

# Robbing the Cradle: Factors Promoting Lecturer-on-Student Transactional Sex Relationships at a South African University

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**Abstract:** While universities have been lauded as sanctuaries of peace where students and staff pursue educational goals, there has been a marked increase in the victimisation of students by staff members who have been known to hound students for sexual favours. This increase in unethical conduct continues regardless of "sound" policies regulating university student and staff relationships. Against this background, this study sought to explore the factors shaping the pervasive practice of transactional sex between staff and students at a university in rural South Africa. Underpinned by the sexual exchange theory, the study utilised an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. The findings categorised into four key themes – academic reasons, impunity and power dynamics, financial constraints, and peer pressure and influence – highlight the entrenched nature of this practice within the university setting. The study recommended implementing and enforcing strict policies with clear consequences for perpetrators and establishing confidential reporting systems and dedicated support units for victims.

**Keywords:** Authority, gender-based violence, higher education, masculinity, transactional sex.

## 1. Introduction

Transactional sex refers to sexual relationships where one partner exchanges compensation, such as good grades, money, gifts, or favours, for sexual intimacy or access to sexual activities (Kyegombe et al., 2020; Hansen & Johansson, 2023). Research shows that transactional sex between lecturers and students is a prevalent issue in universities worldwide, particularly involving sex for grades and opportunities (Mafa & Simango, 2021; Clarke, 2022; Mawere & Seroto, 2022). The complexity of this issue is evident as it involves both consensual and non-consensual sexual relationships due to power dynamics (Gukurume, 2022; Mawere & Seroto, 2022; Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2023). While some students may willingly participate in transactional sex, external pressures such as financial strains, academic ties, and fear often contribute to these relationships (Mugodzwa & Ngwerume, 2022; Qiu & Cheng, 2023). Lecturers engage in transactional sex for personal gain, exploitation, and power dynamics, while students primarily cite financial difficulties, academic pressures, or the desire for improved grades as their motivators (Eller, 2016; Kyegombe et al., 2020; Kotze et al., 2022). The issue arises when students are coerced or manipulated into engaging in sexual relationships with lecturers, violating academic integrity, respect, and ethical conduct (Ncube, 2019; Kirkner et al., 2022; Mafa et al., 2022).

There are several problems associated with lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices in universities. Firstly, this practice undermines the credibility of academic institutions and devalues academic qualifications (Blum et al., 2018; Clarke, 2022; Hendricks, 2022). Additionally, it creates an uneven playing field, as students who do not engage in transactional sex may be at a disadvantage compared to those who do (Ncube, 2019). Consequently, transactional sex undermines academic meritocracy and contributes to grade inflation and unfair academic practices. Secondly, lecturer-on-student transactional sex creates power imbalances that can have severe negative consequences for

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the affected students (Mafa et al., 2022; Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2023; Ngidi, 2023). Due to the excessive power and influence held by lecturers over their students, some may exploit or manipulate students (Kotze et al., 2022; Hamlall & Jagath, 2024). Research on this subject shows that this exploitation can lead to emotional, psychological, or physical harm, which negatively impacts the academic and personal well-being of the students involved (Adams et al., 2013; Duby et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2021). Thirdly, lecturer-on-student transactional sex is often associated with sexual harassment and gender-based violence. It violates the fundamental human rights of students, particularly female students, who are disproportionately affected by this practice (Masvawure, 2010; Crittenden et al., 2021). Consequently, transactional sex perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and reinforces the notion that females are sexual objects in service to male sexual pleasures (Hendricks & Kanjiri, 2020; Kotze et al., 2022; Jagath & Hamlall, 2024).

In addition, transactional sex has been identified as fostering cultures of silence regarding the reporting of violence committed by individuals in positions of authority (Ncube, 2019; Omar, 2019; Ikogho, 2022). Power dynamics make it difficult for students to report unethical conduct by rogue lecturers. This is largely due to evidence suggesting that those who reject advances from such lecturers often face unexplained failure in certain modules (Ncube, 2019; Clarke, 2022; Ikogho, 2022). In some cases, transactional sex is closely linked to patriarchy, complicating the ability of female students in patriarchal societies to address this widespread practice (Adams et al., 2013; Mensah, 2020; Mfeka-Nkabinde et al., 2023). While transactional sex is typically depicted as male lecturers exploiting female students, evidence demonstrates that this phenomenon affects students of all genders (Forsman, 2017; Gukurume, 2021). Numerous studies have revealed the pervasive nature of transactional sex (see, for example, Adams et al., 2013; Omar, 2019; Ncube, 2019; Hendricks, 2022), the victimisation of female students in universities (Choudhry et al., 2014; Ncube, 2019; Ngidi, 2023), and the psychosocial consequences of engaging in transactional sex (Blum et al., 2018; Mensah et al., 2022). Given the limited existing literature on the factors influencing the occurrence of lecturer-on-student transactional sex at a South African university, this study aimed to make a significant contribution toward addressing this knowledge gap.

## **1.1 Research question**

What are the factors shaping lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices at the selected university?

## **1.2 Theoretical framework**

Social exchange theory (SET) offers a compelling framework for understanding lecturer-on-student transactional sex by focusing on the dynamics of exchange processes in social interactions. Initially proposed by George C. Homans and further developed by Peter Blau, John Thibaut, and Harold Kelley, SET posits that social behaviour is driven by individuals seeking to maximise rewards and minimise costs to self (Homans, 1958). Within the context of lecturer-student interactions, this theory explains how students might engage in transactional sex as a strategic exchange where sexual favours are given in return for academic or financial benefits. Central to SET is the idea that individuals evaluate their interactions based on perceived rewards and costs (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). For students, the benefits of improved grades or financial support may outweigh the personal and emotional costs associated with engaging in transactional sex. Ahmad et al. (2023) argue that SET addresses the role of power dynamics in shaping these interactions. In academic settings, Ingraham et al. (2018) reveal that lecturers wield significant influence over students' academic and professional outcomes. This creates an environment where students may feel compelled to comply with demands for sexual favours due to the power imbalance. This dynamic illustrates how the lack of accountability and the imbalance of power can facilitate such exchanges. Additionally, Homans (1958) considers the impact of social norms and reciprocity on behaviour. This means that sometimes students might perceive transactional sex as a normative practice within their

academic environment, influenced by peer behaviour and expectations, thereby reinforcing the practice. SET thus provides a comprehensive lens for examining lecturer-on-student transactional sex because it highlights how individuals engage in exchanges based on a calculation of rewards and costs, power dynamics, and social norms. This perspective offers valuable insights into the motivations and constraints that drive these sexual interactions.

## 2. Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach to investigate the phenomenon of transactional sex as experienced by university students at a rural South African university. The study emerged as a follow-up to concerns about the pervasiveness of transactional sexual relationships, which were raised by several participants during the collection of data for a PhD study on violence in South African universities. Using mixed methods allowed for a more robust exploration of the topic by combining the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods (Almalki, 2016; Hothersall, 2017). After obtaining ethical permission from the University of Fort Hare (MNC001-22), the study was formulated along an exploratory sequential design, as explained by Creswell and Creswell (2018). This meant that data were collected and analysed in two distinct phases: the first involved the qualitative phase, and the second was the quantitative phase. In the qualitative phase, 15 students and five lecturers were purposively sampled based on their self-reported knowledge of transactional sex practices at the university. Table 1 below presents the demographic data of the students who participated in the qualitative phase.

*Table 1: Qualitative phase student participants' demographical data*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Level of study</b>
Student 1	Male	18-23	Undergraduate
Student 2	Non-binary	18-23	Undergraduate
Student 3	Male	24-29	Postgraduate
Student 4	Male	18-23	Undergraduate
Student 5	Female	24-29	Undergraduate
Student 6	Female	18-23	Undergraduate
Student 7	Non-binary	18-23	Postgraduate
Student 8	Male	30 and above	Undergraduate
Student 9	Female	24-29	Undergraduate
Student 10	Female	18-23	Postgraduate
Student 11	Female	18-23	Undergraduate
Student 12	Non-binary	30 and above	Undergraduate
Student 13	Male	24-29	Undergraduate
Student 14	Female	24-29	Postgraduate
Student 15	Male	18-23	Undergraduate

From there, the data were analysed thematically following the steps prescribed by Clarke and Braun (2006). In the quantitative phase, a survey was developed and deployed through Google Forms to students at the university for 90 days, using a simple random sampling technique. A total of 137 complete participant responses were garnered from students. Table 2 below presents the demographic data from the quantitative sample (n=137).

*Table 2: Quantitative phase demographical data*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Participants (n)</b>	<b>Participants (%)</b>
Gender	Female	85	62
	Male	50	36.5
	Non-binary	2	1.5
Age range	18-23	86	62.8

	24-29	41	29.9
	30 and above	10	7.3
Socioeconomic status	Low	92	67.2
	Middle	40	29.2
	High	5	3.6
Source of financial support	Bursary	115	83.9
	Family	17	12.4
	Self	5	3.6

To test the generalisability of the findings from the qualitative phase, survey questions were developed using the themes from participants in the qualitative phase and were analysed using descriptive statistics. For each of the themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews, the researchers developed constructs to help measure the attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs of the students in relation to factors enabling lecturer-on-student transactional sex. The responses for all the constructs in each theme were then averaged to generate the overall outlook of the theme tested. Because the study was centred on sensitive and traumatic experiences, the researchers arranged for a professional counsellor to help debrief the participants and researchers after each interview. Participants were informed about the study's aims and objectives and were invited to join the study if they were interested. They were also given the guarantee that they would be allowed to withdraw their consent at any stage of the study without any consequences. All data was anonymised to prevent harm to the participants.

### 3. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

In the qualitative phase, participants were asked to explain their knowledge of the factors they believed were influencing the lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices at their university. The researchers explained to them that in this study, the term 'lecturer-on-student transactional sex' was used to describe sexual relationships in which a lecturer provided a student with any form of compensation in exchange for sexual favours. The analysis of the participant responses revealed four themes: academic reasons, impunity and power dynamics, financial constraints, and peer pressure and influence. The following subsections present each theme in greater depth, followed by a presentation of the quantitative results.

#### 3.1. Academic reasons

The findings from the qualitative phase of the study revealed that the majority of students and staff believed that lecturer-on-student transactional sex was primarily based on academic reasons. One can draw from the experiences of a student who said:

*"...students give sexual favours because they want to pass challenging modules. The lecturers prey on students, and because they have the upper hand, students tend to give in and sleep with lecturers. I have seen it mostly from male lecturers, but some female lecturers do the same. We once had a lecturer who was very vindictive in our entire class because a certain student had turned down his advances, but the matter only got resolved when we complained to the faculty manager." Student 8.*

These sentiments were validated by a male lecturer who argued that:

*"I have cautioned a few colleagues, especially the younger contingent of staff members, who are new to this practice and its dangers. Students are vulnerable, and lecturers have quite some power over them. In my view, this is just rape, but the coercion is not verbal or physical, it is more aligned with academic performance. Psychologically, students are at a disadvantage because of the existing power dynamics. It is almost like a subtle 'Sleep with me, or else you will fail'." Lecturer 4.*

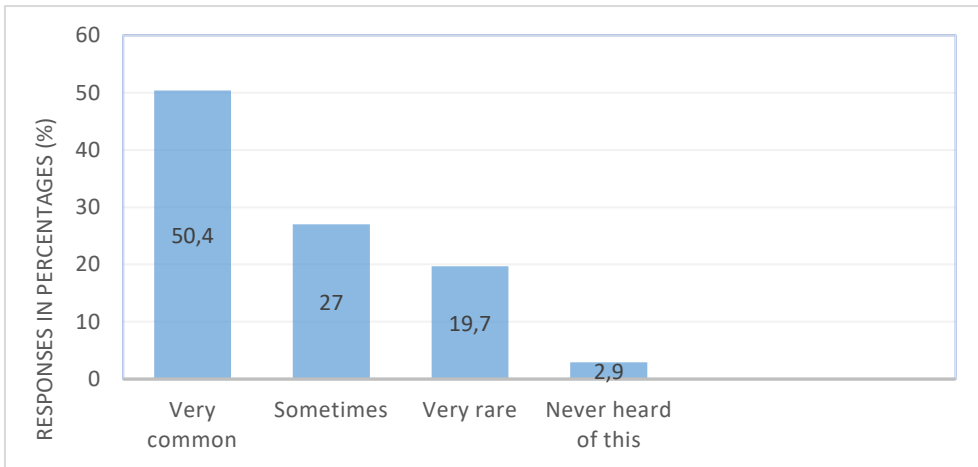
There were also students who argued that the conditions of funding, which were tied to academic performance, made things more difficult for students. One student best expressed these sentiments by saying:

*"...how can you turn down the opportunity to pass and maintain a bursary? Some of us come from impoverished backgrounds where if I lose funding, that is the end for me and my siblings, whose lives depend on my successful completion of this degree...given this tough choice, I will, unfortunately, choose funding at whatever cost." Student 11.*

There were also a limited number of participants who alleged that some students were actively seeking out sexual relations with lecturers, and not all students were victims. For instance, one student shared:

*"In our [social media] groups, there is always talk of lecturers who are 'weak' ...you know the ones who can be tempted and you can give them something you know sex. Once you sleep with them, it will be very difficult for them to make you fail. We know lecturers that have 'consultations' exclusively after sunset in their offices, they even ask that we all write down our mobile numbers on assignments when we hand them in for marking. What business does a lecturer have calling students around midnight? It is clear give them what they want and you will pass. It is painful, especially for female students." Student 3.*

To confirm or disconfirm the generalisability of the finding that academic reasons were a driver of lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices at the university, students were asked to rate the frequency with which the factor shapes transactional sex. Of the 137 participants who responded to the survey, 50.4% believed that this was a prevalent factor, 27% said it was sometimes a cause, 19.7% said it was very rarely a factor, and 2.9% said they had never heard of academic reasons shaping this form of transactional sex. Below is Figure 1, depicting participants' views of the extent to which academic reasons influence the production of lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices.



**Figure 1:** Participants' views of the extent to which academic reasons shape lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices

The above findings indicate that a cumulative majority of 97.1% of the participants recognised academic reasons as a factor influencing lecturer-on-student transactional sex at the university. Of this majority, 50.4% indicated that such reasons were very common, 27% stated that they were sometimes a factor, and 19.7% considered them to be very rare. Only a small percentage of 2.9 percent claimed to have never heard of academic factors influencing such relationships. These results align with the qualitative findings, which emphasise the significant role of academic reasons in perpetuating lecturer-on-student transactional sex.

These findings are consistent with a study conducted by Mafa and Simango (2022), which revealed that compromised educational outcomes were a prominent consequence of transactional sex and other forms of sexual harassment experienced by female students at universities. Additionally, Banda-Chitsamatanga and Ntlama (2020) and Clarke (2022) have reported that predatory lecturers sometimes base their advances on the academic success of the targeted students. This argument is supported by Clarke's (2022) study, which found that students with limited academic ability may engage in transactional relationships with lecturers to exchange sex for higher grades or academic assistance. Furthermore, the application of Homans' (1958) SET helps explain why students perceive the power dynamics inherent in these relationships with lecturers as being influenced by the analysis of costs and benefits associated with the lecturers' control over their academic futures.

### **3.2 Impunity and power dynamics**

The participants also revealed that power dynamics were a central theme in shaping lecturer-on-student transactional sex relations at the university. In the qualitative phase of the study, participants noted that it was difficult for students to turn down the advances of individuals who had power over their academic futures. Consider, for example, the student who said:

*"Strictly speaking, it is difficult to say no. I have friends who have been in the unfortunate situation where they have been accosted for sexual favours by lecturers it got so bad that one had to drop out. A friend of mine was doing a Master's degree and she ended up dropping out because the lecturer kept delaying her progress. Can you report a supervisor who can simply argue that the work is not yet ready? The whole aspect of supervision is subjective, and the student ends up looking stupid."* Student 15.

A lecturer also added:

*"Higher education is structured in a way that tilts the power in the favour of a lecturer...yes, students have power through their student bodies but there is always a deep-seated fear that reporting a lecturer can result in the lecturer's colleagues retaliating it becomes an 'Us versus them'. I am talking about what I have seen, there is a camaraderie among lecturers, whether it is in covering up or retaliating on those who make allegations...I have seen it with my eyes. To correct this problem, there is an urgent need to reconsider power structures and decentralised authority...there must be limits to what a lecturer can do."* Lecturer 2.

Another student added their experiences of the phenomenon by stating:

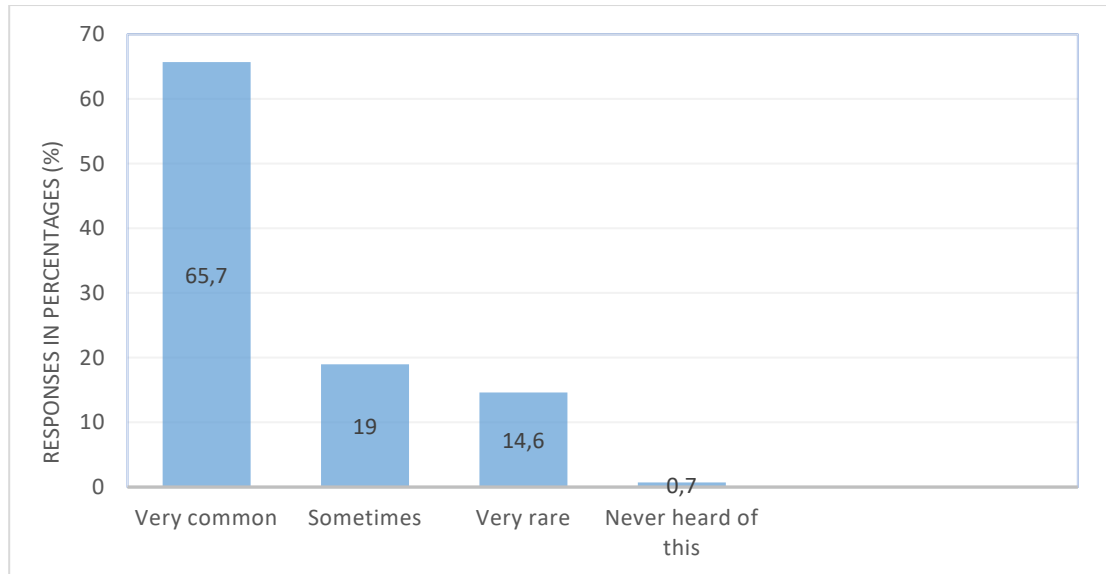
*"...there is a tilted balance between lecturers and students. That for me is the basis of this sex for marks thing we see in universities. The imbalance can reflect in several angles, it can be financial. I know many that have been taken advantage of due to their financial needs; it can also be in terms of actual influence who is likely to be believed between an undergrad student and a big professor who has exceptional qualifications and has been around the institution for decades?"* Student 6.

Another section of the participant also presented an additional view, which was well captured in the sentiments offered by Student 2. The student revealed:

*"...I think the main issue is about power both democratic power and autocratic power if I can say. Many students, especially female students, are just defenceless against male lecturers. In some instances, you find that the power is implied, for example issues about how nothing can be done to them (lecturers) because they are powerful. I have seen reports made, including on the private anonymous hotline where we are encouraged to report, then nothing happens. This is the reality we live in pretending to care about students, but in practice there is very little being done."* Student 2.

When these views were tested in the quantitative phase for generalisability, the results suggested that impunity and power dynamics play a significant role in shaping the outlook on transactional

sex. Out of the 137 participants who responded to this question, 65.7 percent identified it as a very common factor, 19 percent believed it was sometimes a factor, and 14.6 percent said it rarely influenced transactional sex. Only 0.7 percent had never heard of impunity and power dynamics as factors shaping transactional sex practices at their university. Figure 2 below shows the participants' views on the extent to which impunity and power dynamics influence the perpetuation of lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices.



**Figure 2:** *Participants' views of the extent to which impunity and power dynamics shape lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices*

The findings above confirm the view that impunity and power dynamics were viewed as factors shaping lecturer-on-student transactional sex, as demonstrated by a cumulative 84.7% (65.7% who said it was prevalent and 19% who said it was sometimes a factor). While an additional 14.6% agreed that it was a factor, albeit very rare, the remaining 0.7% did not acknowledge this as a factor shaping transactional sex. These findings suggest that the university was generally viewed as a site where abuse of power and impunity were endemic.

The findings from the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study align with those of previous studies, such as Mafa, Simango, and Chisango (2021), who revealed that transactional sex practices were underreported due to factors such as fear of failure and the laxity of authorities in dealing decisively with such incidents. This position is supported by the SET, which argues that individuals will always make decisions that best benefit them (Corpronzano & Mitchell, 2005). This argument aligns with Fadipe and Bakenne (2020), who established that despite several sound legislative strides, many universities in Africa have inadequate safety measures to protect female students from sexual harassment and abuse. The intersection of impunity and power dynamics creates a breeding ground for the domination of students by their lecturers (Mncube et al., 2022). This toxic combination harms victims and also undermines the integrity of educational institutions by perpetuating cultures of exploitation and abuse.

### **3.3. Financial constraints**

An additional theme that was apparent from the views shared by the participants in the qualitative phase of the study was that financial constraints were significant shapers of how lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices were occurring at the institution. According to several participants, students engaged in transactional sex relationships due to financial hardships, and these

relationships provided a means to overcome their lack of financial resources. A good example can be drawn from a student who stated:

*"For me, the most important thing here is money...we are mainly poor students from rural communities where financial stability is something we can only dream of. Now imagine how complicated it becomes when even the bursaries and financial aid schemes reject funding you or do not pay on time. The reality is that most students cannot call home, there is nothing because the family members they left there are surviving on the insufficient grant from the government. Can you blame transactional sex here? The need dictates choice, students see it as a sacrifice that must be made to achieve a greater good." Student 7.*

Along the same lines, a lecturer also argued:

*"Poverty for me is the main driver of this practice. As long as there is financial vulnerability, there will always be predators on our students – this can be either within the university or from outside. It is a pity that financial need pushes students to a corner where they sometimes feel isolated and without options...it is not just female students as most are led to believe, even male students are also victims." Lecturer 1.*

This perspective was corroborated by Student 10, who acknowledged that financial hardships were behind their own experience of lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices. The student confessed:

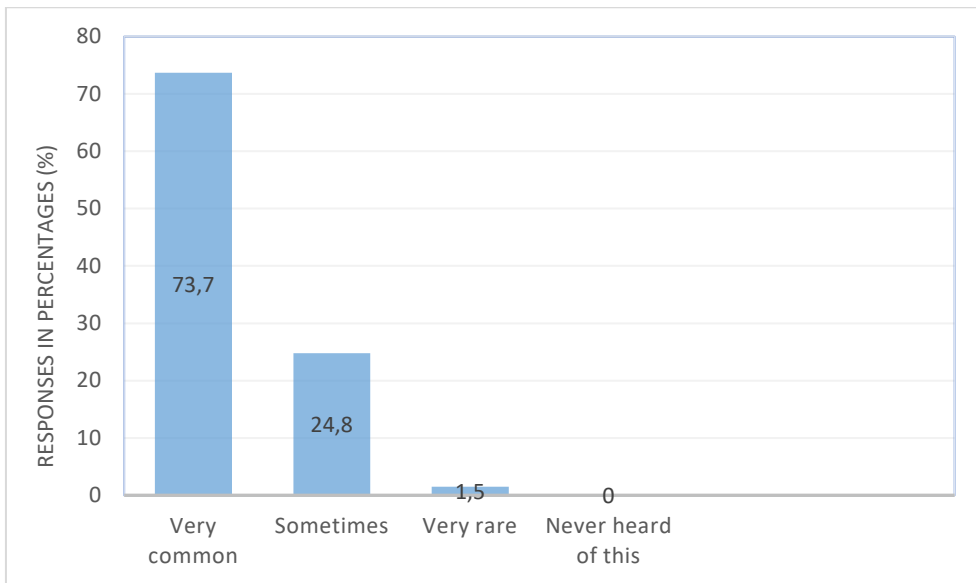
*"I have been involved in this thing [transactional sex] before. What I can tell you is that it is so difficult to not have certain basics at university. In my early years at university, there were several male lecturers and tutors that were after me and I kept running away because that is not how I was raised. In my third year, I lost funding and did not have anywhere to run to. I ended up giving in to one lecturer and I got some financial support to complete my undergrad comfortably." Student 10.*

Lecturer 5 also revealed that the university had been alerted to how some students were being taken advantage of by lecturers and had consequently moved to regulate relationships between staff and students. The lecturer argued:

*"...the institution has now made it clear in a policy that any undeclared relationships will attract some consequences. Students have decried how some lecturers chase after them for sexual favours in return for financial or material resources. It is not a crime coming from a disadvantaged background, and lecturers have a duty of care for these students. For me, it is the financial need of students that is often taken advantage of by these rogue elements in academia, and we must find ways of helping protect our vulnerable students." Lecturer 5.*

When the role of financial constraints was tested as a potential driver of transactional sex relationships at the university, findings suggested that participants unanimously believed that this played a role, although to varying extents. Of the 137 responses received for this question, 73.7 percent said this was a very common feature of most lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices, while 24.8 percent said it was sometimes a factor, and the remaining 1.5 percent believed it was very rarely a factor. Figure 3 below presents participants' views about the extent to which they believed financial constraints shape lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices at the university.





**Figure 3:** Participants' views of the extent to which financial constraints shape lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices

The findings above reveal that the majority of the participants believed that financial constraints significantly shaped lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices. An overwhelming majority of 98.5% of the respondents acknowledged that financial constraints played a role – of these, 73.7% said it was very common, while 24.8% said it was sometimes a factor. The remaining 1.5% said this was a very rare factor influencing how transactional sex happens at the university, while none of the participants said they had never heard of this. These findings suggest that financial constraints played a huge role in shaping exposure to transactional sex practices.

The findings from the two phases of this study corroborate those of previous studies on the phenomenon. A case in point can be drawn from Gichane et al. (2020), who found a strong correlation between the multiple dimensions of poverty and susceptibility to transactional sex. In the South African context, Miri (2022) found that students engage in transactional sex due to financial constraints and the appeal of a lavish lifestyle. Our results also align with Mensah's (2020) assertion that transactional sex is a ubiquitous sexual culture in higher learning institutions, used to meet consumer demands, contemporary trends, and power dynamics. Stereotypical gender standards and expectations in society, where men provide and women are subservient and compensated, are the driving force behind this behaviour. Moreover, the discourses of pleasure, materialism, preference, and autonomy are central to the practice of transactional sex (Mensah, 2020). The elite group is driven by the possibility of benefits from high pass rates, enabling them to be top performers and is typified by non-resistant behaviour. The disadvantaged group is primarily driven by impoverished circumstances, peer pressure, and their desire to conform to categorised gender prospects provided by autonomous relationships.

### 3.4 Peer pressure and influence

The findings from the qualitative phase further reveal that another theme shaping lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices is peer pressure and influence. Participants note that part of their involvement is trying to fit into peer groups and finding acceptance among peers involved in the practice. One can consider the perspective offered by a student who insists:

*“In my view, our friends are very influential...if your friends are involved in sleeping with lecturers for money or marks, you find yourself joining in. Remember, when you go out, you cannot just rely*

on your friends, so you must step up or change friend groups. Unfortunately, we want to be in groups that trend and live the high life...so we just go with the flow." Student 5.

A lecturer also added to this by arguing:

"The problem is that this thing is enabled by group mentality and I mean this from both the side of the students and lecturers. The lecturers doing this are cronies, and the student victims are usually also friends...here, I am talking about students doing this for money and gifts, not the ones manipulated for marks and academic progress." Lecturer 3.

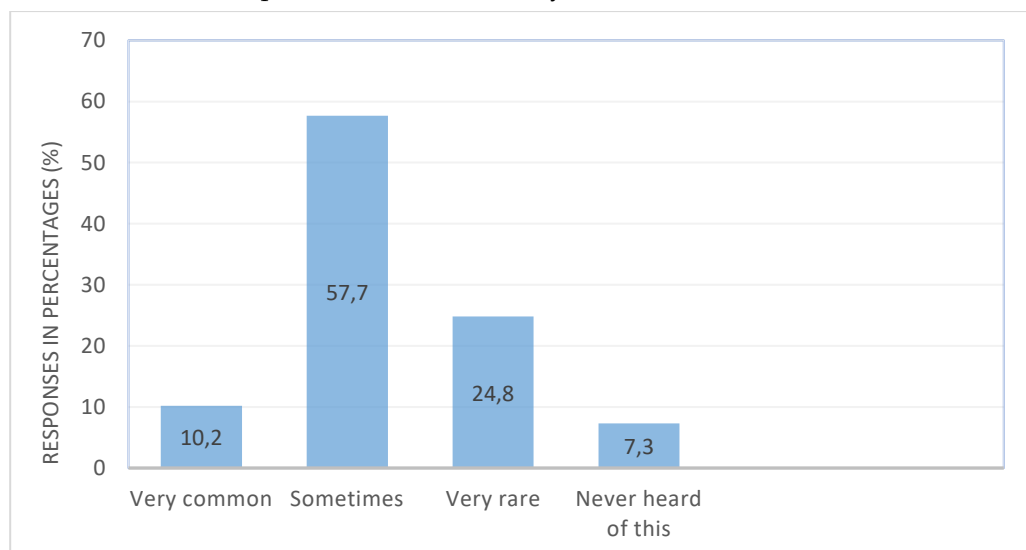
These sentiments were also similar to those of a student who reasoned:

"Think of it this way: a friend with whom you have been struggling to make ends meet suddenly starts living a comfortable life; they can afford to eat out and support their family at home. You, too, have needs and have a family that needs to be taken care of then they tell you how they are making the money. It is more like prostitution for me, but what can we do? The lecturers doing this have friends and they encourage students to visit them with other students. It is sad because it is simply preying on us because of the vulnerability we have." Student 14.

One can also consider the perspective offered by a student who said:

"How I got to know about this was through my friends...I am ashamed of it but I just went along with my friends' way of doing things. I really cannot say I was pressured into it but it was more like getting influenced to engage in this thing. So from my experiences, it is the need to fit in that drove me into it." Student 9.

In the quantitative phase, the participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed that peer pressure was shaping lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices. The findings revealed that of the 137 students who responded to the question, 10.7% said this was a very common factor, while 57.7% said it was sometimes a factor. The remaining 24.8% said it was very rare, and 7.3% said they had never heard of this as a factor shaping transactional sex. Figure 4 below presents participants' views about the extent to which they believed that peer pressure and influence shape lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices at the university.



**Figure 4:** Participants' views of the extent to which peer pressure shapes lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices

The findings presented in Figure 4 above reveal that 67.9% of the respondents affirmed the role of peers in shaping lecturer-on-student relationships. This total includes 10.2% who said it was very common and 57.7% who said it was sometimes a factor. Additionally, 24.8% of the respondents stated that it was very rare to hear of lecturer-on-student transactional sex relations, although it is important to recognise that its occurrence is a cause for concern. These findings indicate that peer pressure and influence significantly shape lecturer-on-student transactional sex practices.

Previous studies, such as Adebola (2018), show that it is not uncommon for adolescents and young adults to engage in transactional sex by imitating their friends and peers who are involved in such practices to meet their financial needs. The desire for a contemporary lifestyle, as promoted by society and media outlets, also plays a role. This desire stems from a need for peer approval, a sense of identity, and the pursuit of financial security and social status. Socioeconomic factors like poverty, gender inequality, and lack of knowledge can contribute to transactional sex relationships in some cases, but psychosocial variables like peers, family, societal pressure, material possessions, aspirations for upward mobility, and romantic ideals also play a significant role (Duby et al., 2021).

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study has shed light on the complex factors that contribute to the practice of transactional sex between staff and students at a rural university in South Africa. The findings, which are organised into four main themes - academic reasons, power dynamics and impunity, financial constraints, and peer pressure and influence - underscore the entrenched nature of this phenomenon within the university context. Academic pressures, such as the pursuit of higher grades or the desire to gain academic advantages, create a vulnerable atmosphere in which students may perceive transactional sex as a viable solution to their challenges. The power dynamics between staff and students further exacerbate the issue, as staff members often exploit their positions of authority, knowing that they are unlikely to face repercussions due to the prevailing culture of impunity. Financial constraints also play a significant role, as many students feel compelled to engage in transactional sex as a means of coping with economic hardship. Lastly, peer pressure and social influence contribute to the normalisation of this practice, creating an environment in which such behaviours are tolerated and sometimes even encouraged.

To address the issue of transactional sex between staff and students at universities, a comprehensive strategy is necessary. This strategy should encompass the implementation and enforcement of strict policies, accompanied by clear consequences for perpetrators. Additionally, the establishment of confidential reporting systems and dedicated support units for victims is essential. Empowerment initiatives should prioritise the education of students, particularly women, about their rights and the resources available to them. Moreover, financial support programs should be expanded to alleviate the economic pressures that drive students towards transactional sex. Peer mentorship and support networks should also be developed to provide guidance and promote healthy choices. Regular monitoring and research are crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of these measures and adapting strategies accordingly.

#### **5. Contribution to Knowledge**

This study contributes significantly to the growing body of knowledge on transactional sex in higher education. It specifically focuses on lecturer-on-student relationships at a rural South African university that predominantly serves poor rural communities. The research sheds light on the complex interplay of academic pressure, power imbalances, and institutional complicity that foster exploitative relationships. By identifying these key themes, our study provides a more refined understanding of the factors that drive transactional sex beyond mere financial and marks exchanges. Our findings challenge the traditional view of transactional sex as primarily a monetary transaction and introduce academic and psychological pressures as central components. This new perspective

has potential implications for policy reform within universities and can aid in enriching existing theoretical frameworks. Specifically, our findings highlight the need for stronger enforcement of sexual misconduct policies and the development of robust support systems for vulnerable students, including enhanced financial aid and academic assistance. Our study fills critical gaps in the literature and lays a foundation for future research on the long-term effects of such relationships and the effectiveness of institutional interventions in different cultural and educational contexts.

## 6. Declarations

**Authors contributions:** Conceptualisation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); Literature review (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); methodology (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); software (N/A); validation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); formal analysis (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); investigation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); data curation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.) drafting and preparation (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); review and editing (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); supervision (N/A); project administration (B.H.M. & E.A.H.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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