

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Relational experiences of meaning making as a pathway to academic adjustment among African international university students in South Africa

Relasionele ervarings van betekeniskepping as 'n pad na akademiese aanpassing onder Afrika internasionale universiteitstudiante in Suid-Afrika

Shingairai Chigeza¹ & Angelina Wilson Fadji²

Article history: Received 10 February 2025 | Accepted 9 April 2026 | Published 18 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Relationships constitute a core aspect of psychological wellbeing models. More so, research from different sociocultural contexts has shown that relational experiences provide a form and shape for an individual's worldview. By applying meaning-making models, this study aimed to explore relational experiences of meaning making that contribute to academic adjustment among African international students at a university in South Africa. In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 undergraduate and postgraduate students. Meaning making through relational experiences among African international students was underscored by their concern for the wellbeing of close family members and in cross-cultural social interactions that imposed a coherent worldview on the students' lives. Such worldviews provided direction and motivation to forge ahead in their educational pursuits, while acknowledging the importance of intrapersonal connections in this process. Additionally, their social contributions enabled them to establish connections with the broader community. In terms of theoretical contributions, our study showed how relational experiences of meaning making enable international students to forge a sense of identity and purpose, all of which are essential for academic adjustment. Our findings also have implications for wellbeing interventions at higher education institutions.

KEYWORDS

Relationships, meaning making, African international students, South Africa

OPSOMMING

Verhoudings vorm 'n kernaspek van sielkundige welstandsmodelle. Verder het navorsing uit verskillende sosiokulturele kontekste getoon dat relasionele ervarings die vorm en aard van 'n individu se wêreldbeskouing beïnvloed. Deur betekenisvormingsmodelle toe te pas, het hierdie

- 1 Dr Shingairai Chigeza, Senior Lecturer; Research Psychologist: Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria, South Africa. Email: shingairai.chigeza@up.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0003-0539-091X.
- 2 Dr Angelina Wilson Fadji, Senior Lecturer: Psychology, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. Email: angelina.wilsonfadji@dmu.ac.uk. ORCID: 0000-0002-3093-0538.

studie ten doel gehad om relasionele ervarings van betekenisskepping te ondersoek wat bydra tot akademiese aanpassing onder Afrika internasionale studente aan 'n universiteit in Suid-Afrika. In-diepte-onderhoude is gevoer met 30 voorgraadse en nagraadse studente. Betekenisskepping deur relasionele ervarings onder Afrika internasionale studente is beklemtoon deur hul besorgdheid oor die welstand van naaste familieledes en deur kruiskulturele sosiale interaksies wat 'n samehangende wêreldbeskouing in studente se lewens gevestig het. Sulke wêreldbeskouings het rigting en motivering verskaf om voort te gaan met hul opvoedkundige strewe, terwyl die belangrikheid van intrapersoonlike verbindings in hierdie proses erken is. Daarbenewens het hul sosiale bydraes hulle in staat gestel om verbindings met die breër gemeenskap te vestig. In terme van teoretiese bydraes toon ons studie hoe relasionele ervarings van betekenisskepping internasionale studente in staat stel om 'n gevoel van identiteit en doel te vorm, wat noodsaaklik is vir akademiese aanpassing. Ons bevindings het ook implikasies vir welstandintervensies by hoëronderrysinstellings.

SLEUTELWOORDE

Verhoudings, betekenisskepping, Afrika internasionale student, Suid-Afrika

Introduction

The international migration of African students to other countries to pursue a better quality of education and quality of life is a quite common occurrence. As part of their study experience, these students form different relationships and have a myriad of interactions, what we refer to as relational experiences. Besides other benefits, these relational experiences contribute to how individuals make sense and meaning of their world (Martela & Steger, 2016). In South Africa, the majority of international students are from other African countries, especially those that actively promote internationalisation (Nyerere, 2022). South Africa participates in intra-Africa academic mobility schemes that are aimed at promoting higher education cooperation between different countries. These schemes aim not only to improve skills and competences of students, but also to develop and retain high quality human resources for Africa's development (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2016; Nyerere, 2021; Sehoole & Lee, 2022). There is a general intra-regional migration of students within the African continent for study purposes, but South Africa is by far one of the most popular destinations.

The first major survey done among international students in South Africa showed that the country had the highest number of international students enrolled compared to all other African countries, hosting nearly 43,000 foreign students in 2014 (MacGregor, 2014). Although this number is actually reported to have decreased from previous years (72,875 in 2012) due to xenophobic attitudes, hostile attacks, strict government policies, and other adjustment challenges, South Africa remains the highest ranked educational hub in Africa (Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Khumalo, 2017; Mittelmeier et al., 2019). In 2023, the number was 45,000 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). Regardless of its cultural and socio-political challenges, South Africa is still the most preferred destination for many African international students, mainly because of the

strong reputation of its higher education system, a greater availability of technology, a wider range of research and innovation opportunities, affordable fees, and affordable cost of living (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017; International Education Association of South Africa, 2020; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021).

The growth of student sojourner numbers has led to an increased awareness of the importance of investigating the wellbeing of this group, since research has widely demonstrated their difficulty integrating into academic and social environments (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Chigeza et al., 2013). Most of the research pertaining to African international students coming to South Africa has focused on their experiences and challenges in terms of financial difficulties, prejudice and discrimination, and xenophobic attacks (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Sing, 2016; Tella, 2018).

Important to wellbeing is an individual's ability to create order, make sense and establish some form of stability in their personal worldview and lived experience – that is the process of meaning making. For African international students, this process might be even more critical as they do not only enter a new phase of their lives, they also have to adjust in an unfamiliar sociocultural context (Lashari et al., 2018). To engage in this process of meaning making, relationships have been identified as key (Delle Fave et al., 2011, 2016; Wissing et al., 2020). As much as previous studies have addressed specific challenges in the adjustment process of African international students (Tella, 2018), there is a gap in research to understand relationships that foster meaning making as pathways towards academic adjustment.

Literature review: Experiences of international students

Upon arrival at campuses, international students are usually socialised into the institution's culture through orientation initiatives and tour guides (Chigeza et al., 2017; Fletcher-Anthony & Efthymiou, 2017). These initiatives help the students to familiarise themselves with the new environment and become aware of the institution's espoused cultural values, history, and mission statements (Linley, 2017). Despite these social programmes, international students have still been found to be at greater risk of mental illness during their time at university compared to their host peers, as they face different adjustment issues, both on and off campus (Forbes-Mewett, 2019; Hyams-Ssekasi & Caldwell, 2018).

The adjustment process for international students is governed by various individual and environmental factors that also influence the meaning-making process, for instance, the individual's ability to engage with the host context and experience a sense of belonging and satisfaction (academic and social) (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Rabia, 2016; Rivas et al., 2019). These factors (individual and environment) in turn determine the individual's level of adjustment and positive experience during their academic journey (Bastien et al., 2018; Lashari et al., 2018; Vasilopoulos, 2016). Most African international students at South African universities report suffering marginalisation or alienation, and having experienced psychological and psychosocial problems like homesickness, loneliness, low self-esteem, immense culture stress and adjustment problems (Chigeza et al., 2017; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021; Mutongoza & Olawale, 2023; Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Weber, 2016).

Meaningful connections influence not only the individual's degree of interaction with the host country, but also their level of acculturative stress, academic and social satisfaction, and sense of belonging and engagement – all of which are important contributors to their level of adjustment (Bastien et al., 2018; Lashari et al., 2018; Vasilopoulos, 2016). According to Mason (2017b), international students are more comfortable with and reliant on social relationships (with friends and family) than on professional ones. Thus, social relationships are at the core of international students' meaning-making processes, and it is interesting to note how they aid in students' social and academic adjustment.

Theoretical framework

Meaning making

According to Steger (2012), meaning making refers to the individual's capacity to identify order, coherence and purpose in life, as well as to set, pursue and attain goals that could result in a sense of contentment. The three-dimensional model of meaning (coherence, purpose and significance) is proposed by most scholars (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016; Mason, 2013; Steger et al., 2021). Coherence emanates from a cognitive theoretical component and is about a sense of comprehensibility, while purpose builds on the motivational component and expresses having a sense of directedness, being enthusiastic about the future, and pursuing future-oriented goals in life. The third facet, significance, speaks to the worthwhileness, importance and value one attaches to life.

University students are said to be in constant search of meaning as they begin to define and redefine their identity through exploration, experimentation, and connection (Negru, 2012; Li et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022; Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2017). Experiencing meaning at this stage enables them to manoeuvre through the immense changes, experiences and challenges that they have to face while creating a coherent worldview (Ryff & Singer, 2006; Steger, 2009).

Regarding the search for meaning among South African university students, Mason (2017a) emphasizes that students experience meaning as beyond the self to include relationships, education, and religion. Mason (2017a) also highlights how students begin to pursue prosocial quests that transcend intrapersonal needs and contribute to the development of community and family (Mason, 2017a). Nell (2014) found that relationships, hope of achieving own plans and goals, personal growth and development, were the most significant ways through which South African university students made meaning of their lives. These results corresponded with those of Wissing et al. (2014) who found that relationships – particularly with family – were the most important source of meaning among university students in South Africa.

Relational experiences of meaning making

Relationships, which are usually identified as any form of connection one has with another person or a group of people, have been found to contribute significantly to the wellbeing of individuals (Wissing et al., 2019). Studies have shown that most people who report to be happy and satisfied with their lives usually have positive relationships with people around

them (Kansky, 2018; Tough et al., 2017; Wissing et al., 2019). Relationships – both social and professional – are vital, as they offer support, interpersonal emotional regulation, companionship, motivation and mentorship, all of which improve one's social, emotional and psychological wellbeing (Williams et al., 2018).

After leaving their homes, family and social networks, international students struggle to create relationships that will facilitate their adjustment and adaptation to university life (Williams et al., 2018). In a study by Kasese-Hara and Mugambi (2021), international students in South Africa reported that social support from academic staff and other students was vital for their adjustment. A review of previous literature has confirmed that relationships are one of the most important sources of meaning making among university students (Khumalo, 2017; King & Hicks, 2021; Wissing et al., 2019; Wissing et al., 2020). In their study, Wissing et al. (2020) demonstrated that relationships are important sources of meaning because they lead to intrapersonal gains like growth, competence, mastery, satisfaction and inner wellbeing (Wissing et al., 2020). According to Lashari et al. (2018), social networking and friendship formation are important sources of meaning making among international students as they facilitate interaction and connections, which are important in satisfying emotional, personal, and academic needs.

We argue that relational experiences as sources of meaning making among international students might allow them to understand their new world through the lens of emerging social relationships while retaining the identities linked to the relationships in their home country. Experiencing purpose could emanate from goal-directed behaviours that are relational in nature (Wilson et al., 2021) and serve to preserve or protect close others. Whereas the significance component of meaning might be derived in relationship as an end itself. When students believe that a certain social relationship is important for their wellbeing, relationships like it are seen as significant as an end in themselves.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no research is available on how African international students at South African universities experience relational meaning making. The current study therefore sought to explore these students' relational experiences of meaning making and its contribution to the students' adjustment at a South African university. Findings from this study are critical because while South Africa is a major destination for migrant African students, the country is also known for its xenophobic attacks and at times hostility towards foreigners. It is important to understand how African international students navigate such a space through relational meaning-making experiences to ensure they adjust and succeed academically. The present study centred on the question: what are the relational experiences of meaning making that contribute to academic adjustment among African international students in South Africa?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to provide an in-depth understanding of African international students' relational experiences of meaning making as pathways to their academic adjustment.

Research context, sampling, and participants

The research was conducted at a South African higher education institution situated in the Gauteng province. It is one of Africa's top universities and one of the largest contact universities in South Africa. Altogether 19 undergraduate and 11 postgraduate (Honours, master's and PhD) students were purposively selected for this study. The students were from the humanities, engineering and education faculties. The group consisted of 18 males and 12 females, and their mean age was 23 years old ($SD = 3$).

The main criterion for inclusion in the study was that students had to be originally from another African country but enrolled at the University. To qualify for inclusion, the participants had to have studied at the University for at least one year, but they may not have lived in South Africa for more than three consecutive years. African countries represented in the study included Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Swaziland. Due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, snowball sampling (a chain-referral sampling method) by Creswell and Creswell (2018) was used to recruit students, and interviews were conducted both over Zoom and face to face. Advertisements on online platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp were also used to create awareness about the project.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the relevant board (the University's Ethics Committee for Human Research in the Faculty of Humanities (HUM049/0320)). The study was explained to the participants and their written informed consent was obtained. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences, and the final study findings were presented using pseudonyms so as to ensure participants' anonymity.

Data collection

In-depth interviews were used to understand the relational experiences of meaning making that fostered the academic adjustment of African international students. Interviews were conducted in English by trained research assistants using an open-ended interview guide as a guideline for probing. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, some interviews were conducted virtually by means of telephone and Zoom calls, but some were done face to face, with each full interview lasting approximately 40 minutes to an hour.

Data analysis

The responses to the in-depth interviews were analysed using thematic analysis based on the six steps suggested by Clarke and Braun (2014). This method enabled the researchers to identify patterns of meaning and to interpret, describe and report on various aspects of the themes that emerged from the findings. Themes were inductively extracted. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, there was prolonged engagement in the field and the researchers continuously checked with participants if their views had been accurately captured. Two experienced coders analysed the data independently. Researchers kept reflexive notes throughout the study to reduce the possibility of biased findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lub, 2015). Our positionality, as

both foreign researchers, allowed us to acknowledge and understand participants' experiences. Study participants were identified according to a set code pattern, for example, P14 M UG, which indicates the participant's number (P14), gender (M), and level of education (UG: undergraduate).

Findings and discussion

In response to the research question concerning relational experiences of meaning making that contribute to academic adjustment among African international students in South Africa, four themes emerged: (i) sense of purpose; (ii) a connected coherent whole; (iii) sense of self; and (iv) social contribution. In the meaning-making process, relational experiences among African international students centre around the individual's ability to find purpose and identity. This is further enhanced by their understanding of the world as a coherent whole because of the opportunity to give back and contribute to the social space around them.

Theme 1: Wholeness and purpose

Making meaning through relational experiences among international students was grounded in their concern for the wellbeing of close family members. Such concern was linked to their experiencing of a sense of purpose. Building on previous research, our study shows that internalised processes such as a sense of purpose are developed through the fostering of existing relationships with close family members and forging new ones by interacting with the host country nationals. This finding is critical because although relational challenges are common for international students, they also provide an avenue for developing important indicators of functioning, such as a sense of purpose.

I talk to my family just to hear how is it, how everyone is doing at home ... you know that thought will linger on in your mind, you not as happy as when you hear that everyone is doing fine, everyone is doing well ... the state of my family does influence like my whole being to a certain extent. (P6 M UG)

I speak with my in-laws and my parents, I will be happy too, when I know everything is going fine with them it motivates me to continue with my studies. (P20 M PG)

Beyond the need for support and social interaction, international students explained that their concern for the wellbeing of others and for maintaining existing connections was linked to their own feelings of being motivated, having a sense of direction and purpose. It would seem that their close relationships allowed this group to focus on what was important amidst the challenges of life as a foreign student. Relationships created a pathway towards adjustment and prevented them from feeling lost in the unfamiliar space they had found themselves.

The findings of our study confirm the views of Damon et al. (2003) who purport that sense of purpose involves having a stable intention to accomplish something meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self. In a similar vein, Sharma and Yukhymenko-Lescroart (2018), as well as Yukhymenko-Lescroart and Sharma (2023), argue that sense of purpose plays a crucial role in college students' study persistence and

eventual attainment of a degree. For African international students in this study, clarity and purposefulness resulted from their maintaining of relational interactions that reminded them of their reason for being in South Africa. Being assured of their family's wellbeing brought feelings of contentment and allowed the study participants to focus on their educational pursuits.

In order to aid their adjustment within the university space, international students seemed to purposefully draw on their social ties, which guided them to manage the challenges of university life and establish their place as international students. It became apparent from our study that relational experiences serve as an important compass when individuals find themselves within a space that requires an adjustment of their worldviews.

From a theoretical perspective, according to Martela and Steger (2016), a sense of purpose is linked to the understanding of meaning. However, the current study shows that relationships form a crucial part of this process. Wissing et al. (2020) found that relational domains of meaning in life were predominant in a sample of South African and Ghanaian adults. In their study, motives for relationships as a source of meaning were linked to support felt, personal growth experienced, the experience of satisfaction, happiness, joy, pleasure, inner state of wellbeing, or a sense of competence and mastery (Wissing et al., 2020). Among African international students, relational experiences that allow for meaning making are those experiences that support the finding and fulfilling of a personal purpose.

Theme 2: A connected and coherent whole

This theme suggests that instead of focusing on the individual, our study revealed that it was the person in relation to others that provided participants with a coherent worldview. This is because relational meaning-making processes came with social interactions that provided a coherent worldview for African international students. Fostering a clear and rational worldview provided a way to interpret their current lived experiences and to forge ahead in their educational pursuits. For Participant 11, meaning in life was attributed to seeing others as part of a larger “whole” that included the individual, while responses from the other participants confirmed their wish to interact with fellow students.

But my view regardless of where we are coming from. The best way to make the society better, make meaning out of life is to relate with the other as an integral part of you.
(P11 F PG)

These people around added colour to my life here in South Africa and gave me a family away from home. (P3 M UG)

You need like friends to interact with, different kinds of people and also just getting to know what other people know and how they value life and also the different culture that are around the place. (P8 M PG)

It's the very fact that I'm a human being, I think that's very important and then like I have people around me, that I'm able to interact with, making friendships and interacting with people it give meaning to me. (P7 M UG)

Participants in the study highlighted the significance of cross-cultural interaction and considered it important in shaping a coherent worldview. The interactions were a source of “colour” and “value” for international students. The connotation of colour and value points to the fact that relationships fashioned the way these international students saw the world, what was important and perhaps even what made life worth living.

Despite the fact that the students came to South Africa with different goals and educational aspirations, the pathway to their adjustment and achievement of such goals was linked to relationships that added colour and value to their lives. Glass and Westmont (2014) as well as Rivas et al. (2019) agreed and found that social interactions were very effective in promoting feelings of belonging, which often mediate positive academic and social outcomes.

Other studies – in contrast – report international students as having poor relationships and cramped social contact with host students (Chigeza et al., 2013; Chinyamurindi, 2018; Hale et al., 2020). Apart from hampering the bridging of cultural divides, limited contact has in the past resulted in international students facing academic and personal challenges (Glass et al., 2015; Hale et al., 2020). The results of the current study are in stark contrast with the latter and instead resonate with the findings of Anthony et al. (2005) and Stacey (2007) who indicate that people influence one another by how they perceive one another; thus, patterns of meaning and relating are propagated or limited by how people act in each given moment. In our study, it seems that both African international students and the citizen students created relationships that were not defined by their status of “foreigner” and “citizen”. This in turn allowed for meaningful positive reciprocal interaction. One participant even mentioned that “*South African people are very friendly*” (P11 F PG) and another described how they felt like equals with citizen students.

I would say there's been a lot of support, like especially from the university, like very formal support structures. You are as comfortable as students who are from here. There isn't a difference and difficulty. (P1 F UG)

Theme 3: Intrapersonal connectedness

In addition to the external interactions that formed part of African international students' experiences of meaning, there were instances where students looked within themselves during this process of meaning-making. By asking questions about values, significance and purpose, students engaged in introspection, explored what was important to them and found motivation to continue with their educational pursuits. Our study demonstrated how African international students manage to thrive by constantly reminding themselves of who they are and what their priorities are. This deeper connection with their inner identity is linked to their reflecting on future prospects of finding good job opportunities, provided that they succeed at university.

What I value the most you know because when I look at, into like why we came here, what was my main priority to come here, all I can see is that it's just been a form of constant growth in the sense of being. (P29 M PG)

So often I remind myself why I am here, and I tell myself that I need to do what needs to be done so that I finish, I came here for this PhD, and I need to focus on it, look for other opportunities elsewhere. (P5 M PG)

African international students were apparently able to adjust to their new environment by reminding themselves of their reasons for coming to South Africa. Such motivations provided a way for them to thrive through meaning making, echoing a sense of purpose as purported by Steger (2012). Even when conditions were difficult in their host country, African international students' ability to make meaning by connecting with their inner purpose seemed to provide a pathway towards adjustment.

I want to thrive as much as I can, it gives me the sense of meaning to why exactly I'm here because that's my initial priority to why I moved to this country, I'm essentially here in South Africa for academic reasons, that's very important to me. (P25 M UG)

Trying to make sense it is like a driving force, it's like it's difficult but it's worth it because I get a good education and I also get good job opportunities. (P10 M PG)

In line with our findings, Li et al. (2022) suggest that university students use this period of adjustment as a time to define and redefine their identity and future selves – that is, what we label as meaning-making processes, based on intrapersonal connectedness. Our findings also correspond with those of Chigeza et al. (2017) and Newsome and Cooper (2016), who mentioned that the unique struggles international students face can sometimes lead to a deeper awareness of and connection with the self. Wissing et al. (2020) maintain that intrapersonal motives for experiencing meaning are linked to an inner sense of competence and opportunities for personal growth. The need for growth was emphasized in our study, as students wanted to succeed and achieve the goals for which they had come to South Africa.

Theme 4: Social contribution

Our findings demonstrated a relational dimension of meaning making through connections with the larger community in which students find themselves. We refer to this as a form of social contribution, where they engage in activities to improve the wellbeing of others while establishing new connections. From a theoretical perspective, Keyes (2003) defined social contribution as a facet of social wellbeing, where an individual engages in activities to promote the wellbeing of their own community or society. What is unique to our study is that such relational experiences and social contribution proved to be key for meaning making among international students in South Africa. Typically, most international students would be more concerned about achieving their personal and/or educational goals, but our study shows that to experience meaning in life, students went beyond a focus on the self. Students mentioned that they were involved in a variety of activities on campus as well as in the larger community, as an act of giving something back to the host institution and country.

I am involved in political and social activism on campus together with other citizen students, I like sharing ideas and to give voice to the voiceless, this is very important to me. (P19 M PG)

One of the most important things in my life is making the world a better place to live.
(P9 M UG)

We interact and make friends with South African students as we do community service.
Things that we do, in terms of giving back initiatives, they connect a lot with some of the
things that I'm involved in back home and give meaning in my life. (P2 M PG)

The above excerpts show that the international students in our study made meaning by actually striving to improve the quality of life for South African citizens in their various give-back activities.

According to Mahali et al. (2018), relational experiences are at the core of wellbeing, and one such relationship involves the self and the community. Our study found that interactions on this level – in the form of social contribution – indeed form part of the meaning-making process. Moreover, Lillyman and Bennet (2014) claim that international students who make meaning through sharing their personal experiences and knowledge with the host country, as well as through networking with citizens, succeed academically.

Conclusion

As a novel contribution to studies centred on the experiences of African international students, maintaining relational interactions with family members (as a primary source of connections) provided a sense of direction and purpose to the lives of the participating African international students, reiterating Steger's (2012) theoretical proposition. Nurturing these relational ties and sustaining regular interaction with relatives in their countries of origin aided the students' contentment and motivation to pursue and attain their educational goals. An applied contribution of the study is that psychological support services and interventions offered to international students who are struggling to focus on their studies can capitalise on reminding these students of their relationships with family members and re-affirming the goals that formed part of their initial decision to study in South Africa. A positive education approach could be embedded into teaching and support services in a way that fosters wellbeing while promoting academic achievement.

Our findings further reflect that adjustment comes through creating a coherent worldview, based on interactions with members of the host society. For African international students, meaning in life was enhanced when they viewed themselves as part of an integrated whole and did not identify or define themselves in terms of their status as foreigners. This outlook allowed positive cross-cultural interactions with citizen students. An integrated worldview provided not only motivation to forge ahead with educational pursuits, but also instilled a sense of belonging, which in turn assisted them to adjust to their new learning environment. Our study suggests that the connotations of "value" and "colour" allowed international students to feel part of a larger whole; hence they were able to cope with the demands of their new lives. It also seems to contradict research that shows a decline in African international students in the country. However, our findings may well reflect the views of a few privileged students who have had slightly better experiences in the higher education space. Despite this discrepancy, we argue that our findings may be relevant for future students who can leverage existing

and new relationships to navigate broader academic challenges and psychosocial issues peculiar to South Africa. Within the higher education space, Student Affairs should be intentional in their attempts to better integrate both local and international students in the academic system.

Making sense of who they are and reminding themselves of their goals and values in life allowed the African international students in our study to form deeper intrapersonal connections. They experienced meaning through introspection and through redefining their identities and inner purposes – all of which served as pathways towards their adjustment and the achievement of their educational goals. Our findings also show that meaning making was experienced beyond a focus on the self. It extended to engaging in activities that would contribute to the wellbeing of South African society at large, as a form of social contribution. An important theoretical implication is how coherence, significance and purpose could take different forms depending on the sociocultural context of those being studied. In this sample, it was about relationships providing significance, motivation to pursue their goals, while helping them to understand their current world as international students in South Africa. This relational view of wellbeing has consistently been emphasized in African wellbeing literature but it has not been adequately explored in the context of African international students whose life-worlds include both those in their home countries and in South Africa.

Recommendations

The numbers of African international students who journey to South Africa in search of a good quality of life and better education can be expected to continue to rise. Thus, it is important to understand how their lived experiences and relational meaning-making processes enable these students to adapt and thrive in their educational pursuits. The findings of this study suggest that the academic adjustment of African international students may be enhanced through relational meaning-making experiences that promote a sense of purpose, a coherent worldview, intrapersonal connections, as well as motivation to achieve educational goals. Programmes that allow for cross-cultural social interaction should be encouraged to allow the establishing of new relational connections, the sharing of knowledge, and the creation of networks for African international students to flourish in the host country. In addition, higher education institutions can use strategies like a buddy system where host nationals are paired with international students to assist them in adjusting to their new academic space. Counselling and psychological services in institutions of higher education should design and implement educational and psychological interventions that promote meaning making among their African international students. An institutional climate or culture that prioritises the nurturing of positive relational experiences can be fostered through orientation programmes, newsletters and a reward system for outstanding ambassadors of this culture.

Regarding recommendations for future research, new studies can explore the complexities and potential challenges that arise in intercultural interactions and determine how meaning making occurs even in the face of negative relational experiences. In addition, there is a need for impact studies that determine the extent to which meaning-making

interventions are beneficial for African international students. Future research can also involve longitudinal data collection to follow these students over a period of time to better understand their relational experiences. Given that social contribution is key to the meaning-making process and the ability to communicate in the community is necessary, African international students should be encouraged to enrol for short courses aimed at learning local languages other than English. Since South Africa has eleven official languages, they should focus on the language used mostly around the host institutions where they are studying.

Limitations of the study

COVID-19 restrictions affected our study in that some of the interviews had to be conducted virtually over the telephone or by Zoom. Although the use of different or inconsistent interview formats could have affected the quality of the data collected, we ensured that the same process was followed both virtually and in person.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (HUM049/0320), with additional permission from the University's International Cooperation Division. All participants provided written informed consent and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

Funding acknowledgement

We acknowledge the University of Pretoria for the support with Research Development Program (RDP).

References

- Alharbi, E. S., & Smith, A. P. (2018). Review of the literature on stress and wellbeing of international students in English-speaking countries. *International Education Studies*, 11(6), 22–44. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v11n6p22>
- Anthony, L. G., Anthony, B. J., Glanville, D. N., Naiman, D. Q., Waanders, C., & Shaffer, S. (2005). The relationships between parenting stress, parenting behaviour and preschoolers' social competence and behaviour problems in the classroom. *Infant and Child Development: An International Journal of Research and Practice*, 14(2), 133–154. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.385>
- Bastien, G., Seifen-Adkins, T., & Johnson, L. R. (2018). Striving for success: Academic adjustment of international students in the U.S. *Journal of International Students*, 8(2), 1198–1219. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i2.143>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>

- Caldwell, E. F., & Hyams-Ssekasi, D. (2016). Leaving home: The challenges of Black-African international students prior to studying overseas. *Journal of International Students*, 6(2), 588–613. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i2.372>
- Chigeza, S., De Kock, J. H., Roos, V., & Wissing, M. P. (2017). The subjective well-being of first-year tertiary students during an induction programme. *Africa Education Review*, 14(3-4), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2016.1224563>
- Chigeza, S., De Wet, A., Roos, V., & Vorster, C. (2013). African migrants' experiences of xenophobic violence in South Africa: A relational approach. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 23(3), 501–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2013.10820658>
- Chinyamurindi, W. T. (2018). Narratives of a sense of belonging: Perspectives from a sample of international students in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(3), 209–225. <https://doi.org/10.20853/32-3-2581>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2014). Thematic analysis. In T. Teo (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of critical psychology* (pp. 1947–1952). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_311
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- Damon, W., Menon, J., & Cotton Bronk, K. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 119–128. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads0703_2
- Delle Fave, A., Brdar, I., Freire, T., Vella-Brodrick, D., & Wissing, M. P. (2011). The eudaimonic and hedonic components of happiness: Qualitative and quantitative findings. *Social Indicators Research*, 100(2), 185–207. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-010-9632-5>
- Delle Fave, A., Brdar, I., Wissing, M. P., Araujo, U., Castro Solano, A., Freire, T., Hernández-Pozo, M. D., Jose, P., Martos, T., Nafstad, H. E., Nakamura, J., Singh, K., & Soosai-Nathan, L. (2016). Lay definitions of happiness across nations: The primacy of inner harmony and relational connectedness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, Article 30. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00030>
- Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2017, April 28). Draft policy framework for the internationalisation of higher education in South Africa. *Government Gazette* (Vol. 622, No. 40815). Government of the Republic of South Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.dhet.gov.za/Policy%20and%20Development%20Support/Draft%20Policy%20framework%20for%20the%20internalisation%20of%20Higher%20Education%20in%20Suth%20Africa.pdf>
- DHET (2023). *Statistics on post-school education and training in South Africa: 2021*. DHET. Retrieved from <https://www.dhet.gov.za/DHET%20Statistics%20Publication/Statistics%20on%20Post-School%20Education%20and%20Training%20in%20South%20Africa%202021.pdf>
- Dominguez-Whitehead, Y., & Sing, N. (2015). International students in the South African higher education system: A review of pressing challenges. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 29(4), 77–95. <https://doi.org/10.20853/29-4-506>
- European Education and Culture Executive Agency. (2016, July 13). *Intra-Africa academic mobility scheme* [Fact sheet]. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2797/00056>
- Fletcher-Anthony, W., & Efthymiou, L. (2017). Assessment of a college orientation course for international students. *Journal of College Orientation, Transition, and Retention*, 24(1). <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v24i1.2911>
- Forbes-Mewett, H. (2019). Mental health and international students: Issues, challenges and effective practice. *International Education Association of Australia (IEAA), Research Digest*, 16. <http://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.19923.94243>

- Glass, C. R., Kociolek, E., Wongtrirat, R., Lynch, R. J., & Cong, S. (2015). Uneven experiences: The impact of student-faculty interactions on international students' sense of belonging. *Journal of International Students*, 5(4), 353–367. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i4.400>
- Glass, C. R., & Westmont, C. M. (2014). Comparative effects of belongingness on the academic success and cross-cultural interactions of domestic and international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 38(1), 106–119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2013.04.004>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 191–216). SAGE Publications.
- Hale, K., Rivas, J., & Burke, M. G. (2020). International students' sense of belonging and connectedness with US students: A qualitative inquiry. In U. Gaulee, S. Sharma, & K. Bista (Eds.), *Rethinking education across borders* (pp. 317–330). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2399-1_19
- Heintzelman, S. J., & King, L. A. (2014). Life is pretty meaningful. *American Psychologist*, 69(6), 561–574. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035049>
- Hyams-Ssekasi, D., & Caldwell, E. F. (2018). Rethinking student wellbeing experiences: The coping strategies of Black-African international students. In K. Bista (Ed.), *Global perspectives on international student experiences in higher education: Tensions and issues* (pp. 213–227). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315113456-14>
- International Education Association of South Africa. (2020). *Innovation and resilience in higher education internationalisation* (Study South Africa: A guide to South African Higher Education, 19th ed.). International Education Association of South Africa. Retrieved from https://ieasa.studysa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SSA-19th-edition-final-artwork_compressed.pdf
- Kansky, J. (2018). What's love got to do with it? Romantic relationships and well-being. In E. Diener, S. Oishi, & L. Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of well-being* (pp. 619–642). DEF Publishers. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/psychfacbooks/9>
- Kasese-Hara, M., & Mugambi, J. I. (2021). Experiences of African international students in a South African university – A qualitative study. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35(4), 116–137. <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-4-4065>
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2003). Complete mental health: An agenda for the 21st century. In C. L. M. Keyes, & J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 293–312). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10594-013>
- Khumalo, G. M. (2017). *Migration: Exploring the experiences of international students studying in South African universities, a case study of University of Witwatersrand* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Witwatersrand. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/10539/25187>
- King, L. A., & Hicks, J. A. (2021). The science of meaning in life. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 72(1), 561–584. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-072420-122921>
- Lashari, S. A., Kaur, A., & Awang-Hashim, R. (2018). Home away from home – The role of social support for international students' adjustment. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 15(2), 33–54. <https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli2018.15.2.2>
- Li, J.-B., Dou, K., & Liang, Y. (2020). The relationship between presence of meaning, search for meaning, and subjective well-being: A three-level meta-analysis based on the meaning in life questionnaire. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 22(1), 467–489. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-020-00230-y>

- Li, J.-B., Wang, Y.-S., Dou, K., & Shang, Y.-F. (2022). On the development of meaning in life among college freshmen: Social relationship antecedents and adjustment consequences. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 23, 1709–1735. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-021-00470-6>
- Lillyman, S., & Bennett, C. (2014). Providing a positive learning experience for international students studying at UK universities: A literature review. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 13(1), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240914529859>
- Linley, J. L. (2017). We are (not) all bulldogs: Minoritized peer socialization agents' meaning-making about collegiate contexts. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(5), 643–656. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0051>
- Lub, V. (2015). Validity in qualitative evaluation: Linking purposes, paradigms, and perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 14(5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406915621406>
- MacGregor, K. (2014, September 6). Major survey of international students in South Africa. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20140905134914811&query=education>
- Mahali, A., Lynch, I., Fadiji, A. W., Tolla, T., Khumalo, S., & Naicker, S. (2018). Networks of well-being in the Global South: A critical review of current scholarship. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 34(4), 373–400. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796x18786137>
- Martela, F., & Steger, M. F. (2016). The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(5), 531–545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1137623>
- Mason, H. D. (2013). Meaning in life within an African context: A mixed method study. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 23(4), 635–638. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2013.10820679>
- Mason, H. D. (2017a). *Inhloso kanye bizo*: Exploring South African university students' conceptions and enactment of purpose. *Journal of Moral Education*, 46(3), 272–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2017.1345723>
- Mason, H. D. (2017b). Stress-management strategies among first-year students at a South African university: A qualitative study. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 5(2), 131–149. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v5i2.2744>
- Mittelmeier, J., Rogaten, J., Long, D., Dalu, M., Gunter, A., Prinsloo, P., & Rienties, B. (2019). Understanding the early adjustment experiences of undergraduate distance education students in South Africa. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 20(3). <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i4.4101>
- Mutongoza, B., & Olawale, B. (2023). The unnoticed few: Exploring the challenges confronting international students and staff at a rural university in South Africa. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 6(2), 107–122. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2023.11>
- Negru, O. (2012). The time of your life: Emerging adulthood characteristics in a sample of Romanian high-school and university students. *Cognition, Brain, Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 16(3), 357–367.
- Nell, W. (2014). Sources of life meaning among South African university students. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 24(1), 82–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2014.904087>
- Newsome, L. K., & Cooper, P. (2016). International students' cultural and social experiences in a British University: "Such a hard life [it] is here". *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 195–215. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i1.488>
- Nyerere, J. (2021). Academic student mobility and refugee education in Kenya. In C. T. Sehoole, & J. J. Lee (Eds.), *Intra-Africa student mobility in higher education: Strengths, prospects and challenges* (pp. 51–67). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78517-8_3

- Nyerere, J. (2022). Intra-Africa academic mobility and the fourth industrial revolution. In E. Oliver (Ed.), *Global initiatives and higher education in the fourth industrial revolution* (pp. 107–129). University of Johannesburg Press. <https://doi.org/10.36615/9781776405619-05>
- Padilla-Walker, L. M., & Nelson, L. J. (Eds.). (2017). *Flourishing in emerging adulthood: Positive development during the third decade of life*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190260637.001.0001>
- Rabia, H. M. (2016). Undergraduate Arab international students' adjustment to U.S. universities. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(1), 131–139. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n1p131>
- Rivas, J., Burke, M., & Hale, K. (2019). Seeking a sense of belonging. *Journal of International Students*, 9(2), 682–704. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i2.943>
- Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. H. (2006). Best news yet on the six-factor model of well-being. *Social Science Research*, 35(4), 1103–1119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.01.002>
- Sehooole, C. T., & Lee, J. J. (Eds.). (2022). *Intra-Africa student mobility in higher education: Strengths, prospects and challenges*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78517-8>
- Sharma, G., & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M. (2018). The relationship between college students' sense of purpose and degree commitment. *Journal of College Student Development*, 59(4), 486–491. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0045>
- Stacey, R. D. (2007). *Strategic management and organizational dynamics: The challenge of complexity to ways of thinking about organizations* (5th ed.). Routledge.
- Steger, M. F. (2009). Meaning in life. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 679–688). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195187243.013.0064>
- Steger, M. F. (2012). Making meaning in life. *Psychological Inquiry*, 23(4), 381–385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840x.2012.720832>
- Steger, M. F., O'Donnell, M. B., & Morse, J. L. (2021). Helping students find their way to meaning: Meaning and purpose in education. In M. L. Kern, & M. L. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of positive education* (pp. 551–579). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64537-3_22
- Tella, O. (2018). South African higher education: The paradox of soft power and xenophobia. In A. Akinola (Ed.), *The political economy of xenophobia in Africa* (pp. 81–92). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64897-2_7
- Tough, H., Siegrist, J., & Fekete, C. (2017). Social relationships, mental health and wellbeing in physical disability: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 17, Article 414. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4308-6>
- Vasilopoulos, G. (2016). A critical review of international students' adjustment research from a Deleuzian perspective. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 283–307. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i1.570>
- Weber, E. (2016, June 14–17). *An ambivalent community: International African students in residence at a South African university* (ED568115) [Paper presentation]. 14th Annual international conference of the Bulgarian Comparative Education Society, Sofia, Bulgaria. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED568115>
- Williams, W. C., Morelli, S. A., Ong, D. C., & Zaki, J. (2018). Interpersonal emotion regulation: Implications for affiliation, perceived support, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 115(2), 224–254. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000132>

- Wilson, A., Wissing, M. P., Ndimba, L., & Somhlaba, N. Z. (2021). Representations of hope, goals, and meaning from lay person's perspectives in two African contexts. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 61(4), 493–515.
- Wissing, M. P., Khumalo, I. P., & Chigeza, S. C. (2014). Meaning as perceived and experienced by an African student group. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 24(1), 92–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2014.904101>
- Wissing, M. P., Schutte, L., Liversage, C., Entwisle, B., Gericke, M., & Keyes, C. (2019). Important goals, meanings, and relationships in flourishing and languishing states: Towards patterns of well-being. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 16(2), 573–609. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-019-09771-8>
- Wissing, M. P., Wilson Fadji, A., Schutte, L., Chigeza, S., Schutte, W. D., & Temane, Q. M. (2020). Motivations for relationships as sources of meaning: Ghanaian and South African experiences. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02019>
- Yukhymenko-Lescroart, M. A., & Sharma, G. (2023). Sense of purpose and progress towards degree in freshman college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(1), 187–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120975134>

How to cite:

Chigeza, S., & Wilson Fadji, A. (2026). Relational experiences of meaning making as a pathway to academic adjustment among African international university students in South Africa. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 14(1), 229–246. <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v14i1.5570>