They should stay focused and not do things they are not here for and don't switch their personalities to accommodate other people. Money is also a huge issue if you're an international student if your family is not well off you have tough time adjusting because almost everything you do needs money so if you don't have funding it becomes a problem" (PN6).

International students often encounter a distinct array of challenges while studying abroad, necessitating thoughtful consideration and proactive planning. The primary issues noted include cultural differences, language barriers, and unfamiliar academic standards, all of which can greatly affect their educational journey and mental health. Financial worries were also emphasized, as international students often face unforeseen expenses related to tuition and living costs, highlighting the importance of careful budgeting and financial awareness. Furthermore, adjusting to a new environment can be daunting, making it crucial for international students to access support services as soon as possible. The above-mentioned narratives shed light into the advice students are giving to other future transnational migrant students.

Interestingly, a lot of participants shared their advice for those thinking about migration, highlighting the importance of being prepared, having patience, and being critically aware of the challenges that lie ahead. This advisory tone not only showed a sense of agency but also

reflected a deep understanding of the structural pitfalls involved. It painted a picture of how peer knowledge can step in to fill the gaps left by institutional support. These insights serve as both coping strategies and subtle critiques of systemic failures. From a research perspective, this theme sheds light on how migrants create their own informal networks of survival and wisdom in response to the neglect they often face.

4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the study successfully identified and analyzed the key socio-cultural challenges faced by international migrant students in higher learning institutions in Mbombela, South Africa. Through in-depth interviews with 20 participants. The section started by offering a demographic and economic profile of the international students. It then followed to produce themes. Several prominent themes emerged, including language barriers, experiences of xenophobia and discrimination, economic hardships, cultural differences, and the absence of adequate institutional support. The findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to integration that these students face, highlighting the need for more inclusive and supportive measures to improve their socio-cultural experience and overall well-being in the host country.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of key findings regarding the sociocultural integration of international students in tertiary institutions in Mbombela, utilizing Giddens' Structuration Theory as a framework. Structuration Theory offers a perspective to analyze how international students, as active participants, engage with the social structures of the host community, navigating both supportive and restrictive elements in their integration process. The section will look at the theoretical contribution of the theory on this study. The analysis focuses on the continuation of the several key themes which are: language barrier and communication, xenophobia and discrimination, economic barriers and access to resources, social networks, lacking institutional systems, cultural difference and hybridity, and caution and advice

5.2 Language barrier and communication

International students struggle with language and communication (An and Chiang, 2015). International students also bring a distinct flair to the university but also face a number of challenges unfamiliar language being one of them. The literature stated above concurs with what the theory adopted for this study entails. According to Giddens, he states that society is a structure and there structural properties and elements that have both an enabling and constraining aspect of a human being. Language itself is an enforced part of the structural properties, according to Giddens language serves as a compelling illustration of how its structures comprising of the rules and norms function as both as the means of communication and the results of communicative interactions.

The ongoing use of language not only maintains its structure but also facilitates its evolution. Giddens (1984) attests that language itself is part of the societal structure. The social structure also shape individual interactions, the language then shapes the way the international migrant students interact. The international migrant students experience a significant change in different languages they are exposed to in the host community, which results in a pattern of the students drawing on these already established norms and practices to guide their behaviour and by doing so, the students then reproduce and transform the structures in the

host community as stated by (Gomez et al., 2014; Lee and Rice, 2008; Yao et al., 2019) that Building connections with peers who share similar international backgrounds, as well as those with comparable cultural experiences, can help students find their place and thrive in the host community.

Also Giddens (1984) acknowledges that modern countries and modern societies where people, including migrant students do encounter different language systems and the language systems limit access to social, economic and political opportunities. As much as international migrant students are taught in English yet some of them are French, Portuguese and Swahili, their ability to act within the societal structure of the host community is not that significant since they cannot change the societal systems which concurs with Gribble (2008) claimed that the desire to learn in a foreign language is one factor in student migration which is a big challenge for the students. The only way for migrant students to act accordingly is outside of the social systems of the host community due to the fact that the majority will only feel a sense of belonging when they are outside of the host community with people from their home country because they know that those people know them better than their current setting in the host country and also they are able to speak their home languages fluently without any barriers. When migrants go new environments they constantly reflect on their actions and they then use language as a way to make effect to their decisions and levels of interaction.

As the researcher focused on the sociocultural integration of international migrant students, he frequently consider how language influences their experiences. Language goes beyond mere words; it serves as a vital means of understanding, belonging, and self-expression in a new setting. Yet, for many students, language can also pose a significant barrier that complicates their integration. In the initial phase of this study, Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory was employed to help the researchers grasp the dynamics at play. This theory illustrates how individuals both shape and are shaped by the social systems they engage with. For migrant students, language acts as a tool for navigating their new environment while also serving as a framework that affects their interactions with others.

Through interviews and personal interactions, the researcher observed that language barriers impact students in two significant ways: First, in terms of social isolation, students frequently

struggle to form relationships due to their inability to express themselves fluently or grasp cultural nuances, leading to feelings of loneliness. Second, regarding academic challenges, it is evident that many students find it hard to engage in class discussions or finish assignments because of their limited language skills.

When it comes to communication, students put in a lot of effort to tackle these challenges. Some enrolled in language classes or practiced speaking with friends, while others turned to translation apps for help. Their determination reminded me of Giddens' concept that individuals actively shape their experiences, even when faced with limitations imposed by social systems. Meanwhile, the host community also contributed to the integration process. Lecturers who used straightforward language and classmates who exhibited patience played a crucial role in bridging the gap. This interaction between migrant students and the environment of their host community illustrates that communication is not just a one-way street. It requires a collaborative effort that involves understanding and adaptation from both parties.

Language presents both challenges and opportunities for international migrant students. While it can pose obstacles, it also facilitates deeper connections and cultural exchanges. As researchers, educators, and members of diverse communities, we need to acknowledge the significance of communication in fostering integration. The researcher does agree with Giddens' Structuration Theory's stance on language barrier and communication as it highlights that even small actions such as speaking slowly, using straightforward grammar, or demonstrating kindness can lead to significant positive changes in the lives of international migrant students.

5.3 Xenophobia and discriminations

Xenophobia and discrimination were identified as major structural barriers within the host community. Participants shared their experiences of bias, which often arose from stereotypes related to their cultural or national identities. These prevailing attitudes affected how international students felt about their safety and sense of belonging in Mbombela. The statement concurs with the literature by MacGregor (2014) supported this assertion, noting

that transnational migrant students in South Africa encounter challenges such as xenophobia. Also, according to Wang et al. (2001; 2012) and Zhang-Wu (2018), various factors, including xenophobia, hinder their learning, growth, and development, leading to significant difficulties in their host environments.

Deeply rooted xenophobic attitudes and discriminatory practices in higher education often pose major obstacles to the integration of international students. These issues are evident in policies and the unconscious biases of both staff and local students. For instance, this study found that institutional processes often prioritize local students when it comes to resource distribution, while international students may be subtly marginalized by a curriculum that lacks cultural inclusivity. Giddens suggests that these structures are dynamic, and maintained through ongoing practices. As a result, xenophobia endures, as it is continually reinforced in daily interactions and institutional norms.

According to Giddens (1984), discriminatory practices are sustained by social norms and a lack of attention from institutions. For example, participants pointed out instances of bias in housing distribution and interactions with peers. Nevertheless, students took the initiative by building alliances with other marginalized groups and reaching out to international student organizations, actively challenging discriminatory narratives. The structuration theory states that if international migrant students live in a xenophobic area they also reflect high levels of reflexivity to ensure that they are incorporated into the mainstream society which can be through a change of language, identity, and culture to try and blend into the society of the host community.

The agency of international students is crucial in navigating and potentially challenging these structural barriers. Many international students actively work to integrate by forming networks. Through their efforts, they confront discriminatory practices and encourage cultural exchange. A practical example of this is when students from various backgrounds collaborate on academic or social projects; by doing so, they disrupt xenophobic stereotypes and promote mutual understanding. This aligns with Giddens' perspective that individuals, although constrained by structures, can reflexively influence and change those structures over time.

The concept of duality of structure helps us understand how macro-level institutional policies interact with micro-level social interactions. On a larger scale, policies designed to foster inclusivity, like anti-discrimination laws or cultural competence training for faculty, can transform the structural environment, making it more welcoming for integration. On a smaller scale, the interactions between local and international students often mirror and reinforce wider societal attitudes. Positive exchanges can help reduce xenophobia, while negative experiences can deepen exclusionary practices, creating a cycle between structure and individual actions. MacGregor (2014) backed up this claim, stating that the difficulties faced by transnational migrant students studying in South Africa include lack of friends and xenophobia. The ongoing presence of xenophobia and discrimination can also be seen as a reflection of larger societal issues in Mbombela, such as economic rivalry, limited resources, or historical patterns of exclusion. These macro-level influences shape how local students and staff view international students, who may be seen as competitors or outsiders. Structuration theory emphasizes that these societal attitudes are not static; they are constantly reinterpreted and acted upon within institutional contexts. By tackling these underlying issues, institutions can disrupt the cycle of perpetuating exclusionary norms.

The researcher for this study has always been intrigued by how individuals from diverse backgrounds adapt and integrate into new environments. For many international students, this journey can be quite challenging. Through his investigation, the researcher has identified xenophobia and discrimination as major obstacles to sociocultural integration. Numerous students recount experiences of feeling marginalized due to their accents, cultural traditions, or even their clothing choices. These instances of exclusion, whether deliberate or not, foster a sense of "otherness" that can isolate students and diminish their confidence and engagement.

The researcher does concur with what Giddens is explaining in the Structuration Theory which provides a useful lens for understanding issues faced by migrants. It also highlights that individuals who are international students are not merely passive victims of societal norms. Rather, they engage with these norms, occasionally questioning and transforming them. Nonetheless, these students encounter institutional structures such as policies, cultural expectations, and power dynamics that frequently sustain discrimination. For instance, subtle

biases within academic groups, insufficient support for cultural diversity, or a lack of representation in student leadership all contribute to shaping their experiences.

The researcher did have a discussion with many international students who shared their experiences. They explained how they navigated new cultural expectations while striving to maintain aspects of their own identity. Some students felt alone because they were treated differently, while others found motivation to forge friendships despite the challenges. These narratives provided the researcher with insights into the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society, as described by Giddens (1984). A significant finding in this research is that xenophobia and discrimination often arise from misunderstandings or stereotypes. Local communities may sometimes perceive international students as outsiders. However, these students also contribute fresh perspectives, knowledge, and cultural richness, creating opportunities for mutual learning and growth.

5.4 Economic barriers and access to resources

Economic barriers from their home countries often show up as limited financial resources, which restrict international student's ability to engage fully in both academic and social activities. Also, financial hardships are also common, limiting social activities and causing stress due to increased living costs, tuition costs, and financial aid eligibility restrictions as stated by (Beaver & Tuck, 2021). Giddens (1984) suggests that structures like financial systems or educational policies can either enable or limit individual agency. In this context, insufficient funding serves as a limiting structure. International students may struggle to afford textbooks, housing, or cultural events that could help them integrate. This exclusion can lead to feelings of alienation and deepen cultural divides within higher education institutions, as students find it difficult to meet the socioeconomic expectations of their new environment.

From an agency perspective, international migrant students often show resilience and creativity in overcoming various barriers. Some may take on part-time jobs, seek scholarships, or engage in informal support networks to cope with their financial challenges. These actions illustrate the "agency" aspect of structuration theory, where students actively respond to the structural limitations they encounter. However, these coping strategies might

lead to decreased involvement in extracurricular activities or social events, which can further hinder their ability to integrate into the socio-cultural environment of their host institutions. Institutions are not merely passive in this dynamic however, they represent structural elements that can either worsen or alleviate these economic challenges. For example, tertiary institutions in Mbombela might offer targeted support programs, such as financial aid or mentoring services, designed to promote inclusion. However, the availability and effectiveness of these initiatives can differ based on institutional policies and resources. According to Giddens (1984), structures can both enable and constrain, and poorly designed interventions may unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities by favoring certain groups over others.

Economic barriers are not standalone issues as they intertwine with various sociocultural factors like language, identity, and social networks. For international students, the lack of access to resources frequently results in social exclusion, as they may not have the financial ability to engage in cultural and academic activities. The statement concurs with (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013) social relationships that provide access to institutional resources and knowledge of cultural norms. This exclusion deepens feelings of alienation and hinders the development of meaningful relationships within the host community. Structuration theory illustrates this relationship, demonstrating how economic limitations at a structural level translate into sociocultural challenges at the individual level, thereby sustaining cycles of marginalization.

When examining the experiences of international migrant students, the researcher was struck by the intricate relationship between economic challenges and resource access that influences their sociocultural integration. Having witnessed the migration process firsthand within the host community, he recognized the significant inequalities that often go unnoticed. By applying Anthony Giddens (1984) structuration theory, he aimed to understand how these students navigate their new surroundings and the systems that both support and hinder them. Economic barriers frequently serve as invisible obstacles for international students. Many come from families that have made considerable sacrifices to send them abroad, hoping for a brighter future. However, upon arrival, these students encounter high tuition fees, limited financial aid options, and difficulties in finding part-time work due to visa restrictions or

discrimination. These challenges not only impact their finances but also restrict their participation in cultural and social activities, further isolating them from their host communities.

Structuration theory (1984) illuminated the fact that these students are not merely passive victims of their situations. Giddens posits that structure and agency are interconnected, meaning that while systems like educational policies or economic conditions can influence behavior, individuals also possess the ability to act and shape these systems. For instance, international students often establish support networks within their cultural communities, sharing resources and advice to cope with economic difficulties. These actions reflect resilience and agency, even in the face of restrictive structures. Access to resources be it financial, social, or informational is another vital element. Institutions may promote integration programs but often neglect to address the fundamental needs of international students. Without affordable housing, mental health support, or career counseling, many students find it challenging to fully integrate. This disparity underscores the structural inequities present.

This research has shown the researcher that integration is a reciprocal process. While international students need to adjust to their new surroundings, host communities and institutions also need to implement structural changes to effectively welcome and support them. Utilizing structuration theory, he recognized how the interplay between structure and agency can create opportunities for change. The researcher was moved by the bravery it takes to leave one's homeland and the strength needed to establish a new life in a different place. By highlighting these issues, he aims to honor the struggles and resilience of migrant students while advocating for systems that foster their success.

5.5 Social networks

Social networks play a dual role in the integration process, serving as both facilitators and limitations. For international students, institutional networks like student organizations or mentorship programs provide established frameworks that shape their interactions. These networks consist of rules (cultural norms and expectations) and resources (access to knowledge, support, and opportunities). As highlighted by scholars Briggs and Ammigan

(2017) peer-to-peer campus-supported programs generally target the entire student body, there has been a growing focus on the interactions among international students. In Mbombela, institutions may host multicultural events or implement buddy systems to encourage interaction among various student groups. However, the success of these initiatives largely depends on how actively students participate, highlighting the agency that Giddens discusses in his structuration theory.

The role of international students in shaping their sociocultural integration is significant. By engaging in or even establishing new social networks, these students demonstrate their capacity to adapt to or reshape the cultural dynamics of their institution. Giddens (1984) notes that forming informal peer groups or utilizing digital platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook enables students to share experiences and tackle challenges together. These activities highlight how agency functions within and alters the structural landscape, fostering micro-environments of cultural exchange and mutual support among students from diverse cultural backgrounds within the institution.

The integration process requires ongoing negotiation of cultural norms as stated by (Hofstede, 2011). International students often encounter institutional frameworks that favor dominant cultural practices, which can restrict opportunities for cultural exchange. At the same time, their agency can push back against these limitations, such as by organizing cultural festivals or advocating for more inclusive policies. This illustrates the duality of structure: while students are influenced by the institution's norms, their involvement can also transform those norms. For instance, the persistent advocacy of international students in Mbombela may result in greater institutional acknowledgment of their diverse needs.

The integration process requires ongoing negotiation of cultural norms. International students often encounter institutional frameworks that favor dominant cultural practices, which can restrict opportunities for cultural exchange. At the same time, their agency can push back against these limitations, for instance, by organizing cultural festivals or advocating for more inclusive policies. This illustrates the duality of structure: while students are influenced by the institution's norms, their involvement can also transform those norms. The continuous

efforts of international students in the city of Mbombela may result in greater institutional acknowledgment of their diverse needs.

While there is potential for agency, various structural barriers frequently impede the sociocultural integration of international students. Differences in language, prevalent stereotypes, and institutional policies can limit students' access to wider networks. These obstacles illustrate the restrictive nature of structure in Giddens' theory. For example, international migrant students in institutions of higher learning in Mbombela may struggle to engage in specific student organizations if communication primarily takes place in the local language. The ongoing presence of these barriers highlights the necessity for institutions to thoughtfully assess and modify their structures to promote true inclusivity.

Social networks serve as essential tools for addressing academic, social, and cultural challenges. Through these platforms, students forge connections that aid their adjustment to new surroundings and strengthen their sense of belonging. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory provides a lens for examining the dynamic interplay between individual actions and societal structures. It illustrates how students exercise their agency to interact with established networks while also impacting and transforming those networks. For migrant students, social networks are not merely venues for passive engagement; they are also arenas for negotiating identities, cultural norms, and institutional practices.

Formal networks at universities, including student organizations, academic groups, and cultural associations, create structured opportunities for integration. These platforms enable interactions among peers, faculty, and local communities, providing essential support for both academic success and cultural adjustment. Informal networks, such as friendships and peer groups, are equally important, offering emotional support and practical help in everyday life. The process of sociocultural integration involves a mutual adaptation. As students adjust to their new surroundings, they also contribute their cultural viewpoints, enhancing the social fabric of the institutions they become part of. Social networks act as bridges, linking diverse cultural backgrounds and promoting inclusivity within academic communities. By understanding the relationship between individual agency and structural factors in the development and utilization of social networks, we can better comprehend the varied

integration experiences of international migrant students. Analyzing these interactions allows institutions to discover ways to better support their students and foster a more inclusive and culturally aware environment.

5.6 Cultural differences and hybridity

Cultural differences are among the most significant factors affecting the experiences of international students as Brislin et al. (2006) states that being mindful of cultural differences and challenges related to cultural integration. These differences can be seen in language barriers, varying social norms, and distinct educational expectations. For instance, students from collectivist cultures might find it challenging to adjust to the individualistic approach of institutions in Mbombela. Structuration theory sheds light on this tension, viewing it as a structural constraint while also emphasizing the students' ability to navigate and negotiate these differences. Through their interactions in both academic and social settings, students adapt and reinterpret their cultural norms, which in turn contributes to the evolving nature of institutional culture.

Cultural differences were evident in the unfamiliar lifestyles of local students, with some international students struggling to adapt to South African cuisine. They also noted that local students appeared more westernized and seemed less connected to their cultural traditions. Despite these cultural differences, students found that their academic performance remained unaffected; however, they did experience a sense of culture shock. Additionally, many students recognized that to thrive in this new environment, they needed to preserve their own cultural identity while also appreciating South African culture, without letting it alter who they are. Several participants expressed a tendency to reject the new culture, becoming almost nationalistic about their own. While cultural norms and institutional practices influence the experiences of international students, structuration theory by Giddens (1984) highlights their ability to navigate these challenges. Students engage in classroom discussions, social events, and community activities, leveraging these opportunities to express their identities and adjust to new cultural settings. For example, an international student may organize cultural festivals, creating a space for dialogue that connects local and international viewpoints. This not only supports personal integration but also enhances the overall cultural landscape of the

institution. And also the literature by Crowne (2013) that international migrant students engage with the new culture during their travels

Hybridity arises as a key result of the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency. When students from various cultural backgrounds interact, they forge new, hybrid cultural forms that merge aspects of their home cultures with those of the host country stated as stated by (Berry, 2005). Giddens (1984) theory emphasizes that this hybridity is not a passive phenomenon but is actively shaped through daily practices. For example, students may create a shared dialect that fuses expressions from their native languages with local slang, showcasing a process of mutual adaptation and cultural co-creation.

The sociocultural integration of international students in Mbombela is influenced by the structures of tertiary education. Policies that encourage inclusivity, like language support programs, mentorship initiatives, and cultural exchange activities, can act as helpful tools. However, the success of these programs relies on the students' willingness to participate and the institutions' ability to respond to feedback. Structuration theory emphasizes this mutual relationship, where institutional changes arise from both top-down initiatives and bottom-up actions.

The researcher decided to concentrate on the idea of cultural hybridity, which involves blending various cultural identities, and its significance in the lives of migrant students. To better understand these experiences, he referred to Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. His concepts regarding the interplay between individuals and societies appeared ideal for grasping the balance between adapting to a new culture and preserving one's identity. Structuration theory posits that while individuals operate within the confines of cultural and social systems, they also possess the ability to transform these systems through their actions. This dual perspective enabled him to investigate how international students adjust to their new surroundings while also influencing them. The researcher had conducted interviews with students from diverse countries studying at higher education institutions in Mbombela. Their narratives highlighted an ongoing process of negotiation. For instance, one student shared how they embraced local customs to connect with peers but still maintained traditions from home when with friends from their own country. These experiences illustrated hybridity—a

fusion of old and new cultures. It became clear to him that students were not merely absorbing the prevailing culture but were actively blending elements from various cultures to forge something new and distinctive.

Cultural differences emerged as both challenges and opportunities. Common struggles included language barriers, unfamiliar social norms, and feelings of isolation. However, for many students, these challenges turned into chances to grow and connect with others. One student shared that learning a new language boosted their confidence and helped them forge friendships with locals. Another student recounted how they introduced their classmates to traditions from their home country, fostering moments of cultural exchange. As the researcher examined the experiences of international migrant students through Giddens (1984) theory, he observed that these students were influenced by the cultural systems they encountered while also actively shaping their own social environments. They adapted to societal expectations but also sought ways to express their identities. This dual process of adapting and transforming was crucial for their sociocultural integration. Through this research, he discovered that integration is not a one-way street. It involves dialogue and exchange, where both the host culture and the migrant students impact one another. These insights deepened my appreciation for the resilience and creativity of international students. They demonstrated that cultural differences can be more than just obstacles; they can serve as opportunities for growth, understanding, and innovation, paving new pathways for belonging in a diverse world.

5.7 Caution and advice

A key element of Giddens' theory (1984) is recognizing the structural constraints that influence individual behavior. For international migrant students, factors like institutional policies, cultural norms, and language barriers frequently serve as obstacles. In Mbombela, the absence of inclusive support systems such as insufficient language assistance programs or poor cultural orientation can impede students' ability to adjust to their new surroundings. These structural challenges not only affect their academic success but also limit their chances for meaningful social interactions, which are essential for successful integration.

Giddens (1984) emphasizes that, despite structural constraints, individuals have the power to navigate and reshape their environments. In the institutions of higher learning in Mbombela, international students are actively looking for ways to adapt, whether by building social networks with peers from similar backgrounds or engaging in cultural exchange by trying to adapt to the lifestyle and culture of the host community. This ability to act is evident in small yet meaningful negotiations, like embracing new cultural practices or using technology to overcome communication barriers. However, their capacity to exercise this agency depends on the resources and institutional support available to them. As (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg and Chagnon, 2009) attest that institutional support mechanisms in place is crucial for different cultures transition for the international migrant students' ability to adapt.

The dynamics of structuration are also apparent in peer relationships as it concurs with (Gomez et al., 2014) that building connections with peers who share similar international backgrounds can help students find their place and thrive. Interactions between local and international students are influenced by existing social norms, but these interactions also reshape those norms over time. Promoting collaborative activities like group projects or cultural events can help dismantle stereotypes and foster mutual understanding. These small-scale exchanges play a role in larger shifts in campus culture, illustrating the cyclical relationship between structure and agency as proposed by Giddens.

While promoting integration, institutions need to be wary of superficial or tokenistic methods. Structuration theory cautions against the belief that changes in surface-level interactions will necessarily lead to deeper structural transformations. A perfect scene to describe the narrative would be celebrating international student days without confronting systemic problems such as housing discrimination or unequal access to financial aid may further alienate students. True integration demands addressing the structural inequalities that sustain exclusionary practices.

The structuration theory by Giddens' (1984) emphasizes the importance of a long-term commitment to changing institutional frameworks. This means incorporating inclusive practices into the fundamental operations of institutions of higher learning in Mbombela. Implementing policies like hiring a diverse faculty, weaving global perspectives into the

curriculum, and encouraging open discussions about cultural diversity can foster lasting change. By aligning institutional objectives with the real experiences of international students, higher education institutions can evolve into environments where both structure and individual agency work together to promote sociocultural integration. Giddens (1984) structuration theory highlights the necessity of a balanced approach that acknowledges the limitations set by institutional structures while also empowering international students to take on roles as agents of change.

To sum up this section, Giddens' structuration theory (1984) provides a useful lens for examining the experiences of international migrant students in higher education institutions in Mbombela. It highlights that while structural barriers may impede integration, students have the ability to navigate and reshape their surroundings. The effectiveness of these efforts is closely linked to the resources and support offered by the institutions.

For meaningful integration, higher education institutions need to go beyond superficial initiatives and confront systemic challenges head-on. By promoting inclusive policies, fostering authentic cultural exchanges, and addressing structural inequalities, these institutions can cultivate an environment where students are not only supported but also empowered to drive positive change. Giddens' theory (1984) emphasizes the significance of this dual approach, demonstrating that real progress is found in the interplay between structure and agency. By embracing these changes, the institutions can evolve into spaces where diversity is not just tolerated but celebrated, enabling both local and international students to excel academically, socially, and culturally.

It's crucial to recognize the diversity among international migrant students. They hail from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, resulting in varied experiences of integration. Simplifying their experiences or making broad generalizations can lead to misleading conclusions. Rose-Redwood et al., (2018) attests to this statement when they stated that Migrant students' networks showcase a rich cultural diversity, shaped by their geographical origins and the dynamics of the host country. Also, Students hailing from similar cultural backgrounds tend to create tight-knit communities, whereas those with diverse origins gain wider perspectives within their networks, which enhances their cross-

cultural competence. To tackle this issue, we as researchers should take an intersectional approach, considering factors like gender, ethnicity, language skills, and previous educational experiences.

5.8 Conclusion

This study has examined the sociocultural integration of international students in tertiary institutions in Mbombela through the lens of Giddens' Structuration Theory. The theory provided a valuable framework for understanding how international students, as active agents, interact with the social structures of the host community, navigating both supportive and restrictive elements that shape their integration process. By applying Structuration Theory, the study highlighted the interconnectedness of agency and structure in addressing key themes such as language barriers and communication, xenophobia and discrimination, economic challenges and resource access, the importance of social networks, institutional gaps, cultural differences, and hybridity. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the need for cautious, yet proactive advice to create enabling environments. Overall, this analysis underscores the theory's contribution to understanding and addressing the complexities of sociocultural integration for international students.

CHAPTER SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

The research utilized a qualitative approach design and conducted data collection with in-depth interviews consisting of twenty (20) international student participants who were sampled utilizing purposive sampling technique. The study employs the structuration theoretical framework to analyze the phenomena in greater detail. By considering the perspectives and experiences of the participants, the study has shed light on the challenges of navigating academic, social, and cultural environments in a new country. By also exploring the factors that either support or impede integration, this research enhances our understanding of how institutions and communities can create inclusive and supportive environments for international students. This section will summarize the main conclusions, discuss the implications of the findings, and offer recommendations for stakeholders to improve the integration process. It will also address the study's limitations and suggest potential directions for future research.

6.2 Summary of key findings

The challenging conditions in international migrant students home country often compel them to relocate to a host destination in another country is believed to offer better circumstances. In the context of this study, it utilizes a structuration theory by Anthony Giddens. Which vividly explains that the sociocultural integration process of international students is shaped by society and also the duality of structure. Language emerged as a significant challenge for international students, aligning with Mudhovozi (2011), who noted that language barriers hindered the progress of transnational migrant students. Although English was the main language of instruction, many students, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, faced difficulties with fluency and academic terminology. Furthermore, local languages like siSwati and isiZulu, frequently used in social and community contexts, created additional hurdles for integration. The absence of organized language support programs intensified these challenges, often resulting in feelings of exclusion and frustration. Effective communication during group projects and social interactions was also affected by these linguistic differences.

Language barriers present a significant challenge for international students around the world. This aligns with the findings of Robertson et al. (2000), which indicate that language issues are often the most common problems faced by international students. Participants in various studies expressed that language difficulties hindered their ability to adapt to the university environment. This supports the conclusions drawn by Yates and Wahid (2013), who noted that language proficiency is a key factor contributing to the adjustment challenges faced by international students in their host countries. For many, these language barriers impacted their learning experiences and academic success. Participants reported that language made it particularly hard for them to complete assignments, comprehend lectures, and engage in class discussions and oral assessments. As mentioned by the students, there were instances when lecturers used the local language during lessons. One respondent in Singh's (2013) study noted that lecturers often spoke in local languages to provide examples, which inadvertently excluded foreign students, despite the presence of these students in the classroom. Additionally, some students struggled with both English and local languages, particularly those from countries like Democratic republic of Congo (DRC), where English is not the primary means of communication. This observation supports Moslehpour and Chou's (2004) assertion that language barriers predominantly affect international students from countries with different communication mediums compared to those of the host university. In such situations, international students often felt lost and marginalized when another language was used for communication.

Language barriers not only impact the learning processes and academic performance of international students but also hinder their ability to communicate and socialize with local students. Local students often prefer to use their native languages when interacting, making it challenging for international students to connect with them. These barriers impede international students' efforts to make friends and engage with locals (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Wright and Schartner (2013) note that the difficulty international students' face in communicating effectively in the host country complicates their socialization and integration with local peers. The study also revealed that language can serve as a tool for discrimination. Students reported that local students often use slang in their native language and engage in name-calling to gossip and exclude them. This observation is echoed by Singh (2013), who points out that international students, similar to immigrants in South Africa, face stereotyping

and are subjected to various derogatory names, such as ‘amakwerekwere’. As a result, international students often feel offended and unwelcome at their host institutions.

Many participants reported experiences of xenophobia and discrimination, which varied from subtle exclusion to outright hostility. MacGregor (2014) supported this observation, noting that transnational migrant students in South Africa face challenges such as xenophobia. Negative stereotypes about foreign nationals, often shaped by wider societal narratives, led to strained relationships in both academic and social settings. Female international students pointed out instances of gender discrimination, adding to their difficulties. Although some students discovered support and solidarity within diverse peer groups, xenophobic attitudes sometimes hindered their full engagement in campus life.

Xenophobia has impacted most of the participants, either directly or indirectly (Zar, 2009). In this context, students noted that they have not experienced or anticipated xenophobic attacks on the campuses of their respective higher learning institutions in Mbombela. However, they expressed emotional and psychological distress due to the recent xenophobic violence occurring in South Africa particularly in Johannesburg. Students shared that this situation affected them personally, as some of the victims had their family members, relatives, or friends in different parts of South Africa. The prevailing atmosphere of xenophobia in South Africa also creates anxiety for international students from other African nations studying there, as they worry about becoming targets of such hostility (Zar, 2009). The study's findings indicate that international students struggle to find accommodation, especially when it comes to securing on-campus housing. As a result, many students have no choice but to seek private housing options.

The perspectives shared by students indicate that the experiences of international students encompass both positive and negative aspects. Most participants recognized that studying in South Africa, especially at higher education institutions in Mbombela, offered numerous benefits that outweighed any occasional negative experiences. Many students reported positive interactions with others; they learned local languages, explored diverse cultures, and discovered new places. Importantly, the institution's strong reputation enhances their status back in their home countries. They also noted that the exposure to a transnational environment

at tertiary institutions in Mbombela helped them develop a sense of responsibility and discipline, equipping them with valuable skills to tackle challenges independently. Overall, students tend to become more independent, self-sufficient, adaptable, culturally aware, multilingual, and much more (Yates and Wahid, 2013).

Cultural differences emerged, particularly regarding the unfamiliar lifestyles of local students, and some international students found it challenging to adapt to South African cuisine. They also noted that local students appeared more westernized and seemed less connected to their own culture and traditions. Despite these cultural differences, the students reported that their academic performance was not negatively impacted; however, they did experience a sense of culture shock. Furthermore, students recognized that to adapt to their new surroundings, they needed to preserve their own culture while also appreciating South African culture, without letting it change their identity. Many participants expressed a tendency to reject the new culture, becoming almost nationalistic about their own (Ward et al., 2001).

Participants raised concerns about the lack of institutional support systems that cater to their specific needs. While some institutions offered basic services like academic advising and counseling, these were often understaffed or too generalized, failing to tackle the unique challenges faced by international students. There were limited programs aimed at providing cultural orientation, conflict resolution, or legal advice regarding immigration issues. Students urged for more proactive and comprehensive efforts from institutions to enhance integration and well-being.

International students encountered various levels of cultural adjustment. Common challenges included getting used to local food, dress codes, and social norms. Those from cultural backgrounds similar to South Africa reported smoother transitions than those from more distinct cultures. Some participants pointed out experiences of culture shock, especially concerning social practices and attitudes towards gender roles. Nevertheless, cultural events and institutional initiatives to celebrate diversity were valued as opportunities to showcase and learn about different traditions. Additionally, the theme of cultural hybridity emerged positively, with students finding ways to blend aspects of their own cultures with those of Mbombela.

To adapt and thrive, the affected students sought various ways to turn their situations around and fit in. Their coping strategies included working diligently, attending extra language classes, forming friendships with local students to better navigate the institution, and utilizing the programs and services offered by the school. According to the findings, despite the challenges they faced, life continued. Most international students made progress in their studies and adjusted to the institutional environment.

6.3 Recommendations

The collective power of international students, through the creation of advocacy groups or cultural organizations, can effectively combat xenophobia. These groups often serve as support networks while also acting as platforms for institutional change, advocating for policy reforms and promoting intercultural dialogue. This aligns with Giddens' idea that agency is not solely an individual characteristic but can also be collective, increasing the potential for structural change. Their initiatives demonstrate how marginalized groups can exert influence, transforming institutional norms and contributing to broader societal movements toward inclusivity.

To foster sociocultural integration, it is essential to address the economic challenges faced by international students through policy changes and institutional practices. Giddens' theory suggests that change can happen when individuals take action to challenge and alter existing systems. In Mbombela, empowering students to participate in decision-making and advocate for inclusive policies can help disrupt the cycle of structural inequalities. By recognizing the connection between individual agency and structural factors, stakeholders can create an environment that not only tackles economic barriers but also promotes holistic integration for international students.

Recognizing the potential stressors that come with adapting to a new cultural and academic environment, institutions should prioritize mental health resources tailored specifically for international students. This could involve hiring culturally competent counselors and establishing peer support groups where students can share their experiences and challenges.

Initiatives led by peers, such as buddy programs or student-run cultural clubs, can also offer ongoing emotional and social support, helping international students forge connections and gain confidence as they navigate their new surroundings.

Tertiary institutions should create thorough policies that emphasize the sociocultural integration of international students. This involves setting up orientation programs specifically designed for these students, which cover local cultural norms, academic expectations, and available support services. Institutions should also encourage cultural sensitivity training for staff and faculty to effectively meet the unique needs of a diverse student body. Additionally, mentorship programs that connect international students with local peers or faculty can help bridge cultural divides and foster a sense of belonging.

Establishing cultural hubs or student activity centers focused on intercultural exchange can provide a space for interaction between local and international students. Regular events like cultural festivals, workshops, or discussion panels can showcase the diverse backgrounds of international students while inviting locals to engage with and learn about different cultures. These activities should be thoughtfully designed to celebrate cultural diversity, challenge stereotypes, and promote mutual understanding.

Partnerships between tertiary institutions and local communities in Mbombela can improve the integration experience for international students. By encouraging local organizations and businesses to offer internships, volunteering, or cultural immersion programs, international students can find ways to connect with the wider community. Institutions can also collaborate with local families to create homestay programs or cultural exchange events, giving students a richer understanding of South African culture while allowing them to share their own traditions.

The situation of international students requires significantly more attention from the institution to enhance their experience. While the university should play a role in helping these students adjust and feel at home, much of this adjustment relies on the individuals themselves, who must actively engage with the challenges they face. It's essential for students to take the initiative and work towards adapting and thriving in their new environment. A

primary concern highlighted by students in this study was financial hardship. The institution should standardize registration fees, ensuring that all students pay the same amount upfront for any outstanding fees before classes begin. Additionally, international students should have access to the same scholarship and campus job opportunities as local students. It would be beneficial if the university could offer more scholarships and a broader range of job options specifically for international students. Furthermore, the institution should consider lowering the international student levy, as many students expressed that it does not provide them with any benefits and only adds to their financial burden.

Institutions should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their integration programs by gathering feedback from international students and collecting data on participation and outcomes. Conducting frequent surveys or focus group discussions can help pinpoint areas for improvement and address emerging challenges. This ongoing process ensures that integration efforts stay relevant and responsive to the changing needs of the international student community. To enhance our understanding, it's essential to conduct a combined study that includes both native and international students. This is important because native South African students were not part of this research, and their perspectives are crucial for a more comprehensive view of the sociocultural integration of international migrant students in Mbombela. Additionally, expanding the study to include students from various higher education institutions across South Africa could lead to more widely applicable conclusions. Therefore, the recommendations of the study are summarized as follows:

- i. Tertiary institutions should create thorough policies that emphasize the sociocultural integration of international students.
- ii. Institutions should also encourage cultural sensitivity training for staff and faculty to effectively meet the unique needs of a diverse student body.
- iii. Higher education institutions should establish cultural hubs or student activity centers focused on intercultural exchange can provide a space for interaction between local and international students.
- iv. Institutions should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their integration programs by gathering feedback from international students and collecting data on participation and outcomes.

6.4 Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that international students face several challenges, including language barriers, xenophobia and discrimination, economic difficulties, and limited access to resources and social networks. In South Africa, these students encounter significant hurdles as they try to adapt to their new environment, particularly due to linguistic, cultural, and social obstacles. For non-English-speaking students, language barriers can severely impact both academic success and social integration. The absence of structured language support programs worsens these issues, often leading to feelings of isolation. Furthermore, many international students experience xenophobia and discrimination, which can manifest as negative stereotypes and exclusionary actions, causing strain in relationships and psychological distress. Cultural differences also play a role in their adjustment, as students may face culture shock and find it challenging to balance their own traditions with those of the host country. The lack of strong institutional support, such as cultural orientation and conflict resolution services, hinders their ability to adapt effectively. Nevertheless, many students strive to maintain their cultural identity while also embracing aspects of the host culture, and they appreciate initiatives that encourage diversity. It is crucial for institutions to enhance their efforts in addressing these challenges to promote better integration and well-being for international students.

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Appendix i: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Demographic Information

1. What is your age?
2. Where were you born?
3. What is your race?
4. What is your home language?
5. What is your current level of education?

Key Questions

6. What was the primary reason for your migration?
7. What arrangements did you make for your education when you made the decision to move?
8. Did you receive any support from family, friends, or organizations when you arrived?
9. How helpful were these support systems in your initial adaptation to the institution?
10. What academic challenges have you encountered since you started studying here?
11. Have you experienced any difficulties in making friends or being accepted by your peers?
12. What cultural differences have you noticed between your home country and here?
13. Have you adopted any new cultural practices or retained practices from your home culture?
14. How do you perceive your cultural identity now compared to before you migrated?
15. Do you feel a sense of belonging in this country? Why or why not?
16. Have you faced any language barriers in your educational or social interactions?
17. Have you experienced any discrimination or stereotypes since you arrived?
18. How do you think your experiences as a migrant student will influence your future aspirations?
19. What advice would you give to new migrant students who are just arriving?

20. How can schools and communities better support migrant students in their integration process?
21. Is there anything else you would like to add or any other experiences you think are important to share?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

Appendix ii: Ethical Clearance



Ref: UMP/Shabangu/09/2024

Date: 21 October 2024

Vuyiswa Shabangu [201875861]

School of Social Sciences

FACULTY OF ECONOMICS, DEVELOPMENT AND BUSINESS SCIENCES

University of Mpumalanga

RE: APPROVAL FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE FOR THE STUDY:

Investigating the Sociocultural Integration of International Migrant Students enrolled in South African Higher Learning Institutions in Mbombela

Reference is made to the above heading.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Faculty of Economics, Development and Business Sciences) UMP, approved the ethical clearance of the above-mentioned study.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e., Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach, and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/ modification prior to its implementation.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be stored securely in the school/division for a period of 5 years.

The Ethical Clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter, Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

A handwritten signature in black ink.

Prof. Ogujiuba Kanayo

Chairperson: FREC,

Faculty of Economics, Development and Business Sciences

University of Mpumalanga

Appendix iii: Informed consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Lucious Vuyiswa Shabangu (201875861). I am a Masters candidate studying at the University of Mpumalanga, Mbombela Main Campus. The title of my research is: **Investigating the sociocultural integration of international migrant students enrolled in South African higher learning institutions in Mbombela**. The aim of the study is to (*investigate the sociocultural integration of international students enrolled in tertiary institutions in Mbombela*). I am interested in interviewing you to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- The interview will take about (1 hour).
- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

I can be contacted at: School of Social Sciences, University of Mpumalanga, Mbombela Main Campus. My Email address is: 201875861@ump.ac.za;

Cell: 0760179149; 0695489054

My supervisor is Dr John Mhandu who is located at the University of Mpumalanga, School of Social Sciences, Mbombela Main Campus. His details are as follows:

Name: Dr John Mhandu

Email: john.mhandu@ump.ac.za

Phone number: 013 002 0525

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

DECLARATION

I..... (*full names of participant*) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire. I understand the intention of the research. I hereby agree to participate.

I consent / do not consent to have this interview recorded (if applicable)

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

.....

Appendix iv: Turnitin Similarity index

Thesis

by LUCIOUS VUYISWA SHABANGU

Submission date: 23-Jan-2025 03:58AM (UTC+0200)

Submission ID: 2569468505

File name: 5800_LUCIOUS_VUYISWA_SHABANGU_Thesis_166239_798086766.docx (1.3M)

Word count: 40783

Character count: 244020

Thesis

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