

FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' CHOICE OF CAMPUS  
AND COMPLETION OR NON-COMPLETION OF COURSES IN  
FET COLLEGES.

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in the dissertation is my own work, and that reference to the work of other people has been acknowledged. This work has not been previously submitted for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Balungile Ngcobo

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## ABSTRACT

The study is about factors that influence students' choice of a campus and how those choices influence students' decision to complete their courses. Since FET colleges have campuses with different historical backgrounds and unique characteristics, they offer specialised programmes according to the resources they have, relevant to their geographic location. The research focused on answering the following questions

- 1) What factors influence students' choice of campus?
- 2) What factors influence the students' completion or non-completion of courses?

The aim of these questions was to determine what currently influences the students' choice and what kind of information or sources do students use in their study choice decisions. Some related researchers in other contexts have shown that there is a link between education and socio-economic factors.

This study has been primarily informed by Tinto's (1987) theory on student retention and non-completion of courses, which suggested that non-completion is a result of a mismatch between the social/academic background, intentions and goals of the student and their institution's ability to meet those goals. Chapman's model of choice (1991) enabled him to indicate some factors, which influence student's choice. The aim of using the model was to check if the same influential factors were important for the current FET students in South Africa. A number of available studies have focused on the student, significant others in their lives, parents and teachers, as well as marketing of colleges or recruitment of students as factors influencing the choice. There is little literature that looks at how the fixed college factors such as program availability, location and reputation influence students, which is the focus of this research.

This study falls into an interpretive paradigm and is qualitative in nature. Data has been collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews conducted among students of different campuses in one FET College. The sources of information are current students, those who dropped out and students who have completed their courses. Data collected show that the costs factor, academic achievement and significant others influence students' choices.

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# CHAPTER I

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Motivation

Further Education and Training colleges are entities that are the product of a “merger during 2001 to 2003 of approximately 150 racially segregated Technical Colleges to 50 multi-campus non-racial institutions, which were supposed to offer vocational education” (Young and Gamble, 2006, p 22). The FET system dictated that these FET colleges through their campuses should “gear themselves towards offering training in locally needed skills, by enrolling and retaining sufficient numbers of students who were keen to move to larger urban centers” (Witness, Dell, 2007). FET colleges are expected to provide necessary skills training to respond to national challenge of skill development in South Africa. This poses a challenge, which threatens the fundamental principle of there not being duplication, which guided the decision about what courses to offer, particularly in semi-rural areas. These areas sometimes lack the infrastructure and equipment needed to offer courses in the workshops for instance.

While FET colleges were positioning themselves for skills provision, the challenge facing the students was deciding and choosing where to study. FET colleges spend time and money in marketing and recruitment programmes to attract students. Such activities may or may not indicate to what extent they have an impact on the student’s FET College choice processes.

Several studies have been conducted in efforts to identify factors that influence college choice in the United States and other international countries, by researchers such as (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1989; Paulsen, 1990) just to mention a few. However, there is very limited information about the factors that influence a student’s decision to attend a particular campus in a multi-campus FET college. While acknowledging that the choice of college strongly influences a student’s career choice (Hossler, et al. 1989), my observation as

an employee at the FET college, was that most students enrolled at the FET colleges landed up there by chance since they did not qualify to enter other preferred institutions.

## **1.2 Research Focus**

As stated above, Technical Colleges merged into regional Further Education and Training Colleges (FETCs) as mandated by the Department of Education in 2001. During this transition period, all colleges that belonged to a particular region were aligned as campuses of a unified College (Asmal, 2001). Before this took place, all these colleges had been offering a variety of courses and working in competition with each other. Since courses were duplicated at each college, access was easy for students because they could choose any college that was close to them. They could also choose what they wanted to study. Other students preferred colleges that were far from home because their perception is that those colleges offer quality service. After the merger of the Colleges, it was recommended by the Department of Education that campuses should specialize to avoid duplication and competing with each other for students.

This merger led to colleges deciding to specialize according to the strengths of each campus in an effort to develop their own distinctive identity and create centers of excellence. This brought about a change that the sector was not prepared for because it meant changing the whole culture in the FET sector. Different colleges had to become campuses of one college. These campuses had developed their own ways of doing things, their own values, and their own ways of recruiting students, which were different from each other. As it is with any organization or institution, their own communities and those around them valued them differently. These campuses “brought with them their own rules, procedures, and even some forms which they insisted everyone use” (Brown, 1995). As would be the case with any institution, these different campuses had their own well-developed systems, and consequently they were resistant towards change. The institutions were faced with challenges such as “changing culture, changing faculty roles, public scrutiny, changing demographics, financial pressures, competing values”, (Kezar, 2002), which affected their main client, the student.

The researcher was interested in determining what influences the students' choice of college and campus, that is, what kind of information or sources students use in their study choice decisions. Research in other contexts shows that there is a link between education and socio-economic factors as Thomas (1972, p 355) said, in the context of students in United States "...educational achievement appears to be tied strongly to socioeconomic status". The researcher also wanted find out what influenced the students' decisions to complete the course they had chosen at that particular campus, or to drop out. This relates to their perceptions about the service delivery at the FET College.

Linked to investigating the students' choices is an exploration of their perceptions of whether the culture of a campus accommodates students from various backgrounds or not. I set out to find out how campus culture affects the retention of students, their decision to carry on or stop studying before finishing their course. According to Pearce and Robinson (2000), every organization has a "distinct culture that it believes no other organisation can copy successfully". Therefore, in organizations with a strong culture, people accept the norms of the culture or opt out and leave. When people do not 'fit in' in an environment, they tend not to perform well. The students' accounts of their experiences at the College, indicate whether they share the values and beliefs of their campuses or whether they would have preferred to do their courses somewhere else had they not only been offered in one campus.

While the researcher was open to indications of any factors that students gave, the factors that influence the choice of campus were expected to include course offerings, geographical location of campuses and people who influenced the decision, as well as perceptions about the service delivered. It was noted that specialization does not allow FET students to choose the environments that suited their backgrounds and socio-cultural factors, since their choices were channeled by the location of the specialization area. Some students did not perform well and eventually dropped out. The questions here were, 'why did some students persevere while others did not?' Was the dropout influenced more by personal problems or were the students' not getting value for the fees they paid?

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

The problem is that there is little that is known about factors that influence students to choose to attend the FET colleges, more especially why they choose to study at particular campuses and the reasons for completion or non-completion of the courses. Through questionnaire and interviews the study examined the students' experiences when choosing college, programs that made them to stay, support they received and any other factors that influenced their decision.

Available literature in South Africa concerning FET colleges focuses on governance, college structure, curriculum responsiveness, college staff and skills development to meet needs of industry (Akojee, Gewer & McGrath, 2005) The "state of VET in South Africa was also an issue of concern" (McGrath, 2004). Nevertheless, other researchers such as Cosser and du Toit (2002) in their study of South African students did look at "the preferences of Grade 12 learners concerning entry in HE institutions and factors that influenced their preferences". There is still limited literature that explores or examines the experiences of FET College students.

### **1.4 Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to describe factors that influence students' choice of campus and completion or non-completion of courses at the FET colleges.

Chapman, 1981, in his study conducted in United States, New York, about indicators in final college choice, "focused on the significant persons, fixed college characteristics, and college efforts to communicate with students". This study aims to identify factors that made students choose an FET college, so that a college can take them into account and focus on activities that could lead to improved learning and retention in order to assist the students to achieve their academic goals.

## **1.5 Rationale (motivation for the choice of research topic)**

The researcher's interest in doing this research stems from the fact that having taught in the FET college environment prior and post merger, there was a perception among staff that some students did not fit into the culture of certain campuses and that these students decided to leave. This study aims to discover the extent to which these perceptions are true. Since the FET College sector was still a new institution after the merger, each campus had its own historical background. Any new organisation has to develop its new identity, but FET colleges were multi-campus institutions with each campus having different and unique characteristics. These campuses offered specialised programmes according to the resources they had, and so campuses in different geographical areas with different environmental factors offered different programmes.

The researcher therefore wanted to find out what factors in students' choices of study area were and what factors in students' decision to complete or dropout were. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) analyse "social and academic integration or institutional fit as measures that have a different influence on persistence and educational attainment for gender and race subgroups". The researcher wanted to know whether FET college students were influenced in the ways they describe.

The researcher's interest was also motivated by a desire to identify the factors students considered when choosing a campus. Finding out why students prefer studying at those chosen campuses, would help the campuses to position themselves for growth. Discovering student preferences would assist with student retention at the FET College, so that future initiatives to continue with specialisation may improve in terms of service delivery in each campus as well as colleges.

The designated curriculum for each campus and how it is delivered, support given to students, the respect students get as well as their holistic development is important in making students stay at a campus. As the curricula unfold in any specific environment, it shapes the

individual choices and actions. A wrong choice of the institution, campus or course made at the beginning will jeopardize students' likelihood of completing.

## **1.6 Research questions**

FET education can be seen as an important skills development sector that deserves the attention of academic research. The topic of this study is 'Factors influencing students' choice of campus and completion and non-completion of courses in FET Colleges'. The research questions act as guidelines to what was being studied, therefore, this study was based on the following questions:

- 1) What factors influence students' choice of campus?
- 2) What factors influence the students' completion and non-completion of courses?

## **1.7 Research objectives**

The study has the following objectives:

- To determine what factors influence students to choose to attend the FET college
- To determine what factors influence the students to attend a particular campus and stay there
- To identify reference sources used by students to make a decision to attend the FET college
- To assess whether students were satisfied with the service delivered at those campuses and whether they were willing to change campuses and fields of study
- To discover factors that result in students' completion and non-completion of courses

## **1.8 Research Approach (Data Collection Methodology)**

A case study was used for this research. Cohen and Manion (2000, p185) believe that “significance, rather than frequency, is a hallmark of case studies, offering the researcher an insight into the real dynamics of situations and people”. It examines the multiple variables and attempts to understand the influences of multilevel social systems on the subject’s perspectives and behaviours, so it was used to determine the student’s perspectives. The intention of the study was to identify whether programme specialization has influenced of the student’s decision to continue studying or dropping out.

The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. This involved conducting research using questionnaires first and later conducting semi-structured interviews to assess the above stated questions.

## **1.9 Research procedure**

The researcher requested permission from the College Management and Campus managers to visit the campuses on certain days. Permission was also sought from lecturers to assist in ensuring that students were available to fill in the questionnaires.

The researcher visited the campuses after questionnaires were filled in, to request willing participants for interviews among the current students and made a list of willing students, noting their contact numbers. The students on the list were later contacted to set up appointments, and only those who were still interested and available were interviewed.

To gather in-depth information I used semi-structured interviews for both the lecturers and the students. This will allow me to probe deeper into understanding the impact of specialization on the student’s interest in the courses and the campuses that provide them. I tape-recorded the interviews conducted and this was used by me for transcription purposes.



Before recording the interview, I asked for permission from the participants and informed them that the information will be confidential.

Friends in class provided for the names of students who had dropped out or completed, some were sourced from registers of previous trimesters and College information system - Coltech.

### **1.10 Definition of terms**

\* Choice – the term choice in this study, refers to the comparison among alternatives and the decision to make a selection based on the information available

\* College choice – selection of an institution by the student

\* Completion – persistence until all subjects in a course are done

\* Non- completion – dropping out without completing the course and passing all subjects

\* FET College – Further Education and Training College

\* Students – learners that have been enrolled full time at the college either currently, completed or dropped out.

### **1.11 Overview of Dissertation**

This study has the following chapters:

## **Chapter 1**

Introductory chapter that presents the background and motivation of the study as well as focus and key questions;

## **Chapter 2**

Entails a review of literature on factors that influence college and campus choice as well as reason for completion or non-completion of courses;

## **Chapter 3**

Discussion of the research design and methodology followed in the study;

## **Chapter 4**

Presents the findings;

## **Chapter 5**

Discussion of the findings and conclusion.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an overview of literature on the South African FET system, as well as on factors that influence students' choice of a college and what influence their choice to complete their studies or dropout. A number of international studies have presented various models on student choice of college and factors that influence students' decision to complete or not complete a course. However, not much research is available on the choices that students make with regard to campuses, even internationally. The international studies need to be analysed carefully to establish their relevance to the South African context.

The perceptions that exist about the nature of institutions in South Africa will influence students' choice of those institution and the reasons to persist. There is "low prestige attached to technical vocational education and training" (Allais, 2003, p1) hence, most students do not make this kind of institution their first choice. For many years, vocational education has often been considered an inferior learning route, even though governments all over the world have tried to raise its status. However, VET plays an important role for young people (Moll, Steinberg & Broekmann, 2005, p 44).

In the South African education system, students make study decisions at two critical points. The first point is at the end of grade 9, when students have to decide on the combination of courses that they will follow in their final three years of high school. At this point the students decide which route to follow, academic or vocational. A student who chooses the vocational route can decide to join the FET College and enroll for the National Certificate Vocational (NCV). The second point is in grade 11 and 12 where students decide whether to further their studies or not. This decision is linked to the choice of the institution, whether it is University, University of Technology or Further Education and Training (FET) College, as

well as what courses to pursue (Cosser and du Toit, 2002). Most students make their decision during the final year of school, which is grade 12.

The “process of selecting a college or university for a high school student is a complex decision, subject to many different influencing factors including academic course offered, geographical location and the social atmosphere” (Wirt, 1999). Yet selecting an institution to attend can also depend on only one particular factor for some students.

## **2.0 Background**

### **2.1 Further Education and Training Institutions**

The Further Education and Training (FET) band “is the most complex and diverse phase of education and training phases, comprising four types of institutions (senior secondary schools, technical and community colleges, enterprise-based training, and a wide array of private providers, including for-profit and non-profit organizations such as NGOs). [All these, except schools, accommodate] three categories of learners: the pre-employed, employed and unemployed” (Kraak & Hall, 1999). According to Kraak & Hall (1999), the FET band is “critical to the development of the information economy because of its location at two important societal intersections. One intersection is that of a wide range of government policies that are vital for the new information economy and the second is at the crossroads between General Education and Training (GET), Higher Education (HE), work, community and personal life” (Kraak & Hall, 1999).

The role of the education system and the FET Colleges in South Africa is to deliver training programmes that are “closely linked to the requirements of people who are currently employed who seek retraining, up-skilling or further education. Additionally, FET programmes need to be responsive to the large numbers of unemployed [people] for whom entrepreneurial and other skills, retraining opportunities and further education constitute critically important avenues [to move] away from the cycles of poverty and deprivation” (Department of Education, 1998 p 17). Therefore, FET is central to lifelong learning.

However, there have been changes in the FET band, with the introduction of differing policies and Acts that govern the FET College sector.

A major change in the Further Education and Training (FET) College sector was in 2001 with the consolidation of 150 technical colleges into 50 multi-campus FET colleges. The merger of these colleges was intended to promote a balanced learning experience that provided flexible access to further education, lifelong learning, and productive employment opportunities in a range of occupational contexts. Colleges were expected to develop new sites where there was a need, or to relocate if their facilities were no longer needed (Pandor, 2006). The plan for FET colleges was that they will teach appropriate skills for the workplace so that skilled workers may generate an economic upswing. A “well designed plan and funding for FET colleges will build up leading skills training centres focused on key economic growth sectors” (Pandor, 2006 p 5). The former minister of Education, Kader Asmal, had suggested that “Colleges must develop the capacity to offer greater support to learners, innovative partnerships with business, industry and communities and a more responsive and flexible curriculum. Failure to address these imperatives will result in colleges remaining mere aggregations of what existed before” (Gamble, 2003). The FET colleges need to play a role in the changing economy of the country as well as in the individual development of current and potential workforce. Therefore, colleges should be identified as learning institutions of choice for individuals and industry.

The FET sector was formally constituted in 2002, with a declaration of 50 merged former technical colleges, college of education and training centers and institution in terms of Further Education and Training Act of 1998. The merger process was intended to create multi-campus institutions that offer the prospect of local responsiveness and access. Colleges reach into almost every town or township and some sites are served by rail or bus link or closer to taxi ranks (Fisher, Jaff, Powell and Hall, 2003).

The first FET Act of 1998 provided “the broad framework within which the FET system could be developed and implemented. It [regulated] FET by providing for the establishment, governance and funding of public FET colleges and the registration of private FET colleges” (Angelis et al, 2001). The new FET Act of 2006 promised to introduce a wide range of

changes in the status and operation of FET Colleges and giving them a distinct legal and educational identity. With the implementation of the new Act, FET colleges were expected to respond to government skills development programmes like the Joint Initiative of Priority Skills Acquisition (Jipsa) and offer high level training in vocational skills and scarce skills to address the skills shortage in the country. Jipsa, which was launched in March 2006 by the then, Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, was “aimed at addressing skills shortages in order to achieve the objectives of the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA), which was to speed up economic growth to six percent by 2010 and to halve unemployment by 2014” (Masango, 2007).

For the intentions of development stated above, the colleges should offer programmes that were inclusive, allowing those who were marginalized in any way to access skills training. They should be able to exercise their rights to study courses and not excluded because they were far away from the learning site offering them vocational and cultural choices.

## **2.2 The FET student**

People who come to the FET College are mainly young people who have been to school for a particular period and need to obtain a skill to join the labour market or improve results to enter higher education. Young adults and unemployed youth fall into this category as well. Fisher, Jaff, Powell and Hall (2003), stated the FET college student is “typically black, have probably completed twelve years of schooling. He or she is likely to be a self-funded student studying full time and have no employment history. He or she may have chosen college study as an affordable alternative to studying at higher education, or as a quicker route to labour market, based on the study conducted by Cosser (2002)”.

The college students can enter the college at the any level according to what they had achieved while at school. For the purpose of the study, the focus is on students who have passed grade 12 or N3 who are registered for N4 up to N6.

### **2.3 Policy and Practice**

The policy calls for the FET colleges in South Africa to be responsive to the need for a highly trained, knowledgeable and innovative workforce (Gamble, 2003). Therefore, “a further education and training system ready to equip youth and adults to meet the social and economic needs of the 21st century” must be established (Pandor, 2006 p 5). There is evidence that “the foundation have been laid for a new kind of college that will be able to meet the needs of industry and communities and to focus on job creation and skills agenda that are key to South Africa’s future success” (Pandor, 2005). South Africa “has a strong social agenda, [which at least in policy], foregrounds the needs of its learners, especially in order to redress past inequities, as well as the needs of society as a whole” (Meyers & Bloom, 2002 p 5). At the level of policy there is some effort made that attempts to integrate historically disadvantaged groups into the labour market and to counteract the negative impacts on unemployment of the youth, which are felt through out the society.

The FET College still follow the programmes that were offered by technical institutions, which were NATED programmes from N1-N6. The students who had passed grade 12 are eligible to register for N4, which assist them when they articulate to higher education if the high school results were not good.

### **2.4 Curriculum design and choice**

The main purpose of all education and training institutions is to enable students to learn. The recent changes in qualifications and curriculum design have had an effect on students’ learning and their choices of where to learn. These changes affect students’ educational aspirations. This poses a challenge for further education ‘to develop curricula and modes of learning which attract individuals and enable them to learn and continue learning’ (Smithers and Robinson, 2000). To deal with this challenge, institutions provide similar educational opportunities in terms of aspects of knowledge and life style, which are common to all social classes, as well as different cultural groupings. Since culture is part of curriculum in the broad sense, it is imperative to have a culture at FET colleges that is accepted by all parties

involved in that environment. Cultural isolation contradicts the idea of equal education opportunity for all. This study aims to find out from students if the culture of FET colleges influences their decision to gain specific knowledge in a specific college.

Gamble (2003) also gives a warning that it is important that when FET colleges decide to offer specialized programmes on particular campuses, the choice of subjects should not marginalize the campus or fail to meet the needs of students who want to attend at that campus. The curriculum offered at FET College institutions, “distinguishes two features of the FET systems as being the beginning of specialisation for learners and serving a dual purpose focusing on two directions, which are guiding learners towards HE and towards employment” (Young, 2006, p 49).

Specialisation of programmes could pose a high risk in sites or FET colleges situated in rural areas compared to those in urban areas, especially because of the distance between sites of learning in rural areas. FET Colleges, as learning institutions, also cater for a vast number of part time students employed in urban areas and some live in rural areas as well. If a certain specialisation programme was offered in rural areas, there could be a problem, when people cannot reach the site on time and having to walk long distances back home.

Research in higher education indicates that social support and campus environment affect the behaviour and performance of a variety of students. Not surprisingly, a link has been documented between the social and academic experience of college students and their attendance at the institutions (Davis, 1994). Social support, campus ethos and campus culture are critical variables in the educational experiences of students. The effect of these variables is gauged from items measuring the attitudes and general satisfaction of the students with the types and amounts of social support and culture they perceived as available from their campus, which influence their decision to persist (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

To investigate the factors that influence the students’ choice of campus and reasons for persistence, a few concepts will be defined that form part of the themes for this study. These concepts are specialisation and career choice, completion or non-completion.



#### 2.4.1 *Specialisation and career choice*

Specialisation is the combination or grouping of similar activities, and is applied where the decision has been taken to limit or decrease the range of products, operations or services provided (du Plessis, 1987) in order to increase gains and have an advantage over other FET colleges.

The challenges of globalization with increased competition, demand specialisation in the production of highly valued products by well-trained and skilled people (Gamble, 2003). The decision of an individual to enter a particular career is a result of different factors or expectations. These factors include aspects such as the students' aspirations about the training offered and how the student visualizes himself or herself fitting comfortably within the specialisation programme. If a student is not comfortable, that leads to another choice.

A strategic example of increasing specialisation is the development of specific student retention strategies and programmes (Dogson and Bolam, 2002). Colleges should be specific in discussing and understanding the needs of their students and have a plan of how they could be met. One more practical example of attending to specialisation is the holding of special induction events either by mature students or FET college student support staff at all campus sites, who should try and explain to the new students how the institution can help, with regards to a chosen field of study, should the new students have problems.

Strategic specialisation within the college should be based on a determination of the colleges' strengths, opportunities and potential markets and should be derived from the college's mission and strategic planning. Although a full range of specialization can flourish on a single campus, every college has its own special niche (Dogson and Bolam, 2002).

Kruss (2006) says that "FET colleges are diverse and do not act uniformly, as determined by the historical and external socioeconomic factors that shape their identity, by the distinct organisational ecology of the college, by the current curricula resources of colleges and the curricula needs of external stakeholders". They have their own distinct identity but all have

the aim of providing programmes that will make them responsive to the needs of their students and their employability, which of course is linked to the needs of society as well as industry for people with particular skills.

## **2.5 What is students' choice process?**

Choice is the evaluation of alternatives and people generally evaluate attributes on the basis of the alternatives rather than a single unit. College choice has been defined as the process a student experiences as he or she makes the decision about where to study. This choice is the decision to select the institution that has the characteristics that the students want (Urbanski, 2000). College is “the process a student experiences as he or she makes the transition from high school to college” (Pitre, 2006). In order to gain a better understanding of this process, it was necessary to examine the stages that students go through during the college selection process.

There has been much research looking at the factors influencing students' choice of a learning site in different institutions in United States and other countries. Chapman's model (1981) is one of the models available that focuses on the students, significant others, parents and teachers, as well as the marketing of a college or recruitment of students.

Understanding the students' choice and selection enables the institution to estimate the students' interests and expectations. Most of the students go through a three-phase process to make the choice of a campus. The first phase is predisposition or college aspiration phase. The second phase is the search and third is the choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). A number of variables influence the students in the search and choice phase. These include the following: college reputation, campus location, campus atmosphere, campus safety, size, college cultural uniqueness and costs (Urbanski, 2000).

Writing of student experiences in the United States, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) contended that in the earliest stage of the college choice process, students developed aspirations for

college attendance. A student who was able to maintain high aspirations for college attendance would have a high likelihood of high educational achievement (Pitre, 2006).

The choice process in the second stage becomes a point where “information that assists him or her in the evaluation of various characteristics about colleges for identifying a good personal fit (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989)” as indicated by (Pitre, 2006 p 1). They indicated that such information would guide a student towards the direction of making a stronger commitment to college.

A student who obtains “sufficient information on different colleges finally reaches third stage, the choice stage that can help him or her eliminate alternatives from a choice set. The knowledge gained allows the students to focus on a college that appears to meet his or her individual needs. It is important to note that a student may opt out of the college choice process at any stage” (Pitre, 2006 p 1).

There are other factors that have influenced the increasing interest in the processes of students' decisions in countries like the United States. Pitre (2006, p 2) found that these factors include “changes in the student populations attending college, shifts in the demographics of the college age population, and increased competition in the higher education environment”. Factors like these mentioned here forces colleges to be mindful of the choice process as it relate to recruitment and enrollment trends (Chapman, 1981). While colleges in South Africa are mindful of the changes in students' behavior, campuses in FET colleges are also mindful of the changes and are positioning themselves concerning program specialty that will interest students, the economy and community.

A recent study conducted in two FET colleges in South Africa showed that “student go to the FET college because of poor high school result or lack of better educational opportunities for them” (Garisch, 2009). These studies were conducted in Mnambithi FET College in Kwa-Zulu Natal, and West Coast College in Wersten Cape. Both these colleges are situated in areas which are far from other educational institutions like Universities. Therefore, students have little opportunities to make choices and comparisons.

## **2.6 A history of models of student choice**

Several theoretical models have been suggested to describe the factors that influence student's choice of an institution. Each of the theoretical models describes the various processes by which a student selects a college. The conceptual approaches to describing the college choice process and factors that lead students to their college choice are exemplified in different models.

The theoretical framework of this study was derived from the model of Chapman (1981). Chapman combined model suggests a set of student characteristics in combination with a set of external influence which ultimately leads students to their choice as also noted in the study by Burns (2006). The model has formed the basis of researchers in college choice in international countries. The model itself looks at the interaction between the students' characteristic and the institutional characteristics, which is the learning environment, as contributing factors to a decision about the institution. With the understanding of the FET college students, such a model would assist to explore the impact of their factors on the decision as was found by Chapman, in the United States.

Chapman (1991) incorporates students' characteristics such as student's socioeconomic status (SES), and external influences such as significant others, fixed college characteristics, college efforts to communicate with students, and influence students' perceptions of a college (figure 1). These characteristics have a significant impact on students' expectations of college life at a particular institution, thereby influencing on their final choice of institution.

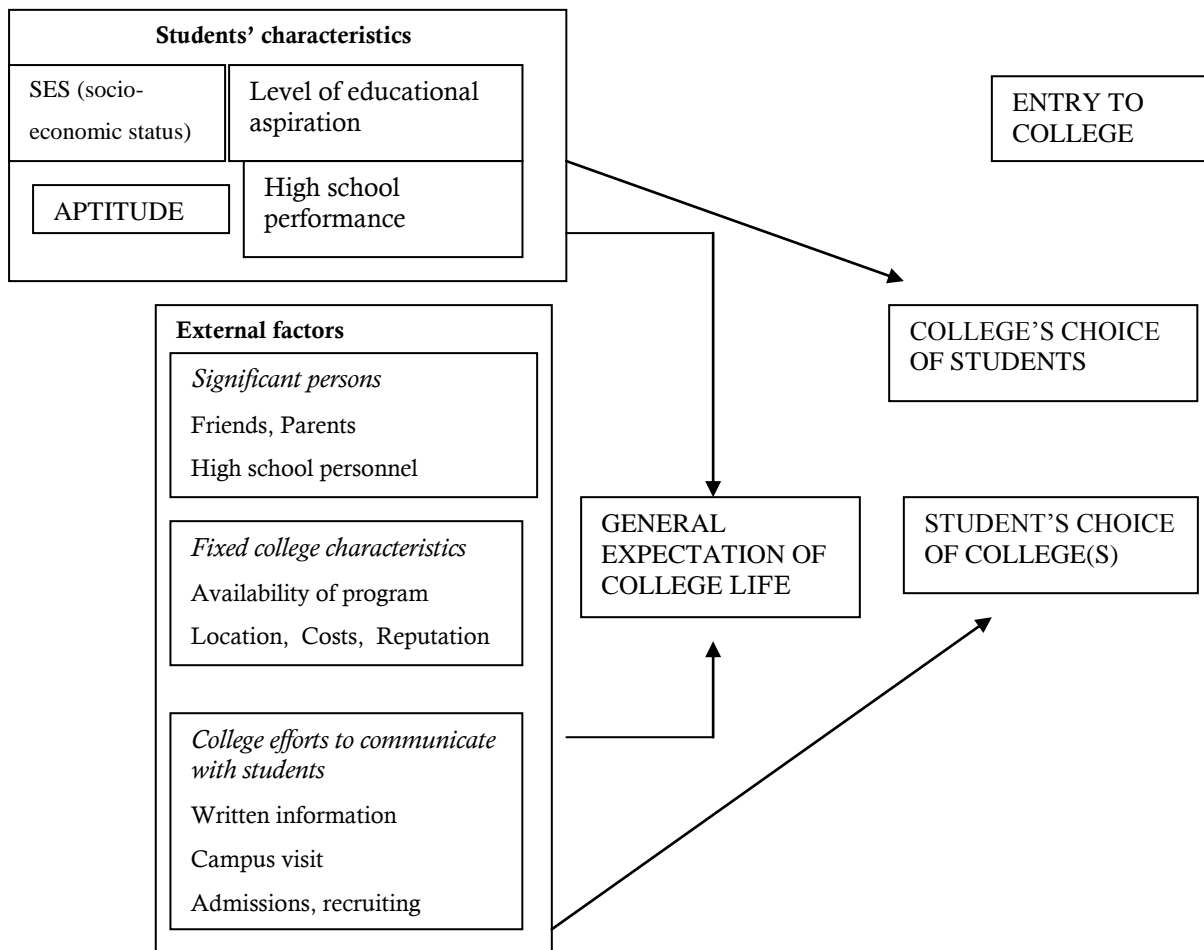


Figure 1 *Chapman's Model of Influence on student College choice (Chapman, 1981)*

The factors identified in Chapman's model above influence and shape students' college choice. Choice depends on students' characteristics and external factors which influence the students' college decision (Chapman, 1981). Chapman also pointed out that researchers concerned with college choice must recognize the complexity of college choice in deciding which variables to investigate, to control and to ignore.

### 2.6.1 Other models

Researchers such as (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982; Martin & Dixon, 1991; Paulsen, 1990; McDonough & Antonio, 1996) have studied the process of choosing a college and developed various models of the college choice in the United States.

They all determined three categories of these college choice models, which are the economic, sociological, combined models.

Other models of choice specify factors leading to college decisions. These are the economic models, the status-attainment (sociological) model, and the information-processing models (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). All the models that are classified under these three groups look at the process of college choice from the students' viewpoint and not from that of the college.

### *Economic model*

Economic models emphasize college choice around the interest of economists in the relationships between the attributes of goods (for example, college and job characteristics) and individual choices as indicated by Hossler & Gallager (1987).

Economists viewed college choice as a highly rational process involving cost and benefits analysis. The economist view saw college choice as an investment of both financial and personal capital in which students tried to maximize their return on their own investments or their parents' resources (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). "Economic models focus on how [students] with certain characteristics differ in terms of variables that are important to them when they choose college. The presumption is that students have (near) perfect information and rationally maximise utility. Unfortunately, students and their families do not always behave as rational as assumed by economists" (Aamodt, 2001 p 5).

Research has shown "that individuals will select a particular college if the benefits they perceive of attending outweigh the perceived benefits of attending other colleges. The economic model emphasises the decision-making process of students and their families, and the variety of ways on which different student's rate and use the college attributes to make their final college choice" (Burns, 2006) as indicated by (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989).

The economic model particularly focuses “on the choices of whether or not to continue schooling, what kind of an institution and finally which institution to attend” (Aamodt, 2001).

### *Sociological model*

Sociological models “were developed from research on educational and status attainment, focusing on the aspirations of individuals desiring to pursue studies at a college” (Burns, 2006). A variety of social and individual factors leading to students’ occupational and educational aspirations are specified in the model (Jackson, 1982). An advantage of “family socioeconomic background and students’ strong academic ability are predicted to have a positive effect on aspirations for college” (Burns, 2006 p 17). Sociological models focused on the relationship among factors that influence the enrolment at a college or a particular campus, such as parental influence (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), influence of significant other (Chapman, 1981) and academic performance.

Sociologists viewed college choice particularly in United States, as a process driven by status-attainment behaviours. Status-attainment models focus “on the identification and interaction of [behavioural] variables as students make decisions about going to college and which college to attend” (Aamodt, 2001 p 5). Aamodt further stated that the status-attainment models comprise of variables such as the “impact of socialisation processes, family conditions, interactions with peers, and school environments on students’ college choices. It is assumed that behavioural variables such as [students’] academic performance, interact with [students’] background variables such as parental education and occupational status” (Aamodt, 2001 p 5).

### *Combined model*

According to Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, (1989) neither of the two models provided satisfactory information, therefore models had to be combined. They stated that the

distinguishing feature for the combined models is their attempt in identifying factors that have an effect on the process of making decisions from a policy analysis point of view. That implies that, “the combined models try to describe economic and social forces that influence individual decision making in order to find opportunities for intervention by colleges in the process of the students’ choices” (Aamodt, 2001 p 6). These two forces include constraints that have an influence on student decisions and on activities carried out that can affect the decision-making process. The term information processing used in this model, mean the completely cyclical process of gathering information, processing it and thereafter making decisions to reduce uncertainty. This enables students to gather and process information while reducing uncertainty about the programs and college they are considering applying to.

The combined models provide a conceptual framework that predicts the effects of policy-making interventions using powerful indicators in the decision-making process from the economic and social models (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989). The two general categories of combined models in the college choice process contain multiple stages: a three-stage model by Hossler & Gallagher, (1987) and a multistage model containing between five and seven stages (Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982). Hossler & Gallagher’s (1987) has a “three-stage model that emphasizes aspiration, search and choice”.

McDonough and Antonio (1996) as indicated in Hayden, (2000, p 16) described three basic approaches that have been used to study the college selection process [for African American students in United States] as social psychological studies, economic studies and sociological status attainment studies. All three approaches focus on decision-making influences” The first approach incorporates the impact of the academic program a student chooses, the cost, social environment of the campus, location of the college and the influence that those factors have on the student’s college choice. (McDonough & Antonio, 1996)

The second approach that examined college choice included economic studies. These studies view college choice as an investment decision for the student (Hayden, 2000). There are three specific assumptions made by economic studies. The first assumption is that “students maximize the perceived cost-benefits of their decision, when deciding on a college. The second assumption is that the student has all the information necessary to make a sound



decision. The final assumption is that the student will make a realistic choice based on the information gathered during the search stage (Hayden, 2000 p 16)

This final approach by McDonough & Antonio (1996), focus on the “sociological status attainment studies, which analyse the impact of the students’ social status about the development of their aspirations for educational achievement” (Hayden 2000).

Martin and Dixon (1991) in Hayden 2000, explored the factors that influence students’ college choice. They assumed the students were influenced to attend college for a variety of reasons that “included (a) future aspirations, (b) perception of the college or university, (c) influences others have on this decision, (d) family tradition of attending the institution and (e) independence-social activities” (Hayden, 2000 p 18). These factors fall on the three broad categories of college choice as indicated by Hossler & Gallagher (1987) which are aspiration, search and choice.

Hayden (2000) found that Smith and Matthews (1990) had examined why students in Virginia, chose to attend a particular college. Their conclusion showed that there were four factors that influenced the students’ choice to attend a particular college. These factors “were (a) opportunity for employment, (b) traditions and activities, (c) whether a relative had attended the institution and (d) the advice from friends focusing on the reputation of the institution” Hayden (2002, p 18).

## **2.7. Staying or leaving the course**

Once students have been admitted to the course, they have to make a decision on whether to stay and complete the course or drop out. This decision was influenced by factors such as teaching methods, college reputation, socioeconomic factors, and the change in a student’s interest in the course. According to Tinto (1982), leaving the college is a decision made when the student does not fit in educationally.

### 2.7.1 *Students' completion and non-completion*

Completion and non-completion of studies is a choice made by an individual. There is a “risk attached to choice, as a poor choice of course, institution or campus can result in non-completion” (Yorke, 1999).

A wide variety of terms are used to describe the process where students stay or leave an institution early without achieving their educational goals. Commonly used terms in addition to completion and non-completion, are “persistence, retention, wastage, dropout, exits, attrition, withdrawal, non-persistence and non-continuation” (McGivney, 1996). Retention can be achieved “through the mustering of support to enable students to be successful, and the lowering or elimination of those factors that can disrupt a student’s education and that can ultimately result in their failure to achieve the educational aims they want.” (Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrigue, 2001, p 37).

Yorke (1999) highlighted the choice of “wrong programme as one of the significant factors for non-completion. [This factor] may be attributable to factors such as poor advice, parental pressure to follow a specific course and inaccurate or misleading information about a course” or campus.

Tinto’s (1987) classic study of student retention and non-completion in education suggested that non-completion is a result of a mismatch between the social/academic background, intentions and objectives of the student and their institution. Research conducted by Yorke, Ozgha and Sukhnandan on behalf of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has demonstrated that a range of individual, institutional and sectoral factors are responsible for full-time students dropping out of university early (Dodgson & Bolam 2002, p 10). The “factors are:

- Incompatibility between the student and their course of study or institution
- Lack of preparation for the Higher Education experience
- Lack of commitment to the course

- Financial hardship
- Poor academic progress”

Yorke (1999) looked at additional factors influencing student retention according to age, gender and social class, and found that younger students, rather than older students, were more likely to leave university as result of choosing the wrong course and being unprepared for living away from home. In contrast, financial issues are the most common cause of mature student non-completion. Yorke (1999) in Dodgson and Bolam also found that “women were more likely than men to express dissatisfaction with the social environment as a reason for leaving university. Men cited financial problems and unhappiness with their chosen area of study as reasons for their withdrawal” (Dodgson & Bolam, 2002).

Maharaj (2008) in his study on retention or dropout of mechanical engineering students at a FET College had developed a table he used to track students’ enrollments and to find the rate of students who stay until completion. Disturbing figures are revealed indicating that students do enroll for N4 course but very few if any proceed to N6 to complete the course. His study revealed that the first enrollment for 2005 showed “31 students in N4, from which only 11 progressed to N5 and no student enrolled for N6. In the same year there was a second new enrollment of 15 students at N4 from which only eight students progress to N5 and again no students enroll for the N6 class. The third and last new enrollment for 2005 shows 12 students in the N4 group from which no students progressed to the higher levels namely N5 or N6” (Maharaj 2008, p 64). This indicate that the drop out rate is high in FET Colleges

## **2.8 Structural and institutional issues**

Students’ choice cannot be understood without considering also the institutional structure in colleges. South Africa is a country with a fairly strong degree of institutional diversity. Even though there has been a shift from racially segregated institution to a more racial and culturally accommodating and inclusive environment. Some institutions still bear the racial stigma. Therefore, choices made by students will be different when compared to countries

and systems where there is strong uniformity, and institutions with different status levels. Our institutions are rated differently and so are the campus sites.

Regional availability is linked to institutional structure. A historically disadvantaged institution in the rural area could probably benefit from recruiting students in the region where it is located, but these kinds of institutions seem to be suffering from declining enrolments. Aamdoft (2001) suggests that this could be “due to geographical reasons, such as, unattractive location, a lack of prestige, or simply because these institutions still are beyond travelling distance for many potential students” (Aamdoft, 2001 p 8). This applies to FET colleges in South Africa and to the other parts of the world. These aspects affect student choice behaviour in a certain way, and the extent to which the initial choice is a definite choice.

Another question to ask is what is the future of further education? The FET College system “lies at the heart of the new integration of education and training system. FET [College sector] is coordinated as a comprehensive interlocking sector that provides a meaningful educational experience to learners at the post-compulsory phase” (Mpumalanga – Education, (2008). According to McGrath (2005), when addressing the key issues and challenges in vocation education and training stated that the “vision for FET sector, in brief, is to make it a band that provides different learning opportunities at the intermediate level of knowledge and skill, within different institutional contexts, to different cohorts of FET learners”.

## 2.9. Theoretical framework

### 2.9.1 Chapman's model of choice

The theoretical framework of this study was derived from the model of Chapman (1981). Chapman's model of choice give the impression that a "set of student personal characteristics in combination with a set of external influences ultimately lead to a set of expectation that guide students to make their choice".

The model itself looked at the interaction between the students' characteristic and the institutional characteristics as contributing factors to a decision about the institution. The students' perception of the institution and the advice they receive should match their needs. With the understanding of the FET college students, such a model would assist to explore the impact of their factors on the decision if it matched what was found by Chapman, in the United States.

### 2.9.2 Tinto's Theory of Retention

Another theoretical basis of this study is Tinto's theory of retention (1975). Since the "early nineteen seventies, academics have been trying to establish theories that would explain the reason why students "drop out" or fail to progress within higher education and beyond" (Eales-Reynolds, 2006). The thinking behind Tinto's model was the development of social and academic integration influenced by the student's commitment to learning and the institution's commitment to teaching.

Tinto's work (1987) in Columbia focused on student retention and non-completion of courses. Tinto envisaged a central cause of non-completion of courses as a lack of integration into the social, cultural and intellectual life of the institution. The individual that "does not manage to fit in, or in some cases consciously comes not to wish to fit in, with the general ethos and atmosphere of a specific institution, for a whole host of reasons: academic,

social, financial, institutional and personal - acting in a complex relationship to each other” (Foster, 2003, p 12). According to Tinto, students’ goals and the ability of the institution to meet those goals are important for their retention.

This should explain the preparedness of the FET College as an institution to meet the needs of its learners and contribute to the economy’s development by providing well-trained human capital. It will also reflect intention of FET College sector to strengthen the supply of skills by offering programmes and services that are relevant to the needs of our country. This means that specialized programmes should assist students to get jobs or enhance their job prospects and open doors for opportunities in the personal, educational, social and economic spheres of life, as an aspect that also contributes to students achieving their goals. Such goals would not be achieved if students drop out.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter describes the methodology used in the study. The purpose of the study is to determine the factors influencing students' choice of campus and completion and non-completion of courses in a FET College. In this chapter the following will be addressed; the research design, ethical issues, population and sampling procedures, data collection methods, data collection procedure, limitations and methods of data analysis.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

The study is a case study, which falls in an interpretive paradigm. The interpretive approach assumes that "all human action is meaningful and has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices. Human action is given meaning by interpretive schemes or framework" (Scott & Usher, 1996 p18). Scott and Usher (1996) also indicated that in the interpretive paradigm "knowledge is not concerned with generalization, prediction and control but with the interpretation, meaning and illumination".

The research was predominantly of a qualitative nature. However, in conducting the study, some aspects required a limited degree of quantitative analysis to support the study.

Qualitative studies allow the researcher "to use small samples of people nested in their context and studied in depth" (Miles & Huberman, 1974 p 27). This helps to focus on the detail and quality of information collected.

The approach was chosen in an attempt to understand how students viewed the environment in which they found themselves regarding choosing what to study, where to study as well as deciding whether to persist or drop out. The choices made were based on the information available to students from various sources. A person's choice may be good or bad depending on the alternatives available to him or her.

### **3.2 Description of study**

A case study approach was used for this research. Cohen and Manion (2000, p. 185) believe that significance, rather than frequency, is a hallmark of case studies, offering the researcher an insight into the real dynamics of situations and people. They examine the multiple variables and attempt to understand the influences of multilevel social systems on people's perspectives and behaviours in the defined case, so this method will be used to determine the students' perspectives.

The case in this study is the FET College in Pietermaritzburg, and the intention of the study was also to describe what factors influenced choice of college and campus from students of three campuses of an FET college in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. Umgungundlovu FET College is located in the Pietermaritzburg. It is a merger between five technical colleges namely Edendale, Plessislaer, Msunduzi, KZN Midlands and Northdale, in 2001. The college serves a large urban and rural geographical region with vast rural geographical client base but campuses are located in the urban areas.

I would refer to these college as campuses, for example Campus A.

- Campus A, located in a previously Black township, entered into the merger with well-resourced workshops and facilities. This college was one of the pioneers in the area of technical education in the Department of Education and Training from early 1980's. It has a huge focus on mechanical engineering programmes. These include fitting and turning; machining; fabrication; auto; tooling and electrical. The campus has a business studies unit, engineering studies unit and a learnerships unit.



- Campus B is located in a previously Indian area. Its focus is Electrical programmes, Financial and Business Management.
- Campus C has a proud history of provision in the area of technical education in the House of Representatives (i.e. serving the Coloured population) that stretched well into the early 1960's. The key focus is Engineering theoretical programmes, information technology, PLC training and electronics. It is situated in the city.
- Campus D was the Grande dame of the merger with a long, proud and very diverse history that stretched well into the early 1900's. Its key focus is Business Studies and situated in the city centre.
- This Campus E played a leading role in the development of technical education in the KwaZulu Department of Education and Culture from the early 1950's. It is located in a semi-rural area of Pietermaritzburg. This campus focuses on building and civil engineering programmes. (Khuzwayo, Roopnarain & Markides, 2008 p 2)

The researcher has selected campuses A, C and E for the study. These campuses were selected based on the courses they offer, which is Engineering studies, and for their location.

### **3.3 Ethical issues**

#### *Permission and Participant Consent*

Permission to conduct the research was requested from all the gatekeepers, which were the management of the college and the managers of chosen campuses. Letters to request permission to conduct the study were given to the management. (See APPENDIX 1 and 2).

Letters requesting students to volunteer to respond to a questionnaire were also available (see APPENDIX 2). These letters were read and made available to students who were in classes

that were targeted to respond to questionnaires. The researcher had developed a questionnaire (see APPENDIX 3) that was given to students who were available in the selected classes to fill in.

Other students were asked to volunteer to be participants in the interviews, which were conducted in places that were convenient to the researcher and the students. Each interview participant was given a consent letter to read, explanations done where necessary for those who decided to participate, and they were told that they were free to withdraw at any time. The students were asked to sign the form as a way of showing their willingness to be part of the research process. A list of semi-structured interview questions was used for different participants selected. (See APPENDIX 4)

#### *Privacy and Confidentiality*

Respondents were informed that the records of the study would be kept private and all matters treated with confidentiality, that no information presented would make them identifiable, and that whatever they said would not affect their relationship with the college.

### **3.4 Population and sampling**

The targeted population for the study was the students at the three campuses of the selected FET College, which offered Engineering courses at N4, N5 or N6 levels at the college.

The students that participated in responding to the questionnaire were current students at the FET College. The targeted sample consisted of senior students from a campus who were doing N4, N5 or N6 levels in Engineering studies, which were Electrical, Mechanical and Civil Engineering courses. The sample was selected according to their availability during that period, in consultation with the Campus management, group lecturer or subject lecturer. The sampling unit was a class and not individuals.

The reasons for this sampling were; firstly, these selected campuses offer different courses and were offered at different senior levels during that trimester. Secondly, the college specialisation plan (Council minutes, 2006, p3) was that a campus would offer one of the above-mentioned courses at the college, so that there would be no duplication. Thirdly, the changes in student numbers per campus, infrastructure, availability and mobility of subject matter experts had led to individual campuses reintroducing these senior levels again. The difference among campuses became the basis for assuming that the characteristics for chosen sample would be different and provide and usable data, because the campuses were located in different parts of the city

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a sample that was purposefully selected from the students. Students that were currently registered for a course at each of the selected campuses were chosen as well as students that had dropped out and those who had completed.

The friends who were still studying gave some of the names of students who had graduated or dropped out to the researcher. Other names were picked up from the College Coltech system. These ex-students were then called to establish whether they were available and interested in participating in the research.

The researcher used purposive sampling as is common in qualitative research. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007, p114,) explained that with purposive sampling, researchers “pick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement, their typicality or possession”. They further state that this sampling is used to “access people who have in-depth knowledge about a particular issue maybe by virtue of their role or experience in that situation”. Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub (1996) explained that purposive sampling is a “procedure by which researchers select a subject or subjects based on predetermined criteria about the extent to which selected subjects could contribute to the research study”.

### 3.5 The data collection methods

The methods used for data collection were a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

#### *Questionnaire*

Questionnaires are written lists of questions that a researcher compiles and distributes to the respondents. Bless and Higson-Smith (1995, p107) said that the questionnaire is a “set of questions with fixed wording and sequence of presentation, as well as more or less precise indications of how to answer each question”. A “questionnaire is easy to standardize therefore, reducing the amount of bias in the results, as there is uniform question presentation. The opinions of the researchers should not influence the respondents to answer questions in a certain manner, as there are no verbal or visual clues to influence the respondent” (Walonick, 2000)

For the purpose of this study the researcher used a self-administered questionnaire, which had closed- ended and open- ended questions. This tool was chosen because the researcher believed that answers to an initial survey, would help to decide what kind of questions to ask when interviewing people. The questionnaires were used because students could answer questions in any order, skip the questions, take some time to go back and answer the questions or even write in comments where necessary. At this stage, the researcher could not probe deeply into the students’ beliefs, attitudes and their inner experiences. The researcher used the questionnaire technique first to gain basic information before getting to a point of probing the students’ perceptions and experience more deeply in interviews.

The questionnaires were presented to each respondent in exactly the same way to minimize the influence of the researcher so as to enable an objective comparison of the results later.

The researcher distributed 100 questionnaires to engineering students from the three campuses and 80 were returned. The return rate was very high because students were found

as groups at the site. These were senior students at their respective campuses. Forty six percent of them were from a semi-rural campus (referred to in this study as Campus E) while 29% were from a township campus (campus C) and 25% were from a city campus (campus A).

The overall population of respondents was divided among the N4, N5 and N6 students. Below is the table (3.1) that indicates number of students registered for trimester 2 in the three campuses targeted in the study. The numbers include full time students and those who registered for examinations only, which is usually about 20% of the group.

Targeted Senior Levels	Campus A		Campus C		Campus E	
	F	M	F	M	F	M
N 4	-	-	10	19	4	18
N5	-	-	-	-	-	11
N6	9	36	-	-	-	-

*Table 3.1 Enrollment per campus (gender and group), developed from Coltech system*

Sixty five percent of respondents were from N4 level, while 5% from N5 students and 30% N6 according to the availability of students in campuses. The majority of students had been enrolled at the college for at least two trimesters. Eighty percent of the questionnaires were returned on time, which was the end of that day.

The questionnaire was used to collect information that addressed the questions of the study. The first five questions were on demographic information and about the respondents and their campuses. The other questions related to the factors that influence their decisions for choosing the college as well as the campus they were studying at. I did not intend to get in-depth information about the respondents and their campuses from these questionnaires, but it was important to find out what course they were doing, at what level, which campus and some indication of why they had chosen that one.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

Cohen and Manion (2002) said “the research interview is a two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation”. The interview relies on the fact that people are able to offer accounts of their behaviour, practice and actions to those who ask the questions. The challenge with semi-structured interviews is that they lack standardization.

The researcher conducted 16 semi-structured interviews. The researcher had visited the campuses to request willing participants for interviews among the current students and made a list. Students that had dropped out or completed their qualifications were identified by friends and from the college information system. It was important to consider how convenient it would be to reach those students.

The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask questions and probe for more clarification to the responses given.

### *Pilot study*

A pilot study on students was conducted to test if questions would be understood before they were used. The research instruments were given to the FET College at campus B, which was a campus not targeted for the study. Pilot testing occurred during the first trimester, in March 2008. The procedure followed was to approach students in class after requesting permission from the lecturer. Students were given questionnaire after explaining the purpose. At the end of 20 minutes, they were requested to provide feedback on clarity of questions and identify other problems. Three students were interviewed afterwards, to check if interview questions were easy to understand.

### **3.6 Procedure of data collection**

#### *Questionnaires*

The researcher requested permission from the Campus manager to visit the campus on a certain day. Permission was sought from lecturers to assist with ensuring that students were available to fill in the questionnaires. Students completed the questionnaire in their respective classes at the end of lessons in time slots directly before tea or lunch breaks.

The researcher explained the purpose of the research to students, after which the questionnaires were handed to those students who were willing to become participants in the study. After the researcher had briefly explained to the participants what they were expected to do with the questionnaires, twenty minutes was allocated to them to complete the questionnaires. While students were busy with the questionnaire, some brave students asked for more clarity in IsiZulu. To avoid going to each individual to assist, I gave the explanation loudly and there were sounds of recognition from others as well.

On completion, questionnaires were collected from participants by the researcher and thanked all those who participated. Of the 100 questionnaires administered, a total number of 80 questionnaires were collected, yielding an 80 % response rate (Josias, 2005 p 89). This means 20 students from all three campuses decided not to return the questionnaires. Those who did not return their questionnaires, walked out of class without handing them back to the researcher. Four students from two campuses said they had made mistakes and did not want to hand in and a few said they were not yet finished and would bring later, which never happened. Administering questionnaires within a group in a classroom setting was convenient for the researcher and the response rate was quite high.

#### *Semi- structured Interviews*

The researcher visited the campuses again to request willing participants for interviews among the current students and made a list with these students' numbers. The students on the

list were contacted later to set up appointments, and only those still interested and available were interviewed.

The researcher conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with a sample that was selected using purposive sampling. It was important to consider how convenient it would be to reach those students. Students that were currently registered in senior levels per course at each campus were chosen as well as students that had dropped out or completed their qualifications.

Students were interviewed after trends had been identified from the questionnaires. Questions asked during the interviews differed according to whether the students were still studying or had dropped out or completed their qualifications.

Some respondents felt it was convenient if they met with the researcher in the researcher's workplace, which is in town though not at a campus. The researcher arranged to fetch the respondents from town to talk in the office. For those students who stayed at the hostel, interviews were conducted in one of the campuses.

The semi-structured interviews were flexible but have the ability to draw a detailed picture of people's perceptions and beliefs about a particular topic. This allowed the researcher to probe deeper into understanding the factors that influenced the student's choice of the courses and the campuses that provide them. The researcher tape recorded the interviews onsite during the data collection process except for one telephonic interview. The recordings were used for transcription purposes. Before recording the interviews, the researcher asked for permission from the participants and also informed them that the information would be confidential. I also took notes of important key words, statement and remarkable expressions relating to questions asked as well as the problems encountered during the interviews.



### Interview questions

#### Current students:

The researcher asked the students questions such as why did they enroll at the college, what factors influenced their choice, who influenced the choice and what were the reasons for staying at the FET college. They were asked if they would advise other students to join them at the FET College. The sequence of questioning did not follow the set questions exactly but was guided by the responses they gave for the previous question asked. (See APPENDIX 5)

#### Students who dropped out:

These students were asked why they had enrolled at the college, at which campus and why they decided to leave. The other questions were who influenced them to choose the college and whether they would recommend the college to any other person. (See APPENDIX 5)

#### Completed students:

These students had been asked about the factors that influenced them to join the college and what motivated them to stay. They were asked if they had considered changing the campus or dropping out. (See APPENDIX 5)

### **3.7 Language**

A qualitative study is about finding meaning, understanding, interpretation and gaining insight. In order to get meaning and gain understanding, language is a very important tool used for communication. When the language is not understood, wrong information can be exchanged. What can also happen is that limited information can be given due to fact that the

other person might not express himself or herself correctly and confidently in the language used.

The questionnaires and interview schedule used during data collection were written in English. Where necessary the questions in the questionnaire were explained or translated to IsiZulu. This happened when brave students would ask for assistance and clarification with some questions, realizing that more students needed help, I explained louder for their benefit as well. Then I would hear sounds of recognition from the rest of the group.

Some interviews were conducted in both English and IsiZulu. When students were asked a question in English, they just responded in IsiZulu. This made students to feel more confident with their responses. Some of the probing questions were also asked in IsiZulu by the researcher. This was an advantage because there was no need for an interpreter used in this study I then translated the responses into English.

As the researcher, I had to ensure that meaning was not sacrificed during translation and interpretation by asking for assistance to verify that the meaning was not lost. The interview transcripts and the recoded interviews were given to someone who was a language and communications specialist to listen to and verify that information was understood correctly. The assistant agreed to abide to confidentiality rules and was not linked to the college.

### **3.8 Timing for the study**

Timing of data collection in the study became very critical. Data was collected in two trimesters. Some of the students who had been approached the first semester but not interviewed then were approached again the following trimester now under a different group. The procedure followed was to ask permission again from those students and set new appointments. I had to check if the students were still happy with the contents of consent letter they had signed the previous trimester. When I started conducting interviews it was towards examinations time and some students were anxious about examinations and failed to honour appointments because of study group meetings.

One student was interviewed in the car at the city library car park after his study group meeting. The library had just closed and going to any other convenient venue was not possible because of time constraints. When attempting to reschedule the appointment for some other time, the student suggested that he would not have a problem doing the interview in the car to complete and be done with it, so that there would be no need to meet after that day. He indicated that he might not be available after that time as he wanted to focus on his studies and he would be too committed thereafter.

The appointments for two students who stayed at the hostel also had to be rescheduled due to unforeseen commitments from my work. They decided on the times and appointments were then set for a time close to their dinner, which was 16:30 and 17:00 respectively. I was not aware of the challenges we could face since this was the time suggested by the students. It had just started to drizzle then and the students did not want to walk with me to classrooms, which would have been a quiet venue and had been used as an interview venue with other students. The one said it would be too far from the dining hall. The other had to meet somebody else after our meeting and wanted to be close to his hostel so that he could meet his friend, especially since it was then drizzling. Therefore, those interviews were conducted individually, in the car, unfortunately with passers-by looking on as they were curious about who was visiting their hostel mates.

Before conducting the interviews, I asked the students if they were willing to talk in the car and they agreed. When the interviews began, the students were relaxed and more communicative, but as more people were passing by, they started to look uncomfortable and tense. The passing traffic started to increase towards the end of the first interview, and I had to check with the student if he was still comfortable. After an agreement to continue, we finalized the interview. With the second student, I requested to move the car to a different spot where he could still his visitor coming and he agreed. One of my colleagues who wanted some assistance with work related matters and to share a few jokes disturbed our interview session. I apologized to the student, explained to the colleague about the interview and continued thereafter.

### **3.9 Limitations**

#### *In relation to the questionnaire:*

The researcher gave students the questionnaire to fill in, in the lesson directly before break. Students might have shared the responses so that they could finish early and leave. They might have given wrong information because they were not given enough time to think about other factors that might have influenced their decision to join the institution. There is no evidence that this happened but it should be expressed as a possible limitation.

I did not count number of females when the questionnaire was handed out in classes, since they are usually few in Engineering classes, therefore I could not use the data to make comparisons between male and female students. The selection of students for interviews did not consider gender but the availability and willingness of student to participate.

#### *In relation to the interviews:*

Some of the appointments set with students for interviews were difficult to honour, due to unplanned commitments that got in the way both from the side of the researcher and students. Most of the respondents were contacted by cell phone. Sometimes they would not answer their phones, which made it difficult to finalise the arrangement to meet. By the time new appointments were planned, some students were no longer willing to participate. The researcher had to approach new people, which were a challenge because some of the students were of the opinion that they were just filling in the gap, as they had not been among the researcher's first choice of participants.

For the interviews that were conducted after school or after work, some respondents seemed to be anxious and wanted to go home to start their daily afternoon activities. The interviews were scheduled for thirty minutes per session. However, the way the students responded pointed to that were anxious, since they were giving one-word answers, and the researcher

ended up asking too many probing questions to try and elicit more relevant information from them. This made the interviews to be very long. In addition, there were students who were not willing to give too much information and those interviews took less time than scheduled

Time constraints led to some interviews being conducted in the researcher's car because going to a suitable venue would add to the tension or would result in that appointment being cancelled, which would have created another problem. Conducting interview in the car was like doing work in an unfamiliar environment, or in a wrong place. I thought the interviews would be regarded as casual, but the students co-operated in the same way as students interviewed in the office as well as the classrooms. For that reason, I felt that the information collected there was of the same value as all interviews conducted for this study.

The aim of merging the colleges was to avoid duplication and encourage programme diversification and specialisation. This benefited some students and the FET institutions but also affected some students negatively. Some could not continue with their studies because of reasons such as transport costs, the culture of the society where the campus is located, uncomfortable territory (because of the person's background), and other factors. Therefore, a person who has had a bad experience with the college might be very reluctant to participate in the research.

The other limitation was that some participants were unwilling to share correct information. Having been involved in some research for the FET College before, like marketing research as well as the analysis of campus environment, I discovered that students have a tendency of providing misleading or incorrect information. Satisfactory or concrete reasons for this kind of behavior have not yet been fully established by the researcher.

Finally, students in FET colleges are very diverse, therefore problems identified from the chosen campuses for the study, might not be generalized to colleges and campuses with different conditions. The issue of generalization is not a main concern for this as a qualitative study.

### **3.10 Data capturing and analysis**

When students came for interviews, the researcher discussed the use of the tape recorder. There were signs of tension among other students. The researcher assured them that their names would not be disclosed in the dissertation and explained that the information would be used for academic purposes only.

Data was analysed by exploring themes that emerged from information gained from the instruments used. Codes were assigned to the data collected. Data from questionnaires was analysed first, and information in responses given by students was used to determine what information would be sought in interviews. Thereafter the interviews were conducted and information gained from them was analysed.

Interview transcripts were systematically coded in order to manage and analyze the information gained through interviews.

The first set of “codes explored themes that were classified into broad descriptive categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Categories were collapsed until the themes within different categories fit together reasonably, yet retained distinctions between categories. Data interpretation was performed by analyzing the information gathered, finding the trends and contradictions. A comparison of the some results was done using graphs. The following themes emerged from the data:

- Educational aspirations, students wanted to achieve training that would allow them to pursue their dream jobs.
- Financial issues, which meant that, the fees at FET College were affordable.
- Influence of family and friends, the influence of family members was even stronger than friends and teachers. Students trusted or respected parents, sisters and brothers who advised and encouraged them to attend college and enroll for certain courses.

- Career patching, FET training was regarded as alternate route to a qualification in higher education. Student came to college to improve results and receive a certificate that will open doors for them in Higher education institution.

### **3.11 Validity**

In order to ensure validity of the study the following research tools were used:

A questionnaire was developed to gather the primary data, which was used to determine what in-depth information should be sought through interview questions, so that they would yield information that was relevant to factors influencing students' choices.

To gather in-depth information I used semi-structured interviews. This allowed me to probe deeper into understanding the impact on student's interest in the courses and the campuses that provide them. The interviews conducted were tape-recorded for transcription purposes.

# CHAPTER 4

## FINDINGS

### 4.0 Introduction

The results of the study about factors influencing students' choice of a FET college and campus as well as factors that influenced students' completion or non-completion of courses are presented on this chapter.

There are two main questions in this research study, which are:

- 1) What factors influence students' choice of campus?
- 2) What factors influence the students' completion and non-completion of courses?

Three campuses of the FET College in Pietermaritzburg were selected for the study and participants were chosen from senior students of those campuses. These three campuses offer Mechanical, Electrical and Civil engineering courses respectively. The total number of participants who were given questionnaires was 100 from these engineering groups. The questionnaires were given to students who were doing N4, N5 and N6 levels of their post-matric level study.

Sixteen interviews were later conducted with three different types of students, those who were still current students in N5 and N6 levels, students who had dropped out and those who completed their courses.

In this chapter, results from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews are stated and analysed.



In his model of student college choice, Chapman (1981) proposed that the choice was determined by the individual student's characteristics such as socioeconomic status and high school performance as well as by external influences. Included in the latter category are the significant persons such as parents, friends and school personnel. Also potentially influential are various items over which colleges can exert some control, in particular, many forms of public written information on colleges. (Keally & Rockel, 1987)

#### **4.1 Changes in data collection**

There were some minor changes in the procedure originally planned to collect data. I had planned to collect data from 12 respondents, who would include 3 completed students, 3 students who had dropped out, and 6 current students, of whom two attended each campus. Three completed students, four dropouts and seven current students agreed to participate in the interviews. Two students doing their practical aspects of the engineering course, referred as 'Workshop' were included in the interview process. This number had to increase to 16 in order to supplement the information gathered

The information gathered from engineering students revealed that most of them had no plan to come to the FET College in the first place, They were only forced by circumstances ranging from being advised by institution of higher learning to not wanting to stay at home.

To get a broader picture regarding the influencing factors for college choice, the researcher then interviewed two Business studies students who had completed their studies, just to check if the reasons and factors were different. The findings revealed similar information.

#### **4.2 Research Findings**

The total number of the respondents who participated in this study amounted to 96. Eighty students responded to the questionnaire and 16 interviewed.

The discussions of quantitative findings were reflected first and then the qualitative findings. That means I will first present the findings from the questionnaires and then look at the interviews.

### 4.3. Findings from questionnaires

#### 4.3.1 Demographic information

##### 4.3.1.1 Gender

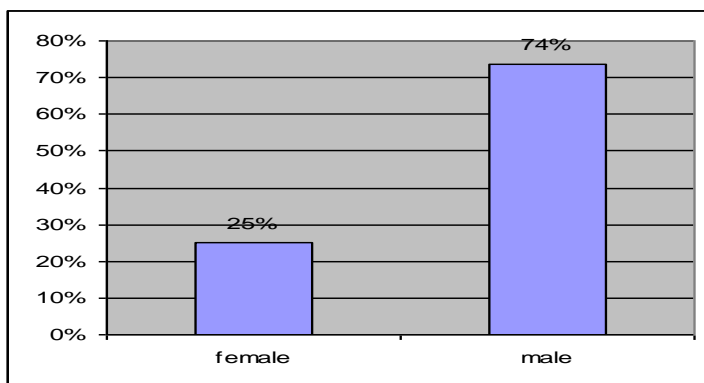


Figure 4.1

Of the total respondents, 74% were males and 25% were females. One percent of respondents did not indicate their gender. I felt that some respondents selected the wrong block in the questionnaire, as the percentage for females appeared to be more than what was physically seen at the sites. I did not count the exact number of females or males in classes where the questionnaire was handed out, but on analysing the questionnaires it seemed that more students had ticked the “female” box than were women in the classes.

#### 4.3.1.2 Age identification

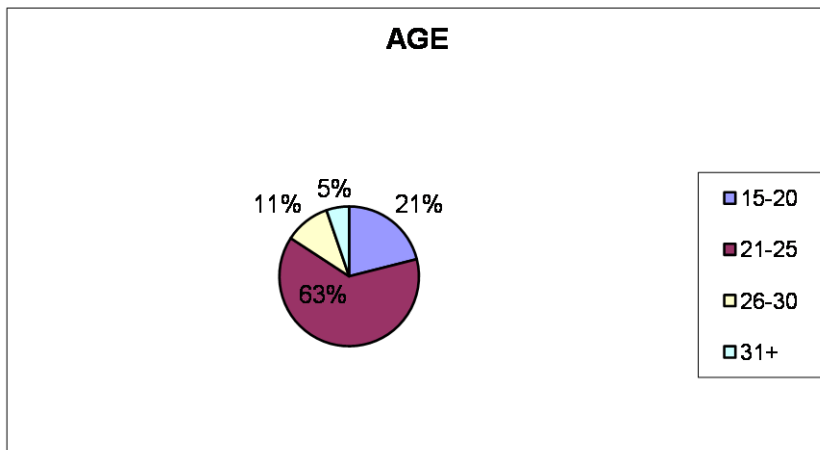


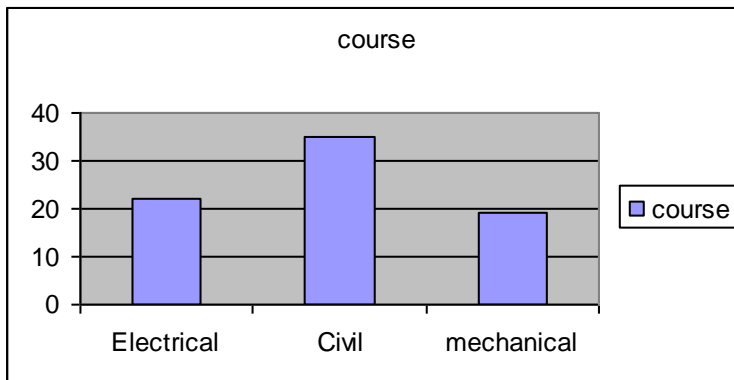
Figure 4.2

Results showed that 63% out of 80 students sampled were in the category of 21-25 years of age. The 15-20 years category had 21%, 11% for the 26-30 category, with 31<sup>+</sup> being the least common category with only 5%. Most of the students sampled were in the 21-25 age categories, since N4-N6 levels are post-matric studies and the sample was selected from students in the N4 to N6 levels of study. Students in 26-30 and 31<sup>+</sup> categories were most likely those that did not continue with studies immediately after matriculation due to whatever challenges they might have had.

There were differences in the fields of study at these campuses. The students who responded to the questionnaire were grouped the major fields according to electrical, mechanical and civil engineering, which are the fields offered in engineering studies at this College. There were 22 participants who were enrolled for electrical field, 35 in the mechanical and 19 participants from the civil field in the three campuses

### 4.3.2 Course of study

#### *Course of study*



*Figure 4.3*

There were 22 electrical, 35 civil and 19 mechanical engineering students that were given questionnaires. The first group of respondents was approached towards the end of the second trimester (May to August 2008). There are not too many students are registered during that period and some students might have dropped out already. The college has high enrollments during the first trimester and then numbers become less for the second and third trimester. The researcher's experience has shown that attendance during this time, which is towards examination, is also a problem. My assumption is that they are preparing for examinations.

### 4.3.3 Stated reasons for choosing college

Students were allowed to choose more than one reason, which led them to studying at the FET College.

Item	Frequency
Did not know what to study	40
Did not meet university requirements	33
Affordability	29
Quick route to a qualification	8
Did not want to stay at home	7
Any other reason	1

*Table 4, 1 Reasons for choosing college*

Of the 80 students who responded here, 40, in other words 50% of the total, got into FET College because they did not know what to study. This was actually shocking to realise that students would get to that level of their lives and still do not know what to study in order to achieve their goals. It would be expected though as possibly the reason why we see many people in South Africa working in the environment they did not study for.

Thirty-three (41%) of these students opted for this course because they did not meet the requirements for the courses they wanted to study at institutions of higher learning. Twenty-nine students (36%) chose what they could afford in terms of the fees for the course.

About eight students (10%) came to FET College because they saw this as quick route to get a qualification and just did not want to stay at home. For them, maybe there was pressure from family members to go to school.

As researcher, I also wanted to know from these FET College students why they chose the courses that they were registered for. According to information from this study, the reasons for choosing certain courses included:

- Having interest in the field they were studying
- Wanted to be artisans
- Wanted to improve their results so they could pursue the course of their first choice at institution of higher learning
- Recommendation by family and friends
- Wanted to explore opportunities of starting their own businesses in those fields

#### **4.3.4 Influences on the choice of campus**

The question asked was on factors that influenced the students' choice of campus.

Prior knowledge about the college and campus	26
Recommended by family, friends	22
Campus specialization ( only this campus offer the course)	22
Cost consideration ( transport)	20
Recommended by other institutions eg. DUT	17
Classes on preferred campus were full	6
Geographic location of the campus	5
Other(specify)	3

*Table4.2 Factors influencing choice of campus*

The table above indicates that the knowledge students had about the college and campus was the main reason they chose the campus they attended. The other influential factors were recommendations by family and friends. Chapman (1981) has referred to these as “significant other”. Campus specialisation and cost consideration also received high rating as influential factors from respondents.

According to the responses, the campus chosen by these students was the only one offering the course they wanted and that affected their enrolment decisions.

Family and friends also had an enormous role to play in assisting students to make decisions about their study choices. The institution of higher learning like Durban University of Technology (DUT) played an important role in guiding the students towards college. When students came to do enquiries at the FET College, the FET College lecturers assisting with registration just performed a minor duty of directing students as to where they had to go because they already knew that these students lacked prerequisites for admission to Durban University of Technology, but would be admitted to FET College. Three students stated that college lecturers advised them about campuses to go to.

The geographic location of the campus, as described in chapter 3, had very little influence on student choices compared to the campus specialisation. Six selections from students indicated that they chose the current campus because courses in their preferred campus were full.

### 4.3.5 Who influenced your final decision about the choice of campus?

Myself	53
Family	30
College lecturers	11
Friends	10
Other(specify):	4
My School teachers	3

*Table 4.3 people who influenced final decision about campus*

Students make decisions in different ways. The quality of their decisions varies according to context, which included programme offering, costs, and support available to them during the decision-making process. The way in which information was communicated to them and their own knowledge played a role in deciding where to go.

Fifty three students had indicated that they made the choices on their own. The influence from family and friends was 27% (30 students) and 10 % (10 students) respectively. Eleven students indicated that FET College lecturers influenced their final choice of campus. Their high school teachers had the least influence on their decision about which campus to go to.

Information gathered in this study shows that the two factors with the strongest influence on the decision to come to the FET College were the students themselves and their families

### 4.3.6 Course they would rather be doing

Sixty eight percent (68%) of the students did not indicate that there was another course they would rather be doing than the one they were registered for at the FET College. These were mainly students at a campus in town, which was popular because of its location and the benefits that came with it, such as taking one taxi or bus to town thus saving on transport costs or availability of accommodation at the campus.

Their reasons for not having an interest in other courses included wanting to improve results to gain access to their dream course at the university, and inability to afford preferred courses. They wanted to pursue their dream courses where they were available because what they were doing now was their ‘second choice’. Therefore, they indicated that no FET campus offered a diploma course in the following fields; Architecture, Information technology or Medical technology, which were courses they wanted. These courses are not offered at this FET College but at University of Technology and Universities. The implication is that they are counting on the FET courses as a bridge to their preferred courses.

The one student who would have changed the field from Engineering Studies to a Public Management course in the Business Studies if she could, stated

*‘My parents did not want me to do it [Business studies] because I studied Math’s and Science in High School’.*

For the students whose focus was on improving results, their responses were that there was no other course but they “want to improve the results” or just want to increase my points”. This would mean that they would accept any course as long as it would give them access to what they wanted.

#### **4.3.7 Changing campus**

Only 28 % of the students had considered changing campus, while 45% felt that their campuses were a good place to be and 7% did not respond to this question. Either the reasons given for staying were theirs was the only campus offering the course, or having good lecturers or that they could not afford to change because of transport and accommodation.

The research results confirm that students would not change because they had no other choice to make. This respondent said *‘It is the only campus offering the course in Pietermaritzburg’*

Another respondent 19 said she had considered changing the campus but her reason show something else when she wrote:



*“Before I came to this campus I always wished I could study here because I heard that the lecturers know their thing [work]. Now that I am here I can see it myself the campus is one of the best”*

Respondent 14 mentioned that the campus is

*“...best equipped for the specific course I’m doing in terms of suitable teachers [lecturers] for the subjects”*

From the responses of other respondents, the decision to stay at their campus was influenced by the fact they can do their studying and also have fun. Hence, some respondents said:

*“I enjoy learning at this campus; teachers and college mates are great”.*

*“...easy access to evening and weekend studies”*

*“...there is a hostel here and I enjoy my course”*

*“...sometimes they cause us to have a good time”.*

Factors such as being closer to home, not wanting to stay at home, that the college that was recommended by a higher institution and wanting to improve results were also given as reasons for staying at the campus.

The students who wanted to change campus did so mainly because they were not happy with the learning material that was available at their particular campuses. There was mention of “no textbooks and teachers are not good in teaching” and also the fact that “lecturers were changed more often” in a trimester. The students would start the trimester being taught by one lecturer and when the need arose to swap the lecturers then they were unhappy. From Campus E, which is out of town, 7% of the students mentioned crime as the problem. They said there were petty criminals who were sometimes roaming around the gate during breaks and after school therefore, and they did not feel ‘safe’.

Transport issues are also a factor for wanting to change the campus. One student wrote, *“It is too far out and it’s very costly to travel and time consuming”* and other said *“I do not have money for transport”*

### 4.3.8 Learning expectations

When students or learners enroll at an institution, they definitely have different expectations. These would cover things like good teaching and learning experience, well equipped learning facilities, good relationships with staff and students, satisfactory duration of the course, just to mention the positive aspects.

Among twenty-three students who responded to this question, some mentioned that they:

*“... not happy and the learning time is short”*

*“...wasn't expecting and prepared to travel every day with public transport to and from my campus, which is away from my residence”.*

*“...expectation met, I am studying what I wanted to study”.*

*“...following a path that will lead me to achieving my goals when I go to DUT”.*

### 4.3.9 Were you satisfied with the teaching and learning provided at the campus?

The table below indicates how satisfied with the teaching and learning in the campuses and the reasons stated. The majority of student just indicated their response with a yes or no and no reason while other went to an extent of writing how they felt. Fourty six percent were satisfied while 23% were not and 11% did not respond. Not all students explained the reasons for the response they gave. The reason below are listed in the descending order from the most noted to least indicated

Satisfied	Not Satisfied
46%	23%
Reasons:	Reasons
Good lecturers	Shortage of resources and teachers
The campus is good but the standard need some adjustment	Lecturers do not finish the syllabus
I am 90% satisfied	Teaching strategies need to improve
	Teachers change all the time
	Course duration short
	They treat us as N1 or N2 rather than students with matric
	I give the campus 40%

*Table 4.4 Satisfaction about teaching and learning at campus*

#### 4.3.10 Where did you hear/learn about the college?

Family and Friends	54
Adverts	31
School visits	9
School teachers	4
Other sources	2

*Table 4.5 Learning about college*

The table above indicates that only 31 students saw the advert of the college while a large group of 54 students came to know about the FET College from family and friends. Nine students selected the school visits, which the college marketing team engages in every year. Four students indicated that heard from their teachers. Only 2% heard about the college from other source, which were registration officials at the University of Technology to enroll there.

#### 4.3.11 Counseling and orientation

Almost half the respondents (49%) said they did receive counseling and some orientation while 45% said they received no counseling. Six percent did not respond. The information they had came from lecturers or friends' attempts to persuade them what to do.

## 4.4 Findings from interviews

As mentioned in above sixteen students that were interviewed, from the three identified groups, which are seven current students with two students in practical groups, four dropouts and three that have completed. Only five of the interviewed candidates were females, but there are very few female students in the engineering field as shown in table 4.1.

Ten interviewees were staying in the hostel or had stayed there during their course of study but according to information they gave, this did not influence their selection.

The following are the results from the interviews.

### 4.4.1 Reasons for enrolling at the FET College

There were quite a number of reasons given for choosing the college as the place of study.

- a) Did not meet the requirement for Higher education.

The requirements for entry at the FET College are results from your previous grade, and registration fees. For students that needed to improve their results with a view to increase their point for entry in universities of Technology, FET was the best option, as one student said “anyone can be accepted at the FET College”.. Other student joined the FET college because of their entry points, as they said;

*P9: “...they do not require entry points like the university”*

At the FET Colleges there are no entry requirements in terms of points or certain symbols per subject, except the indication that the relevant grade has been passed. This means that in order to enroll for N4 level, one should have passed N3 or Grade 12.

Five students had mentioned that they wanted to pursue studies at the institutions of higher learning. However, their academic performance during high school was not good enough to

allow them entry to those institutions. Their plans were only focused at those institutions and the FET College was not even part of their choice process. Passing N4 subjects at the FET College can supplement the poor results obtained from high school thus adding to admission points. Therefore, N4 results or certificate serves as a factor that contributes to why most students find themselves at a FET college and at a campus that offers a course related to their future aspirations, hence they said

P 11: *“My matric results were poor and I needed to upgrade them. At DUT they told me that they needed N4 certificate from an FET college”*

*“My goal is studying at the university and the FET has helped me to get the points”*

Participant no 5, a completed student said this about the college;

*“...wasn't initially my first choice, but I lacked mathematics skills, so I had to come and catch up.... Mostly for math's development...”*

Some students come to the college with an intention to stay only a short while, to improve their results by completing one or two levels (N4 and N5) and then leave. However, once at the college some decide to stay and complete the year's course working towards the N6 qualification (a certificate), and do the in-service training internship so as to get a diploma. The reason for staying range from enjoying the course once enrolled for it to seeing better opportunities for the future with a quick way of obtaining a qualification. This participant stated that:

P 16: *“I also needed the points for entry at a Technikon [University of Technology]. Now that I have my N6 and I can go back and study further”*

Some students do come to the college with the intention of improving their results but find that they do not 'fit in' and decide to stop studying and drop out.

#### b) Affordability

The FET College was cheaper than other higher education institution. Some students, about 19%, said that even though they did not choose the FET College, they ended up there because

the fees made it possible for them to enroll. Lack of finances does force students to prefer a place and end up choosing whatever is available there just to have some qualification. The College was chosen because it cheaper than university.

c) Quick way of getting to a qualification

As the researcher, I believe that main reason for going to any institution is to obtain a qualification. Some respondent indicated that coming to the FET College offered a quicker way of getting a qualification than the university. When armed with a qualification the chance of getting a job would easier, hence participant number 10 said this ‘...*is the shortest route to achieve goals*’). The participant who had dropped out said:

*P 3: “...because it is quicker than varsity. People say you can easily get a job when you go to a FET because you’ll have skills”*

As a quick way of getting a qualification, it enables one to get a job and then study further on a part-time basis or go to institutions of higher learning. The FET College is another alternative route to get a qualification and the good thing is if one goes to institution of higher learning and does not make it at least one will have an FET qualification.

The factors with lower scoring were that of students wanting to be artisans or engineer and the fact that the parents did not want the students to stay at home.

#### **4.4.2 Factors that influenced the choice of campus**

a) Only campus offering the course

Choosing a campus within an institution becomes possible if the institution offers similar courses. It seems as if some students were forced to a campus they wouldn’t have chosen

because it was the only one with the course they want. That happened to these students, and some would change if that was possible;

*P 10: “after doing my own research about courses I found that [Campus E] was the only campus which offered the course I wanted”*

*P 5: “Only place we were told about that offer the course, according to advert and information received from other campuses”*

*P 16: “...the only place that offered the course”*

#### b) Recommendation from family and friends

Friends and family have an influence in recommending which course to choose as well as which campus they preferred because they want to benefit for what the student has studied. At least 10 of the participants (63%) were in some way influenced by a family member or a friend to come to the college

*P 11: “My brother asked me to go study construction related course. Actually I had no interest to study I had to stop work in order to come here.”*

*P 2: “My father encourage me to chose this field so I ended up at this campus”*

#### c) Location

This factor did not have much weight in influencing students. Campuses were classified as rural or urban as highlighted in section 3.2. Some campuses are near where students live and others are not. However, the findings show that what is most important is the availability of programme that the student is interested in. A course that is available at the area, campus the student does not like, or feel comfortable with, will not be chosen. From the interviewed students most of them did not have a problem with the area they chose the course they wanted irrespective of where it was offered. Participant 15 said “*Campus E was the closest place that did handiwork [the practical trade the student wanted]...*” On the same note, participant number 1 had said, “*I did not choose campus E... we were told that the course is*

*only offered there*". In addition, participant number 2 said, *"We live in Pietermaritzburg, so I had no other choice"*.

Many students felt they had no choice about the campus location since *"it was the only campus that offered the course in Pietermaritzburg"* as stated by participant number 12. For the student academic achievement in the particular field they wanted was important. There were a few who choose to study what was available to where they wanted to be, like closer to home or where they could use one transport system. About 11 of the interviewed students followed the course they interested in.

Problems encountered when making a decision about attending college were;

- lack information about college and limited access to resources
- the college rated by as an inferior institution by students themselves, peers and teachers

#### d) Choice and advice

Because of closing dates for registration, choices are made during the year usually after midyear exams. The process is to compare colleges until you find the one that matches your expectation and needs. FET college students are advised to go to college without having to compare with other institutions. This participant found himself in that situation, he said:

*P1 "I got involved in a car accident. The doctor said I must stay at home until June. My parents did not want me to stay at home, so they said I must come to the college."*

*P 5: I went to DUT ...they advised me to come to College"*

#### **4.4.3 Who influenced them about the campus?**

When asked who influenced their decision to study on this campus the most significant factor (about 57%) given was the family, parents and siblings. The extent to which parents consistently encourage their children to continue formal education after high school



influences the decisions of students. For children whose parents have attended college or university, it was likely that they were expected to continue with postsecondary education. Family members who have attended at this FET College or any another college would want the student to go there as well, as the students said

*P 16: "... my sister. She said I must go to an FET college because it was recognized institution and cheap"*

*P 1: "My parents did not want me to stay at home, so they said I must come to the College"*

*P 10: ...my brother came to the college to get some information and he told me to come and study here as well"*

*P 11: "my brother who was a workshop student at [Campus A] recommended that I come to college, but later moved to [Campus B] that was offering the course"*

*P7: "a family member who was studying at [Campus A]*

Friends also played a significant role in assisting the students with their choice. Some of their friends have been at the college before, while others drag their friends along with them to college when they realize they are still not sure of what to do and where to go pursue their studies

Teachers at school have a task of giving career advice to students, since most schools do not have career guidance advisors. This group did not have much influence but the advice given was based on what those teachers thought and what have worked for them. What students say in interviews shows that most of their teachers did not inform them about FET colleges, they only spoke of universities. Therefore, students are advised to go there even if result were not good. Only a few students were given such advice at school and most of them were sent to FET College by the universities.

Influence of significant others also play a role in forcing or guiding students' decision towards their preferred campus for various reasons, such as being a student there previously and the campus being a reputation of the place.

*P 7: "...a family member who was studying at [campus E]"*

*P 10: "...my brother came to the college...then told to come and study here as well"*

*P16: "...my sister"*

*P 3: "I have friends that studied here"*

*P 4: " it was the only one that my mother knew in Pietermaritzburg"*

This shows that these students were influenced by what family and friends knew of the campuses.

#### **4.4.4 Were you happy with the 'way things are done' at the campus?**

After a pause, looking up or pulling of the face, indicating that they were considering their response, ultimately, most students said yes. Only three of the interviewed students said no. The reason for saying yes were good teachers, learning environment was good. Participant 15 said *"Yes. I was impressed because I received good education and knowledge"*

Participant 16 had a different view and said; *"No, because at some stage we were told that we had to teach each other. So we decided to bunk the classes"*

#### **4.4.5 Would you advise other people to join the college?**

Only three students said they would not advise the other people to join the college. This included the student who was a bit reluctant to give an answer. The rest of the interviewees did not seem to have a problem with recommending the college and especially their campuses to other people. The participants responded this way;

*P 9: "Yes. The quality of education is good here. You pay less money".*

*P 13: "No...I think teaching is a problem... Maybe other campuses are OK"*

*P 11: had this to say: "I don't know...(pause) it will depend on how focused the person is. At school you have the whole year of study, if have a problem you can still catch up. Here at the college if you play, by the time you wake up it is too late".*

This could assist with the marketing of the college.

#### **4.5 Reasons for staying or leaving the college/campus**

With specialisation of campuses described above, in chapter 3, some programmes were moved from one campus to others. Not all students were happy with being moved. They had developed relationships with the staff and had made friends at the campus. Changing the campus was not by choice, and this had an impact on other factors such as transport and being close to home. This influenced their decision to leave or stay.

##### **4.5.1 Why did you leave?**

Reasons for leaving the college are very different between students. Reasons given ranged from taking responsibility for an action, which was later seen to be wrong, to punishment from parents. One of the respondents, a male who was 22 years old, firstly laughed when he was asked why did he leave the college and then said;

P 9: *“You see I had a baby and decided that I should I look for a job so as to support my child and thereafter I will finish my course”*

This was an unexpected response from a male student, because in the researcher’s experience and observation, male students always want to complete their studies first in this situation and it is only the girls who would leave school to raise the child. A response that one would expect from a female was from this student, P11, who said *“I fell pregnant when I was doing my N3. My parents felt that they could not support me and the baby that was on the way”* Another student P7, said *“I failed my N4 and my parents said I must stay at home. I will re-write [register a subject for examination only] and then come back next year”*

*“The campus changed the course so I felt I would not fit in and dropped out”*

A student like P3, said: *I wanted to look for the job and attend part-time in the evening”*. This shows that his goal to find the job was more than studying and he was only willing to sacrifice his evenings for college.

#### 4.5.2 Why did you stay at the college?

Academic progress or achievement, in the researcher's view cannot be the only indicator of how students feel about the course they are doing and the institution they are studying at. Students said they stayed on because they liked what they were being taught, while others were being obedient to parents or driven by relationships developed, as illustrated by the following students' responses:

*P2: "...I decided to do my N6, so that I will have achieved something rather than go to DUT having nothing....I will have my certificate as well"*

*P5: "I have developed good relationship with my lecturers who assist me when I am stuck"*

*P 10: "I am planning to go up to N6 with my studies. This is the shortest route to achieve your goals"*

Staying at the college does seem to be linked to personal and academic achievement for some students, even though they came to FET College by chance. For this one student the results that he wanted to improve were still not good, and he was told to do another trimester in order to gain entry into the field he wanted. He then decided to stay and complete the course before approaching that higher institution.

## 4.6 Summary of findings

The graphs below indicate information from the findings highlighting the main factors that influenced students' choice of FET College and the campus. The reasons for completion or non-completion of the course as pointed out by the students were highlighted as well. The graphs figures 4.4 to 4.6, in the summary display the findings in relation to questionnaires and figures 4.7 to 4.9 in relation to interviews. Reasons for completion and non-completion are summaries in figures 4.10 and 4.11

### *In relation to questionnaires*

The figure (4.4) below indicate the reasons for choosing the FET college. What is evident here is that most students came to FET College not knowing what to study. Other students came because they did not meet the requirement of the university and because it was affordable.

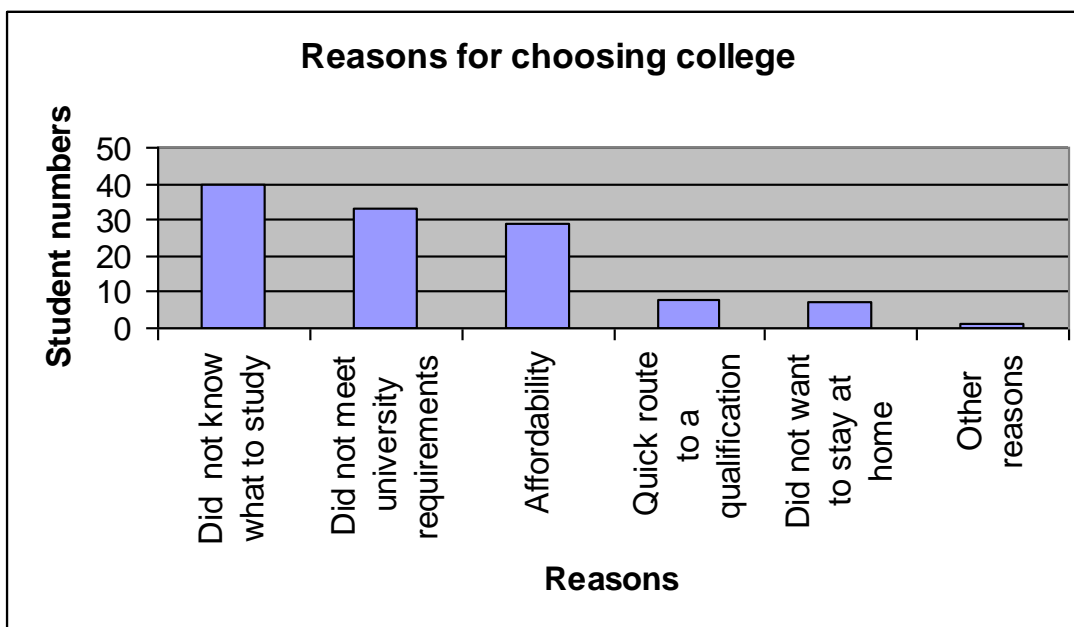


Figure 4.4

### *Reason for choosing the campus*

According to the findings, the main factor that influenced the choice was knowledge about the campus, the influence of family and specialisation as well as financial factors.

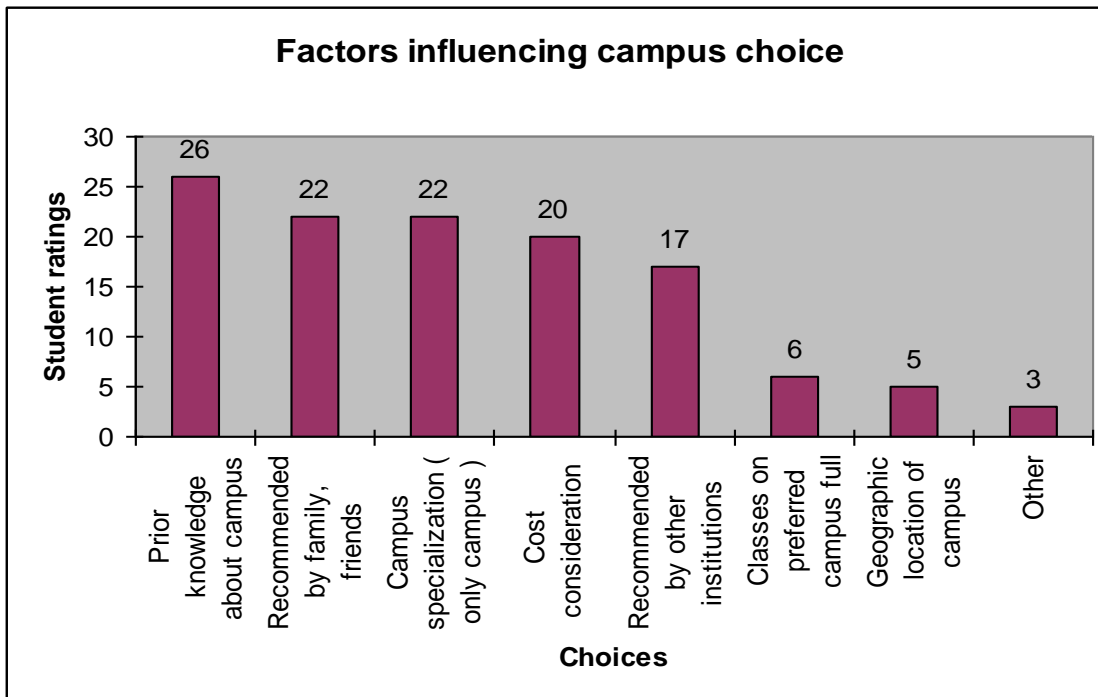


Figure 4.5

### *Influential people*

Figure 4.6 below indicated that the students said they decide on the own to go to the campuses where they were studying in. Family influence was rated as second when it comes to influencing them. FET College lecturers did a little bit of guidance as well.

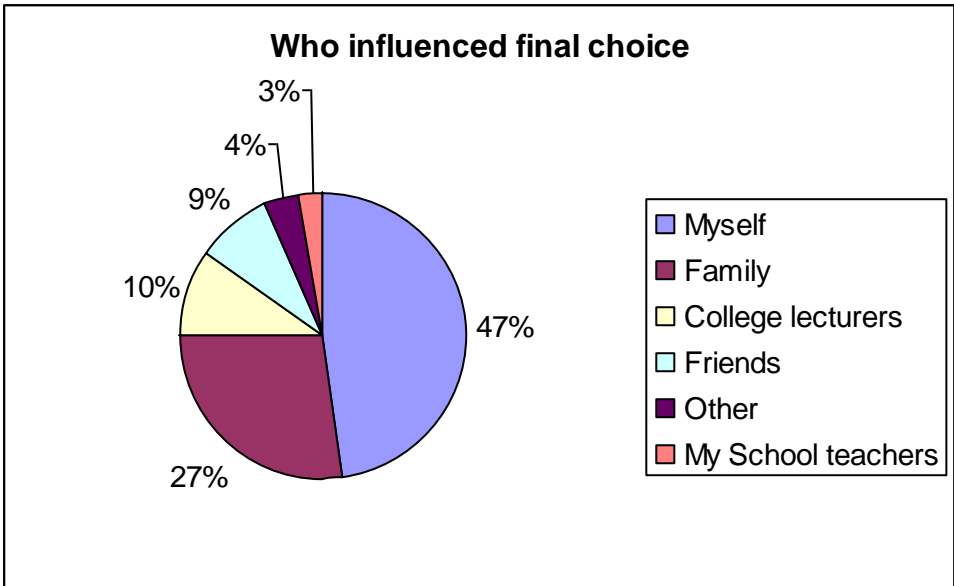


Figure 4.6

*In relation to interviewees*

*Reasons for joining college*

When students were asked about why they joined the FET College, their responses were summarized below in figure 4.7. The main reason was that they did not have enough points to meet the registration requirements at universities. The second reason stated was affordability and the fact that studying at an FET College was a quick route to a qualification had the same rating. Only two students indicated that they came because they did not want to stay at home.

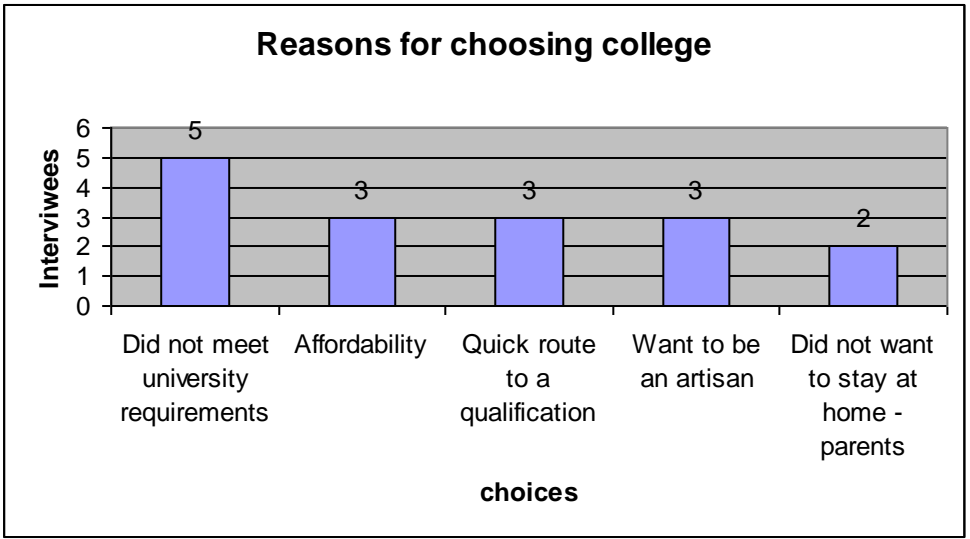


Figure 4.7

*Factors influencing choice of campus*

The campus chosen as indicated by figure 4.8, was the only campus that specialised in that programme. Geographic location and prior knowledge about the campus reputation contributed to the choice. The knowledge given by family mainly, the other institution did assist in selecting the campus.

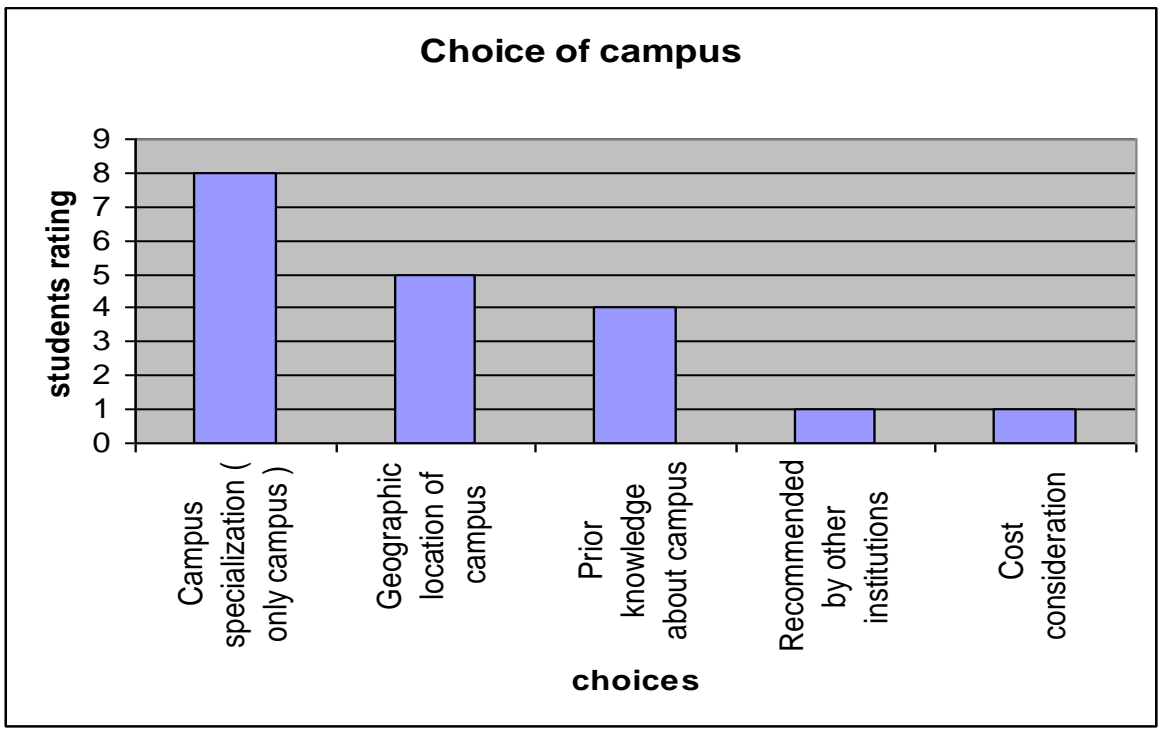


Figure 4.8



*Who influenced the final decision?*

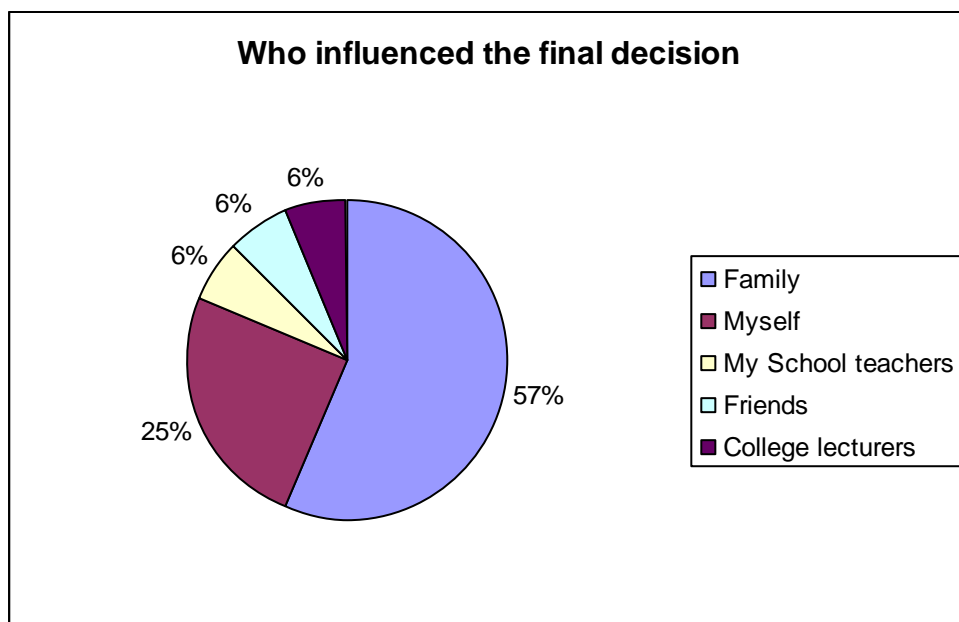


Figure 4.9

The interviewed students indicated that the family influenced their final decision about college, the campus and the courses. Twenty-five percent of student said they made the decision on their own.

*Staying or leaving the FET College*

*Reasons for completion*

The reasons for completion below include findings interviews of current and completed students. The current students were included to find out why they were still studying and had not dropped out. The reason given by the two groups were similar and therefore combined. Improving results and personal achievement were the main reasons. Students also stayed because they were satisfied with the teaching and learning that was taking place in the classrooms. Family support does play a role in keeping students at college.

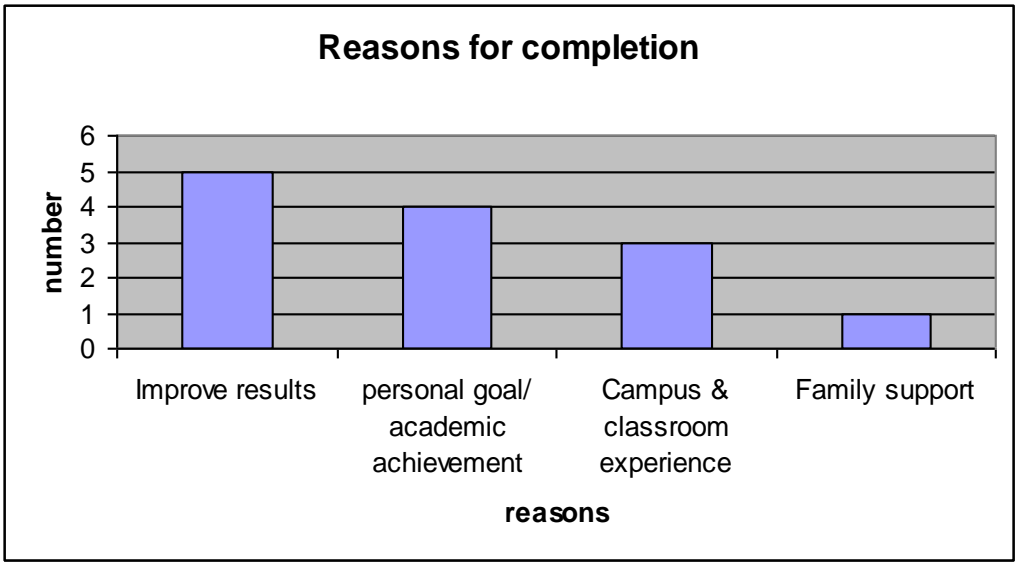


Figure 4.10

*Reasons for non-completion*

Figure 4.11 indicate some of the reasons stated by four dropout students. They were the only group that asked about leaving the college. Their reason included personal issues, which linked to finances in some way. The experiences they had at campus regarding practical work they had expected and changing of course affected their decisions in some way.

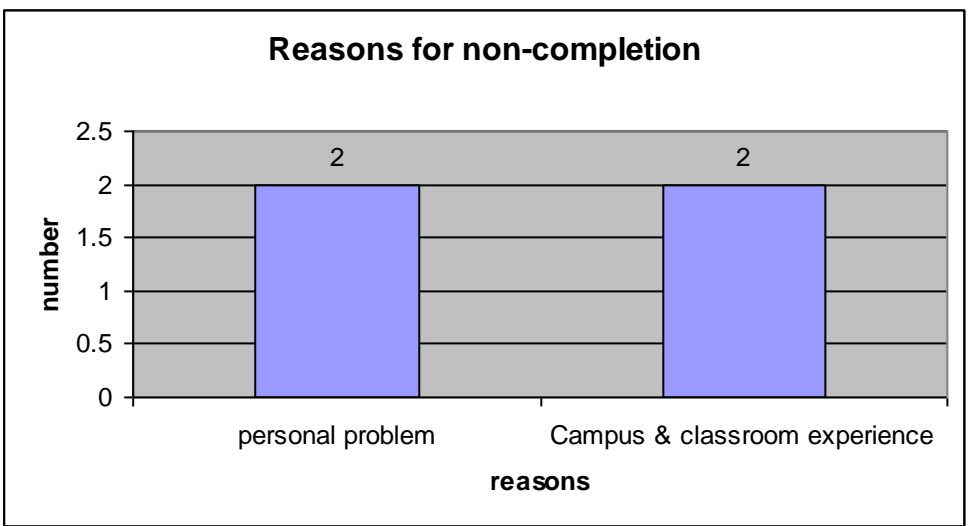


Figure 4.11

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

The focus of this study was to explore the factors that influenced students' choice of a campus and completion or non-completion of courses at the FET College. These factors included students' characteristics, which would be regarded as sociological factors such as socioeconomic status, significant other person, academic influence, and financial factors.

In this chapter, the research questions of the study will be discussed in relation to the findings. General conclusions about the students' choice practice at FET colleges as well as reasons for completion or non-completion of courses will be looked at as well.

#### **5.1 Factors in relation to choice of college**

The first research question in the study looks at the factors that influenced the students to choose to attend an FET College.

##### **5.1.1 Educational aspirations**

The decision to come to FET College reflects the determination from the students. Forty students from the group that were given questionnaires indicated that they did not know what to study when they came to the FET College, but they enrolled at the college as the one educational institution to which they had access. The willingness of other students to enroll at the FET College to improve academic results gained at school shows commitment to achieving educational goals.

High school performance was a determining factor for most students who chose the FET College. The ambition of some students in this study was to go to university. The FET College was not even part of their choice list, but their results from high school that were not good enough to meet the entry requirements at universities, as indicated in figure 4.4 and figure 4.7. This meant that they had to choose the FET College as a route to improve their results. Instead of students repeating grade 12 or a subject at a school level in order to get a better mark, they would register for a course at N4 level (see chapter 3 for description of N levels) at the FET College. Thus, FET becomes a bridge that allows students to gain acceptance to a higher institution. The need for a N4 certificate contributed to why most students found themselves at an FET college. As research participant number 11 indicated, *“My matric results were poor and I needed to upgrade them. At DUT they told me that they needed N4 certificate from an FET college”*. Participant number 16 who also had a goal to study at the university said, *“The FET College has helped me to get the points”*.

The summary in figure 4.7 shows reasons for choosing FET College. Failure to produce enough points for university entrance was the main reason. Therefore, the students who were driven by academic aspirations gave in to the pushing, guidance, instruction and advice from institutions like DUT to enroll at the FET College, even though their wishes were different. Some had learnt to accept the qualification they receive at the FET College and love the place, while others still see the college as the bridge to their bigger dreams.

In addition to the issue of results was the attractiveness of the tuition fees, which were affordable and cheaper when compared to other preferred institutions. Another factor shown in this study to influence choice, is the potential for future employment after completion, since studying at the FET College was regarded as the quickest route to a qualification..

## **5.2 Factors in relation to choice of campus**

The following are the major factors that influence students' choice of campus as found in this study:

### 5.2.1 Availability of the program

The findings as indicated in figure 4.5 and 4.8 showed that the availability of a particular course on a campus carried the most weight in being influential to students' choice processes. The students mentioned that the campus they were studying on was the only campus that offered the course. Prior knowledge about campus and the advice from significant persons were also influential.

The option of choosing a campus within an institution becomes limited if the program is only available on a particular campus. I found that in this study, 28% of students who responded to the questionnaire and about 7 (44%) of interviewees enrolled at a campus they would not have chosen, because it was the only campus that offered the course they wanted. That happened to Participant number 1 who said; *"... after doing my own research about courses I found that this was the only campus which offered the course I wanted."*

The college marketing information through newspaper advertisements and on the radio, had informed students about where to go for certain courses as stated by participant X, who said: *"...this was the only place we were told about that offer the course, according to advert and information received from other campuses."*

The FET College is a multi-campus institution due to the merger process described earlier in chapter 2. At the time of the merger the college management decided on how the college would optimally utilize its resources thus leading to specialisation. The impact of this for students was that they had to be prepared to attend the campus at which the course was offered or change to another course, which would have not been a preferred course. The desire to attend a particular course should outweigh all other difficulties attached to it, for a student to pursue choosing the course irrespective of where it is offered. According to Hayden (2000), choice is an investment on the side of the student, which implies spending money and time.

### 5.2.2 Influence of family and friends

For some of the students interviewed in this study this was linked to the amount of support and encouragement they got from parents in planning for their future careers. This means that the study confirms Burns' suggestion (2006, p 32) that the "greater the quality of parental encouragement, the higher the students' educational and occupational aspiration and the more likely they are to pursue higher education".

The most influential individuals or group on the FET College students was their relatives such as parents, sister and brothers. The findings by Burns (2006) in a study, on African-American students at the College of Agriculture in Missouri-Columbia, were echoed in this study. Burns (2006, p 53), stated that "parents and other family members, and to a lesser extent peers, had the greatest influence on students' college choice". Similarly, in this study, data shows that students enrolled at the campuses that parents and family members had advised them about or attended before. Hence, participant number 2 said, "*My father encouraged me to choose this field, ... so I ended up at this campus.*"

From the findings of this study, it is evident that parents and their support influences students decision or ambition to learn, which confirms what Cosser (2002) found in the South African context that family encouragement was the predictor of post-secondary educational aspirations. The family members encourage students to do courses that would benefit the family as well, even though it seemed as if students had other plans with their lives. For some, whose plan was studying, the course they were doing was not on their original list of choices. Participant number 13 declared that his brother had 'asked' him to study a construction related course.

This participant was asked by family members to leave his job and go to college to learn a course that would add value to the family business. He said "*Actually I had no interest to study I had to stop work in order to come here*". From this statement, I could sense that he was not too happy about that. He had been earning his own money and now had to rely on family support while studying, until he qualified and became able to work in the family business and earn his own salary again. Having a job or starting a business is what most

learners are striving for, it is like achieving a personal goal. Choosing to go back to school is a tough decision to make since one has to forgo the joy of having one's own money.

Even though students themselves made the final decisions about attending at the FET College, parents/family members were likely to influence the process. As indicated in figure 4.9 the influence of family is strong as most of the studies are family funded. The difference in this study as compared to other studies reviewed was that there has been up till now no outside financial support offered to students, which could have enabled them to follow their personal choices. Therefore, they relied on family for financial support.

### **5.2.3 Costs and financial issues**

Students viewed the issue of cost for the courses at the college differently. The questionnaire respondents as indicated in figure 4.5 ranked affordability and cost factors as the fourth factor that influenced them to join the college or choose a course. The participants in the interviews (figure 4.7) indicated that the FET college was considered because it was cheap (affordable) or cheaper than other institutions. This could be viewed in two ways. On the positive side, the college could attract many students because it is affordable. The other side of this would be the question of whether students value the qualification they received from the FET College. That is, do they put in the required effort in their studying in relation to the money they have paid?

Some students stated that the campuses chosen were close to their homes, which implied that it should not be costly to get to the campus. However, this contradicts the actual situation one finds in the campuses. The research conducted for the college by Blose (2008) indicated that many students who enrolled at this FET College were not from the area where the college or campus is situated. As a lecturer at the college, I have found that the statement 'close to home' meant that the FET College or the campus was accessible from home. Pietermaritzburg's taxi routes all run to the centre of town. Therefore, unless students stay within walking distance from the FET campus, they need to take two taxis, one from home to town and another from town to the campus, so the time and travel cost from town to any campus on the outskirts will be almost the same. However, students that come from areas

outside of Pietermaritzburg are compelled to find accommodation either at the FET hostel or any other place closer to campus, in order to get to there on time every day.

#### **5.2.4 Prior knowledge about campus**

I have noted that sometimes students' choices for a course were directed first by the campus. They choose from the courses available at the preferred campus, rather than from courses offered by the FET College as a whole. This is in line with research in United States and other countries, which indicated that an individual would select a particular college or campus if the benefits of attending that place offset attending at any other college or campus (Hossler et al, 1989). The implication was that socio-economic factors were considered for the choice to be beneficial to the student.

The majority of students joined the FET College and chose a particular campus in order to improve their results and enhance their career prospects. As noted above, the main influencing factors for the choice were failure to meet university requirements, cost considerations, desire for a quick route to a qualification and wanting a skill or to become an artisan. Moreover, choosing the campus (as indicated in figure 4.8) was influenced by campus specialisation (the only campus offering the course), the knowledge or reputation of the campus and geographic location, which to me meant accessibility in terms of transport. The factors such as recommendation by other institution were not strong since they recommended FET College as a whole, not any particular campus. Costs were not a strong factor since the fees for all different programmes in the Engineering field are same for the whole college.

#### **5.3 Factors that influenced students' completion or non-completion of courses**

The second question of the study was what factors influenced students' completion or non-completion of courses.



According to the information students gave in response to questionnaires, (figure 4.6), 47% of the final decision about campus was made by the students themselves. However, interviews with students showed that it was more complex. The responsibility for choice of campus or college was on not the students only but on family members as indicated in figure 4.9. In figure 4.9, for 57% of students influence was from family while only 25% could make their own decision. A decision to attend college would go with the decision to stay and finish the course if the environment was conducive for the person himself or herself to continue studying. This meant that these students became aware of issues like location of the campus at an early stage and still decided to register. However, having worked in the college myself, I have observed that students do not like walking to college, even though they live in the area where the campus is because students get to campus tired, sweating or full of mud if weather conditions are not good. The distance from where the student lives might warrant that he or she takes some form of public transport in order to get to the campus on time. This in my view would be a sociological issue, since students would prefer to spend time and money on transport than to walk and arrive sweaty or muddy.

There are intellectual and institutional issues, which come into play when a student decides where to study. When students join the FET College, they do not know the course content and what is expected of them. There is very limited time available for some students to get information about the courses, campus life and learning environment before coming to college. They only learn and experience everything once they are in class and at the campus. Those experiences could be positive or negative for the students, thus, influencing their decision about completing the course. Those experiences would test academic goals of the students

Findings showed that there were other reasons mentioned such as safety, distance, and personal issues that had an effect on the students' decision about persisting or dropping out.

### **5.3.1 Completion**

Students enter an educational institution with an aim of improving their skills and knowledge in order to improve their personalities and lifestyles. Factors that led to students wanting to

complete the course they had chosen had to do with their academic aspirations. The findings indicated that they wanted to finish their N6 so as to achieve some form of qualification. Academic performance and achievement becomes the motivating factor for staying and completing the studies. Therefore, passing the subjects motivates the students to stay.

Almost 50% of the entire group of participants in the study indicated that they had wanted to study at a university. Their focus was still on achieving that dream. The reason many students do not leave immediately after obtaining their N4 certificate is the fact that the FET College operates on a trimester system, whereas the universities operate on semesters. Universities enroll new students at the beginning of the semester, which is either the first semester in January/ February or second semester in July. The trimesters are in blocks of three months, the first one ending in April and the second one in August. Therefore, students enrolled during the first trimester at an FET College, have to wait for the next intake at the universities. Some students decide to continue and enroll for N5 and N6, because that gives them an opportunity of obtaining some qualification. As participant number 2 said: *“I decided to do my N6, so that at least I will have something I achieved rather than go to DUT and [possibly] achieve nothing. The people at DUT say you can make it there if you have started at an FET College, plus I will have my [N6] certificate as well.”*

They also stayed because after completing N6 they would go to companies and be eligible to do in-service training, which make them qualify to obtain a diploma.

The benefit for students, who follow this route at FET College, is that they would have done an introduction to what they learn at the university

Influence of family is another important factor in completion or non-completion of courses. Chapman (1981) regards the motivation and encouragement of significant others as very important in persuading students to enroll at a college and on the attendance as well. It seemed as if students did not want to disappoint the significant people in their lives by dropping out. A participant that had completed, when asked if she considered dropping out, said she would not because she was “scared of my father”.

### 5.3.2 Non- completion of courses

Failure does make students leave the institution. My experience at the FET College has shown that some students decide to leave the college and never return to pursue the course failed. I had expected to find that the reasons for dropping out were the difficulty of courses. Surprisingly from the group of four dropout students interviewed, three did not mention that difficulty was the problem. The decision to drop out was made because of personal problems. As indicated in chapter 4, students had to take responsibility for what had happened to them. Two of the interviewed students that had dropped out had babies and had to find ways to support their children (interestingly, one of these students was male). One student was hoping to find a job and then decided to devote his time to looking for the job. The fourth participant had dropped out because she had not passed all her subjects to continue on to the next level and would therefore have to re-write the subject. Interestingly, the comments they made showed that they were still willing to come back and complete their courses.

Financial reasons were also a contributing factor. Parents could not cope with extra costs for their sons or daughters. Repeating a course or subject is an extra cost, whereas re-writing an examination is cost effective because you register for examinations only and go to college to write that subject.

When programmes were moved from one campus to other due to campus specialization, some students were not comfortable with the change. They had developed relationships at the campus and had become accustomed to the campus culture. It is commonly known that people resist change, and the students were affected in that way. For them, changing was not by choice, and this had an impact on other factors such as transport arrangements and the reputation of that campus. Participant number 9 felt that changes that took place in his campus were not good for him and decided to drop out because he would not “fit in”. According to this student, the campus was now offering new courses, not what he had registered for when he started and felt that if he went back to that campus he would find the course he did not like.

Tinto (1975) said leaving the college is a decision made when the student does not fit in. When a student does not cope with a situation that causes a mismatch in his or her life, leaving that environment becomes an option. In this study, students left college because of personal issues they had to take care of. However, participant number three's response revealed that the plans he had for his life did not match with being a full-time student. He wanted to "look for a job" and rather sacrifice time after hours for college. This implies that students' goals and experiences contribute to a decision to stay or leave. If social or academic experiences at a college are not good, it is likely that a student will not complete the studies.

#### **5.4 Choice process for FET Students**

The findings from the questionnaire showed that many students did not know what they wanted to study at the FET College (table 4.1). They wanted to go to other institution of higher learning, which they had planned for while doing grade 12. Deciding to attend the FET College happened without following the process indicated in the model of choice by Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) which, emphasizes aspiration, search and then choice. What students in this study had to do to realise their aspirations was determined by their academic results. Those with strong results would have a range of options, but for others options were limited, and they were guided and advised by other individuals or institutions during registration time.

In South Africa, students choose between two well-known higher education institutions, universities and universities of technology. If a students cannot gain access to these then they might be forced to seek employment without any training, which is difficult since the country needs skilled people. However, some students who want to pursue their studies get to be channelled into FET Colleges, if their results do not allow them entry into higher education. Therefore, they enroll at FET College without taking time to think about it, as they would have with other institutions.

## **5.5 Course expectations**

When student's expectations about the course or campus and the actual experience do not match, this could lead to their withdrawal. This reflects low commitment, which is often not addressed because of inadequate counseling. Students need proper guidance and counseling to make correct choices. The majority of students in the study were still doing N4 and only 25% of the total sample had gone up to N6 level. It is not easy to predict what percentage will reach the N6 level, as indicated in findings in a study by Maharaj (2008, p 64) when he tracked the students' enrollments for 2005 to 2007 from N4 to N6 levels in on the campuses of the same FET College. In his findings for one of trimesters in 2005, he indicated that where 31 students had enrolled for N4, 11 progressed to N5 and no students enrolled for N6.

Nevertheless, when students' expectations are met, students persist. There would be less dissatisfaction about the campus environment and quality of teaching. That is a state where students are comfortable with lecturers, course content and the campus culture. Colleges should "be adequately resourced and maintained to provide quality learning" (McGrath, et al. 2004) for the benefit of the students.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

Findings revealed that students wanted to pursue studies at the institutions of higher learning. However, their academic performance during high school was not good enough to allow them entry to those institutions. Therefore, they had to choose programmes at accessible institutions like FET colleges. This confirms what Moll, Steinberg & Broekmann (2005, p 44) said, that the programmes offered in VET institutions are generally easier to access than those offered in universities or universities of technology, particularly for a person who has not coped well with academic studies at school.

The availability of the program added to factors which lead to a decision about college and the campus. For some students the academic reputation of the campus was regarded as important, to such an extent that they wanted to register for any program as long as it was

offered there. In such instances, whatever course was available was chosen as long as the person was enrolled at the college. Siever (1984) said the student might be looking for accessibility and convenience. This could also happen if the student liked the location of the campus.

This was supported by research in United States and other countries, where families, more especially those who had attended the college or any other type of tertiary institution, influenced students. In the South African university context, Myburgh, (2005) found that parental and peers influence was positively significant. Likewise, the survey at Mnambithi FET College found that one of the reasons for choosing the FET College was pressure or influence from family and peers to enroll for formal studies to improve opportunities for employment or complete schooling (Garisch, 2009).

The findings in relation to the costs also bear some significance. The college was regarded as cheaper than other institutions by five of the students interviewed.

The historical and political demarcations of Pietermaritzburg have made it difficult for some students to attend campuses situated in geographical areas like in semi-rural areas or townships because of fear for their lives. In South Africa technical training institutions were established for different racial groups. Institutions for blacks were situated in townships and designated areas, removed from white commerce and industry in the cities, and moreover poorly staffed and equipped, as stated by Fisher, Jaff, Powell & Hall, (2003, p5). With this background, some campuses still have the reputation of being for blacks only (see 3.2 for description of study) and therefore have low status even in post- apartheid South Africa. Students of other races are reluctant to enroll at those campuses. This situation extends to tribal issues. A Sotho student indicated that he was not being treated well by other Black students because he “speaks a different language”.

According to information gained in this study, factors that caused students to choose the college or campus were in order of importance the following:

- Wanted to improve their results so they could pursue the course of their first choice at institution of higher learning

- The only campus offering the course
- Recommendation by family and friends
- Affordability
- Having interest in the field they were studying
- Closer to home
- Wanted to be artisans
- Wanted to explore opportunities of starting their own businesses in those fields

This is similar to the study conducted at Mnambithi FET College, which indicated the reasons for students “enrolling at the college included the following:

- ‘My school results were not good enough to go anywhere else’. Studying at an FET college is therefore, regarded as a second - best option.
- The belief that a college qualification will provide a gateway into industry by virtue of established partnerships between the college and industry being in place, in terms of which placement occurs.
- The college is the training provider closest to the students’ place of residence.
- Pressure or influence from family – from parents, primarily, and siblings – and peers to enroll for formal studies to improve opportunities for employment or to complete schooling. That is, colleges are becoming an alternative route to matric in respect of students who have dropped out of school.
- To gain the practical experience and confidence for successful trade test completion” (Garisch, 2009 p 28).

### **5.7 Recommendations for further research:**

Carrying out this study has led me to realize that there are other questions that urgently need to be answered by further research, in order for the FET College sector to become more effective.

Some of the questions are:

1. Responsiveness of the FET College sector to the needs of industry

Are students at FET Colleges learning skills that are needed by the industry close to them?

What are the gaps between the expectations of industry and students' competencies?

2. Are Government calls for skills training being met by FET Colleges?

How well equipped are FET Colleges in terms of staffing, workshops and other resources to meet government calls for skills training?

3. Part-time students – what challenges do they face studying at the FET colleges?



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## APPENDICES

*Appendix 1*

**REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FROM THE RECTOR**

Box 94  
EDENDALE  
3217

The Rector: Mr S. Khuzwayo  
Umgungundlovu FET College

Dear Sir

**PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

I am currently studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and hereby seek permission to conduct research for my Master's degree at the College. I would like to do my research in the three campuses namely; Edendale Campus, Midlands Campus, Plessislaer Campus. I am interested in the Engineering students from these campuses

My topic is: **“Factors influencing students’ choice of campus and completion or non-completion of courses”**

All information gathered from the campuses will be confidential and no names will be used in the thesis.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully

\_\_\_\_\_

Miss BD Ngcobo

RESEARCHER

Contact details: 082 391 0542 or 033 341 2100

\_\_\_\_\_

Sandra Land

SUPERVISOR

033 260 5497

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RESPONSE SLIP:

Permission to conduct research is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

THE RECTOR

\_\_\_\_\_

Date



*Appendix 2*

**REQUEST FOR PERMISSION- CAMPUS MANAGERS**

Box 94  
EDENDALE  
3217

To: Campus Manager  
Plessislaer Campus

Dear Sir

**PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

I am currently studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and hereby seek permission to conduct research for my master's degree at your campus.

My topic is: **“Factors influencing students’ choice of campus and completion or non-completion of courses”**

All information gathered from the campus will be confidential and no names will be used in the thesis

Thank you.

Yours faithfully

\_\_\_\_\_  
Miss BD Ngcobo

RESEARCHER

Contact details: 082 391 0542 or 033 341 2100

Sandra Land

SUPERVISOR

033 260 5497

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RESPONSE SLIP

Permission to conduct research is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
CAMPUS MANAGER

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Appendix 3*

Consent Letter:

Dear Student

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

I am currently doing a Master's in Education and part of the course requirements is that I conduct research.

My topic is on '**Factors influencing the students' choice of campus and completion and non-completion of courses**'.

I would like to request you to participate in this research study. All information gathered during the study will be confidential and no names will be mentioned.

If you are interested in participating in the research, please fill in the reply slip below and return it as soon as possible and I will contact you with further details with regards to suitable times at which we can meet. If you would like to know more about the process, please contact me on 082 3910 542 or 033341 2100

I would greatly appreciate it if you would consider this matter and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Lungi Ngcobo  
RESEARCHER

Sandra Land  
SUPERVISOR

-----  
REPLY SLIP

I \_\_\_\_\_ am interested in participating in the research on Factors influencing students' choice of campus.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

My contact details are as follows:

Telephone No: ( c) \_\_\_\_\_ (h) \_\_\_\_\_

Campus \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix 4

**Questionnaire**

Dear student

I am doing research on factors influencing students' choice of campus and persistence. I would appreciate if you would take a few minutes to answer the following questions. The information that you will give will be treated with confidentiality and will not in any way be used for any other purpose other than this study.

**Part A**

- 1) Gender Female  Male
- 2) Age: 15-20  21-25  26-30  31 +
- 3) Campus \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Course: \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) When did you join the college? \_\_\_\_\_

**Part B**

6) Why did you choose this College?

Affordability	Did not know what to study	Did not want to stay at home	Did not meet Technikon requirements	Quick route to get a qualification
---------------	----------------------------	------------------------------	-------------------------------------	------------------------------------

7) Why have you chosen this course?  
\_\_\_\_\_

8) What factors influenced your choice of campus? (you may choose more than one if necessary)

Prior knowledge about the college and campus	
Recommended by family, friends, teachers	
Recommended by other institutions eg. DUT	
Geographic location of the campus	
Cost consideration ( transport)	
Campus specialization ( only this campus offer the course)	
Classes on preferred campus were full	

9) Who influenced your final decision about the choice of campus

Myself	Family	Friends	College Lecturers	Availability of space
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Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

10) Is there any other course you would rather be doing that is available on another campus, but not yours?

Yes	No
-----	----

10.1) If Yes, which one \_\_\_\_\_

10.2) Where is it offered? \_\_\_\_\_

10.3) Why are you not doing it?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

11) Have you considered changing the campus?

Yes	No
-----	----

11.1) What are your reasons?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

12) How is your learning expectations met or affected by campus specialization? Explain.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

13) Are you satisfied with the culture at your campus and the education provided?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14) Where did you hear/learn about the college?

Adverts	Family & Friends	School Teachers	School visits
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Other source of information \_\_\_\_\_

15) Were you given any counseling and orientation about what is offered at the college? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix 5

**STUDENTS INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

*Dear student*

*I am doing research on factors influencing students' choice of campus and persistence. I would appreciate if you would take a few minutes to answer the following questions. The information that you will give will be treated with confidentiality and will not in any way be used for any other purpose other than this study.*

**Part A**

- 1) Gender      Female       Male
- 2) Age: 15-20       21-25       26-30       31 +
- 3) Campus \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Course: \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) When did you join the college? \_\_\_\_\_

**Current students:**

- Why did you enroll at the FET College?
- \* What key factors influenced you in making this campus your first choice?
- \* Who influenced you to choose this campus?
- \* What educational aspirations/goals did you have when you chose the campus? Are they being met?
- \* What are your reasons for staying at college/campus?
- \* Are you happy/satisfied with 'the way things are done' at your campus? Explain
- \* Would you advise other people to join the college and specifically your campus?

**Students who dropped out:**

- Why did you enroll at the college? Which campus?
- Why did you leave the college?
- Was this campus your first choice?
- How could the college have assisted you in staying and achieving your goals?
- Would you advise other people to join the college and specifically your campus?

**Completed students:**

- What factors influenced your choice of college?
- Would you ascribe your success to the campus at which you studied? Explain
- What motivated you to carry and complete your course at the college?
- Did you change the campus during your study, or did you ever consider doing that?
- Did you ever consider dropping out? If so, please explain what helped you stay.