



Psychological Adjustment among Final-Year Undergraduate Students Transitioning From University to the Labour Market: A Case of the University Of Iringa

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KEYWORDS: psychological adjustment; university-to-work transition; perceived employability; coping strategies; final-year students; Tanzania

ABSTRACT: Final-year undergraduate students face a psychologically demanding period as they prepare to leave university and enter an uncertain labour market, yet evidence from Tanzanian private universities on this transition remains scarce. This study examined psychological adjustment among final-year undergraduate students transitioning from university to the labour market at the University of Iringa, Tanzania, guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory and the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping. The design used was a quantitative cross-sectional correlational design. A stratified random sample of 100 final-year undergraduate students completed a structured questionnaire comprising the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale, an adapted Perceived Employability Scale and the Brief Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory. Descriptive statistics and Pearson product-moment correlation were used to analyse data. Findings showed that psychological adjustment was predominantly poor to moderate, with anxiety the most pronounced difficulty; nearly half of respondents scored in the severe to extremely severe anxiety range and over half reported at least moderate depression. Perceived readiness for the labour market was generally moderate, with few students reporting high readiness. Higher perceived readiness was significantly associated with lower depression, anxiety and overall distress, while emotion-focused coping was significantly associated with lower distress; problem-focused and avoidance coping showed non-significant trends. The study concludes that the university-to-labour-market transition is a psychologically demanding period for many final-year students and recommends strengthening counselling services, expanding career development support and promoting adaptive coping skills to improve transition experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychological adjustment refers to how well individuals adapt emotionally, cognitively and behaviourally to new or changing life circumstances. In the context of the transition from university to employment, psychological adjustment involves the ability of final-year students to cope with uncertainty, manage stress and maintain mental well-being as they enter the labour market (Baluku et al., 2021). Adjustment is not merely a state of reduced distress but reflects a student's capacity to integrate environmental demands with personal resources such as self-confidence, resilience and coping strategies, including how they perceive their readiness for work and regulate emotional responses to stressors such as job-search pressure (Baluku et al., 2021; Edmonds et al., 2024).

Final-year students confront overlapping academic, personal and psychosocial demands. They must manage intensive academic obligations, including dissertations, research projects and internships, while simultaneously preparing for employment and independent adult life (Holmes, 2013). These overlapping demands are associated with heightened anxiety, fluctuating motivation and concerns about employability and social status (Arnett, 2000). The transition to the labour market therefore represents not only

an academic milestone but also a psychologically transformative experience with implications for long-term mental health and career trajectories.

Globally, the rapid expansion of higher education has intensified attention on students' transitional experiences. Tertiary enrolment worldwide more than doubled between 2000 and 2023 (UNESCO, 2025), yet successful graduate transitions depend not only on technical skills but also on psychological readiness, including self-efficacy and adaptive coping (Holmes, 2013). Global youth unemployment remains a persistent challenge, with tens of millions of young people unemployed (International Labour Organization, 2024), a situation that compounds transition-related stress, particularly where higher education expansion has outpaced growth in formal employment. Comparable patterns of elevated employment-related stress among final-year cohorts have been reported in high-income and middle-income settings alike, suggesting that the psychological burden of graduating into a constrained labour market is not confined to any single region but is shaped everywhere by the fit, or lack of fit, between qualifications produced and jobs available.

In the African context, psychological adjustment during university-to-work transitions is particularly challenging because of structural and socioeconomic realities. Youth unemployment and underemployment across Sub-Saharan Africa remain among the highest globally, and millions of graduates enter constrained labour markets each year, contributing to prolonged job searching, skills mismatch and elevated psychological distress (Julius et al., 2024). Financial constraints, inadequate career guidance and weak graduate-tracking systems intensify this transitional stress, and many graduates experience a marked decline in psychological well-being once the gap between educational expectations and labour-market realities becomes apparent.

Tanzania has experienced one of the most significant expansions of higher education in East Africa. Following liberalisation policies from the 1990s onward, the number of universities and enrolled students grew substantially, and private universities such as the University of Iringa have played a vital role in widening access for students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Tanzania Commission for Universities, 2025). This growth, however, has exposed a persistent gap between graduate supply and labour-market demand, alongside inadequate career-guidance infrastructure and limited graduate-tracking systems in many institutions. Tanzanian students report elevated stress, anxiety and depression linked to academic pressure and future employment uncertainty (Rweyemamu et al., 2024; Mwita et al., 2025), and national youth unemployment continues to affect a substantial share of young Tanzanians (National Bureau of Statistics [Tanzania], 2022). For final-year students, these broader socioeconomic conditions translate into immediate personal concerns about repaying student loans, supporting extended families and achieving financial independence.

The University of Iringa, as a private institution with structured counselling and career services, offers a relevant setting in which to examine these dynamics among final-year students who face both academic demands and labour-market preparation simultaneously. Despite growing global and regional evidence, context-specific research on psychological adjustment, perceived readiness and coping strategies in Tanzanian universities remains limited, constraining the development of targeted interventions to support smoother transitions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two complementary theories guided this study. Schlossberg's Transition Theory conceptualises a transition as any event or non-event that alters an individual's relationships, routines, assumptions or roles, thereby requiring psychological adaptation (Schlossberg, 1981). The theory proposes that adjustment to a transition depends on the dynamic interaction of four sets of variables, the 4S system: Situation, the characteristics of the transition itself, including its timing, duration and perceived controllability; Self, the individual's personal psychological resources and demographic characteristics; Support, the social, institutional and familial resources available to buffer stress; and Strategies, the coping mechanisms an individual deploys. For final-year students, the Situation is defined by graduation and uncertain labour-market entry, the Self by perceived readiness and psychological resilience, Support by university counselling and family networks, and Strategies by the coping behaviours examined in this study.

The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) complements this structural view by explaining the cognitive processes through which a transition comes to be experienced as more or less stressful. Central to the theory are two appraisal processes: primary appraisal, in which a person evaluates a situation as irrelevant, benign or stressful (as harm, threat or challenge), and secondary appraisal, in which the person assesses the resources and options available for managing the situation's demands. These appraisals shape both the intensity of emotional response and the coping strategies subsequently selected. The theory distinguishes problem-focused coping, active efforts to manage the stressor directly, from emotion-focused coping, efforts to regulate the emotional distress the stressor produces, with avoidance coping, disengagement through denial, distraction or withdrawal, often considered a maladaptive subtype of emotion-focused coping.

Neither theory alone is sufficient for the purposes of this study. Schlossberg's framework is structural: it identifies which resources matter for adjustment but does not explain the psychological mechanism through which those resources translate into lower or higher distress. Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory supplies that missing mechanism, appraisal and coping, but says comparatively little, on its own, about which resources are most relevant to a specific transition such as graduating into a constrained labour market. Combining the two therefore closes a conceptual gap: Schlossberg identifies perceived readiness as a Self resource

worth measuring, while Lazarus and Folkman explain why that resource should matter psychologically, because it shapes secondary appraisal and, in turn, the coping strategies a student adopts. This integrated framework informed the selection of perceived readiness for the labour market and coping strategies as the two correlates of psychological adjustment examined in the present study.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Final-year undergraduate students are known to face considerable psychological challenges as they transition from university to the labour market, experiencing stress, anxiety and uncertainty while balancing academic requirements, personal responsibilities and preparation for future employment. Globally and in Tanzania, high youth unemployment, economic pressure and limited professional opportunities intensify these challenges, affecting students' emotional, cognitive and behavioural adjustment. Coping strategies and perceived readiness for work are considered critical factors shaping how successfully students navigate this transitional period. Despite these known challenges, there is limited evidence on how final-year students in Tanzanian universities actually experience this transition, how they perceive their readiness for employment, and how they cope with the associated stress and uncertainty. This gap limits the ability of universities to provide effective support, potentially leaving students unprepared for professional life.

The purpose of this study was therefore to examine psychological adjustment among final-year undergraduate students transitioning from university to the labour market at the University of Iringa, Tanzania, guided by three specific objectives: to assess the level of psychological adjustment among these students; to examine the relationship between perceived readiness for the labour market and psychological adjustment; and to determine the relationship between coping strategies and psychological adjustment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design. Data were collected at a single point in time from final-year undergraduate students during the period when they were actively preparing for graduation and labour-market entry. The correlational component allowed the strength, direction and significance of associations among perceived readiness, coping strategies and psychological adjustment to be examined without manipulation of variables. Despite its inability to determine causality, the design enabled the examination of meaningful relationships between variables and contributed valuable insights for theoretical and practical applications (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Babbie, 2021).

Setting and Population

The study was conducted at the University of Iringa, a private university in Iringa Region, Tanzania, offering undergraduate programmes including Counselling Psychology, Education, Business Administration, Law, Community Development and Theology, alongside structured counselling and career-guidance services. The institutional combination of academic, psychosocial and career-development activity made the university a suitable setting for examining perceived readiness, coping and psychological adjustment among students simultaneously completing academic requirements and preparing for employment. The target population comprised all final-year undergraduate students enrolled during the 2025/2026 academic year, a group at the most critical stage of the university-to-work transition.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected using stratified random sampling, with strata defined by academic programme, to ensure proportional representation across disciplines that differ in academic demands, internship requirements and labour-market prospects. The number of participants selected from each stratum in relation to its share of the overall final-year population was established using a proportionate allocation approach; simple random sampling utilizing computer-generated random numbers was then used within each stratum. The sampling frame was obtained from the University Registrar's official list of registered final-year students. Eligible participants were officially registered final-year undergraduate students who were willing to participate voluntarily; students repeating the year or on academic deferment were excluded. This two-stage procedure was intended to strengthen both the internal validity of the sample, by giving every eligible student an equal chance of selection within their programme, and its representativeness of the wider final-year population.

Of 110 questionnaires distributed, 103 were returned and 100 were complete and usable, yielding a response rate of 90.9%, a figure that surpasses the 70-75% benchmark commonly recommended for social science surveys (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The remaining three returned questionnaires were excluded because missing data exceeded 5% of items per case. Because questionnaires were completed anonymously, direct comparison of responders and non-responders was not possible; however, the very high response rate substantially reduces the likelihood of meaningful non-response bias.

Instruments

A structured, self-administered questionnaire containing three standardised instruments was exploited. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (21-item version) measured depression, anxiety and stress on three seven-item subscales, each rated on a four-point scale from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much, or most of the time); subscale scores were summed and doubled, yielding a possible range of 0 to 42 per subscale, with higher scores indicating greater distress (Lovibond & Lovibond,

1995). An adapted ten-item Perceived Employability Scale measured students' subjective evaluation of their readiness to enter and succeed in the labour market on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with one reverse-scored item; total scores ranged from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating greater perceived readiness, and scores were classified as low (10-24), moderate (25-37) or high (38-50) (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). The 28-item Brief Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory measured coping strategies on a four-point scale from 1 (I have not been doing this at all) to 4 (I have been doing this a lot); its 14 subscales were grouped into three broader orientations, problem-focused coping (active coping and planning, 4 items, possible range 4-16), emotion-focused coping (emotional support, instrumental support, positive reframing, acceptance, religion and venting, 12 items, possible range 12-48) and avoidance coping (self-distraction, denial, substance use, behavioural disengagement, self-blame and humour, 12 items, possible range 12-48), consistent with the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Carver, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Validity and Reliability

Content and construct validity were addressed through the selection of established, previously validated instruments and through expert review. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale is a well-validated measure with demonstrated construct validity across cultural contexts (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995); minor wording adjustments were made for cultural relevance while preserving the original meaning of items. The adapted Perceived Employability Scale underwent review of item relevance to local labour-market conditions and minor rewording to enhance contextual clarity while preserving the construct coverage of the original instrument (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). The Brief COPE Inventory was used in its standard form with minor linguistic refinements for clarity, and its alignment with the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping further supported its content validity (Carver, 1997).

Reliability was established through a pilot study conducted with 25 final-year undergraduate students who were not included in the final sample. The pilot assessed internal consistency, identified potentially problematic items, evaluated clarity of instructions and estimated completion time. Cronbach's alpha coefficients, presented in Table 1, exceeded the recommended minimum threshold of 0.70 for all instruments and subscales (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Three items showing low item-total correlations during piloting, one from the Perceived Employability Scale and two from the Brief COPE Inventory, were reworded for clarity and cultural appropriateness while preserving their original conceptual meaning. The refined questionnaire took an average of 15-20 minutes to complete.

Table 1: Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) of the study instruments

Instrument / Subscale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (overall)	21	0.89	Good
Depression subscale	7	0.87	Good
Anxiety subscale	7	0.84	Good
Stress subscale	7	0.86	Good
Perceived Employability Scale (adapted)	10	0.82	Good
Brief COPE Inventory (overall)	28	0.85	Good
Problem-focused coping	4	0.83	Good
Emotion-focused coping	12	0.81	Good
Avoidance coping	12	0.79	Acceptable

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected using paper-based, self-administered questionnaires distributed to selected students after they provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and confidentiality was assured through coded questionnaires and secure data handling. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Iringa's institutional research review process prior to data collection. Participants received a written introductory letter explaining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Because the study addressed sensitive psychological content, a brief debriefing note directing participants to the university's counselling services was appended to all questionnaires, and data collection was conducted in a private, supportive setting. The potential benefit of the research, generating evidence to improve student support services, was judged to outweigh the minimal risk of mild emotional discomfort associated with reflecting on transition-related stressors.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 was used for data analysis. Analysis proceeded in stages: data cleaning and screening for missing values, outliers and entry errors; computation of descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, to summarise demographic characteristics and the distribution of scores on the study variables; and, prior to inferential analysis, assessment of normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were then computed

to examine bivariate relationships between perceived readiness, coping-strategy categories and psychological adjustment indices, at a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed).

RESULTS

Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics

Of the 110 questionnaires distributed to the stratified random sample, 103 were returned and 100 were complete and usable, yielding a response rate of 90.9%. Table 2 summarises the demographic and background characteristics of the 100 respondents. The sample consisted of 56 male (56.0%) and 44 female (44.0%) participants, a distribution that closely mirrors the general gender-enrolment pattern of final-year students at the University of Iringa. Most respondents (68.0%) were aged 22-25 years, while smaller proportions were aged 18-21 years (12.0%), 26-29 years (16.0%) and 30 years or above (4.0%). Regarding household income, 42.0% reported between TZS 500,000 and TZS 1,000,000 per month and 35.0% reported below TZS 500,000, indicating that a substantial share of participants came from low- to middle-income households. All participants (100.0%) had completed an internship or work experience, with 73.0% having internships lasting three to six months and 26.0% more than six months.

Table 2: Demographic and background characteristics of respondents (N = 100)

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	56	56.0
	Female	44	44.0
Age	18-21 years	12	12.0
	22-25 years	68	68.0
	26-29 years	16	16.0
	30 years and above	4	4.0
Household income (TZS/month)	Below 500,000	35	35.0
	500,000-1,000,000	42	42.0
	Above 1,000,000	18	18.0
	Not disclosed	5	5.0
Internship duration	Less than 3 months	1	1.0
	3-6 months	73	73.0
	More than 6 months	26	26.0

Level of Psychological Adjustment

The first objective assessed the level of psychological adjustment among final-year undergraduate students. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale subscales, the total distress score. The mean depression score was 14.40 (SD = 7.63), within the moderate range (14-20) of the scale's severity classification; the mean anxiety score was 16.28 (SD = 10.42), at the severe threshold (15-19); and the mean stress score was 15.00 (SD = 10.12), within the normal-to-mild range (0-18). The overall distress score averaged 45.68 (SD = 22.73). The comparatively wide standard deviations across all three subscales indicate considerable variability in psychological adjustment among respondents, suggesting that while some students were coping reasonably well, others were experiencing substantial distress.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for Psychological Distress Subscales

Variable	Possible Range	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Depression	0-42	14.40	7.63	0	30
Anxiety	0-42	16.28	10.42	0	40
Stress	0-42	15.00	10.12	0	42
Total distress score	0-126	45.68	22.73	2	102

Note. Depression, anxiety and stress subscale scores are each scored 0-42, with higher scores indicating greater distress; the total distress score is their sum.

Severity classification indicated that anxiety was the most pervasive form of distress among the three subscales: 34% of students scored in the extremely severe category and a further 13% in the severe category, meaning that 47% of respondents experienced severe-to-extremely-severe anxiety. This is a striking finding given that participants were approaching graduation and labour-market entry at the time of data collection. For depression, 33% scored in the moderate range, 15% in the severe range and 6% in the extremely severe range; in total, 54% experienced at least moderate depression, and only 26% scored within the normal range. Stress presented a comparatively more favourable picture, with 56% of students scoring within the normal range, although 18% reported severe-to-extremely-severe stress. Taken together, these findings indicate that the overall level of psychological adjustment among

final-year undergraduate students at the University of Iringa was predominantly poor to moderate, characterised by high rates of anxiety, moderate depression and moderate stress.

Perceived Readiness and Psychological Adjustment

The second objective examined the relationship between perceived readiness for the labour market and psychological adjustment. As shown in Table 3, the mean perceived readiness score was 28.46 (SD = 6.99), within the moderate readiness category (25-37). Table 4 presents the distribution of respondents across the three readiness categories: 62% of students fell within the moderate readiness category, 29% reported low readiness and only 9% demonstrated high readiness. These findings suggest that while most students had some degree of confidence in their employability, a considerable minority, particularly the 29% classified as having low readiness, approached the transition period with limited self-perceived preparation for the demands of the labour market.

Table 4: Frequency Distribution of Perceived Readiness Categories

Readiness Category	Score Range	n	%
Low	10-24	29	29.0
Moderate	25-37	62	62.0
High	38-50	9	9.0

Prior to correlational analysis, Shapiro-Wilk tests confirmed that the total distress score, $W = 0.983$, $p = .220$, and the perceived readiness score, $W = 0.983$, $p = .241$, were normally distributed, supporting the use of Pearson correlation. As shown in Table 6, perceived readiness was significantly and negatively correlated with total distress, $r(98) = -.32$, $p = .001$, depression, $r(98) = -.34$, $p < .001$, and anxiety, $r(98) = -.35$, $p < .001$, but was not significantly correlated with stress, $r(98) = -.09$, $p = .358$. These moderate negative correlations indicate that students who perceived themselves as more ready for the labour market reported lower depression, lower anxiety and lower overall distress; the non-significant association with stress suggests that perceived readiness is more closely tied to the affective and anticipatory dimensions of distress than to tension-based stress responses.

Coping Strategies and Psychological Adjustment

The third objective examined the relationship between coping strategies and psychological adjustment. Table 5 presents descriptive statistics for the three coping categories derived from the Brief Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory. Emotion-focused coping was the most frequently used strategy ($M = 34.25$, $SD = 4.05$), followed by avoidance coping ($M = 27.13$, $SD = 8.99$) and problem-focused coping ($M = 12.86$, $SD = 1.69$). The relatively high mean and narrow standard deviation for emotion-focused coping indicate that most students consistently engaged in strategies such as seeking emotional support, positive reframing, acceptance and religious or spiritual coping, whereas the wider variability in avoidance coping suggests considerable individual differences in the extent to which students relied on denial, self-distraction and disengagement.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Coping Strategy Categories

Coping Category	Possible Range	Mean	SD
Problem-focused coping	4-16	12.86	1.69
Emotion-focused coping	12-48	34.25	4.05
Avoidance coping	12-48	27.13	8.99

Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated non-normal distributions for the coping subscales (problem-focused, $W = 0.938$, $p < .001$; emotion-focused, $W = 0.889$, $p < .001$; avoidance, $W = 0.923$, $p < .001$); given the adequate sample size ($N = 100$), Pearson correlation remained appropriate under the Central Limit Theorem (Babbie, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As shown in Table 6, emotion-focused coping was significantly and negatively correlated with total distress, $r(98) = -.26$, $p = .010$, depression, $r(98) = -.26$, $p = .010$, and anxiety, $r(98) = -.21$, $p = .035$, but not significantly with stress, $r(98) = -.16$, $p = .103$, indicating that students who more frequently used emotion-focused strategies reported lower depression and anxiety. Problem-focused coping showed negative correlations with all distress indices, none reaching statistical significance, though the correlation with total distress approached significance, $r(98) = -.19$, $p = .054$, suggesting a trend toward lower distress among students who engaged more in active coping and planning. Avoidance coping showed positive, non-significant correlations with all distress indices, $r(98) = .18$, $p = .077$ for total distress, a pattern consistent with the theoretical expectation that avoidance coping is associated with higher rather than lower distress, although this trend did not reach statistical significance in the present sample.

Table 6: Pearson Correlations between Perceived Readiness, Coping Strategies and Psychological Distress

Predictor Variable	Depression	Anxiety	Stress	Total Distress
Perceived readiness	-.343**	-.354**	-.093	-.319**
Problem-focused coping	-.158	-.150	-.160	-.193
Emotion-focused coping	-.256*	-.211*	-.164	-.256*
Avoidance coping	.171	.158	.108	.178

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

DISCUSSION

Level of Psychological Adjustment

The finding that most final-year students at the University of Iringa experience clinically elevated psychological distress, particularly anxiety, is consistent with the empirical literature on student transitions. The high prevalence of severe-to-extremely-severe anxiety (47%) aligns with Magier et al. (2023), who documented elevated anxiety and depressive symptoms among final-year students preparing for graduation and attributed these levels to transition uncertainty and limited access to psychological support. Within Tanzania, the present findings resonate with Rweyemamu et al. (2024), who reported a high prevalence of moderate-to-severe mental distress among undergraduates, and with Mwita et al. (2025), who identified final-year students as the highest-risk group for depressive symptoms because of job-search anxieties and role transitions. The present study extends this evidence base by focusing specifically on the immediate pre-graduation period, confirming that this transitional phase carries a substantial psychological burden in a private Tanzanian university context that has not previously received close empirical attention.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory helps explain these patterns. The university-to-labour-market transition represents a normative exit transition that disrupts students' familiar academic identities while requiring the formation of new professional roles. For students at the University of Iringa, the Situation component of the 4S model is characterised by high uncertainty, limited formal employment opportunities and the simultaneous demands of academic completion, offering a plausible explanation for the elevated distress observed. The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping further clarifies the internal appraisal processes underlying this distress: the high anxiety levels are consistent with threat appraisals, in which students evaluate the impending transition as exceeding their available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The comparatively more favourable stress results, with over half of students scoring within normal limits, suggest that it is specifically the anticipatory, future-oriented dimension of the transition, rather than immediate situational tension, that is most psychologically taxing for this population.

Perceived Readiness and Psychological Adjustment

The significant negative association between perceived readiness and psychological distress is consistent with Botha (2021), who found that stronger self-perceived employability was linked to reduced anxiety among South African undergraduates. From the perspective of the Transactional Theory, perceived readiness functions as a component of secondary appraisal, the process through which individuals evaluate their resources for managing a stressor. Students who perceive themselves as adequately prepared are more likely to appraise the transition as a manageable challenge rather than an overwhelming threat, an appraisal associated with more positive emotional outcomes (Baluku et al., 2021). The absence of a significant association between perceived readiness and stress suggests that perceived employability is more closely tied to chronic, anticipatory dimensions of distress, such as depression and anxiety, than to situational tension, a differentiated pattern that supports the multidimensional conceptualisation of psychological adjustment adopted in this study.

That only 9% of students reported high perceived readiness indicates that, for most final-year students, the Self dimension of Schlossberg's model, encompassing perceived personal resources and readiness, remains relatively underdeveloped at this critical juncture, a pattern also reported by Atitsogbe et al. (2019) among university students and job seekers in Togo. This has important implications for university counselling and career-development services, since targeted interventions aimed at strengthening students' self-perceived employability could serve as a meaningful buffer against transition-related psychological distress.

Coping Strategies and Psychological Adjustment

The predominance of emotion-focused coping, and its significant association with lower distress, is theoretically and practically meaningful. Within the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, emotion-focused strategies are adaptive when they help individuals manage the emotional burden of stressors that are difficult to resolve directly, such as labour-market entry amid high youth unemployment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The non-significant, near-threshold trend for problem-focused coping may partly reflect the limited number of items capturing this orientation in the Brief COPE Inventory and partly reflect structural constraints in the Tanzanian labour market, where direct problem-solving action may be limited by the scarcity of formal-sector jobs and the influence of personal connections in employment. In such contexts, emotion-focused strategies that help manage the emotional burden of largely uncontrollable stressors may prove more functionally adaptive than direct problem-solving efforts.

The positive, non-significant trend for avoidance coping is broadly consistent with theoretical expectations that avoidance is associated with poorer psychological outcomes (Carver, 1997), although the present sample did not provide statistically conclusive

evidence for this association; the wide variability in avoidance scores ($SD = 8.99$) suggests that some students relied heavily on avoidance while others did not, and larger samples may detect this expected association more reliably. Overall, the coping profile suggests that final-year students at the University of Iringa draw primarily on interpersonal and reflective resources, such as seeking support, positive reframing and acceptance, to manage the emotional demands of the transition, a pattern consistent with the collectivist orientation of Tanzanian society and one that institutional counselling services could build upon through peer-support groups, mentoring relationships and community-based resilience programmes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study examined psychological adjustment among final-year undergraduate students transitioning from university to the labour market at the University of Iringa. Three conclusions follow from the findings. First, the level of psychological adjustment among these students is predominantly poor to moderate, with anxiety the most pervasive form of distress and over half of respondents experiencing at least moderate depression; these elevated distress levels confirm that the pre-graduation period represents a psychologically burdensome phase, consistent with regional and international evidence. Second, perceived readiness for the labour market is significantly associated with psychological adjustment, with higher readiness linked to lower depression, anxiety and overall distress, even though the cross-sectional design does not permit conclusions about the direction of this relationship; that only 9% of students reported high readiness highlights a critical gap in self-perceived preparedness that strongly supports Schlossberg's Self component and the Transactional Theory's secondary-appraisal process. Third, coping strategies, particularly emotion-focused coping, play a meaningful role in psychological adjustment, with emotion-focused strategies the most commonly used and the most consistently associated with lower distress, a pattern reflecting the collectivist and spiritually oriented Tanzanian cultural context in which direct problem-solving may be constrained by structural labour-market barriers. Overall, the study demonstrates that psychological adjustment during the university-to-labour-market transition in a private Tanzanian university is associated with both individual psychological resources, perceived readiness, and culturally congruent coping processes.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. Universities should strengthen counselling and career-development services for final-year students by integrating structured career-preparation programmes, employability workshops, job-search training, interview-preparation sessions and transition counselling into undergraduate education, given that students with higher perceived readiness experienced lower psychological distress. Bodies responsible for university quality assurance, such as the Tanzania Commission for Universities, should encourage higher-education institutions to incorporate graduate-transition preparedness and employability development into quality-assurance frameworks and to establish comprehensive career-development centres offering career guidance, employability training and psychosocial support. National education policy should promote the integration of employability skills, career planning and psychosocial development within higher-education curricula and support collaboration between universities, employers and professional bodies to facilitate smoother transitions into the workforce. Employers, for their part, should recognise that the transition from university to employment is often accompanied by psychological uncertainty, and should establish graduate-orientation programmes, mentorship opportunities and early-career support systems, in partnership with universities, to ease new graduates' adjustment. Finally, final-year students themselves are encouraged to engage proactively in career-planning and employability-development activities and to seek counselling and psychosocial support when experiencing transition-related distress. Future research should employ longitudinal and multi-institutional designs, incorporate qualitative or multi-informant data and track actual post-graduation employment outcomes to build on the exploratory, cross-sectional evidence presented here.

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DISCLOSURE

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