



**Learning during turbulent times:  
An exploration of high academic achievement in undergraduate students during protest  
action at UKZN**

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in Social Science: Educational Psychology in the School of Applied Human Science, College of Humanities, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg Campus.

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**Declaration**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Science, in the Graduate Programme in Educational Psychology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

I, Monique Elizabeth Schoeman, declare that

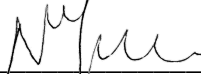
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Monique Elizabeth Schoeman

15 March 2019

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Dr Nicholas Munro  
Supervisor

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- I thank God for carrying me through this journey.

*“Then sings my soul, my Saviour, God, to Thee  
How Great Thou art,  
How great Thou art.”*

**Dedication**

*Meem and Papa*

*This dissertation is a product of all the sacrifices you have made for me, as well the love and support you have given me throughout my life.*

*I hope it will make you proud.*

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### **Abstract**

*#FeesMustFall*: the nation-wide movement that spread across South African institutions of higher education, and resulted in what seemed to be an abnormal and turbulent learning environment. It is remarkable that in such times, there were students who excelled academically. This study aimed to explore the phenomenon of high academic achievement in undergraduate students during protest action at UKZN. The primary objectives were to find out what enables and constrains these students' academic achievement during times of protest action, as well as what kind of learning takes place for them during turbulent times. The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach, and drew on theories from a broad, socio-cultural perspective. Data were collected through one focus group discussion and three individual interviews, which were thematically analysed.

The findings suggest that despite facing a turbulent learning environment, experiencing internalised turbulence in the form of negative emotional states and the difficulty of planning, high achieving students were able to draw on external mediators in order to ensure their academic success. These external mediators include relationships with family members, lecturers, and academic peers and communities, as well as resources such as textbooks and internet sources. Through their ability to draw on these mediators, and to view certain aspects of the turbulent protest action positively, high achieving students could be regarded as displaying academic resilience. Beyond this, the findings also point to how these students thrived – not only due to their high academic achievement in the face of turbulence – but because of the process of transformative learning that they experienced as well.

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## Abbreviations

- ANC: African National Congress
- BCM: Black Consciousness Movement
- CHE: Council on Higher Education
- CRT: Critical race theory
- DHET: Department of Higher Education and Training
- FGD: Focus group discussion
- #FMF: FeesMustFall
- NRF: National Research Fund
- NUSAS: National Union of South African Students
- PAC: Pan Africanist Congress
- #RMF: RhodesMustFall
- SARChI: South African Research Chairs Initiative
- SASO: South African Students Organisation
- UCT: University of Cape Town
- UKZN: University of KwaZulu-Natal

## Technical Terms

- Black: African, Coloured and Indian individuals. This is in line with the definition of Black in national and higher education protocol and convention.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1) Introduction

This chapter discusses the context that led to the research by providing relevant background information to the research problem. On a national level, the chapter aims to provide contextual and historical information about the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) protest action of 2016, and its effects on the curriculum and students of contact universities. The chapter then aims to show that the turbulent situation of South African higher education institutions is located within an international, global context of unrest. By covering these areas, the chapter intends to illustrate why the research reported in this dissertation is relevant and valuable. Moreover, the objectives and the research questions of the study are presented. Finally, the structure of the dissertation is identified.

#### 1.2) Born-frees Question Their Freedom Through Protest

At the end of 2015, South Africa's "born-free" generation of students started to question the legitimacy of their freedom *en masse*. Fundamentally advocating the decolonisation of higher education systems, the mass movement was titled #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) (Graham, 2016; Naicker, 2016), with the students also demanding a 0% increase in higher education fees for 2016 - with the ultimate goal being free higher education. The 0% increment for 2016 was achieved, but higher education tuition fees remained. The continuous demand for free higher education led to a branch of the protest action dubbed #FMF. The year of 2016 continued to be a period of socio-political unrest for South African higher education institutions. Thousands of students and some staff members nationwide participated in the #FMF protests that took place predominantly in the latter half of 2016 (Hodes, 2016).

While protest action in itself does not always result in turbulence, and turbulence is not always characterised by protests, the #FMF protest action can be considered as a turbulent period, due to the resulting disruptions, cancellations, instances of violence and safety concerns within higher education settings. The turbulence on campuses is what led to the academic programmes of many higher education institutions being suspended. Various

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universities responded to the suspension of academic programmes in different ways. For example, at both the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), examinations were shifted later in the academic year, and most undergraduate students were granted the opportunity to write their year-end examinations regardless of their class marks (<https://www.uct.ac.za/students/exams/>; <https://notices.ukzn.ac.za/ViewNotice.aspx/31232>). Additionally, UCT only began their 2017 academic programme on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2017, which is later than the usual commencement date of the academic year (<https://www.uct.ac.za/students/exams/>).

Despite the turbulence in the academic setting, many students were presumably still able to pass modules, with some still being able to achieve high results at the end of the year. It is the phenomenon of high academic achievement or learning well during turbulent academic settings that is of interest to the researcher and the focus of this study. The study recognises that although “academic achievement” is possibly constrained to the curriculum (i.e., marks to denote achievement in assignments, tests and examinations), learning is broader and not constrained by the curriculum. In other words, students learn beyond what is contained in the curriculum and the marks they are awarded for curriculum-related tasks. Furthermore, although the study recognises that academic achievement exists along a continuum (e.g., from academic underachievement to high academic achievement), it is academic achievement at the high or exceptional end of the achievement continuum that is of specific interest in the study.

Forming part of an overarching institutional research project at UKZN (i.e. “The student academic exceptionalism project: Equity and exceptional academic achievement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal” [HSS/0060/015CA](#)), this study is specifically focused on the process of high academic achievement during protest action. This study aimed to explore how high achieving students managed to cope and perform well during these periods of unease. To elaborate: the research attempted to explore what structures or systems helped high achieving students, as well as what constrained these students, in the process of academic achievement. This study intended to provide insight into, firstly, what is currently working for high achieving students, and secondly, what could possibly be done in the future to enable more students to succeed academically, even amidst campus unrest and instability.

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### **1.3) A World in Turmoil**

Unrest and resulting instability are issues that are not unique to the higher education context but are pertinent to other national and global settings as well. For example, xenophobic attacks, which were most extensive in 2008 in South Africa, continue to be a source of national turmoil. The violence against Somali migrants in February 2017 invoked anger in many community members of Pretoria and led them to take to the streets in early March, protesting against xenophobia, among other concerns (“Anti-xenophobia march to Union Buildings”, 2017). In 2018, the country witnessed protests in relation to fuel increases (“National Protest against fuel increase”, 2018), service delivery (“SA service delivery protests more frequent and violent in 2018”, 2018), as well as gangsterism in Westbury, Johannesburg (“Westbury residents vow to continue protests until demands met”, 2018). On a broader scale, the civil war in Syria has resulted in the loss of more than 250 000 lives since its wake and continues to be the primary source of incessant unrest and instability for Syrians (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/16979186>).

When considering the unrest of higher education institutions, it is important to recognise that “...these protests are taking place in a context of growing neo-liberalisation of the higher education institutions across the globe” (Naicker, 2016, p. 60), and are resonant with global instances of political, ideological, and educational instability and disruption. This study is informed by such instances of other national and global unrest as examples of the turbulent times in which global societies are existing, and university students are learning. Although only focused on a specific context (learning and protest action at UKZN), the researcher aimed to show that this unrest is not situated in a void, but is located in a global state of turmoil. Hence, the study speaks to the need to understand how learning unfolds during tumultuous socio-political and educational contexts.

### **1.4) The Context of South African Higher Education**

In order to determine why this study is of value, it is crucial to consider the current context of South African higher education. Since the end of the Apartheid era, there has been a process of massification, whereby the number of students has almost doubled from 1994 to 2011 (Department of Higher Education & Training [DHET], 2013). As pointed out by Fraser and Killen (2005) the drive for massification intends to increase participation rates in higher education and is related to a growing shift away from higher education only being for an elite

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few. One of the intended goals of reforms such as massification in higher education is thus to ameliorate the socio-economic and race-based inequalities that remain in the post-apartheid era (Fraser & Killen, 2005).

Accompanying the vast increase in student intake is a significant failure rate, and a low graduate production rate (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2016). In fact, it is estimated that one in every four contact students either fails or drops out within the first year of their studies (CHE, 2016). In an attempt to better understand these stark realities of poor academic achievement, failure in higher education has been the focus of research and this has subsequently resulted in literature largely based on deficits (or what is “wrong” with students) (Harper, 2010; DHET, 2013). As pointed out by the DHET (2013, p. 32), “the reasons for [the] poor performance [of students] are complex, but are relatively well-known...” What is less well known is how students manage to excel and succeed in their studies, and what is being done well by institutions and students alike. Hence, there is a gap for studies that focus on the factors that enable high academic achievement among students, especially in the current turbulent higher education and global context which could threaten to further destabilise learning and academic achievement.

### **1.5) The Significance of the Research**

This research aimed to draw conclusions about the aforementioned focus and differed from the overarching institutional project within which the study is embedded, by contextualising high academic performance in the midst of protest action. While the project sought to explore how high achieving students continue to excel even during times of educational instability, it also explored the perceptions of students as to what is not working, or what is constraining them in coping and performing well during protest action. Gaining a “fuller” understanding of the factors that influence high academic achievement in such times, and what motivates and supports students to perform well (in spite of the turbulence in the educational system surrounding them), may be useful in recognising what support structures and practices should be reinforced or reassessed for students in future instances of similar turmoil. The study can thus be seen as being beneficial for higher education institutions and the students who are core to these institutions.

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Additionally, the research may be viewed as valuable as it is aligned with what the DHET (2013) specified as a necessity for both national policy as well as for universities - to focus on improving the access, success, and throughput rates of students. Furthermore, a recent strategic focus for the National Research Foundation (NRF) in partnership with the DHET and other affiliations, highlights the value of the proposed study. Through the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI), the NRF sought chairs to focus on research surrounding post-school education and training in the university setting, specifically in relation to pedagogical access and student success (NRF, 2017).

Moreover, the research can be seen as directly speaking to the objectives of the UCT #RMF Fall Mission Statement (2015, "Our demands") which include "... interrogating the notion of "academic excellence" which is used to limit black academics and students' progression within the university[,]" as well as the introduction of "... a curriculum and research scholarship linked to social justice and the experiences of black people." This research aligned itself with the CHE's (2016) definition of Black, which includes African, Coloured, and Indian individuals. Additionally, the study specifically sought to explore and to prioritise the experience of high academic achievement in Black students during turbulent learning conditions. Emphasising Black students' understanding of their own high academic achievement during abnormal learning conditions amplifies the voices of students who are seen as previously disadvantaged. Furthermore, it provides relevant stakeholders with the information they need regarding decisions about systematic curriculum change that is informed by and aligned with social equality in academia.

Finally, and as previously stated, protest action and other forms of unrest are not unique to South Africa's higher education context, but also relate to the labour market and service delivery issues, xenophobia, and general instability worldwide. In a world that is filled with such instability, it may be imperative to take note of what is helping people to cope, and perhaps, to succeed; and to explore how people are learning about themselves and the world around them, through their lived experience of such turmoil.

### **1.6) Objectives and Research Questions**

The objectives of this study were, first, to explore what enables high achieving undergraduate students to sustain their high academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action; second, to explore what constrains high achieving undergraduate students' academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action; and finally, to explore what kinds of learning take place for high achieving undergraduate students during times of turbulent student protest action.

Linked to these objectives, the study aimed to answer three critical questions. First, what enables high achieving undergraduate students to sustain their high academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action? Second, what constrains high achieving undergraduate students' academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action? Finally, what kinds of learning take place for high achieving undergraduate students during times of turbulent student protest action?

### **1.7) Structure of the Dissertation**

The dissertation consists of six chapters in total, namely, the Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, Discussion, and Conclusion chapters. The Literature Review presents the theoretical framework of the study and critically discusses relevant works pertaining to the research problem, with the aim of defining the gap that exists in the literature, and thus the need for this research. The Methodology chapter provides the theory of the method used to conduct this study, as well as an account of how the research was conducted. The chapter also includes a section focusing on the reflexive role of the researcher during the research process.

The Findings chapter provides relevant information about the research participants in the form of short vignettes. With the aim of answering the research questions posited for this study, the chapter subsequently presents the themes constructed from the data in relation to each research question. Drawing on relevant theory and literature, the Discussion chapter provides critical insight into the findings of the study, thus speaking to their conceptual meaning. The final chapter of the dissertation, the Conclusion, summarises the dissertation, considers the strengths and limitations that it has, and provides contextual implications of this research.



### **1.8) Conclusion**

This chapter provided relevant background information of the context of the research problem, specifically, the context of both national and international turbulence. The focus of the chapter shifted from the local, to national, and subsequently, to international turmoil, in order to locate the South African context of higher education in a global world of turbulence. The impact of such turbulence on academic institutions and the students that are core to them was also considered. The central research phenomenon was indicated by the perceived gap in the literature regarding how students are able to cope and to succeed during these times, that is, high academic achievement during protest action. Furthermore, the central objectives and research questions of this study were outlined. The introduction also provided an overview of the up-coming five chapters. As previously described, the following chapter, the Literature Review, shall focus on the key concepts of the theory and literature that underlie this research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### 2.1) Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present relevant national and international literature relating to the central phenomenon of this study, namely, learning well and achieving academically during protest action and turbulence. Located within a broad, sociocultural framework, literature pertaining to the study has been organised into three overarching sections, namely, *South African youth and protest action*; *Understanding learning*; and *Shifting perspective: Learning well and achieving academically during protest action and turbulence*. Through this review of literature, the researcher aims to argue three crucial points, as discussed below.

First, protest action and instability are not unique to the current context of higher education. South African history shows that instability and revolt are evident in the nation's distant as well as recent past. From this knowledge, it is logical to conclude that turmoil in the face of an unequal system is an issue that shall persist until fundamental changes pertaining to socio-economic equality takes place. Hence, a study pertaining to unrest can be regarded as highly relevant.

Second, in the midst of turmoil as a result of protest on campus, students were faced not only with a challenging socio-political situation, but also an "abnormal" learning environment in which their usual learning process would have been compromised. It is thus tentatively posited that students (a) had to find other means to support their learning, and (b) were able to learn something greater from this turbulent environment about themselves and the world around them by interacting and engaging with their context.

Third, the researcher argues that there is a gap in the higher education research agenda. Specifically, most research and literature seems to have focused on (a) deficits of students and universities, and (b) certainly since 1994, has situated these deficits within a "normal" or non-turbulent learning environment. While understanding areas of growth within seemingly non-turbulent contexts of learning is no doubt important, it is evident that previous research

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has not considered, to the same extent, the strengths of students and universities in succeeding in the midst of a turbulent environment.

These points lead to the ultimate research question of how students are able to excel academically in trying times of protest action. Very little research has been discovered and accessed by the researcher regarding this problem, indicating a need to focus on it.

### **2.2) South African Youth and Protest Action**

A reflection of South Africa's past sketches a stark picture of inequality, instability, and turmoil. The history of protest action in the country, as presented in this review of literature, has been broadly divided into two eras, namely, pre-democracy (before and during apartheid) and democracy (post-apartheid). Although people of various ages took part in past protest action to fight for various forms of freedom, for the purpose of this study, the focus is mainly on protests that were driven by the youth of the nation. It is of value to understand the history of protest action, in order to contextualise and better understand the recent student uprisings within South Africa. This contextualisation aims to show that the #FMM mass student protest did not occur in a void, was not new, and is highly unlikely to be the last instance of protest led by the youth of the country. Therefore, understanding how South Africans, and in particular, South African students, in this case, cope during such turmoil, is justified and called for.

#### **2.2.1) Pre-democracy.**

During apartheid, which officially began in 1948, many forms of youth protest action arose in response to the National Party's oppressive policies. The years spanning from 1948 to 1990 may be described as turbulent (Williams, 1997). In 1953, the governmental area of Black Education was moved to the area of Native Affairs, which was directed by Hendrik Verwoerd (Williams, 1997). This was the year that the Bantu Education Act was passed – a year that would have ripple effects on future decades.

One of the most historically significant uprisings took place on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1960. The infamous *Sharpeville Massacre*, as it is now known (due to its primary location at Sharpeville, near Johannesburg), started among many Black people in South Africa as a non-violent movement against having to always carry an identity document under the pass law,

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used to limit access of Black people into the resourceful urban areas which were dominated by the white populace (Williams, 1997). The protest led to the use of live ammunition on protestors by policemen, which resulted in a total of 69 fatalities, and a few hundred people being seriously wounded (Lodge, 2011). The Sharpeville Massacre was an important turning point for South African liberation history, as the anti-pass struggle persisted, and the apartheid regime subsequently started to enforce other brutal policies, including the ban of the African National Congress (ANC) as well as the mass arrest of the Pan Africanist Congress' (PAC) leadership (Lodge, 2011). Despite this, resistance persisted, although the spirit of opposition had been "bruised". It is of note here that the Sharpeville Massacre was not distinctly led by youth, but was an important event that could be argued to have inspired young South Africans to be more critical of their unjust surroundings.

In the later years of the decade of the Sharpeville Massacre, the voice of the oppressed South African youth started to grow in strength. For instance, in 1968, the South African Students Organisation (SASO) was formed at the "University of Natal – Black Section" (the Durban-Westville campus of UKZN), in order to provide a representative body for black students (Heffernan, 2015). In 1969, Stephen (Steve) Bantu Biko, a key figure of the youth revolt, was elected president of the organisation (Stubbs, 1987). A great influence on the ideology behind the struggle for freedom was the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Biko (as cited in Stubbs, 1987) defined Black Consciousness as:

The realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation---the blackness of their skin---and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the "normal" which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realisation that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, blacks are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black. Black Consciousness, therefore, takes cognisance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people black. It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life. (p. 49)

Biko became known as the father of BCM, and in 1970, he was appointed as Public Secretary of SASO (Stubbs, 1987).

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The growth of the youth's critical voice during the 1960s can be understood as foregrounding their powerful resistance from the 1970s, onwards. In 1968, students around the world were facing turmoil within the context of higher education. Students in Paris protested against the shutting down of their university, while students at universities in South Africa such as the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of the Witwatersrand, University of the North and the University of Fort Hare, also protested for various reasons, including the removal of a black lecturer at UCT, as well as the banning of Fort Hare students from being allowed to associate with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) (Heffernan, 2015). Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro, who was a student at the University of the North, as well as a SASO leader, largely influenced the protest of youth across South Africa between 1971 and 1974, as he brought to the forefront the inequalities in Black higher education through his graduation speech in 1972, which resulted in him being expelled (Heffernan, 2015). Indeed, the 1970s may be described as a defining time for youth politics in South Africa. In May 1972, the Alice Declaration was formed by delegates of SASO, in response to all students being expelled from the University of the North, after they boycotted Tiro's expulsion (Heffernan, 2015). Tiro was murdered in February 1974, and his death, although impacting significantly on the political bodies he was so instrumental to, resulted in heightened desperation in the youth's fight for freedom (Heffernan, 2015).

In general, learners rioted against the apartheid regime's increased control over their school curriculum, and when the government declared at the end of 1975 that schools would have to teach half of the standard five curriculum in Afrikaans, masses of learners began an uprising in Soweto from the onset of 1976 (Williams, 1997). This unrest led to the day now known as Youth Day – June 16th. The years that followed continued to be turbulent in the context of higher education and were marked by a number of other significant events. In 1977, SASO and the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC) were both banned and Steve Biko was murdered whilst in detention (Heffernan, 2015). Of significance in the following years, was the formation of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in 1979, as well as the Azanian Student Organisation (AZASO) in 1980 (Heffernan, 2016).

Through all of the protest and strife for freedom before democracy in South Africa, there were students like Tiro who managed to perform well academically and to graduate. This research is concerned with discovering what aided students to perform well, especially since

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the persistence of South African youth at educational pursuits, despite hardship and unrest in higher education and broader societal contexts, has continued into the period of democracy.

### **2.2.2) Democracy.**

With the official end of apartheid in 1994, democracy had finally been “achieved”. Despite this massive transformative step in South African history, many residual issues of the apartheid era remain in the current context, as “... present-day inequalities and lines of socio-economic oppression are built on the legacy of the preceding periods of colonisation and apartheid” (Canham, 2018, p. 322). For example, it has been found that approximately 52.2% of the South African population lives in poor households (Rogan, 2016). This statistic prompts the questioning of the progress made in South Africa since the end of Apartheid, which significantly marginalised and disadvantaged Black South Africans, who form the majority of the population.

Some of the issues of contemporary South Africa have led citizens to start demonstrations, as discussed previously in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. However, one of the most recent student-led forms of mass protest action the country has faced is the #FEMF movement, which aimed to achieve the total decolonisation of, as well as entirely free higher education. Figure 2.1 on the following page is a photograph that captures a scene of the 2015 #FEMF movement at UKZN, where masses of students marched beneath the jacarandas on the Pietermaritzburg campus, singing songs of freedom that could be heard from the second floor of the New Arts Building.



Figure 2.1. Pietermaritzburg UKZN students protest for free higher education. October 22, 2015.

### 2.2.2.1) *#RMF and #FMF: movements that shook the “new” South Africa.*

The genesis of the “born-free” students’ transformative aim for the decolonisation of higher education institutions can be traced back to 2014. What initiated the movement in particular, was the release of a document created at the University of the Witwatersrand – which was titled “WITS Transformation Memo 2014” (Naicker, 2016). The document addressed the issues of colonised higher education and curricula as a whole, by proposing the implementation of a number of policies and strategies in order to create a truly decolonised institution (Naicker, 2016). Though students had thus already been considering these matters in 2014, the public eye was only caught when the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at UCT was deliberately covered with faeces in 2015 by student Chumani Maxwele. The defilement of the statue has been described as the event which gave the entire movements of #RMF, and subsequently, #FMF, their impetus (Naicker, 2016).

The students also used significant theoretical frameworks to support their critical stand against the system of higher education. These frameworks were informed by key figures such as Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon (UCT: RhodesMustFall, “Our demands”, 2015; Naicker, 2016). Although the origin of the movement was stated here to have been the *WITS Transformation Memo*, Naicker (2016) suggests that other incidents such as the Marikana

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Massacre influenced the protest as well. This would make sense, as numerous objectives set out by the #RMF campaign included those that would empower and benefit the workers of universities. Further, a direct reference is made to the Marikana Massacre in the objective pertaining to a minimum wage of R10 000 for UCT workers (UCT: RhodesMustFall, “Our demands”, 2015).

Research has also suggested that the #FMM protest action grew drastically due to the influence of media such as television, Twitter and Facebook (Glenn, 2016). This explains why the movements are written and referred to with hashtags, a popular item that allows common posts to be grouped together based on their tags, on media such as Facebook and Instagram. Indeed, it can be argued that the masses of protesting students were mobilised through forums which are easily accessible in the modern world. These forums allow students to unite in more efficient and effective ways. The protest no longer involved a few students in a single university but involved thousands of students across South African universities. Students who were account holders of Facebook, and who followed the movement, or even were able to see “posts” by the #RMF page through “friends” following the page, were able to see the rationale for the protest and the goals it aimed to achieve. The movement was thus accelerated by the solidarity which popular media forums allowed.

According to the official UCT #RMF Mission Statement (2015, para. 1) “... the experiences seeking to be addressed by this movement are not unique to an elite institution such as UCT, but rather reflect broader dynamics of a racist and patriarchal society that has remained unchanged since the end of formal apartheid.” This statement, among many others in the document, would undoubtedly have rapidly aroused a critical spirit of opposition in students, justifying their decision to not attend lectures in order to protest. With class attendance being poor, or with classes being disrupted, learning was likely to be highly compromised.

By the end of 2015, the movement had evolved and was primarily focused on achieving a 0% increase in tuition fees for 2016. The aim of this 0% increase and ultimately, the goal of free education, was aligned with one of the main objectives of the #RMF movement, stipulated as a plan to “[r]adically reduce the currently extortionate fees” (UCT: RhodesMustFall, “Our demands”, 2015). This branch of the protest action became known as #FMM and continued into the year of 2016. The unrest became especially heightened, thus increasing the challenge to learn, when the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande,



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announced in September 2016 that fees would increase by 8% in 2017, but that students with a household income of up to R600 000 would not be affected by the increment.

In response to the persisting nation-wide unrest on campuses, former President Jacob Zuma addressed the nation in a speech on the 03<sup>rd</sup> of October 2016. Zuma emphasised the severity of the educational crisis and encouraged students to defer from acts of violence and intimidation. He also reminded the country that the “government is committed to do everything possible to progressively make higher education more affordable for all, and to be fee-free for the poor and the working class” (Zuma, 2016). In order to address the various financial needs of students, the government came up with a few implementations, including a grant for “missing middle” students. However, campus unrest persisted.

The history of youth protest action shows that there has always been some form of segregation among the majority. Zegeye (2004) indicates that “[t]he culture of the ‘necklace’ or burning tyre [used to kill people by setting them alight], serves to remind us that the so-called black youth culture cannot be conceived of as an undifferentiated social class or group of people” (p. 853). The same can be said about students during the #RMF and #FMF protest actions. Although the majority of the protestors were Black, there were also Black students who did not part-take in the protests, and beyond this, there were white students and staff who did participate. Thus, Canham’s (2018) view that those who resist decolonisation (and following this logic, do not take part in the strikes) are those who are privileged and middle-class, may be misleading, particularly if social inequality is believed to be linked to race. Moreover, the notion that race is directly linked to inequality has been questioned in South Africa, as some institutions have argued that admission policies should also take into account other aspects such as the quintile of school attended and parental level of education, because race is no longer perceived as a solely accurate way of determining whether an individual is disadvantaged (Etheridge, 2014).

The #FMF protest action has been critiqued as being more of a self-serving cause, as opposed to being driven by an altruistic fight for radical social change. Long (2018) posits that the protesting students, who are the growing elite, are in search of a coherent sense of self – an identity – rather than social equality and justice, as they claim. Inherently, through the sole focus on their immediate surroundings (the academic realm), the student protestors excluded the larger societal realm consisting of the South African population at large, many of whom

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are living in poverty and may not be able to access higher education at all. Beyond this, and within the higher education context, the protest action caused disruptions, consisted of violence towards other students, staff, and authority figures, excluded other races (even those considered Black), and essentially, hindered others from obtaining their education efficiently. The protest may thus be further critiqued as not only dehumanising others in order to humanise a particular group of people, but also for fundamentally moving away from the essence of a just and equal society, the very thing the movement claimed to be aligned with (Long, 2018).

The effect of the protests on institutions of higher education can be seen in the costs of the damages incurred. Numerous universities; including the University of Stellenbosch, North-West University, University of Limpopo, University of Johannesburg, University of the Western Cape, Walter Sisulu University, Tshwane University of Technology, UKZN and others, reported damage due to protests (“Counting the cost of FeesMustFall protests”, 2016). The total damage costs reported in 14 universities nation-wide amounted to R300 302 848.58 (“Counting the cost of FeesMustFall protests”, 2016).

Apart from the previously mentioned effects on the academic programmes and infrastructure of institutions, a number of micro-level stressors existed for students, as well. Although the protest action of 2016 did not involve the torturing or killing of any students who did not part-take in the demonstrations and who went against the wishes of the protestors (as may have been the case in pre-democratic South Africa), these students were labelled as “amagundane” – meaning “rats” in IsiZulu. Students were also threatened and chased out of their lecture venues. Furthermore, students experienced teargas in their residences, and the situation on campuses became increasingly “prison-like” with the copious presence of police and other private units of protection such as the *M17 Security Intelligence* (“Live report: ‘We are still going to burn if management continues to be arrogant’”, 2016). In light of this multi-layered, turbulent context, it is logical to assume that the learning conditions were by no means “normal” or conducive during the last few years. To identify how students managed to learn well during the turbulence they faced, it is essential to consider what learning is. The following section explores the notion of learning.

### 2.3) Understanding Learning

As mentioned in the previous section, in order to understand *how* students learn well in times of turbulence, it is necessary to first clarify *what* learning is. There are numerous ways in which learning can be understood, however, this study conceptualises learning within a broad, sociocultural framework, drawing on the works of Lev Vygotsky, Paulo Freire, and Jack Mezirow. Furthermore, the research draws on a number of other socio-cultural-related theories in order to understand learning in higher education more deeply and critically. These theories include retention theory, transformative learning, and critical race theory (CRT).

#### 2.3.1) Sociocultural learning in higher education.

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is highly applicable to the field of conceptualising learning among individuals in higher education. Thus, the researcher adopted a sociocultural lens, through which students are viewed as autonomous, relational beings (Marginson & Dang, 2017). Learning, from this perspective, is something which takes place among autonomous people in a created "... learning environment [that] can be conceived of as a shared problem space, inviting students to participate in the negotiation and co-construction of knowledge" (Haenen, Schrijnemakers & Stufkens, 2003, p. 246). Thus, for instruction to prove effective, it should, as suggested by Bonk and Cunningham (1998) allow for the embedding of learning in authentic tasks, dialogue, interaction and engagement with others. Bonk and Cunningham's (1998) understanding of learning is in line with Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of problem-posing education, wherein individuals teach each other and are mediated by the world. Aligned with the sociocultural framework of this research, Freire (1970) posited that true learning and transformation takes place through collaborative discussion and not through the oppressive banking system of education, wherein students are viewed as empty vessels in need of knowledge deposits from lecturers. Indeed, the banking system of education may be viewed as one that treats students as automatons, whereas problem-posing education acknowledges students as human beings with historicity and an ability to think critically (Freire, 1970).

A key concept of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory, is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD can be understood as the cognitive distance between the student's current understanding of his or her coursework (as determined by independent problem solving), and the potential understanding that he or she can reach through engaging

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with a peer, tutor, or lecturer who is more capable in that particular field of study (Vygotsky, 1978). Evidently, the ZPD may be seen as a construct that is aligned with Freire's notion of problem-posing education, as it does not undermine the student in their ability to learn (to think critically), and is not indifferent to the student's existing foundation of knowledge and experience (historicity). Rather, it recognises that learning and transformation take place between at least two critical beings, dialogically. Students who attend contact-based institutions are likely to also draw on a multitude of other resources within the institution so as to progress in their ZPDs, and thus learn. These resources, or mediators (Vygotsky, 1978), may include artefacts such as textbooks and internet sources (Brown et al., 1993).

Within a sociocultural framework, Cunningham (1996) states that the individual psychological processes of students can be understood as rhizomes. These interconnected "roots" are situated within a social interactional, cultural, institutional, and historical context (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Thus, students are inherently influenced by, and in turn influence, their multiple contexts. This influence may take place through a variety of means. For instance, students may be qualitatively transformed by internalisation, defined by Vygotsky (1978) as the "... internal reconstruction of an external operation" (p. 56). Language, for instance, may be internalised so that it has both an interpersonal (primary) as well as an intrapersonal (secondary) function (Vygotsky, 1978). Students also use psychological tools and create signs (thus effecting change) in their environment in order to mediate their learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Although mediation is commonly thought of as something visible, such as a student attending a tutorial and receiving verbal guidance, it may also occur out of plain sight – deeming it invisible mediation (Hasan, 2002). Invisible mediation, as further interpreted by Moll (2014) occurs in the moments of everyday life, and is related to visible mediation, because it is internalised, ordinary social experience that shapes the way that students engage with formal learning. This suggests that students may rely on other, seemingly "invisible" mediators that shape their process of learning at university.

In a turbulent learning environment, where lectures are cancelled and time for interacting and engaging with peers, tutors, and lecturers (arguably the essence of contact-based education, and certainly the crux of the socio-cultural theory of learning) has been minimised, students would have faced multiple challenges. Not only were they likely to have been influenced by

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the turbulence that surrounded them, but they also faced the challenge of needing to rely more on other artefacts of mediation, in order to continue their pursuit of obtaining their education and performing well academically. The gap in the literature thus lies in knowing what these mediating aspects are, both visible and invisible, and how they assisted students who must have used them effectively, in order to become high academic achievers in the face of a turbulent learning context.

### **2.3.2) Learning transformatively.**

Another related approach to learning is through the theory of transformative learning, which was formulated in 1978 by Jack Mezirow. Through this lens, learning can be defined as "... the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92). Due to the fact that transformative learning aims to build the basis in understanding which is required for effecting social action in a democracy (Mezirow, 2009), it is probable that students went through some form of transformative learning to decide that the problematic context of higher education called for an uprising. Moreover, it is likely that high achieving students were able to learn something greater about themselves and their contexts, during the protest action.

Transformative learning has strong links to the sociocultural frame of this study, and Mezirow (2009) draws on the philosophical works of Jurgen Habermas in discussing the foundations of transformative learning. Habermas (1981) posits that when there is a shared understanding of a given subject, it can positively influence the legitimacy of that specific conviction. Thus, it can be argued that learning essentially takes place through shared discourse. Furthermore, there are particular conditions which are needed for unrestricted and complete participation in discourse and subsequent learning to take place (Mezirow, 2009). These conditions include the need to "... be able to become aware of the context of ideas and critically reflect on assumptions, including their own" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92). Transformative learning, then, can be seen as having a critical element.

In explaining how he conceptualised transformative learning, Mezirow (2009) presents "a critical dimension of learning in adulthood that enables us to recognize and reassess the

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structure of assumptions and expectations which frame our thinking, feeling and acting” (p. 90). This form of conceptualising learning pertains to the present research, in that the researcher aimed to determine whether (and what kind of) learning took place for high achieving students during the strikes of 2016. Based on her own personal experience of being a student during the 2016 strikes, the researcher anticipated that some form of transformative learning would have taken place for students. More specifically, the researcher was interested in finding out what high achieving students learnt about themselves, others, and the larger societal context, in addition to attaining high academic achievement outcomes during the turbulent time of protest actions and related academic disruptions during the course of 2016.

Transformative learning also recognises the notion of learning as a process. Mezirow (2009) describes the process of learning transformatively as encompassing a few key aspects. First, there is a critical reflection on the assumptions made by ourselves and others. Second, there is use of empirical research methods in determining the truth of scientific and other claims. Third, discourse is participated in freely so that learning can take place communicatively. Finally, until new evidence or reason to reassess the belief appears, action is taken to live by that newly internalised belief or transformation in understanding.

The researcher intended to find out what students’ critical thoughts were pertaining to the 2016 protest action and its influence on their learning and subsequent exceptional academic achievement, as well as what (if any) transformations took place for them in their understanding. These transformations may relate to ways of thinking about and understanding what influences success during unrestful higher education conditions, as well as to the dynamics of race, power, and education.

### **2.3.3) Thinking critically about race, power and education: Critical race theory.**

This study also adopts a critical perspective when exploring and understanding the turbulent higher education context of 2016. This critical stance was decided upon due to a number of reasons. First, the protest action was racially based, as it was said to be primarily about the need to address race and class-related inequalities in access to and success in education (UCT RhodesMustFall Mission Statement, 2015). Linked to the previous point, one of the key objectives of the UCT #RMF Mission Statement (2015, “Our demands”) was to “[a]dopt an

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admissions policy that explicitly uses race as a proxy for disadvantage, prioritising black applicants.”

Second, it is important to consider racial domains in relation to high academic achievement. There is an understanding that academic achievement is in fact related to race and class, particularly in South Africa, where the legacies of apartheid are still evident. Thus, race can be seen as a predictor of academic achievement in education, but not necessarily due to race as a sole category, but because of the way(s) in which race and other relevant factors such as prejudice, socio-economic status, access to resources as well as educational opportunities, and language, intersect. Statistics show that academic performance, success, and throughput is racially skewed. For example, as indicated by the CHE (2016) “[i]n three- and four-year qualifications, the completion rate of white contact students is 50% higher than that of African contact students” (p. 145).

To target social inequalities in higher education, South Africa has seen a number of transformations, for instance:

... the implementation of policy measures to redress past inequalities, such as outlawing discrimination on the basis of race or sex; affirmative action; alternative admissions tests to complement the national final secondary school examination; the recognition of prior learning to facilitate access for mature students; extended curriculum programmes for students that show potential; and a state-funded national student financial aid scheme (CHE, 2016, p. 295).

These implementations have contributed to a growth in the number of students accessing higher education. Along with this, and naturally, with the need to cut back on costs due to the #FEMF protests, there has been a decrease in the staff to student ratio (CHE, 2016). Thus, lecturers have had to work under significant pressure to do more, with less (CHE, 2016). It would, therefore, be understandable if the quality of authentic, problem-posing education and learning, enabled through thorough dialogue, engagement, and feedback in universities has been affected over recent years.

It is clear that the protest action of universities in the past few years was politically-driven, and requires critical thinking regarding the dynamics of race and power in higher education.

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In order to explore the above-mentioned dynamics of higher education, CRT, although stemming from Critical Legal Studies (CLS), may also be applied to the educational context. When looking into the race-based inequalities in higher education,

... critical race theory asserts these incidents are neither random nor recent in their onset ... [and the happenings] are not isolated incidents manifesting solely at an individual level. [...] CRT provides a way to understand and disrupt this system of structural racial inequality (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 3).

Understanding these sociocultural-oriented ways of learning and thinking, which influence academic achievement (transformative learning and CRT) may assist in comprehending how undergraduate students managed to learn, and beyond learning, managed to perform well in the turbulent socio-political context of 2016.

### **2.4) Shifting perspective: Learning well and achieving academically during protest action and turbulence**

It is important to note that the study frames learning and its link to academic achievement on a continuum. Moreover, the study chooses to focus on achievements or strengths, as opposed to weaknesses or deficits. Harper (2010) points out that we know very little about students who manage to perform well academically, in spite of the various challenges they may face. This research is thus aligned with a need to move away from deficit-centred research, as also argued by Smit (2012) as well as McKay and Devlin (2016), and to rather focus on an anti-deficit approach to understanding learning in the South African context of Higher Education, especially when it presents as turbulent.

A number of factors have been found to influence the process of learning for students in the “normal” context of higher education, and in so doing, are likely to influence academic success in non-turbulent learning conditions. These factors can be classified as either pre-enrolment factors or post-enrolment factors. Pre-enrolment factors include, but are not limited to, aspects such as matric performance, cognitive ability, personality factors and locus of control, that may all contribute to the academic performance of a student (Fraser & Killen, 2005; Ngidi, 2007). On the other hand, post-enrolment factors include (and once again, are



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not limited to) influential areas such as appropriate balance between academic commitments and social life, ability to work independently, interest in the course, consistent effort of learners, timely and regular examination preparation, understanding what lecturers expect, appropriate choice of course of study, effective examination techniques, relevance of course, as well as willingness to ask for help from lecturers/tutors (Ngidi, 2007). Furthermore, Ngidi (2007) found a strong, statistically significant correlation (0.65;  $p=0.00^{**}<0.01$ ) between lecturers' and students' perceptions of factors influencing success at university, in an environment without disruption.

The above-mentioned aspects are indeed valuable for understanding, from a more cognitive perspective, some of the ways that student academic performance is influenced in normal learning conditions. However, very little research has focused on what helps students to learn during turbulent times, or in a physical context of disruption (The, Adam, Meldrum, & Brunton, 2017). From a sociocultural perspective, one may consider that some form(s) of mediating aspects must exist for students to persist with their education, even though it becomes increasingly challenging to do so with protest actions in contact-based institutions. Resilience may be one of the mediating aspects that enables students to persist at their learning, to perform well academically, and ultimately, to be retained at their contact learning institution.

### **2.4.1) Resilience and high academic achievement in the face of turbulence.**

Professor Mosia, Chairperson of the CHE, described the 2015 and 2016 academic years as:

... a testing time for all ... [that] ... rocked the university sector in unprecedented ways reminiscent of the biblical "David and Goliath" when an underdog challenged a giant. Sustained student protests, violence, destruction of property and postponement of examinations changed the character of the higher education system as we knew it (CHE, nd, p. 9).

Given such a poignant statement describing the university setting during most of 2015 and 2016, high achieving students can be said to have been resilient. Resilience may be understood "... as the ability to bounce back from adversity, frustration, and misfortune..." (Ledesma, 2014). It can also be defined as a person's ability to continue functioning, despite

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the multiple stressors they may be facing (Perry, 2002). One model of resilience, namely, the challenge model, developed by Garmezy, Masten and Tellegen (1984) posits that facing a stressor that is not too slight, or significantly excessive, may, in fact, enhance the person's ability to adapt to a challenge (O'Leary, 1998). On the other hand, the protective factor model of resilience focuses on aspects considered to be protective factors that interact with a stressor or risk factor, to lessen the likelihood of a negative outcome (O'Leary, 1998). This speaks to the possibility that students who performed well academically during turbulence experienced some form of invisible mediation, including a process of interactive protective and risk factors, which fostered resilience in them.

The resilience-related concept of thriving, by definition, strongly applies to the high achieving students. Furthermore, and as previously stated, it is likely that the students were able to learn something greater from this turbulent period of their academic careers, which is supported by the notion of thriving, as well. As described by Ledesma (2014) "... thriving is characterized by a growth experience as a result of adversity, and as such, the individual demonstrates strengthened resilience after enduring hardship" (p. 3). Both internal (personality and self-factors, or individual resources) and external (relationships, social support) aspects of an individual have been found to influence resilience (Ledesma, 2014). This links to the sociocultural theoretical framework of the current research, which emphasises the role of both the autonomous individual, as well as their social, relational surroundings, as instrumental in learning and development.

In the broader, sociocultural context in which high achieving students are situated, it may be posited that UKZN, as an institution, displayed resilience during the turbulent time of protest actions. This broader, systemic level of resilience may be seen as organisational resilience, a term used to describe an organisation's ability to foster career resilience in their employees (Ledesma, 2014). The same may be said about an institution of higher education, such as UKZN. The particular notion of resilience in students, that is, students facing stressors but still thriving in an academic setting, may be referred to as academic resilience, a concept referred to in multiple studies (Anagnostaki, Pavlopoulos, Obradović, Masten, & Motti-Stefanidi, 2016; Dickinson & Dickinson, 2015; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009).

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A study conducted by The et al. (2017) regarding the perceptions of dental students' and staff on the impact of learning environment disruption on their learning and teaching experiences found themes that support both the sociocultural and resilience theories that this research has adopted. Their findings indicate that students valued having a space for personal and collaborative work. However, the contributions of staff were seen as more valuable than the role of the physical learning environment. Moreover, the physical environment was not perceived as a hindrance to their learning. Rather, the staff and students were able to adapt to their disrupted environments, through resilience and organisation (The et al., 2017).

The above-mentioned study, although taking into consideration a disruptive physical learning environment, did not focus on an environment that is beyond disrupted. That is, the study considered learning disruption due to reconstruction, and not due to a learning space that is violent in nature, and possibly perceived as unsafe by students as a result of aspects such as exposure to teargas, being chased out of venues, security and police presence, as well as being searched and surveilled while on campus. UKZN students may thus differ on the note of whether or not the physical environment constrained their learning during the turbulent #FMF protest actions.

### **2.4.2) Retention in trying times.**

Retention theory is focused on the factors which enable students to persist in their studies in higher education. Specifically, it can be defined as "... the series of events which leads individuals to stay in the institution in which they first enrolled" (Tinto, 2010, p. 51). The theory seeks to identify the elements that prevent students from leaving before the completion of their course of study (Thomas, 2002). Retention theory is relevant to this study, given the fact that students were able to persist in their education, despite ongoing protests and disruptions on campus. Many students may have had to go home due to safety concerns (if they stayed in residence) and might not have had the financial means to return. The researcher was interested in understanding what assisted students to continue studying at a contact-based institution, even in times of turbulence. Tinto (2010), in discussing retention conditions (which would lead to academic success) refers to factors such as student expectations, support (academic and social), self-efficacy, financial support, assessment and feedback, involvement, and sense of belonging. Most of these aspects may be argued as all

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having a sociocultural aspect to them, and thus further support the researcher's sociocultural understanding of the phenomenon of learning during turbulent times.

### **2.5) Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of relevant literature pertaining to the study. With an overarching sociocultural theoretical framework, the chapter included three main sections, namely *South African youth and protest action*; *Understanding learning*; and *Shifting perspective: Learning well and achieving academically during protest action and turbulence*

Through these sections, the researcher aimed to argue three points that ultimately lead to the fundamental question of how students managed to perform well in a disruptive learning environment. The first point is that protest action and instability are not unique to the current context of higher education. Second, within this turbulent environment, students (a) had to find other means to support their learning, and (b) were able to learn something greater from this turbulent environment about themselves and the world around them. The third and final point is that there is a gap in the literature. That is, most literature has focused on (a) deficits of students and universities, and (b) has situated these deficits within a “normal” or non-turbulent learning environment.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### 3.1) Introduction

This chapter provides information pertaining to the research design, sampling and sampling method with rationale, data collection, data analysis, research quality criteria, and finally, the ethical considerations of the study. The chapter presents these sections in a way that is chronological – aiming to mirror the process of the study.

#### 3.2) Design of Study

The study followed an overarching qualitative design. According to Babbie and Mouton (2005), the objective of this type of research is to *describe* and *understand* human experience. The research focused on describing and understanding the perceptions of students regarding what influences their academic performance during turbulent times and was thus suited to a qualitative approach. Moreover, the research was interpretive in its approach. The decision to adopt an interpretive stance was made because the study aims to move beyond mere description. According to Terre Blanche, Kelly and Durrheim (2006) the interpretive perspective “...involves taking people’s subjective experiences seriously as the essence of what is real for them (ontology), making sense of people’s experiences by interacting with them and listening carefully to what they tell us (epistemology), and making use of qualitative research techniques to collect and analyse information (methodology)” (pp. 273-274).

The interpretive perspective additionally helped the researcher to understand the social world in which people live, by prioritising two key principles. The first principle is understanding in context – in other words, looking at what the speaker or author means, and what the background and current context of the speaker or author is. The second principle is the researcher as the primary tool – which entails the researcher using a specific set of skills – for example, listening, interpreting and having empathy - in order to elicit information purposively and to synthesise this information accordingly (Terre Blanche, Kelly, & Durrheim, 2006).

### 3.3) Sampling and Sampling Method with Rationale

This research falls within an existing research project entitled "The student academic exceptionalism project: Equity and exceptional academic achievement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal" – HSSREC protocol reference HSS/0060/015CA. Thus, ethical clearance for sampling and data collection had already been obtained by the time data collection for this research commenced (see Appendix B). This particular sub-research project also obtained independent ethical clearance (see Appendix C).

The sample for the study consisted of six participants (five females and one male) from UKZN, Pietermaritzburg campus. The participants were all high-achieving undergraduate students registered in the College of Humanities at the time of the 2016 protest actions. High achieving students were targeted for selection into the study because this research is specifically focused on high academic achievement during protest action. The “population” of high achieving undergraduate students at UKZN was generated through being granted access to the UKZN Scholarships Committee list of students who were eligible for monetary awards based on their academic results in 2015. Permission to access the aforementioned list was granted and approved by HSSREC as this sampling strategy forms part of an overarching institutional research project (see Appendix D). Only high achieving students in the College of Humanities at the Pietermaritzburg campus were targeted, so as to maintain homogeneity of the sample and transferability of the findings, which is later discussed in the Quality Criteria section of this chapter.

This study thus made use of purposive sampling, as the focus of the research was on a particular group of students: undergraduate students in the College of Humanities at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus, who, on the basis of their high academic achievement, were eligible for the award of a scholarship. Purposive sampling is an approach which is used in qualitative studies in order to “... maximise the range of specific information that can be obtained from and about that context, by purposely selecting locations and informants that differ from one another” (Babbie & Mouton, 2005, p. 277).

The method of recruitment for participants started with the researcher’s perusal of the list of high achieving undergraduate students from the UKZN Scholarships Committee. Of the entire population of high achieving students, only Pietermaritzburg students from the College of Humanities were emailed an invitation (see Appendix E) to consider participating in the

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research, as well as an information sheet (see Appendix F). Once participants responded with an interest to participate in the study, details regarding the date, time, and venue of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were communicated with them. All students who responded to the invitation to participate in the study happened to be Black (i.e., African, Coloured, or Indian) students and this was aligned with the researcher's goal to privilege the information and knowledge generated by members of previously disadvantaged groups. Privileging this information speaks directly to the critical aspect of this study, as it gave Black students the space to showcase their stories, and by doing so, the methodology of this research is in line with CRT.

Six students responded to the email and arrived for Phase A of data collection – the FGD. After the FGD, all six participants were invited to participate in individual interviews with the researcher (see Appendix G), and provided with information sheets (see Appendix H) however, only three of these six students agreed to do so. The researcher contacted those three students who agreed to participate in individual interviews via *WhatsApp*, where dates, times and venues for interviews were arranged.

### **3.4) Data Collection**

As identified above, the data collection process of the study was divided into two phases, namely Phase A and Phase B. In Phase A, two recorded FGDs were initially planned, consisting of 6-8 participants each. This plan was not fully followed through, as only one FGD was conducted. This was due to, firstly, the poor participant response rate. Secondly, and more importantly, the first FGD and the set of three interviews following it produced data that seemed to become saturated. Thus, the four sources of data (i.e., one FGD, and three individual interviews) were deemed sufficient for the study. Phase A of data collection dovetailed with that of a colleague, who is also using the data from the FGD (along with other data that she has produced independently) for her study. The FGD was thus facilitated by both the researcher and her colleague.

Upon arrival at the FGD venue, the participants were invited to consent to the audio recording of the FGD, and asked to sign a confidentiality pledge (see Appendix I). At the start of the FGD, participants were arranged in the formation of a circle, where participant and researcher introductions commenced. A stimulus activity (see Appendix J) was then

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presented to the participants in order to stimulate their thinking around what space(s) they envision as enabling and constraining high academic achievement at UKZN. Following the stimulus activity, the researchers facilitated an open discussion with the aid of a set of semi-structured questions (see Appendix J). All participants were given the opportunity and encouraged to respond and participate in the FGD, with the aim of the discussion being to generate a broad understanding on the agreed and disagreed upon perceptions of participants in relation to the research questions. The key areas of the discussion thus surrounded what supports and hinders the participants' high academic achievement during protest action; how these supportive and hindering aspects are similar and/or different to learning during "normal conditions"; how particular resources play a role in their academic achievement; as well as the ways in which they believe UKZN could aid them in times of turbulent protest action.

Carey (2016) describes the focus group technique as unique and useful, due to the synergy that arises from the various interactions, which in turn, encourages participation. The collaborative, shared space of the FGD enabled the researcher to gain insight into data pertaining to the dynamics of racial perceptions, and specifically in relation to the dynamics of higher education access, success, and protest. It also fitted the sociocultural understanding of learning as a socially-constructed process. Moreover, the FGD allowed for the facilitation of indigenous knowing, which is defined by Romm (2015) as "...processes of people collectively constructing their understandings by experiencing their social being in relation to others" (p. 1). Furthermore, the focus group was a technique that worked well for the time constraints of the research, as the researcher had access to numerous participants and thus sources of information, in a single FGD (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Finally, the FGD provided an immediate comparison between the experiences and opinions of the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). It thus allowed the researcher to see, in action, the shared construction of views and knowledge, which all fed into the main findings of the study.

On the other hand, the FGD presented a number of limitations. According to Carey (2016), a FGD can result in participants not sharing their views openly due to conformity and an array of group factors, including individual perceptions of influential participants, possible contact again with other members of the group, and the impression of needing to give a certain or "correct" response. The FGD also presented the limitation of being unable to go in depth with each participant regarding their relevant views and experiences, thus hindering the quality or thickness of the data (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Carey (2016) also suggests that while



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responses from a FGD are valid, they may not necessarily be reliable, as they are constructed within a very particular social context. It is for this reason that Phase B, which consisted of individual interviews, was conducted. The interview schedule (see Appendix K) was standard for each interview, and was semi-structured in nature, allowing for follow-up or questions of clarity. The individual interviews, which were also recorded with the participants' informed consent (see Appendix L), were held with three of the participants of the FGD, thus improving the reliability of the data in the FGD. The key areas of discussion during the interviews included personal background information of the participants; the personal meaning and significance of high academic achievement; what helped and motivated them to sustain their academic performance during turbulent times; how the strikes may have influenced their views of themselves as well as their surrounding context (thus speaking to the third objective of the research which surrounds the kind of learning that took place for them during the turbulent protest action); and how they believe students can assist themselves in learning well during turbulent times.

There were a few perceived advantages for beginning the data collection process with a FGD. For instance, during the FGD, the researcher was exposed to a broad understanding of the perceptions of students surrounding the research questions, and this helped to familiarise her with *what* the individual interviewees were likely to talk about, and *how* they might talk about these concepts (Kvale, 1996). Moreover, conducting the FGD before the individual interviews allowed for rapport to be established between the researcher and the participants, thus enhancing their openness in addressing sensitive issues such as race during the interview. Furthermore, having this familiarity before conducting the interviews, helped in refining the interview questions in order to further explore areas of interest pertaining to the research questions.

### **3.5) Data Analysis**

As recommended by Silverman (2013) the analysis of the data began as soon as possible – as soon as the very first pieces of data were collected. For example, part of being a reflexive researcher was keeping a research journal, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013). Data obtained from both phases was first transcribed, where comments and links within the data were made during the process of transcription, using the “add comment” function on

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Microsoft Word. While transcribing the data verbatim, the researcher had also tried to use as much grammar as possible in order to capture how participants were responding. Raw data and the source of it is included and denoted in two ways in the write-up of the findings. Appendix M contains the guidelines for reading quotes and the transcription symbols used in the findings chapter.

The data analysis process involved thematic analysis, which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) "... is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data." The researcher began reading through the stimulus activity, as well as the FGD transcript, in order to initiate rudimentary coding of the content at a surface level. This was executed through the use of a table in Microsoft Word, which was later moved to Microsoft Excel. The columns were labelled "Question;" "Themes;" "Subthemes;" "Data Item;" and "Participant". This was where the initial comments made during transcription became useful for working with the data.

After using Microsoft Word and Excel, the researcher shifted to managing the data in NVivo 11, a computer software package designed particularly for qualitative data analysis. According to QSR International (n.d., para. 5) using NVivo in qualitative data analysis enables the researcher to work more efficiently, thus saving time; quickly organize, store and retrieve data; uncover connections in ways that are not possible manually, and rigorously support findings with evidence.

All data units were imported into the Sources folder on NVivo. Themes which had already been generated in Microsoft Excel were created as nodes. The researcher then read through each source of data (four transcripts) and through a process of highlighting text which was relevant to the research questions and dragging it to the relevant node(s), was able to take the data analysis further. It is noteworthy that complete coding was utilised (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, data could be coded in more than one way and could, therefore, be dragged to more than one node. During this process, NVivo memos containing the researcher's critical thoughts surrounding themes and subthemes (i.e. "child nodes") were written up.

Titles, as well as the number of overarching themes, changed as the researcher progressively immersed herself in and worked with the data. Once all relevant data had been coded, the researcher looked at how they could be arranged, linked, and discussed from "broadest" to

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“narrowest”. The researcher also assumed that the number of references would not necessarily capture the importance of a particular theme. The researcher also created a data map using NVivo and Microsoft Word, which helped her to visualise the themes, subthemes, and interconnections of the findings, from a broad to a narrow level.

### **3.6) Quality Criteria**

Due to its qualitative nature, the study focused on achieving credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Moreover, the study was conducted by a researcher who adopted a reflexive role, which further served to enhance the research quality.

#### **3.6.1) Credibility and dependability.**

While credibility can be understood as the truth in the findings, dependability can be seen as the reliability of the research (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). That is, studies conducted with similar samples and contexts should yield similar results, in order for the research to be considered dependable. Both credibility and dependability, according to Babbie and Mouton (2005) are said to be enhanced through triangulation. Triangulation involves using information or data collected from multiple sources, various points of view, and several different methods, in order to gain a better understanding of reality (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). The study attempted various forms of triangulation, including data, theory, and investigator triangulation (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Data triangulation was initiated by conducting two phases of different data collection techniques (focus group discussion and interviews), both of which involved participants at different levels of study, from various schools in the College of Humanities. Furthermore, theoretical triangulation was employed through the use of numerous theories and perspectives within the sociocultural framework to conceptualise the findings of the study. Finally, investigator triangulation was utilised by contacting the co-researcher of this study in order to confirm and discuss the codes and themes of the FGD.

#### **3.6.2) Confirmability.**

Confirmability can be defined as the degree to which data is a product of the focus of the research question, and is objective, as opposed to subjective and biased on the part of the

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researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). In terms of ensuring confirmability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest a confirmability audit trail, which can be used to ascertain whether the findings and interpretations of the research can be linked back to the raw data. The study was subjected to such a trail, composed of six classes of data (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). That is, the researcher continuously consulted with and referred to these six classes of data, including raw data in the form of transcripts; data reduction and analysis products, which were codes; data reconstruction and synthesis products in the form of themes; process notes in the form of reflexive journal comments; material relating to intentions and dispositions, which were the initial proposal of the study as well as the theoretical framework; and finally, instrument development formation which were the question guides for the FGD and interviews.

### **3.6.3) Transferability.**

Transferability is the degree to which the findings can be applied to other, similar contexts (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). The quality criterion of transferability was addressed in this research through the use of thick descriptions and purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To elaborate, the study made use of detailed, contextualised data obtained from a sample of high-achieving undergraduate students in the College of Humanities, at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus, who were on a specific scholarship list. Having fewer variables attributable to the participants, such as the college and campus they come from, increases the transferability of the research to other Humanities students at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus.

### **3.6.4) Researcher reflexivity.**

Part of ensuring research quality is adopting a reflexive process, or researcher reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is through assuming this role that the researcher is able to identify how she has influenced the research process and outcomes, from the design of the study to the final write-up, and everything in-between (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Indeed, the qualitative researcher, who is not an empty vessel, has an influence on the production of knowledge which is generated by the research.

#### **3.6.4.1) *Researcher context.***

As described by Tracy (2013), adopting a reflexive stance as the researcher allows for and promotes the consideration of the ways in which the researcher's context influences the process of interacting with and interpreting the research. Born and raised in Pietermaritzburg,

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the researcher is a White, middle-class only child who attended two ex-Model-C schools. She completed her undergraduate and honours degrees at UKZN, majoring in Drama and Psychology for her Bachelor of Arts degree. Having been a high achieving student, the researcher was a participant in a related study of high academic achievement during her third year at UKZN. In 2016, the researcher felt that she had learnt a significant amount through a simultaneous process of witnessing masses of students standing together for a revolutionary cause, while she was attending a Social Psychology module which spoke of the very things happening a few hundred meters outside the lecture venue. The year of 2016 was thus one which brought to the forefront where the researcher stood as a young white woman, beneficiary of Apartheid, as well as of the protest action, instantaneously pained at the destruction of buildings and the reality of our very “un-rainbow-like” South African nation.

In 2017, the researcher registered for a Master’s degree in Educational Psychology and still had the words of Fanon, as well as the protest songs of her fellow students, ringing in her head. This is the path that ultimately led her to conduct this research and the reason why she viewed herself as a participant in the process.

### **3.6.4.2) *Researcher reflexivity in data collection and analysis.***

Through the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher implemented the technique of keeping a reflexive research journal, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013), wherein she was able to write down her critical, reflective thoughts. The notes made during data collection were useful when starting to work with the data at a later stage, for they served as reminders of what the researcher’s critical and reflective thoughts were when starting this project, and what processing had occurred that informed the initial understanding of the data produced in the study.

Even though there were no White participants in the research conducted, the researcher, who is also part-participant in the study, can be seen as having brought that very racial dynamic into the data collection space, due to her being White. When discussing matters of race and power in both the FGD as well as in the individual interviews, the participants, who were all Black, may have felt that they needed to be cautious when expressing their beliefs, because the researcher asking them was White. This may have had an influence on their ability to

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explicitly state how they view certain matters, especially if they perceived that the researcher may have misunderstood, or taken offence to such statements. The researcher was aware of this possible dynamic, and through respectfully asking questions of clarity following vague responses which surrounded race, aimed to convey that she possessed an awareness of such realities, as well as a non-judgmental acceptance of their views on these matters.

Being aware of how the data collection instruments may have influenced the findings, known as functional reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013), was also necessary. The researcher became aware of the nature of some of the questions asked, in both the FGD and the individual instruments, specifically, that a few of them were leading questions. Having this awareness meant that the researcher needed to reflect on the process that may have led to certain findings surrounding race, and question whether the same findings might have been established if the questions had been differently phrased.

The researcher also implemented reflexivity through critically reflecting on whether she was looking for herself in the data. For example, when interviewing a specific participant, the researcher felt that she was colluding with the participant based on the fact that the participant was majoring in Drama and Psychology, the same modules which the researcher majored in. Having shared the same exposure to particular worldviews, the researcher needed to be cautious that she did not collude with the participant in that interview. In the event that she did, the researcher needed to be wary of giving the data produced from the interview higher standing in comparison to the other interviews, merely because it “sat right” with her own views. Furthermore, the researcher improved reflexivity by receiving critique regarding the findings and interpretations of the study from her supervisor, and by contacting her co-researcher in order to compare and discuss the findings of the FGD.

### **3.6.4.3) *Reflexivity in researcher skill development.***

Through the process of conducting the FGD and the subsequent interviews, the researcher became aware of her areas of growth for future research. One challenge was to get a discussion generated in the FGD, rather than a mere response to a question. Initially, the FGD participants would take turns in responding to the researchers but would interact minimally with each other. As the FGD progressed, though, participants started to respond and react to one another’s statements, developing more of a discussion. Upon reflection, it may have been

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useful to keep directing questions aimed at the researchers, back to the participants, to get them thinking and discussing more. Furthermore, during the FGD, the researcher was sometimes “caught up” in the conversation, where she would share a personal view, and this may have influenced the data generated.

Moreover, there was somewhat of a challenge in that the questions on the FGD guide were at times altered (unintentionally), to the extent that it generated responses that were unrelated to the question intended. This speaks to the level of in-depth planning the researcher had failed to do prior to the FGD, which would have ensured that both researchers had the same understanding of how much of the FGD question guide was alterable, and how much was to remain as is. Additionally, the allocated time frames for the FGD were not realistic and were thus not adhered to, as the stimulus activity was completed within minimal time, and the main discussion went over time. This would have been better handled, perhaps, if the researcher had run a pilot before the actual FGD, which may have enabled her to be aware of how much time is taken by certain questions, and which questions need more attention than others. It would have also brought attention to the matter of altering FGD questions and the effect thereof.

The process of conducting interviews improved with practice. This was evident in the way the interviews kept getting thicker in terms of data generated. The more the researcher learnt which areas to probe into, the more information she would obtain. However, finding a balance between getting too much (sometimes irrelevant) and getting too little information, was a challenge. In future, pilot interviews may be useful. This would help the researcher to see how participants understand questions, and how they may or may not respond.

Reflecting on the research process as a whole, the nature of this research was iterative, which allowed the researcher to collect data, begin the analysis, and have the freedom to decide whether it was necessary to go back to the stage of data collection (or not), based on what data is available. The researcher’s reflexive role enabled her to move between the stages of the research design, as well as make adjustments, where deemed necessary after critical reflection. This is because, as pointed out by Babbie and Mouton (2005), the realm of human behaviour is not static, and thus, studies of it may need to be adjusted accordingly. All in all, the reflexivity adopted in this research speaks to the socio-cultural and critical elements of the study (i.e. knowledge is socially constructed, and should be considered critically).

### **3.7) Ethical Considerations**

#### **3.7.1) Obtaining informed permission to conduct research.**

The following permissions were obtained to conduct this study:

- Gatekeeper's Approval (UKZN registrar) – see Appendix B.
- Ethics approval – see Appendix C.
- Approval from Chair of Scholarships Committee – see Appendix D.

#### **3.7.2) Ensuring participant autonomy.**

The autonomy of participants was protected through the use of an informed consent form (see Appendix L), which provided information about the study in English – a language that all respondents understood.

#### **3.7.3) Minimising stress or harm.**

Two steps were taken to minimise any potential stress or harm in relation to the accessing of student names and student numbers of high achieving students. Firstly, the list of UKZN scholarship students was requested to be ranked according to merit, but for all scholarship award decisions to be removed from the list. This removed any confidential financial award information from the data, leaving only the names and student numbers of scholarship eligible undergraduate students. Therefore, the researcher did not have access to information about any student's financial award status. The research was not concerned with actual scholarship awards, but rather the academic achievement histories used by the Scholarships Committee to make these awards. The researcher identified the UKZN Scholarships Committee as a convenient internal medium through which high achieving undergraduate students could be identified. Secondly, the high achieving students were contacted via their student email address once only, inviting them to participate in the research project. These purposively selected students could then either respond to or ignore and/or delete the email invitation to participate in the study.

In order to prevent possible secondary victimisation during data collection, in the case where students disclosed traumatic events related to their experiences of protest action or other related incidents, participants were reminded that participation in the study was completely voluntary, and that they could leave the study at any time, if they wished to do so. Should a



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participant have chosen to leave the study, any information or data obtained from that former participant would no longer have been used for the study in any way. Participants of the focus group were also required to sign a confidentiality pledge (see Appendix I) stating that whatever was discussed in the focus group, should, by all means, remain in that space. This pledge served to maintain confidentiality and to avoid secondary victimisation. In the event that a participant experienced significant distress whilst taking part in the study, the participant would have been contained by the researcher, who has been trained in counselling skills. The participant would then have been referred to the Humanities Student Support Services for counselling, if necessary.

### **3.7.4) Participant compensation.**

Participants were compensated for their time by receiving a light lunch and juice. Furthermore, those who additionally participated in the individual interviews received vouchers from the Hexagon Cafeteria, a restaurant which is situated on the UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus.

### **3.7.5) Storage and disposal of research data.**

Written and electronic forms of data are being kept in a securely locked cabinet for five years in the researchers' offices. Thereafter, written data will be incinerated and electronic data shall be deleted. In the dissemination of research findings – in the form of the finished thesis, oral presentations, publication, and so forth – confidentiality of participants will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

## **3.8) Conclusion**

This chapter has chronologically presented information pertaining to the research design, sampling and sampling method with rationale, data collection, data analysis, research quality criteria, and finally, ethical considerations of the study. The chapter has been presented in this manner so as to convey the actual process of conducting this research. The following chapter shall present the outcome of this methodology – the findings of the study.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### 4.1) Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings of the study. To begin, short vignettes about each research participant are provided. Each vignette includes information pertaining to the participant's race, sex, course and level of study at the time of data collection, whether they participated in both the FGD and an individual interview, their key strategies for excelling academically, and finally, a quote about their views and/or understanding of being an exceptional academic achiever. Then, since the data collected from the FGD and the three individual interviews were analysed using complete coding followed by thematic analysis, the chapter shall present themes in relation to the initial research questions posed. These research questions are, first, what enables high achieving undergraduate students to sustain their high academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action? Second, what constrains high achieving undergraduate students' academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action? And third, what kinds of learning take place for high achieving undergraduate students during times of turbulent student protest action?

#### 4.2) Participants

The names of the six participants presented below are pseudonyms. These were allocated to each individual participant to foster anonymity.

##### 4.2.1) Priya.

When participating in the FGD, Priya, an Indian woman, was completing the third year of her Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies. Priya participated in an exchange programme in France during the #FMF strikes, but was present for other protest action on campus in years before, and was thus still able to contribute to the FGD based on her previous experiences. Priya's key strategy for excelling academically is to minimise procrastination and to avoid working under pressure. Her understanding of high academic achievement is connected to a personal feeling of gain:

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[...] I put quite a lot of pressure on myself to do well academically, which is, you know, is being high percentage or reflecting well, but exceptional academic achievement is like when I feel like personally just when I feel like I was able to actually understand and engage, and take away from that module and be able to apply that in future and not just you know the distinctions [...]. (Priya, FGD, 29-33)

### **4.2.2) Amahle.**

Amahle, an African female student, was completing her third year of a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree when she participated in the FGD. Majoring in Psychology and Human Resource Management, her main strategy for achieving academic excellence was to ensure that she had a timetable that outlined what she had to accomplish by the end of each day, and to stay disciplined in her endeavour to adhere to this plan. Amahle's understanding of high academic achievement is related primarily to marks. However, she also links it closely to wanting to relieve her mother, who is a single parent, of the stress of paying tuition fees, as she notes that: “[...] I always have that thing that I have to get good results you know, so that I can maybe, you know, get a scholarship and she [Amahle's mother] gets to relax, you know, ya” (Amahle, FGD, 510-511).

### **4.2.3) Sasha.**

Sasha, a Coloured female, was completing the third year of her Bachelor of Social Science degree in Psychology and Human Resources when she was a participant in the FGD. Her key strategy for excelling was to make her own notes for exams and to start working on assignments as soon as possible. Describing herself as the only academic in her family, Sasha has felt that she has always been a high achiever, to the extent that it has become unsurprising and expected. However, Sasha's high academic achievement seems more meaningful to her when she is achieving well in Psychology. The quote below captures this link.

For me as well, for Psychology when I, when I get my distinctions for that I feel like, I feel well because that is my passion, Psychology is my passion that is what I wanna do. When I get it for HR, it's just like you know I got a distinction for HR it's fine, but for Psychology, that means more to me because that is actually what I want to do and ya. (Sasha, FGD, 39-42)

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### 4.2.4) Lindiwe.

Lindiwe was an African female third-year student completing a Bachelor of Arts degree in Drama and Performance Studies, as well as Media Studies, at the time of data collection. Lindiwe was a participant in the FGD as well as an individual interviewee. In order to excel academically, she uses a timetable to guide her studies and works in her bedroom. Furthermore, Lindiwe views her high academic achievement as something she has to maintain, in order to get funding for her studies and thus make her mother's role as a single parent, slightly easier. This is seen in the excerpt below.

[...] Cause it, uh, it means that I was doing something right, for me, uhm, I dunno, when I got the opportunity to uhm cause I was kinda thinking about my mom – she's a single parent, like, uhm, and then, she's taking care of the, like all of us and sometimes even cousins, so I was, and on teacher salary, so it's ridiculous. And then I was thinking, uhm, if I do not get uhm at least funding, a bursary, or something to study, then I cannot study. [...] (Lindiwe, Interview, 287-291)

### 4.2.5) Siyabonga.

The only male participant in the study, Siyabonga, who is African, was completing the final year of his Bachelor of Theology degree majoring in Biblical Studies, at the time this study was conducted. He was both a FGD participant as well as an individual interviewee. Siyabonga finds that working under pressure improves the quality of his work, and thus, it is his key strategy for excelling academically. In terms of his understanding of what it means to be a high achieving student, Siyabonga views marks as being separate from the process of true learning.

Ya, it's my first time encountering such a crazy term "exceptional academic achievement". Ya, so for me it is just fulfilling to have put my time into good use through the year. Hmm, and then if I can take out as much as I can then I would achieved for myself. The marks really they generate on their own. (Siyabonga, FGD, 47-50)

### **4.2.6) Mandisa.**

At the time of data collection, Mandisa, who is an African female, was registered for an Honours degree in Psychology. Mandisa participated in the FGD and was one of the three participants who agreed to be interviewed, as well. With regards to her key strategy for excelling, Mandisa relies mostly on the use of online resources, such as YouTube videos, to learn subject matter well. In sharing her view of what high academic achievement means to her, Mandisa noted that it instils a sense of pride in her, and has become a way of life, as is suggested when she says: “[u]hm, man, it’s just, uh– very proud, and it’s just something that– cause, I’ve always been good at school...” (Mandisa, Interview, 95-96) and when she says: “[s]o it’s just something that has to happen, like uh, there’s no other alternative. I have to do it” (Mandisa, Interview, 98).

### **4.3) Presentation of Findings**

The findings of the study are presented in the form of themes relating to the initial research questions posed. A total of six themes were created from the analysed transcripts. A number of excerpts that were coded to form part of these themes have been included in the chapter, as well. Table 4.1 (see below) provides a visual summary of the six themes and their subthemes, in relation to the research questions initially posited. The table presents the findings categorically as either internal or external operations. Appendix M presents guidelines for reading excerpts.

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Table 4.1

*Summary of main findings in relation to research questions, categorised as external or internal operations*

	External Operations	Internal Operations
Enabling	<p><b>1.</b> Others and artefacts as mediators of learning well in turbulence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family</li> <li>- Lecturers</li> <li>- Academic peers and communities</li> <li>- Textbooks and internet sources</li> </ul>	<p><b>2.</b> The self as a primary resource for learning well in turbulence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engaging with work alone and non-attendance</li> <li>- Positively perceiving some aspects of the protest action</li> <li>- Holding goals and values in mind</li> </ul>
Constraining	<p><b>3.</b> Volatile spaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A negative change of atmosphere</li> <li>- Limited access to usual academic resources</li> </ul>	<p><b>4.</b> Internalised turbulence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Negative feelings</li> <li>- Difficulty in planning</li> </ul>
Kinds of Learning	<p><b>5.</b> A new “normal”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strikes on campus are “normal”</li> <li>- Race, equality and academic achievement</li> </ul>	<p><b>6.</b> Learning how to respond to the norm of protest action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deciding on a position</li> <li>- The balance of positionality and high academic achievement in turbulent protest action</li> </ul>

**4.3.1) Enabling external operations: Others and artefacts as mediators of learning well in turbulence.**

**4.3.1.1) Family.**

As depicted in Table 4.1 above, one of the external aspects that continuously enables students to persist in their studies is the relationship that they have with their family. Knowing that the family cares about their academic performance, and the resulting values and expectations they need to constantly live up to, even when learning seems challenging, seems to enable students to perform well. For example, when discussing his family, Siyabonga noted that, "... they [his family] were very interested and keen to see what is the result of the studying. Uhm, so, ya, it is motivating" (Siyabonga, FGD, 394-395). Siyabonga's statement shows that his family's overt interest in his academic performance is something that encourages and motivates him to do his best. Mandisa's family has both implicit and explicit expectations of her that elicit a sense of pressure, as she states that:

Uh, for me, uhm, cause I've always done well, so it's something that's – expected. Right, so– I, it's a bit of ya, pressure sometimes to keep up. But, it's, it's, it's okay though. It's fine. But they [family] do expect me to, to do well. (Mandisa, FGD, 429-431)

The quote above shows that Mandisa is implicitly expected by her family to do well, as it is something that she has always been able to do. Furthermore, as shown by her repeated attempts to convey that it is "okay" and "fine," her family's expectation may result in a sense of pressure, which she feels she needs to accept and normalise for herself, in order to keep performing well. Her family also shows their expectations explicitly, for instance, "[...] they'll be like 'yeah, did you make that dean's list this semester? And are you going to make the dean's list next semester?' type of questions" (Mandisa, FGD, 435-436).

Mandisa's family's expectations are thus shown through questioning, as well as through their own academic performance, as Mandisa notes that "[y]eah, so the whole family's, err, very academic. Yeah, so, academics are important, so..." (Mandisa, FGD, 442). Coming from a family that values academia, Mandisa's statements show that this value is shared or imparted onto her and that she feels she has to live up to her family's expectations of her. Similarly, Lindiwe's family values academics, and because her siblings excel, she experiences some

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form of pressure to do the same, even when she feels demotivated in her studies, or when studying is especially challenging. Specifically, Lindiwe reported that:

Uhm, I have the same thing here, cause, uhm, all of my siblings – I have three siblings – and they all excel. Uhm, so, my parents kind of, uhm, whenever we like ‘I really can’t do this anymore, I feel like, I feel pressured, I feel...’ And they’re like, ‘oh okay, but you, you’ll do it. It’s fine, you’re going to get through. Okay. Okay.’ And then they move on. (Lindiwe, FGD, 445-448)

Lindiwe’s statement further indicates that her utterance of feeling pressure (“... I feel pressured...”), like Mandisa’s, is something that elicits some kind of reassurance and support. The only difference is that Mandisa seems to be reassuring herself when she thinks and speaks about the pressure she feels, while Lindiwe refers specifically to how her family plays a role in reassuring her by telling her that she will do it and will get through (“...you’re going to get through ...”). A different dynamic can be seen with Amahle’s relationship with her family. For Amahle, it is primarily the consistent verbal encouragement that she receives from her mother that enables her to maintain her high academic achievement. Amahle also mentions receiving a reward from her mother, which aids her to sustain her high academic achievement:

Every semester when I get good results, she would actually reinforce it by giving me a reward. So, I think that kind of motivates me, like every time, every single thing, she actually praises me... You know, like she never forgets to do that. So I think she’s supportive in that way and that encourage me to do well all the time. (Amahle, FGD, 506-507)

As indicated in the above statement, Amahle repeatedly reiterates her mother’s unwavering role in encouraging her to do well.

Yeah, and with what she said as well, she’s the one who’s paying for my studies and she’s a single parent so... You know, I always have that thing that I have to get good results you know, so that I can maybe, you know, get a scholarship and she gets to relax, you know, ya. (Amahle, FGD, 509-511)



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In the statement above, it is clear that Amahle has taken on the responsibility to give something back to her mother through her high academic achievement. This reinforces the notion that it is the relationship with her mother which Amahle values. She cares about her mother and would like to show reciprocation in the relationship by easing the financial burden of having to pay her tuition fees. For some participants, the link between their ongoing high academic achievement and their relationship with their family is not as directly explicit:

So, when I tell them like, something, they're just like "I know you can do it, you know, I know..." So, they play— it's nice to know that— okay, my mom passed away, but it's nice to know that my dad is, he knows that I can achieve this, and he's proud of me, but, there isn't like a direct link. [...] (Sasha, FGD, 403-405)

Sasha acknowledges that it feels good to know that her father is proud of her, but believes that she is the only one who places pressure on herself to maintain her high academic achievement because her family does not "explicitly" pressure her. The excerpt containing dialogue with Sasha and Lindiwe below further supports this view.

Sasha: It's the opposite with me, I have four older brothers and my whole family 's spray painters and panel beaters and like hail, hail technicians, and I, I'm the only academic one in the family.

Researcher: Oh, okay.

Sasha: So, they don't put pressure on me, but I think I put pressure on myself.

Lindiwe: Ya.

Researcher: Ya.

Sasha: 'Cause, they've said I'm the brains of the family, so now I've gotta just live up to it. (Sasha & Lindiwe, FGD, 472-479)

As indicated above, Sasha does not seem to believe there is a direct link between her family and her high academic achievement. However, by telling Sasha that they are proud of her, that they "know" she can do it, and by giving her the title of "the brains in the family," it is evident that Sasha may be implicitly or indirectly expected by her family to fulfil the role of the academic, creating a sense of pressure that is not overt. Thus, the relationship with her

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father and brothers still influences her academic performance. A similar dynamic exists for Priya and her parents:

Uhm, well, I, I do put a lot of pressure on myself just because, err, parents is paying for my studies, so, getting a scholarship and that sort of thing has always been motivation for me to, to be consistent. But uhm, I, I, I was really the opposite in high school, and I was, it was like a really bad patch and I didn't do any work and I was, I was, I was a bit of a– I was a bit of a– uh... Ya, I was tough to deal with for my parents, so I think now that I'm doing very well, its', it's, it's good for them to see that. [...] (Priya, FGD, 485-490)

Priya puts pressure on herself to perform well but struggles to separate this pressure from her relationship with her parents. She links the pressure to finance, but it is clear that the financial benefits of performing well academically are only a motivating factor because it would allow for her to give something back to her parents, just as Amahle would like to show reciprocity in her relationship with her mother. Moreover, it seems that Priya feels that by performing well academically, she is making up for her past perceived academic mistakes, which she believes affected her parents. Thus, although they do not seem to explicitly pressurise her, Priya's relationship with her parents is something that elicits pressure from within herself, to do well academically.

### **4.3.1.2) Lecturers.**

In addition to the relationship with their family playing a role in enabling the students to learn well, the findings suggest that the relationship that high achieving students have with their lecturers also largely contributes to their ability to perform well, even during times of turbulence. Sasha, for instance, noted that “[...] sometimes if lecturers know your name and know that you've done well you kind of feel, ok now I need to keep it up, 'cause they actually know my name” (Sasha, FGD, 522-523). Here, Sasha speaks overtly about the lecturer knowing one's name, and also knowing that one has done well. This points to the relationship between lecturer and student – one that can range from a lecturer not knowing who a student is, and thus not knowing about their academic performance, to one where the lecturer knows the student and their achievements. In the latter case, as indicated by Sasha's

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statement, there is a sense of expectation that is created. This is further supported when Lindiwe noted that:

[...] [i]t's conversational sort of, like if you, if you uhm go up to a lecturer and you started speaking to them like, them knowing you by your name and, and you kind of have this association basically and then, I dunno, they, they kind of know you and then they expect things from you and you also expect something from yourself. And, kind of, I don't know if I'm making any sense. (Lindiwe, FGD, 539-543)

Lindiwe refers to knowing someone by name conversation and having an “association” with the lecturer, all of which may be seen as aspects of a relationship. She evidently feels that she has to perform because of the existing relationship with her lecturer. Thus, the relationship with the lecturer seems to motivate high academic achieving students to maintain their grades. This maintenance of grades is mediated through expectation – Lindiwe talks about being expected to perform well by both the lecturer and then herself, as a result of the relationship. It seems as though Lindiwe taps into a process that she has experienced but is unsure whether she is “making any sense.” Beyond this, the findings show that the relationship that the participants have with their lecturers provides other enabling elements. For example, Sasha found that:

[...] a lot of the time or some lecturers actually just give you more information about honours, or masters, or stuff like that. And it kinda just allows you to gain more information, because a lot of students don't get that information and sometimes you need to just go up and actually ask the lecturers, and when you ask them, you actually realise “oh okay, you know this, I didn't know that, and then it helps you to even work harder towards getting into honours or masters or whatever. (Sasha, FGD, 526-531)

Sasha's statement points to the notion of lecturers being a source of valuable information. Accessing that information, which appeared seemingly challenging elsewhere, encouraged her to work harder at reaching her own academic goals. Likewise, Lindiwe's comment below shows that the relationship between a lecturer and their student is one that allows for excellence.

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[...] like when I got here from transitioning from high school to here, it's like a new experience with lecturers, it's different from teachers and it's, it's like uhm, they're not your peers but then they kind of give you uhm, uhm, other support systems that really help you to excel, and uh it's you can talk to them on uhm, I dunno, peer to peer level, and they can actually level with you on certain things where you can discuss things that uhm, irrelevant to the, the subject or the module, but uhm, they add more information. (Lindiwe, FGD, 534-539)

Lindiwe seems to view the relationship as being different to one between a teacher and learner. She may perceive the relationship one has with a lecturer, as similar to that of a peer, although she acknowledges that lecturers are not peers. Siyabonga's statement below also indicates that the relationship with lecturers enables him to do well, particularly during times of unrest.

Yeah, yeah, and I studied whenever I could uhm, but, ya, I think, also, the, the engagements with the lecturers sending an email back and forth uhm would really help. Would really help, uhm, ya, and whenever we'd have that odd quiet day [during the protests], we can come into campus, you consult for whatever area that is not clear in the work and that helped. (Siyabonga, Interview, 330-333)

From the statement above, it is evident that communication and consultation aspects of the relationship with his lecturers assisted Siyabonga to excel academically, even during the protest action on campus. It seems that knowing that one has a lecturer to turn to for support, is what is crucial for him:

There were two or three occasions I would meet with a lecturer uhm and they would talk us through and say, "Listen guys, we understand the situation, we understand the outplay of things, uhm, but we are, what we are looking to do, is to perhaps take one from your exercises that was the highest, and maybe forward that for DP purposes." Uhm, ya, and just assist you with whatever they, they, they could actually say from an employee's perspective of the university. [...] So, it was, it was, it had a calming effect. (Siyabonga, Interview, 559-569)

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Here, Siyabonga's statement indicates that the lecturers enabled students to perform well during protest action because they were supportive. That is, they were understanding of the student's concerns, and conveyed this understanding to them both verbally, as well as by making adjustments in the academic programme affected, in order to enable them to perform well academically during campus unrest. He further describes this as having a "calming" effect on him, indicating that the lecturers may have played a role in soothing the worries that accompanied the students during campus unrest.

### **4.3.1.3) Academic peers and communities.**

At a broader level, the findings indicate that high academic achieving students perceive the relationships with their academic peers and communities as enabling during times of campus unrest. For example, when discussing his peers, Siyabonga indicated that:

Uhm, and they are also in theological studies. For the ministry. It's something we had a talk about. Uhm, if some are calling everything the context of protest for no attendance of classes, does it mean we get work frees somewhere? And it's a talk we had and we said no, you cannot, we, we need to study. (Siyabonga, Interview, 352-355)

Siyabonga's above quote indicates that speaking to academic peers about the protest action and the possible implications thereof, helped him to realise that he felt he needed to continue persisting with his studies ("... we need to study") despite the fact that protest action on campus had become a reason for many not to attend or do their coursework. Siyabonga's discussion with his peers and subsequent conclusion of still needing to study in the face of turbulence indicates that he may perceive it as an active choice or a decision of how the protest is going to affect his studies. Further supporting this theme of how communities enabled participants, Lindiwe noted that "[...] the Catholic church that I went to kept me grounded [...]" (Lindiwe, Interview, 428-429). Moreover, she spoke of how the UKZN drama community enabled her to perform well during turbulence:

[...] So we knew at least when it came to Drama, a lot of our stuff had to be put on hold, and at least you got a chance to focus on your other like majors and your other studies, uh, but with Drama you knew that at least that I have like a couple of weeks

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before that is due, or before they release a date for when that is due. So that was something. So they were actually active within it and they were also advocating that we also focus on our studies. So, in a way, it kinda helped me uhm in, with the time that they gave us [...]. (Lindiwe, Interview, 524-530)

That really helped me pull myself together uh cause regardless of all the mayhem that was going on, somehow they were also part of the activist people, but uhm they still gave words of encouragement and stuff like that. So, it kinda helped a bit. (Lindiwe, Interview, 453-455)

Lindiwe's first comment above highlights that she was always aware of what was going on with the curriculum in Drama and Performance Studies during campus unrest. This points to the kind of communication that is valued between lecturers and students – when Lindiwe knows what is happening in her Drama modules, she feels relief because she can dedicate time and energy more effectively to other subjects that also demand her attention. Lindiwe also notes, in both the above quotes, that the Drama community occupied an interesting position of being part of the protest, and simultaneously encouraging the students to keep sight of their academics. Thus, the verbal encouragement from a community that she belongs to, seems to have enabled her to do well.

### **4.3.1.4) Textbooks and internet sources.**

“Textbooks and internet sources” is the final subtheme of “others and artefacts as mediators of learning well in turbulence”. The findings show that high achieving students seem to draw on either internet sources and/or textbooks, in order to support their learning during turbulence. Mandisa specifically found that “[...] the internet, the Wi-Fi is very important for me, that's where I get everything, cause I don't buy textbooks, uh, everything I find online” (Mandisa, FGD, 586-587). On the other hand, Lindiwe found that:

[...] Wi-Fi is good, but having the textbook is also something. I mean it adds a bit of extra, that if you don't attend or you don't... You still find it there cause they also using it. Uhm, the lecturers. (Lindiwe, FGD, 595-597)

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For Mandisa, the Wi-Fi enables her to access internet sources which support her learning, even in times of turbulence. It is a vital part of her studies, as she does not buy textbooks. Lindiwe, on the other hand, recognises that while Wi-Fi (and thus internet sources) are useful, the textbooks prescribed by the lecturer are more valuable in their contribution to high academic achievement. She ascribes this value to the fact that the textbooks are also used by lecturers.

### **4.3.2) Enabling internal operations: The self as a primary resource for learning well in turbulence.**

#### **4.3.2.1) *Engaging with work alone and non-attendance.***

Some high achieving students perceive solitary engagement with their work and non-attendance, as enabling their high academic achievement, particularly in times of campus unrest. Sasha, for instance, noted that “[...] a lot of us here said that we study better at home anyway, so feel like I think that’s what got us through most of the protest actions [...]” (Sasha, FGD, 65-66). Supporting this notion of independent learning as beneficial during turbulence, Mandisa said that “[f]or me the strikes were not really a problem, because I don’t really hmm attend anyway so...” (Mandisa, FGD, 104). Furthermore, Priya stated that “[...] because I engage with the content on my own anyway, I find I am able to still do that” (Priya, FGD, 122-123).

The above three statements show that for at least half of the participants, studying or learning is seen as something that can be done alone. Furthermore, being able to engage with work independently enables them to achieve academically during the strikes and turbulence on campus. Beyond this, there is an implicit understanding in each statement that the turbulence on campus is only a problem if students attend and if students rely on lectures to engage with the content. Further implicitly denoted by the repetition of the word “anyway,” is the sense that high achieving students continued to do during turbulent times, what they usually do in normal learning conditions (i.e., learn independently).

#### **4.3.2.2) *Positively perceiving some aspects of the protest action.***

Most of the participants had the ability to perceive some of the practical implications of the turbulent protest action in a positive light, or as beneficial in some way. As shown in Table 4.1, this internal perception was an operation that enabled them to maintain their high

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academic achievement. Siyabonga, for instance, noted that “[...] it was helpful as well during the strike period, because I went way over the set dates. Then, the extensions helped” (Siyabonga, FGD, 356-357). Sasha, on the other hand, would see the turbulent protest action time as a time for resting, as she said that she “[...] would just relax while there was no work to do until there was work again, so that then... ya, then I would start studying” (Sasha FGD, 363-364). Furthermore, Amahle was able to view the turbulent protest action time as a productive break, as she noted that “[...] it gives me more time to actually catch up with everything, you know, get up to speed with all of my work, you know. It gives me more time to actually study. So, it’s productive for me” (Amahle, FGD, 369-371).

The statements above all show how these high achieving students were able to view the turbulent protest action period as allowing for rest and/or productivity. Thus, even with the sudden changes in the academic programme, the postponement of tests, exams, and other due dates, the participants displayed resilience as they were able to do the required work at the time, and in fact, were able to catch up on other work, as in Amahle’s case.

### **4.3.2.3) *Holding goals and values in mind.***

The findings indicate that many of the participants were able to keep their goals, as well as their values in mind during the turbulent time of protest action, further supporting the notion that they displayed resilience. This is demonstrated in Lindiwe’s discussion of one of the aspects that helped her stay motivated during the turbulent protest action:

Uh, basically, what I wanted at the end of it. Like I did not want to repeat a year and that’s something that you, you want to progress all the time. So, uhm, even though there were protest actions, I kind of I knew what I wanted at the end of it [...].  
(Lindiwe, Interview, 460-462)

Lindiwe held in mind that she did not want to repeat the year, her goal was thus to progress. She needed to do everything she could to get to that goal, even in the face of campus turbulence. On the other hand, Mandisa kept in mind her long-term goals, as can be observed in the excerpt below.



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Mandisa: Uhm, well because I just, I wanted, I want to graduate. I want – have a goal and I don't feel like anything could stop me.

Researcher: Okay, what is your goal?

Mandisa: Uhm, I want to have my PhD, and uh, become a, uh, well I actually want to become a professor. Yeah. (Mandisa, Interview, 199-203)

Mandisa's long-term goals of graduating, obtaining her PhD, and becoming a professor, seems to be what enabled her to stay motivated in the turbulent protest action time. Due to the fact that all the goals the participants above mentioned were academic-related, it is logical to assume that they value their academics, and thus, prioritised these goals. For Siyabonga, his values and goals differ slightly.

[...] So, for me, it's important to get the most out of every course, uhm, that I attend, whether I'm registered for it or I'm there for non– uhm, non-degree purposes. I, I find it very important. My problem is that I am here, it's my time that I'm spending here, it's time away from my family that I could be with, so I take that as a valuable treasure that I cannot let go to waste. [...] (Siyabonga, Interview, 271-275)

Siyabonga's statement shows that his goal is to get the most out of every course. This is linked to his value of time. Due to him being away from his family, Siyabonga feels that he needs to make the most of his time by studying, even when there seems to be a reason to slow down or not work (e.g., due to protest action and the resulting turbulence on campus).

### **4.3.3) Constraining external operations: Volatile spaces.**

#### **4.3.3.1) *A negative change of atmosphere.***

The high achieving students of the study seem to have felt that there was a negative change in their learning environment. This can be seen in the following statement made by Siyabonga, who links the negative change in the environment during the turbulent protest action period, to the presence and actions of the security forces on campus.

Well, at doors here and gates we would get stopped, we would have to open our bag, the MI7 people and whoever else in the security forces would have to browse through your bag and check if there's anything that they were looking for. I wish I didn't

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know. It was never explained. You just had to open your bag and they'd look.

(Siyabonga, Interview, 639-642)

For Siyabonga, the negative change in the environment is linked to people, specifically, the MI7 security forces and their behaviour, which was deemed intrusive. Siyabonga's statement indicates that the university environment became hostile and accusatory toward students who had no intention of causing harm. Similarly, Lindiwe experienced the presence of the additional security on campus as intrusive, creating a very particular, surveilled atmosphere, as she noted that "[...] they always stopped and they watched you. And you do whatever you do, until you, you don't see them anymore, and it's that surveillance that you, you constantly being watched, I don't like that" (Lindiwe, FGD, 903-905).

Both Siyabonga and Lindiwe's statements above indicate an uncomfortable, unpleasant change in their usual academic environment, which may have made it challenging for them to come to campus and feel that they could be productive, as per usual. Amahle seemed to feel that the environment was no longer stable and secure for the students, "Cause there's just so much uncertainty, whatever, yeah" (Amahle, FGD, 872). Lindiwe may have felt this too, as she said that she "[...] did not quite enjoy watching students being shot at, being teargassed, it was really uhm not something that I would want to happen again" (Lindiwe, Interview, 442-443). In addition to the uncertainty of the environment, it may have been perceived as violent and traumatic for some, as Lindiwe indicated that she witnessed acts of aggression. These acts would no doubt have impacted on the parties directly involved, such as the security, police, and students. However, Lindiwe's statement also indicates that even passers-by or observers – those not directly involved – may have been affected by the violence around them.

### **4.3.3.2) *Limited access to usual academic resources.***

Most of the participants found that during the turbulent protest action, they had limited access to their usual academic resources, including space, Wi-Fi, and communication with lecturers. Siyabonga, for example, said that

[...] my problem with that was, can I get on campus to access connection, to be able to do the work I needed to do. Uhm, can I be able to get to the library which was also

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not so, yeah, not so nice, and there was an incident we were in the library we had to leave the library [...]. (Siyabonga, Interview, 252-254)

Siyabonga thus found himself questioning whether he would find space on campus to be productive – something that is taken for granted at a contact-based institution. His statement further points to how volatile the learning space was because even when students found a space to learn, for instance, at the library, they could soon be asked to leave, just as Siyabonga was. Lindiwe supported the notion of access to space as having been reduced during the turbulent protest action

[b]ecause, everywhere people were just... It was, it was a riot... Like they would come into reses and disrupt and getting outside meant you had to walk through these authority figured men who were standing, patrolling and restricting you from finding a place where you can actually work. [...] (Lindiwe, FGD, 134-137)

Even Mandisa, who does not usually rely on physically being present at the university to learn, found that she could not always access the Wi-Fi: “[...] there was a time last year where the Wi-Fi wasn’t working at res. That was the most stressful thing ever. Because then I just, I even regretted not going to class because I...” (Mandisa, FGD, 578-580). Thus, even for students who usually rely on aspects of the university that do not require physical interaction, learning may have, at times, been challenging. For Mandisa, the extent of this challenge and to thus perform well academically during times of campus unrest is indicated by her sudden sense of regret that she did not attend classes, which she perceives, in retrospect, would have enabled her in some way. However, classes also seemed unpredictable. Siyabonga noted that “[...] the protest period was a time for no classes, basically [...]” (Siyabonga, Interview, 315). In contrast, Lindiwe said that:

[i]t, it was with some lecturers immaculate how they communicated, but with others it wasn’t so perfect. And, that’s where they can really improve in terms of uhm... let’s say uhm, er, things need to be submitted, things need to go in and some lecturers need to be attended, and then you can’t do that because of this and that. But yet, lecturers will continue even though some, like, turbulence is going on in the school. (Lindiwe, Interview, 1507-1511)

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Siyabonga's statement above points to an assumed general consensus that there would be no lectures at all during the protest action ("... a time for no classes...") thus limiting access to the resource of learning collectively in a lecture, as well as time to interact with lecturers. On the other hand, Lindiwe's statement indicates that the situation on campus was not necessarily as "clear-cut", because she found that some lecturers still communicated, while others did not. Furthermore, Lindiwe noted that some lecturers would stop classes because they knew some students could not attend, while others continued, despite low attendance rates.

### **4.3.4) Constraining internal operations: Internalised turbulence.**

#### **4.3.4.1) *Negative feelings.***

The participants of this study mostly showed that negative feelings were elicited in response to the turbulence on campus. Priya's comment demonstrates an aspect of this when she notes that:

[...] dates were moved and the whole timetable had shifted and just adjusting to that was a challenge, but besides that I mean if you, at that stage I wasn't exactly aware of how lecturers communicate and I was a little bit lost so... (Priya, FGD, 117-119)

Priya mentions that the changes that resulted from the turbulent protest action required adjustment and that the adjustment was challenging. She also refers to her feeling of being "lost" which indicates that she may have felt a sense of confusion as to how to respond to the changes happening in the timetable, because she wasn't, at the time, aware of how lecturers communicate. In saying this, Priya emphasises the importance of communication between lecturers and students and shows how poor communication can indirectly serve to constrain high academic achievement. For Lindiwe and Siyabonga, the turbulent protest action resulted in very particular feelings, such as feeling "[...] very surveilled" (Lindiwe, FGD, 187) and feeling that there was

[...] a cloud in my mind that anything could happen, uh, as you walk in two's and threes, you get people in uniform forming some kind of formation strategy. Even their strategic points they stood at. It was kind of intimidating. That was really the only time I felt like I don't want to be there. (Siyabonga, Interview, 216-220)

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Due to the copious presence of security forces, Lindiwe and Siyabonga experienced similar feelings in response to what they both perceived as an intrusive presence. Their comments indicate that they may have experienced a sense of anxiety (“surveilled”, “a cloud in my mind”, “intimidated”). With seemingly anxious feelings such as those described above, it is understandable that learning would have been somewhat hindered. Siyabonga’s quote also shows how these negative feelings may lead to a sense of not wanting to be on campus at all – something which may also be perceived as a constraining element if high achieving students rely on the physical space and other resources at the university to learn well.

### **4.3.4.2) *Difficulty in planning.***

Some of the participants, although not explicitly stating any negative effect on their emotional state, described a different kind of internal challenge – a difficulty in planning during times of turbulence. For example, Amahle noted that “[...] if there’s a strike, you can’t really plan, and I like planning so I guess that, that becomes a problem” (Amahle, FGD, 867-868). Describing how she struggled to plan, Sasha said that:

[...] disorganisation does mess things up a little bit, because you don’t know when you going to finish your lectures, when exams are going to be, you can’t really plan anything in your life because you know the protests are happening. (Sasha, FGD, 67-69)

Both Amahle and Sasha’s comments show how the turbulent protest action time may have interfered with their ability to plan – not just academically – but personally, as well, as shown by Sasha’s statement (“... can’t really plan anything in your life...”). Sasha’s quote further indicates a possible underlying sense of uncertainty and resulting anxiety in the face of turbulence in the academic environment (“... mess things up...”; “... you don’t know when...”). It is thus clear that the participants’ experience of negative feelings and difficulty in planning were constraining internal operations directly related to the turbulent protest action in their academic environment. That is, they seemed to have internalised the turbulence around them.

### **4.3.5) Kinds of learning (external operations): A new “normal”.**

#### **4.3.5.1) *Strikes on campus are “normal”.***

In responding to FGD and interview questions regarding the turbulent #FMF protest action, the participants seemed to be inclined to also refer to other instances of campus unrest in the past. Priya noted that she “[...] did encounter a few strikes, protests before that in the previous years [...]” (Priya, FGD, 116). Moreover, Mandisa said that “[...] [i]t was just like, it’s just something that happens, you know, every year, something’s gonna happen so you kind of prepare for it mentally and yeah.” (Mandisa, Interview, 194-196). Thus, it is evident that the participants had experienced protest action before the #FMF strikes, and seemed to be speaking of it nonchalantly as if it has come to be the norm of the university setting. Further supporting this, Mandisa’s statement shows that there is underlying anticipation for protest action, that is, she has learnt to expect it every year. Siyabonga’s statement below takes this notion of protests as a norm at Higher Education, even further.

In my first year, I was very confused, there was a strike, the people was making a noise on the corridor and I didn’t understand and one come up to us and said, hmm, it would be best for you guys to leave class now. (Siyabonga, FGD, 80-82)

Here, it is clear that Siyabonga has previously experienced not only protest action, but protest-related turbulence, at university, as he speaks specifically of noise, confusion, and disruption (being forced to leave his lecture unexpectedly).

#### **4.3.5.2) *Race, equality and academic achievement.***

Through experiencing the #FMF turbulent protest action on campus, the participants seemed to question, in various ways, the notion of race, equality and academic achievement at university, and in South Africa. For example, Priya said that:

[...] race is still a very very important factor, because you know, based on based on the country, well specifically the South African context, based on the history, it has put Black people in a position where, you know, they are, they, it’s still not, it’s still, there’s still not an equal, on an equal playing field, whatsoever. (Priya, FGD, 746-749)

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Priya's statement points to a general understanding of how the South African past has created a position of disadvantage for Black South Africans, in general. Mandisa supports this view, and links it to inequality in the university context, as indicated below.

[...] I didn't know that it would be a problem going into varsity. Or, not a problem, but, I will be different from other people, going into varsity. And the strike made me realise that, no, actually, uhm, you know, black people are disadvantaged, and it's a problem, even though its normal for us, it's what we deal with every day, but once you come into contact with people who are, you know, well-off, it becomes you know, apparent, it becomes a problem. Because then, you're not equal, and you're not given the same opportunities. (Mandisa, Interview, 335-341)

Mandisa's statement captures her experience of problematising what has been considered normal to her – particularly in the university setting. Moreover, it was only through connections with and comparisons to other students that Mandisa was conscientised about African race-related issues. On the other hand, some of the participants learnt to challenge the notion of disadvantage as only relating to African people in the South African context, as can be seen in Sasha's statement below.

[...] But I feel like the world that we living in now, there's so much diversity [...] and I think more and more it's becoming less you know, it's impacting less, race is impacting less on your academic life, because it's just the world is just so different now, you know, you don't just see white rich people, you see, like I said, every type of race, doing something, achieving more, or achieving less. Or, you know, up and down, up and down. (Sasha, FGD, 735-745)

Sasha's statement indicates a view that times have changed, and that aspects of the world, particularly in the South African context (such as the ways in which race links to inequality and academic performance) may not be as they used to be. Similarly, Lindiwe learnt about how other races, who were excluded from the protest action because of "normal" assumptions, may also be perceived as disadvantaged.

[...] I remember speaking to a group of Indian people, who said that this also affects them because uh, they're paying for their fees and uh it and, and they don't have a lot

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when they back home. So, it was a surprise to me, because uh, most of the time, when it comes to who has wealth and who doesn't, we usually see uhm, uhm, we classify this race as the impoverished one and this one well-off. [...] (Lindiwe, Interview, 1168-1173)

Lindiwe's statement above supports Sasha's notion that there has been a norm of "African-only" disadvantage that was challenged by her encounter with individuals of other races during the turbulent #FMF protest action. Particularly, Lindiwe was made aware of instances of inequality in the university setting that apply to other races, as she noted that:

[...] for them it's like we can't, we really can't, we work and then we work for to, to pay the school, uhm, on the side and then we still have to come here and study because uh we can't apply for NSFAS, we don't, we don't qualify. Uh, because of our race. So, that was, that was something that was very significant to me that these people were really eager to be part of the march because they saw the movement as revolutionary in itself and it would help them a great deal and then, but they couldn't because of who they were, uhm, their skin and everything. [...] (Lindiwe, Interview, 1184-1190)

Lindiwe's awareness of these seemingly normalised inequalities, was made possible by her interaction with other students, and ultimately led to her asking, "[...] who does it [the #FMF protest action] benefit at the end of it, and who does it leave behind?" (Lindiwe, Interview, 1196-1197)

### **4.3.6) Kinds of learning (internal operations): Learning how to respond to the norm of turbulent protest action.**

#### **4.3.6.1) *Deciding on a position.***

The findings indicate that the participants who were interviewed all considered their worldviews and/or values in order to decide on their position in relation to the turbulent protest action. Siyabonga, for instance, noted that:

[a]s a person who, didn't in my first degree, get NSFAS funding, uhm, or a bursary or scholarship, the prospect of less fees uhm, or even a fee-free tertiary education, for



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me, was a positive. So, as far as that is concerned, the protests for me were justified.  
[...] (Siyabonga, Interview, 284-286 )

Siyabonga clearly identified with the need for the protests, as he had past experience of not receiving any financial support in the form of bursaries or scholarships. However, he had over time received financial support and thus recognised that he was no longer in the same situation as other students in the movement, as can be seen in his comment below.

[...] Uhm, so, some of us were in the in between. You are affected directly, yes, uhm, but you're not really in the deep like the next student who has to pay for fees, uhm, who has to pay for a student loan once they get work or anything like that, uhm, so, it's for a person to find who they are, what their needs are, or what their objectives were when they came to university and make a decision whether they want to achieve what they came for. (Siyabonga, Interview, 590-595)

Facing a dilemma in his positionality and how to respond to the movement, the above statement captures some of the aspects that Siyabonga considered and thus, what he believes others should consider in deciding how to respond to the protest action on campus. These considerations include an individual's identity, needs, and goals. Lindiwe's considerations also helped her to decide on her position, as she noted that:

[...] for me, it was uh, uh, basically, if I wanna be, honestly speaking, uhm, I the Catholic church that I went to kept me grounded uhm, although there was just a lot of hustle and bustle, I really wanted to be a part, but uh, uh, some of their, sometimes you would go into the peaceful marches maybe, and you would listen and you would hear that they, you know, there's something going on there. [...] (Lindiwe, Interview, 428-432)

In deciding how to respond to the protest action on campus, Lindiwe seems to have primarily been influenced by her church's religious values. Mandisa also seemed to consider how she responded to the protest action, as is shown in the following excerpt.

Mandisa: Yeah. I guess, yeah, you know, people fight in different ways, so I'd rather get the degree and change things while, you know, as, you know, as I excel.

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Researcher: Yes.

Mandisa: Than, you know, the the whole streets thing was not uh for me. I'd rather fight with the mind than, you know, physically. (Mandisa, Interview, 409-413)

For Mandisa, her value of academics may have meant that she viewed her contribution to societal change differently, in that she would rather use her education to implement change.

### **4.3.6.2) *The balance of positionality and high academic achievement in turbulent protest action.***

Depending on their position in relation to the turbulent protest action, the participants all seemed to have learnt how to use resources in a way that would still enable their high academic achievement during the turbulent protest action. For some, their participation in the protests meant they needed to use their time wisely. For instance, Siyabonga said he would “[...] be immersed in the protest by day– uhm, but I’d makes, I’d make time to study, uhm, in the evening [...]” (Siyabonga, Interview, 302-303). Siyabonga seemed to have learnt how to use his valued resource of time in a way that would continue to allow him academic excellence, as well as space for participation in the protests. On the other hand, Lindiwe, still facing her inner conflict of how to respond to the turbulent protest action, learnt to use another form of participation, as can be seen in her comment below.

[...] I really kind of, you know, sympathised with and he [referring to another student] made me want to actually be part of the movement and sometimes I was so but at the end of it, although I wanted to commit, but uh if I wanna commit to protesting, something is left neglected so rather I focus on that and uhm and and be an active participant rather on social media, maybe that’s something that I did. (Lindiwe, Interview, 463-467)

Lindiwe learnt how to use social media as a resource she could draw on, in order to be somewhat of an active participant in the strike, while at the same time, being able to focus on her academics (her values). Lindiwe also had to find other ways of learning, as she also noted that:

[...] at times the library uh was closed and we needed to use it. I needed to get books and uh, and some of the books are not available online and very expensive online, and

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so I had to resort uhm online journals, journal articles. And sometimes I don't like reading journal articles [...]. (Lindiwe, Interview, 409-412)

Other participants who did not participate in the protest action, like Priya, appear to have learnt to take ownership of communication with lecturers. For example, Priya noted that:

[...] the only thing that I would have to do is consistently check when deadlines are and that sort of thing but, because I engage with the content on my own anyway, I find I am able to still do that. (Priya, FGD, 121-123)

Although Priya may have learnt what she can do to be proactive and thus perform well in turbulence, her statement also shows that she continued to draw on herself as a resource during times of turbulence. That is, Priya learnt that her usual style of learning still helps her to perform well in times of turbulence.

### **4.4) Conclusion**

This chapter presented the main findings of the study, in relation to the initial research questions posed. The findings were presented in the form of external and internal operations connecting to each research question. Thus, a total of six overarching themes were developed through thematic analysis. These themes were supported by excerpts of the raw data, collected through the FGD as well as the individual interviews conducted. The findings suggest that the students drew on aspects of both themselves and others, in order to learn well during turbulence. Despite the students' end result (high academic achievement), they seemed to be aware that the external, volatile spaces they were surrounded by, as well as their internalised turbulence, made it challenging for them to learn and to perform well. Finally, with regards to what they learnt during the protests, the participants were able to think critically about what has come to be the norm of the higher education context and broader societal context. On an internal level, they seemed to have learnt how to respond to the norm of protest action. In the form of a discussion that draws on the literature previously presented, the following chapter considers what these findings mean conceptually.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### 5.1) Introduction

Chapter 5 draws on relevant literature as well as theory, as discussed in Chapter 2, in order to demonstrate what the main findings of this study mean conceptually. This research aimed to answer three main questions relating to high academic achievement in undergraduate students during protest action at UKZN. Specifically, the researcher was interested in finding out, first, what enables high achieving undergraduate students to sustain their high academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action; second, what constrains high achieving undergraduate students' academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action; and third, what kinds of learning take place for high achieving undergraduate students during times of turbulent student protest action. In the previous chapter, the findings of the study were presented in the form of six overarching themes. As was depicted in Table 4.1, it is clear that the participants experienced both external and internal operations in relation to what enabled and constrained their high academic achievement, as well as in relation to what they learnt during the turbulent #FMF protest action period. The majority of the overarching themes constructed from the findings are paired and discussed in Chapter 5 according to the research questions they relate to, as visually depicted in Table 5.1 on the following page.

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Table 5.1

*The order and layout of themes discussed in relation to research questions*

Order of Discussion	Layout of themes in relation to RQs
RQ1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Enabling external and internal operations: Others and artefacts as mediators of learning well in turbulence</b> (family, lecturers, academic peers and communities, textbooks and internet sources)</li><li>• <b>The self as a primary resource for learning well in turbulence</b> (engaging with work alone and non-attendance, positively perceiving some aspects of the protest action, holding goals and values in mind)</li></ul>
RQ2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Constraining external and internal operations: Volatile spaces</b> (negative change of atmosphere, limited access to usual academic resources) and <b>internalised turbulence</b> (negative feelings, difficulty in planning)</li></ul>
RQ3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Kinds of learning (external and internal operations): A new “normal”</b> (strikes on campus are "normal," questioning of race, equality and academic achievement) and <b>learning how to respond to the norm of turbulent protest action</b> (deciding on a position, the balance of positionality and high academic achievement in turbulent protest action)</li></ul>

### 5.2) Enabling External and Internal Operations

It is clear that what enabled the participants of this study to perform well, even during times of turbulence, was a combination of external and internal operations. Vygotsky (1978) refers to both external and internal forms of operation when he describes how the act of a child grasping for an object can be understood as an external operation and when he suggests that

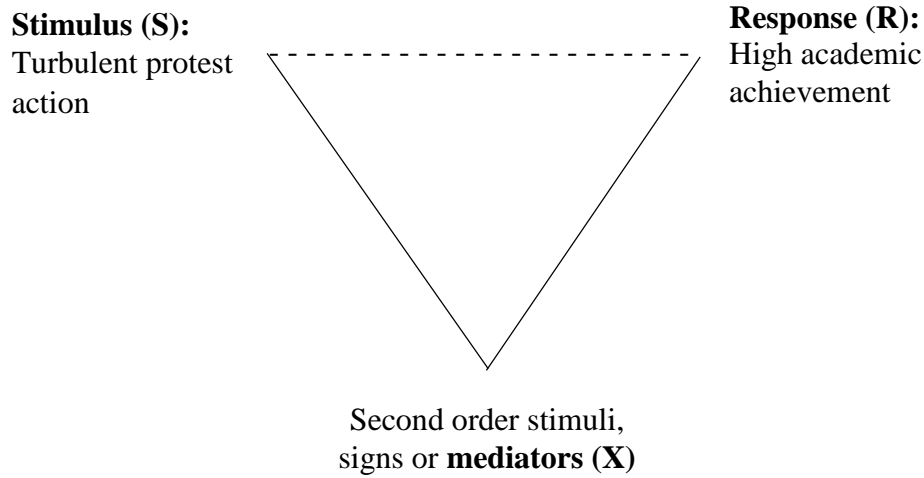
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individuals have internal psychological operations. Psychological or internal operations have the ability to be transformed by external stimuli and the mediated aspects of these internal operations are fundamental features of higher mental processes (Vygotsky, 1978). Supporting the notion of both external and internal operations mediating learning during turbulence, Tinto (2010) suggests that what aids student retention and thus academic success, is indeed the use of both external as well as internal resources.

### **5.2.1) Enabling external operations: Others and artefacts as mediators of learning well in turbulence.**

The first theme constructed from the data, “others and artefacts as mediators of learning well in turbulence” captures the finding that high academic achieving students seem to draw on a number of external resources to mediate their learning during times of turbulent student protest action. Daniels (2015) defines mediation as a process “... in which mediators serve as the means by which the individual acts upon and is acted upon by social, cultural, and historical factors” (p. 36). Mediators are central to human development and learning, as Vygotsky (1978) draws frequently on how the memory, attention and cognitive growth of children are mediated. Moreover, Vygotsky (1978) introduced the key concept of mediated operations that are central to all higher psychological processes, whereby an individual’s direct (non-mediated or innate) response to a stimulus is influenced or mediated by the presence of a second order stimulus. This second order stimulus is a sign, which not only changes the existing relation between the individual’s direct response and the stimulus they are faced with but also exerts an influence on the individual, as opposed to the environment, known as reverse action (Vygotsky, 1978). It is ultimately through the process of reverse action (which occurs through mediation) that individuals learn and are “qualitatively transformed” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 40). When applied to the current research of how high achieving students were able to learn and academically succeed in spite of the turbulence surrounding them, Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the structure of sign (mediated) operations can be adapted, as is illustrated on the following page.

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*Figure 5.1.* Adaption of Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the structure of sign operations as it relates to high academic achievement during turbulent protest action.

As depicted in Figure 5.1, the external and internal mediators (X) which were used by participants of this study, would have contributed to their ability to sustain their high academic achievement (R) as a response to the turbulent protest action (S). The external mediators which the participants used included interpersonal relations with family members, lecturers, academic peers and communities, as well as interactions with artefacts such as textbooks and internet sources.

### **5.2.1.1) Family.**

Although the participants all have varying relationships and dynamics with their family members, it is evident that their academic success seems to be influenced by the presence of family in their lives. That is, high achieving students seem to be receiving various forms of mediation through pressure and/or support from their families, which is at times explicit (or visible) and sometimes implicit (or invisible) (Wertsch, 2007; Hasan, 2002). The finding that high achieving students receive mediation from their families affirms the theoretical framework of the study, as it shows how academic success is mediated by the social and cultural aspects of high achieving students' lives. The families of the high achieving students may have, through the cultural transmission of academic values (Daniels, 2015), instilled in the students an expectation to attend university and may have also provided overt mediation

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in the form of encouragement and emotional support (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). They may have also implicitly elicited pressure within the high achieving students by giving them a particular academic role or identity to live up to. Supporting the finding that families may mediate the high academic achievement of these students, a study conducted by Roksa and Kinsley (2018) on the role of family support in facilitating academic success in low-income students found that positive academic outcomes are fostered by emotional support received from family members. Similarly, Somers et al. (2011) found that parental involvement mediated academic achievement and resulted in higher grades among urban Black youth in Detroit, America.

It is interesting to note that the African participants (i.e., Amahle, Lindiwe, Siyabonga, and Mandisa) in the study could see an overt link between their family and their high academic achievement. The other two participants, who were Coloured and Indian, believed that there was less of a direct link between their family and their academic success. The subtle difference in the finding may be partly attributed to the different cultures of the students. For example, Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that for those who belong to collectivistic cultures, and cultures that place emphasis on interdependence (as opposed to independence), the expectations of others, particularly family members, are likely to strongly influence a student's motivation to achieve. On the other hand, the notion that family exerts a significant influence on students' motivation to achieve contradicts the findings of a study conducted on a sample of minority ethnic groups by Dennis et al. (2005), which suggest that family expectation motivation did not significantly impact on student academic outcomes.

It is noteworthy though, that Dennis et al. (2005) also argued that personal and individual motivation, which is typically associated with individualistic Western cultures that value independence and uniqueness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) may not be entirely separable from the interdependent values that the students have and that "... the ability to have both collectivistic and individualistic motivations may be most predictive of academic success" (Dennis, et al., 2005, p. 233). The possibly inseparable link between individual motivation and interdependent values may point to high achieving students experiencing the process of internalisation, whereby external operations are internally reconstructed (Vygotsky, 1978). That is, the values and expectations held by the high achieving students' families are internally reconstructed and serve both an interpersonal (interdependent) and intrapersonal (individualistic) function.



### 5.2.1.2) *Lecturers, academic peers and communities.*

Lecturers, as well as academic peers and communities, also contributed to the mediation of the student's high academic achievement during turbulent protest action. Similar to the kind of support, and thus both the visible and invisible mediation received by their families, high achieving students seem to receive a sense of support from lecturers that surpasses the necessary content of the curriculum. Lecturers enable high achieving students to progress within their ZPD's, referred to in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.1) as the distance between the student's current understanding of his or her coursework (as determined by independent problem solving) and the potential understanding that he or she can reach through engaging with a peer, tutor, or lecturer who is more capable in that particular field of study (Vygotsky, 1978). However, beyond the lecturer's role in enabling progress within ZPDs of students, the relationship that high achieving students have with their lecturers may provide a platform to access academic-related and other information, as well as a sense of support and expectation, which further enables them to excel. Indeed, as argued by Froneman, du Plessis and Koen (2016), the relationship between an educator and a student can, when effective, create a conducive learning platform.

The sociocultural framework of learning emphasises the role of expert assistance through the interaction that occurs between a student and a lecturer (Thompson, 2013). The sense of support and expectation that results from the relationship with lecturers does not end when there are turbulent times on campus but continues to influence high achieving students' academic performance. Many of the participants also noted how communication with lecturers enabled them to achieve during turbulent times. Lecturers can thus be said to mediate high academic achievement during turbulence both visibly, through providing instruction and through discussing course content with the students, and invisibly, through the very interaction or relationship they have with the student.

It is interesting that none of the participants said that their lecturers had explicitly put pressure on them to perform well. Rather, it was the meaning of the subtleties within the interpersonal dynamics that high achieving students had with their lecturers that mediated their academic performance. For example, Sasha pointed out that "[...] sometimes if lecturers know your name and know that you've done well you kind of feel, ok now I need to keep it

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up, ‘cause they actually know my name” (Sasha, FGD, 522-523). For Sasha, it is the nuance of the lecturer knowing her name that serves to mediate, in part, how she responds to the stimulus of the turbulent protest action. The lecturer knowing her name becomes a sign that she has an expectation to live up to, and in so doing, exerts an influence on her behaviour by making her work harder to achieve her goals (reverse action). For Lindiwe, there is an aspect of faith or belief in the lecturers as a result of their interpersonal dynamic. Lindiwe trusts the textbooks to support her learning, predominantly because the lecturers who she knows and trusts are “also using it [the textbook]” (FGD, 597).

The academic peers and communities that high achieving students interact with also influenced their ability to maintain their high academic achievement in times of turbulent student protest. It is no surprise that this may be the case, seeing that tutoring and student engagement have been some of the key ways in which universities have aimed to improve academic performance and retention (Faroa, 2017). Participants communicating with their peers and extended communities in casual conversations and interactions, in order to make decisions pertaining to their academic achievement during the turbulent protest action, is congruent with two key concepts outlined in the review of literature in Chapter 2. These are discussed in the following paragraph.

First, the participants’ interaction and communication with peers and communities to make informed decisions about their academic work, is consistent with the sociocultural concept of learning that was used to ground this study. This is because the essence of a sociocultural approach to learning is through speech in dialogue (communication), which occurs in interpersonal relationships and social interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Second, the finding that high achieving students use communication with academic peers and communities to mediate their academic success during turbulence supports the concept of student psychological processes as rhizomes (Cunningham, 1996). Specifically, some of the high achieving students in the study seemed to direct themselves outwards, finding connections as they drew on their social interactional, cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in finding ways of mediating their learning during the turbulent protest action (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Their rhizome-like response to the stimulus of turbulent protest action is evident not only in the ways they relied on their academic peers and extended communities to mediate their learning, but also in the way the students drew on other mediators, including

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their families, lecturers and artefacts in their immediate environment to enable their high academic achievement. The following section focuses on these artefacts.

### **5.2.1.3) *Textbooks and internet sources.***

As posited in Chapter 2, students also used textbooks and internet sources to mediate their learning during times of turbulence. They thus drew on their cultural and institutional artefacts as mediators. While some students still prefer the use of textbooks, a minority seem to strongly advocate the use of internet sources or web-based lecture technologies, which are increasingly being used by students in contact-based institutions (Gysbers, Johnston, Hancock, & Denyer, 2011). Preference for the use of internet sources during times of turbulence, as found by the current study, may be due to high academic achieving students generally not being able to afford textbooks, and because they feel they have easier access to course material through the internet. The internet is also accessible when the university library is closed due to turbulent protest action on campus. This may further motivate students to rely on the internet for mediation during such times where lectures are cancelled. As suggested by Marginson and Dang (2017), students in the context of globalisation are increasingly relying on technologies such as computers and cell phones, which can be classified as “virtual forms of mobility and mediation” (p. 123).

### **5.2.2) Enabling internal operations: The self as a primary resource for learning well in turbulence.**

Although external mediators such as relationships with family members, lecturers, academic peers and communities, as well as the use of artefacts including textbooks and internet sources seem to play an important role for the high achieving students in this study, the findings indicate that they may primarily rely on internal aspects of themselves in order to learn well and achieve academically during campus unrest and resulting turbulence. “The self as a primary resource for learning well in turbulence”, as the title of the second theme constructed from the data suggests, represents the internal operations of high achieving students that enable them through mediation to persist at their studies, even in turbulent environments.

### *5.2.2.1) Engaging with work alone and non-attendance: internal operations of self-regulation.*

A number of the participants noted that engaging with work alone and non-attendance enabled them to achieve academically during turbulent protest action at UKZN. Not being able to attend lectures during campus unrest was initially expected by the researcher to have had a negative impact on the academic achievement of students. Particularly, the researcher expected that for most, if not all high academic achieving students, attendance and thus face-to-face engagement with lecturers would be a priority, predominantly due to the emphasis placed on learning through social interaction that is posited by the socio-cultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as the previously discussed notion of students drawing on lecturers to enable their academic achievement. Moreover, the finding is contradictory to the findings from other studies which show that lecture attendance is associated with academic success (Landin & Pérez, 2015; Thatcher, Fridjhon, & Cockcroft, 2007).

It was thus unexpected that at least half of the participants in the study seemed to be unperturbed by the fact that their lectures had been cancelled or postponed during the turbulent protest action, as they felt that they studied or engaged with the work better either independently, or at home, in general. These participants would only attend certain lectures which they deemed important. Similarly, a study conducted at a European university by Bos, Groeneveld, van Bruggen and Brand-Gruwel (2016) found that students only attended a few lectures at the start of the semester, and relied on recorded lectures for the remainder of the course. One may ascribe the decreasing reliance on lecture attendance to the increasing prevalence and access to internet resources that students now have. However, Gysbers et al. (2011) found that web-based lecture technologies and thus internet sources alone do not reduce lecture attendance. Indeed, many students do still regularly attend lectures, as was the case with the other half of the participants in the study, even with online resources which do not necessitate their presence at face-to-face lectures (Gysbers et al., 2011). It thus clear that other mediating aspects influence the decrease in the need to rely on lectures.

One of these other mediating aspects may be self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1979). The findings of this study suggest that in their pursuit of academic excellence, the high achieving students were not dependent on lecture attendance *or* on the external mediators which contributed to enabling their academic success during turbulent protest action (relationships with family, lecturers, academic peers and communities as well as the use of

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textbooks and/or internet sources). Rather, the high achieving students relied more on their ability to self-regulate or control their own learning, in order to perform well academically during “normal” learning conditions, as well as during turbulent protest action. As discussed by Wertsch (1979), developing children experience a transition from other- to self-regulation over four successive levels that are not necessarily exhaustive or precisely defined. By the time the individual has reached the fourth level, they have assumed complete responsibility for problem-solving, a shift has occurred from the interpsychological to the intrapsychological, and egocentric speech serves as a mediator of self-regulation (Wertsch, 1979). A similar dynamic is observed in the adult high achieving students of this study. Both Sasha and Priya explicitly stated that while their relationships with their families did play a part in motivating them to achieve, their academic success was more dependent on, or as a result of themselves. Evidently, the participants of this study were self-regulating and were no longer relying on a large portion of regulation from attending lectures, or from direct guidance from lecturers and families, as might have been the case much earlier in their academic careers (Wertsch 1979).

It may be argued that over the course of their academic careers at university, the high achieving students have also developed and experienced a process of transition similar to the developing children in Wertsch’s (1979) research. All the participants were completing the final year of their undergraduate degrees, and were all able to control their learning or the aspects that enabled them to learn, in different ways. For example, while both Lindiwe and Mandisa experience pressure, they have different ways of responding to, and thus controlling it. Lindiwe’s decision to engage with her family through speech about her feelings of academic pressure elicits support and reassurance from them. Therefore, in the face of pressure (S), interpersonal speech is functioning as a mediator that Lindiwe has employed (X) to elicit verbal support from her family (R) which in turn creates a sense of competence, a positive feeling in her that she can achieve her academic goals (reverse action). Mandisa, on the other hand, seems to use her own voice or egocentric speech (X) when she is feeling pressured (S) to elicit a sense of reassurance (R). This can be observed when she noted that “it’s, it’s, it’s okay though. It’s fine” (FGD, 429-431).

### 5.2.2.2) *Positively perceiving some aspects of the protest action and holding goals and values in mind: internal operations of resilience*

The high achieving students displayed resilience in their ability to perceive some practical aspects of the protest action positively, as well as in their ability to hold their goals and values in mind in order to motivate themselves to continue studying. This notion of students using their own resilience in the form of positive perceptions and the mental holding of their goals and values affirms the previously discussed finding that the high achieving students were predominantly relying on self-regulation to continue performing well during times of turbulence.

Wells and Claxton (2002) state that a resilient student is one who is able to "... take on learning challenges of which the outcome is uncertain, to persist with learning despite temporary confusion or frustration, and to recover from setbacks and failures" (p. 28). The participants of the study thus displayed the internal operations of academic resilience and thriving. This is because, in spite of the turbulent setting, the high achieving students continued to study and thrive as they mobilised other mediating factors, such as individual and social resources in response to the turbulent setting, all of which evidently led to positive outcomes in the form of high academic achievement (Ickovics & Park, 1998). The high achieving students in this study were able to transform various aspects of their context which may be perceived as risks, into something positive (Morales, 2008). Thus, the students mediated their learning through their own positive perceptions of what the turbulent academic programme meant for them. For example, Siyabonga, Sasha and Amahle all viewed the disruption in the academic programme as a productive break and/or as a time for rest.

A study conducted by Morales (2008) on academically exceptional students of colour found that 86% of their participants had future orientations – goals which enabled their resilience and thus their ability to perform well academically. This corresponds to the findings of the current research. For example, both Lindiwe and Mandisa were aware of their goals and used them to mediate their motivation for continuous learning, even in turbulence. The mental "holding" of their short- and long-term goals enabled them to continue studying, even in the face of considerable risk factors such as the disruptions and disorganisation in the academic programme, as well as the resulting negative emotions within the students, all of which may have threatened their academic success and retention.

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Even with the knowledge that the high achieving students relied largely on their ability to self-regulate and draw on their internal resilience, the role of external aspects of mediation that supported their high academic achievement during turbulence cannot be diminished. Notably similar to the findings of the current research, a study conducted by Dass-Brailsford (2005) surrounding resilience and academic achievement among disadvantaged Black youth in South Africa found that what reinforced the resilience of students was a combination of individual characteristics such as being goal-oriented, motivated and having the perception of agency, *as well as* receiving support from families and role models, schools and communities. Indeed, both internal (personality and self-factors, or individual resources) *and* external (relationships, social support) aspects of an individual have been found to influence individual resilience (Ledesma, 2014). Therefore, it may be argued that aspects of their surrounding contexts, or their external operations, somehow contributed to the internal operation of resilience that can be observed in high achieving students during turbulent protest action.

The notion of students being internally influenced by their surroundings is linked to Vygotsky's (1978) statement that all functions occur twice: "... first on the social level and later, on the individual level: first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the [student] (intrapsychological)" (p. 57). Moreover, as previously noted, individualistic motivations may not be completely separable from collectivistic or interdependent values (Dennis, et al., 2005). Thus, the presence of family members in their lives, as well as lecturers (both who support them, instil values in them, and create pressure to perform) may be seen as protective factors, for they continued to provide invisible mediation to the students in times of turbulence, even if the students relied more on their own self-regulation. Moreover, UKZN as an institution may be said to have demonstrated organisational resilience (Ledesma, 2014). Through their open communication about cancellations or postponements of lectures and/or examinations, as well as their willingness to take the risk of sometimes continuing with the academic programme despite the turbulence, it can be said that they fostered resilience in the students (O'Leary, 1998).

### **5.3) Constraining External and Internal Operations: Volatile Spaces and Internalised Turbulence**

The high achieving students faced and interacted with volatile spaces during the turbulent #FMF protest action. The resilience of these students and their context (UKZN), were among the mediators that enabled them to succeed academically during one of the most turbulent periods of South African higher education. High achieving students who participated in the study were aware that the university environment had become a volatile space during the turbulent protest action of 2016 and that this external volatile space had contributed to what constrained their ability to learn well during times of turbulence. More specifically, as indicated in Table 5.1, the high achieving students detected a negative change in the academic environment and felt that access to their usual academic resources had been limited. For students like Lindiwe, for instance, who relied on attendance, lectures were no longer consistent as there seems to have been a general lack of consensus in how different academic courses responded to the turbulent protest action on campus. While some lectures commenced, others were cancelled. Similarly, Siyabonga found that access to the library had been reduced. The finding that the high achieving students experienced a reduction in the access to their usual academic resources on campus during turbulence, which in turn served to constrain their academic achievement, corresponds to the findings of a study conducted by The et al. (2017). Both the current research as well as that of The et al. (2017) indicate that high achieving students value, at least to a certain extent, access to space and other resources on campus for work.

From a sociocultural position, turbulence would first be present within the individual's external, or interpsychological context, and then it [turbulence] would be experienced by the individual on an intrapsychological level (Vygotsky, 1978). It thus makes sense that in addition to the negative shifts they observed in the physical environment, the high achieving students seem to have experienced a sense of internalised turbulence. This is where the findings of the current study diverge from those of The et al. (2017), where the students did not perceive their external environments as a hindrance to their learning. While a number of the high achieving students in the current research noted that they learnt better alone or off-campus in general, thus giving the impression that the physical context of their campus had no effect on them, the majority of participants experienced internal states that made it challenging for them to perform well academically during times of campus unrest. As shown in Table 5.1, the internalised turbulence manifested as negative feelings in relation to the



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environment, as well as the experience of having difficulty in planning. Thus, it may be said that the high achieving students experienced another process of internalisation, whereby aspects of themselves were internally reconstructed by the external operation of instability and turbulence (Vygotsky, 1978).

Thus, although the turbulent physical environment was not a direct hindrance for a few of the high achieving students, it is likely due to the fact that they were not physically present on campus or attending regularly, to begin with. Had all the participants relied more on lecture attendance and on-campus resources (as did a few participants), they may have all been able to identify a direct link between their turbulent physical environment and their internal difficulty in planning. This is not to say, though, that those high achieving students who rely less on attendance and on-campus resources (such as the library) were not *indirectly* affected by their turbulent university setting. Mandisa, who relied the least on lecture attendance, noted at one point that she regretted not attending lectures, as she faced a time where she had no access to Wi-Fi. Sasha and Priya, who also relied less on attendance and on-campus resources such as Wi-Fi and the library, noted that they found it challenging to plan, and appreciated any communication they received from lecturers. An implicit psychological process can thus be said to have made it challenging for high achieving students to learn as per usual, even if they did not attend regularly (Wertsch, 2007).

Although The et al. (2017) use the concepts of disruption and turbulence in the learning environment interchangeably, the current study separated these terms based on the notion that an environment can be disruptive without being turbulent. The students in the study conducted by The et al. (2017) were facing a disruptive learning environment, but one that had positive effects or outcomes, such as the reconstruction of buildings and facilities surrounding them. The high achieving undergraduate students of UKZN, however, faced a disruptive environment that was turbulent in nature, and although seemingly driven by an altruistic cause, led to very different environmental changes as opposed to the outcomes of the disruption in The et al.'s (2017) study. Rather than being surrounded by reconstruction (which may be viewed more positively), UKZN high achieving undergraduate students who relied more on attendance and on-campus resources were surrounded by *deconstruction*. Not only did they face the physical deconstruction of buildings, but they also experienced the abstract deconstruction of the academic programme as they knew it, as well as of the usual university atmosphere as one of structure, safety and comfort – one where they do not get

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chased out of venues, searched, or surveilled. The turbulence was clearly not always physical, tangible and overt. Rather, it was at times internalised in the form of struggling to plan and *feeling* negative emotional states in response to the turbulent environment.

### **5.4) Kinds of learning (external and internal operations): A new “normal” and learning how to respond to the norm of turbulent protest action**

During the turbulent protest action on campus, high achieving undergraduate students appear to have learnt more about what has come to be considered “normal” both in terms of strikes on campus, as well as in terms of race and equality in UKZN and nation-wide settings. The fifth theme generated from the data, “a new normal,” speaks directly to the kinds of learning that took place for high achieving undergraduate students regarding their external context.

Due to the way in which a number of the participants spoke nonchalantly about previous strikes on campus and the related turbulence they experienced, it is logical to conclude that there seems to be a process of desensitisation to strikes on campus over time. This would make sense seeing that Mandisa, the participant at the highest level of study and thus arguably with the most exposure to turbulence on campus, felt the least perturbed by the turbulent #FMF protest action. However, she also mentioned an aspect of mentally preparing herself each year for turbulence, when she said that “[...] [i]t was just like, it’s just something that happens, you know, every year, something’s gonna happen so you kind of prepare for it mentally and yeah.” (Mandisa, Interview, 194-196). Thus, it is more likely that the apparent nonchalance evident in some of the responses to the campus turbulence points to a process of resilience-fostering, as opposed to desensitisation. This process of resilience-fostering is aligned to the challenge model of resilience (Garmezy et al., 1984), which posits that facing a stressor that is not too slight or significantly excessive, enhances the person’s ability to adapt to a challenge (O’Leary, 1998).

The findings also show that the high achieving students began questioning and problematising, especially as a result of the turbulent protest action, external circumstances which were previously considered “normal” to them, such as race, equality and academic achievement. Some of the participants felt that the protests brought to the forefront how Black South Africans are still facing inequality at institutions of higher education, where they are treated differently and are still not afforded the same opportunities as other racial groups.

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Indeed, schools, and thus logically, universities, can be viewed as instrumental in the perpetuation of structural racism (Teeger, 2015). These participants were aware, however, as posited by CRT, that instances of inequality at institutions of higher education are not isolated but "... are symptomatic of a society that remains entrenched in racist ideologies" (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 3).

Other participants felt that times have changed, in that racial groups that are commonly considered as previously disadvantaged, are no longer the only ones facing socio-economic challenges. For these participants, it is the norm of "African-only" disadvantage that has come to be questioned and challenged. The high achieving students thus confirmed the notion that race is no longer a sole means of determining disadvantage (Etheridge, 2014). Moreover, by witnessing the turbulent protests and how certain groups of students were excluded from the movement due to their race, a few of the participants may have been conscientised of some of the racial dynamics in the protest action, in the university, and in South African society at large. These dynamics may be perpetuating inequality, the very thing that the #FMM movement sought to abolish. Through the various forms of critical thinking and through problematising what has come to be considered as normal – the mindsets, habits of mind and meaning perspectives referred to by Mezirow, (2009) – it is evident that transformative learning took place for high achieving students. Indeed, they became "... aware of the context of ideas and critically reflect[ed] on assumptions, including their own" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92).

The transformative learning did not end there. The sixth and final theme constructed from the data, "learning how to respond to the norm of turbulent protest action," captures what internal transformations occurred for the high achieving students during the turbulent protest action time. Particularly, the theme points to the finding that the participants learnt how to respond to their "normal" learning environment of turbulent protest action. The participants seemed to consider their own worldviews and values in order to decide what their position was in relation to the protest action. Moreover, they learnt, depending on their position, how to use resources in a way that would enable them to perform well academically, in spite of the turbulence surrounding them.

The aspects that influenced some of the participants' decision to participate or not, highlight the role of an individual's community in shaping their worldviews and values, and thus how

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they choose to respond to certain situations such as protest action on campus. For example, there seems to have been a sense of inner conflict at times for various participants between their values and desire to participate in the movement. Mandisa, for instance, was at times part of the protest, but actually believes in creating social change through education. Furthermore, Lindiwe would want to be a part of the protest but would be deterred by certain elements of the turbulence that went against what she believed to be “peaceful” from her internalised perspective of the Catholic Church.

Faced with such dilemmas, the high achieving students also had to learn how to balance their positionality and their high academic achievement during the turbulent protest action. Most of the participants had to do this by either deciding not to participate in the movement at all, by balancing protest during the day with academics in the evening or by finding other means of participation, such as social media platforms. The use of social media platforms to participate in the protest action was evidently widespread, as it largely influenced the growth of the movement as a whole (Glenn, 2016). Beyond this, the fact that students were able to find means to participate in the protest while simultaneously prioritising their academic, goes to show the ability of high achieving students, and South African students at large, to be qualitatively transformed (Vygotsky, 1987), adapt to their circumstances, and find alternative tools in order to reach their objectives.

Bos et al. (2016) found that students base their tool use on familiarisation as opposed to their learning needs. This corresponds to the findings of the current research, but only to a certain extent. All the participants seemed to be inclined to continue using their usual methods and tools for engaging with work during campus unrest. This worked well for those high achieving students who relied less on attendance and more on internet sources. However, those who usually relied on lectures and library access for textbooks no longer had consistent access to these tools. These high achieving students had to adapt their tool usage during turbulent protest action. For instance, Lindiwe, who is familiar with and thus prefers using textbooks, needed to resort to the use of journal articles, which she found challenging but necessary. Thus, the current research posits that in times of turbulence, high achieving students may adapt their tool usage based on their learning needs, in order to ensure their academic success.

### **5.5) Conclusion**

This chapter drew on relevant literature as well as theory (as discussed in Chapter 2) in order to demonstrate what the main findings of this study may mean conceptually. Most of the overarching themes of the findings were categorised together in line with the research questions they relate to. It is evident that high achieving students experienced both external and internal operations in relation to what enabled and constrained their high academic achievement, as well as in relation to what they learnt during the turbulent #FMF protest action period.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

#### 6.1) Introduction

This chapter provides a succinct summary of the research process and main findings. The chapter also includes a brief consideration of the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as the contextual implications and recommendations for policy, practice and future related research.

#### 6.2) Summary of Research Process and Main Findings

This research aimed to explore high academic achievement among undergraduate students during protest action at UKZN. The researcher was interested in finding out what enables high achieving undergraduate students to sustain their high academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action; what constrains high achieving undergraduate students' academic achievement during times of turbulent student protest action; and finally, what kinds of learning take place for high achieving undergraduate students during times of turbulent student protest action. Drawing on a broad socio-cultural theoretical framework, the study viewed learning as a social, interactive, and shared process. Through the process of thematically analysing the data generated from the FGD and three individual interviews that were conducted, a total of six overarching themes were constructed, namely, "enabling external operations: others and artefacts as mediators of learning well in turbulence;" "enabling internal operations: the self as a primary resource for learning well in turbulence;" "constraining external operations: volatile spaces;" "constraining internal operations: internalised turbulence;" "kinds of learning (external operations): a new 'normal'" and "kinds of learning (internal operations): learning how to respond to the norm of protest action".

Despite facing a turbulent learning environment, experiencing internalised turbulence in the form of negative emotional states and the difficulty of planning, the high achieving students of this study were able to draw on external mediators in order to ensure their academic success. These external mediators included relationships with family members, lecturers, and academic peers and communities, as well as resources such as textbooks and internet sources. Through their ability to draw on these mediators, and to view certain aspects of the turbulent protest action positively, the high achieving students displayed self-regulation and academic

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resilience. Beyond this, they thrived – not only due to their high academic achievement in the face of turbulence – but because of the process of transformative learning that they experienced, as well.

### **6.3) Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

In considering some of the strengths or contributions of this research, there are very few published studies pertaining to how students learn and succeed academically in the face of a turbulent learning environment. Thus, although research has been conducted on how students learn during normal learning conditions, this study contributes to understanding how students learn well in seemingly abnormal conditions. The current research may provide information and guidance to students, lecturers and institutions alike about what enables and what constrains students from learning well during these turbulent times. The study also places emphasis on the strengths of undergraduate students and their ability to excel during turbulence. Thus, the research moves away from the largely deficit-focused literature that exists on students. Moreover, in a context of vast inequalities, turbulence in the higher education sector and in South Africa at large is likely to persist. The study may thus remain relevant in the future.

On the other hand, there are a few perceived limitations of this study. First, there is the possibility that students felt uncomfortable speaking of issues pertaining to race openly during the FGD and interviews, due to the fact that the researcher is white. These dynamics were taken into consideration when conducting data collection as well as during the process of data analysis. Second, in having the FGD before the individual interviews, students' novelty of the topic of high academic achievement in turbulence may have worn off and during the interviews, they may have presented opinions which were largely informed by the FGD. In contrast, however, this could enhance the data's triangulation. Considered from another perspective, conducting the FGD before the individual interviews with the same participants, might be a disadvantage due to the fact that the interviews may be biased. One way in which the researcher tried to intervene in this matter, was to probe for clarity and personal experiences or opinions, thus furthering the level of inquiry and adding something new or different to the data generated in the individual interviews.

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Additionally, some of the critical responses by a few of the participants may have been directly evoked by the researcher's specific, at times "leading" questions about race and equality. Furthermore, due to the qualitative framework and aims of this research, the sample of students was relatively small and contained participants with very particular similar attributes such as institution and College (UKZN, Humanities), level of study (undergraduate), race (Black), and high academic achievement. Although this served to enhance the homogeneity of the sample and thus the quality of discussion in the focus group, the findings of this study may not be generalisable to all students of other institutions of higher education.

### **6.4) Contextual Implications and Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Future Related Research**

UKZN as an institution of higher education can be praised for maintaining communication with students during turbulent protest action. In future instances of turmoil, the students will benefit from consistent communication from lecturers, as well as the university. Cohesion in the way in which academic coordinators and lecturers respond to turbulence (for example, by suspending lectures) will benefit the university community, especially those students who feel that due to safety concerns, they could not attend a class that was continuing with low attendance rates. Furthermore, a sense of cohesion will serve to reduce confusion among staff and students alike.

As shown by the findings of this study, lecturers seem to have a significant influence on high achieving undergraduate students. Thus, students will be influenced by the level of calmness or panic they perceive in their lecturers during times of campus unrest. If lecturers can remain contained and maintain a sense of control during protests, the high achieving students seem to feel less unsettled by the surrounding chaos. This may speak to what lecturers can do to increase their own, and subsequently, their students' sense of stability, during times of unrest.

UKZN and other institutions of higher education should be cognisant of the fact that during academic turbulence, students may face a variety of challenges that may negatively influence their experience at the institution. Not only do they face a reduction in access to their usual academic resources, but they also experience a negative change in the environment due to police and security presence, being searched and surveilled, as well as witnessing the



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destruction of buildings. In times of turbulence, it may thus be useful to ensure that practical resources are prioritised if lectures are suspended. For instance, the Wi-Fi on campus should remain accessible to students. Beyond access to practical resources, resources such as student support should become more actively involved in creating a sense of support for the students. For psychologists who form part of the student support centres at universities, there is room for engaging in critical discussion regarding the experiences of students in the university, as well as how to improve various forms of support for students during times of turbulence. For example, emotional support may be specialised for the context of turbulence on campus for all students (engaging/not engaging in protests). Moreover, psychologists in student support centres could collaboratively create resources for students such as tips on how to stay up-to-date with work, even during turbulence.

The university management can also work collaboratively with student support to create a safe space or forum to allow for students to express how they feel about the changes on their campus, as well as to make suggestions about ways that the institution can ameliorate their distress or sense of disorganisation. After all, their presence on campus is what is core to a contact-based institution of higher education such as UKZN. Furthermore, enabling a platform for representatives of students to meet and liaise with security and police forces may be useful in demystifying their presence on campus, and enhancing a sense of union and safety between students and security, as opposed to the alienation and fear that students may experience.

Distance teaching techniques during contact-based turmoil may become a core feature in the future of UKZN and similar institutions. In future instances of turmoil, lecturers may wish to draw on other techniques of teaching their students, such as having an online video-call meeting, or an online discussion or forum about the topic(s) that were to be discussed in class. This mode of learning has already been implemented by some lecturers during times of non-disruption but as a method of assessing, as opposed to a primary method of teaching.

Regarding future relevant research, a similar study could be conducted with a sample containing Black and White participants from another College or field of study beyond the Humanities. This will provide more information about how various races as well as Colleges and students perceived and responded to the turbulence in their academic environment. Future studies may also consider looking at how students who participated fully in the protest

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action managed to learn. Furthermore, radical research on how to prevent a protest from resulting in turbulence in higher education could be also conducted. In continuing the anti-deficit approach of this study, future research surrounding students facing turmoil in higher education settings may utilise the constructs of Positive Psychology as a theoretical framework, or as a complementary theory to an existing broad theoretical framework. In terms of the methodological considerations for future studies, it may prove beneficial to run a pilot FGD, as well as to prepare the participants for the FGD in advance, making them aware that it is a space for shared discussion. Participants should be encouraged from the outset to engage with one another, directing comments to other participants as opposed to solely responding to the researcher. Member checking or respondent verification may also be implemented to enhance the data's confirmability.

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## Appendices Appendix A: Turnitin Originality Report

### Monique Schoeman final dissertation

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## Appendix B: Gatekeeper's Approval for Overarching Research



6 January 2015

Dr Nicholas Munro  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
College of Humanities  
Pietermaritzburg Campus  
UKZN  
Email: [munro@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:munro@ukzn.ac.za)

Dear Dr Munro

### RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

*"The student academic exceptionalty project: Equity and exceptional academic achievement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal".*

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample as follows:

- with a request for responses on the website. The questionnaire must be placed on the notice system <http://notices.ukzn.ac.za>. A copy of this letter (Gatekeeper's approval) together with the ethical clearance must be simultaneously sent to [govenderlog@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:govenderlog@ukzn.ac.za) or [ramkissoob@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ramkissoob@ukzn.ac.za). You are not authorized to distribute the questionnaire to staff and students using Microsoft Outlook address book.
- access to UKZN data.

Please note that the data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely

  
MR BAATILE POO  
REGISTRAR (ACTING)

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 8005/2206 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 7024/2204 Email: [registrar@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:registrar@ukzn.ac.za)

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)



Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Hlengiwe College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

**Appendix B.1 Ethics Approval for Overarching Research**



12 February 2015

Dr Nicholas Munro 316183  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Dr Munro

Protocol reference number: HSS/0060/015CA

Project title: The student academic exceptional project: Equity and exceptional academic achievement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

**Full Approval – Expedited Application**

In response to your application received on 3 February 2015, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol have been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

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

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

  
.....  
Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)  
Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

/pm

Cc Supervisor/Project Leader: Dr Siaka Lougue, Annapurna Hazra & Kealoleboga Maruping  
Cc Academic Leader Research: Professor D McCracken  
Cc School Administrator: Mr Sbonelo Duma

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Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/8350/4557 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4609 Email: [zimban@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:zimban@ukzn.ac.za) / [snymam@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:snymam@ukzn.ac.za) / [mohunp@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:mohunp@ukzn.ac.za)

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**Appendix B.2: Updated Ethics Approval for Overarching Research**



22 March 2017

Dr Nicholas Munro 316183  
Annapurna Hazra  
Keaoleboga Maruping  
Siaka Louge  
School of Applied Human Sciences – Psychology  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Dr Munro

Protocol reference number: HSS/0060/015CA  
Project title: The student academic exceptionalty project: Equity and exceptional academic achievement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

**Full approval notification- Amendment application**

This letter serves to notify you that your application for an amendment dated 14 March 2017, has now been approved as follows.

1. Change in project leaders/collaborators
2. Access to 2016/2017 UKZN Scholarships lists

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.

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

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shamila Naidoo', is written over a horizontal line.

Dr Shamila Naidoo (Deputy Chair)

/px

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Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

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Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/8350/4557 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4609 Email: [ximbsc@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbsc@ukzn.ac.za) / [apvman@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:apvman@ukzn.ac.za) / [mohunp@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:mohunp@ukzn.ac.za)

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)



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## LEARNING DURING TURBULENT TIMES

21 February 2017  
Dr Shenuka Singh  
Chair: Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Dear Singh,

**Re: Amendments to research protocol (HSS/0060/015CA): 21 February 2017**

Ethical approval was granted for the abovementioned research project on 12 February 2015 (see Appendix 1).

Approval for two minor amendments to the protocol are requested. These proposed amendments are detailed below:

1) Change in project leaders/collaborators:

In the initial ethics application (see Appendix 2, page 1), four UKZN staff members were listed as project leaders/collaborators. Kindly note that I am now the only UKZN staff member working on this project. Could this please be amended with HSSREC?

2) Access to 2016/2017 UKZN Scholarships List

In the initial project proposal, gatekeeper's permission (i.e., the Chair of the UKZN's Scholarships Committee) was sought (and granted – see Appendix 2, page 35) to access the 2014/2015 list of UKZN potential scholarship recipients.

Data collection for this project is continuing in 2017, and therefore, I have sought permission from the Chair of the UKZN's Scholarships Committee for access to the 2016/2017 list. This permission has been granted (see Appendix 3).

It would be appreciated if ethical approval could be granted for the abovementioned modifications to the original research protocol.

Sincerely



Nicholas Munro, PhD  
Lecturer: Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus

**Appendix C: Ethical Approval of Current Research**



15 June 2017

**Ms Monique Elizabeth Schoeman (213532594)**  
School of Applied Human Sciences – Psychology  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Ms Schoeman,

**Protocol reference number: HSS/0635/017M (Linked to HSS/0060/015CA)**

**Project title: Learning during turbulent times: An exploration of high academic achievement in undergraduate students during protest action at UKZN**

**Approval Notification – Expedited Application**

In response to your application received on 29 May 2017, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

**PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.**

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

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

.....  
Dr Sherruka Singh (Chair)

/ms

Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Munro  
Cc Academic Leader Research: Professor D Wassenaar  
Cc School Administrator: Ms Mandy...

**Appendix D: Approval from Chair of UKZN Scholarships Committee**

RE: Request for approval: Access to UKZN Scholarships report/list

12 January 2015  
03:20 PM

Subject	RE: Request for approval: Access to UKZN Scholarships report/list
From	Renuka Vithal
To	Nicholas Munro
Sent	05 January 2015 11:04 AM

Dear Dr Munro

Your request is supported.

May I also kindly request that you provide the Scholarships Committee with a report on your findings when the study is completed.

Regards

Prof Renuka Vithal (or acemv)  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning)  
Professor in Mathematics Education  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Maddal Kuzeni Road  
Howard College Campus  
2nd Floor Francis Stock Building  
Tel: 031 260 3585 Fax: 031 260 3360  
Email: [rvithal@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:rvithal@ukzn.ac.za)  
[www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)  
PA: Ms Corlia Olivia Ogle  
Tel: 031 260 4231 Fax: 031 260 3360  
Email: [corlia@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:corlia@ukzn.ac.za)

**From:** Nicholas Munro  
**Sent:** 02 January 2015 03:12 PM  
**To:** Renuka Vithal  
**Subject:** Request for approval: Access to UKZN Scholarships report/list

Dear Prof Vithal,

I write to you in your capacity as Chair of the University Scholarships Committee.

As you are aware, I am leading an institutional research project on exceptional academic achievement among UKZN students. One of the ways in which I can access the names of undergraduate UKZN students who are excelling academically is through the Scholarships Committee's Scholarship report/list. This report/list is generated by the Scholarships Office in Student Funding in preparation for the Scholarships Committee meetings which you chair.

I would like to request your approval for me to access the 2014 or 2015 Scholarships report/list so that I can objectively and purposively identify high achieving UKZN students. It is my intention to email the UKZN students on the list via their student email addresses, and invite them to participate in the institutional research project on exceptional academic achievement. The students will only be emailed ONCE, and if a student does not respond to the email, no further attempts will be made to contact her/him. Each student will receive an email inviting them to participate in the study by completing an online questionnaire, attending a focus group discussion, and/or participating in an interview with one of the researchers from the research team.

Please advise if you would approve and support the use of the Scholarships report/list in the abovementioned way.

Nicholas Munro, PhD

**Appendix D.1: Updated Approval from Chair of UKZN Scholarships Committee**

**RE: List of potential UKZN scholarship recipients**

21 February 2017 02:13 PM

Subject	<b>RE: List of potential UKZN scholarship recipients</b>
From	Karan Naidoo
To	Nicholas Munro
Cc	Denise Govender; Michael Davids
Sent	15 February 2017 11:32 AM

Dear Nicholas

I am sure this will not be a problem.

However, we have not had a meeting as yet for the UKZN Undergraduate Scholarships for 2017. This is largely due to the examination results being made available only on 1 February 2017.

Denise will advise you once this meeting takes place.

Kind regards

Karan Naidoo

From: Nicholas Munro

Sent: 14 February 2017 10:51 AM

To: Karan Naidoo <NAIDOOK59@ukzn.ac.za>

Cc: Denise Govender <PILLAYDN@ukzn.ac.za>

Subject: RE: List of potential UKZN scholarship recipients

Dear Coria (and Denise)

Thank you – in the past I liaised with Karan and Denise (see attached)

Denise – in Prof Vithal's absence, I am simply looking for email support in principle for me to have access to the current UKZN Scholarships list for the purposes of a UTLO funded institutional research project. Once I have this support from the Scholarship's committee, I will then submit a revised application to HSSREC (see the attached current approval).

Thank you

Nicholas Munro, PhD  
Lecturer: Discipline of Psychology  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Private Bag X01  
Scottsville, 3209

Tel: +27 33 260 5371

Email: [munron@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:munron@ukzn.ac.za)

From: Karan Naidoo

Sent: 16 April 2015 09:44 AM

To: Nicholas Munro

Cc: Denise Govender

Subject: RE: List of potential UKZN scholarship recipients

Dear Nicholas

We are having another meeting on 20 May. After this I will be able to give you an updated list which

**Appendix E: Email Invitation to Prospective FGD Participants**

Dear student,

**Invitation to participate in a focus group discussion on the topic of exceptional academic achievement by UKZN students**

We are conducting an institutional research study on undergraduate students who excel academically at UKZN. As an undergraduate student who has excelled so far at UKZN, you are being emailed and invited to participate in a focus group discussion on the topic of exceptional academic achievement at UKZN (see attachment to this email for more information on the focus group discussion and the study).

If you are interested in participating in a focus group discussion on the campus you are studying, please reply to this email and we will get back to you with further details about the date, time, and venue of the focus group discussion.

Sincerely,

Monique Schoeman

Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

moniqueschoeman@rocketmail.com

Asthu Mahabeer

Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com

**Appendix F: Participant Information Sheet for FGD**

Dear student,

**Participant information sheet: Research study on exceptional academic achievement by UKZN students (focus group discussion)**

The research study

We are from the PMB School of Applied Human Sciences, discipline of Psychology, and are conducting an institutional research study on undergraduate students who excel academically at UKZN. The aim of the project is to explore how undergraduate UKZN students excel academically, with a particular focus on learning during protest action. The results from the study could assist UKZN to understand what facilitates exceptional academic achievement at UKZN, and how this could be encouraged and supported. You have been invited to participate in a focus group discussion.

The focus group discussion

The focus group discussion will take about 90 minutes, and will be held in a venue on your campus. There will be about six other students in the focus group discussion. The facilitator of the focus group discussion will invite you to share your experiences on how you manage to excel academically at UKZN, and you should only share what you are comfortable to.

Confidentiality, anonymity, and risks/benefits

You will also be asked to sign a confidentiality pledge wherein you agree not to reveal to others the contents of what was discussed in the focus group discussion. You may elect to use your actual name or a pseudonym (i.e., a made-up name) during the focus group discussion and this research study. If you elect to use a pseudonym, this name will be used thereafter in any presentations or dissertations and journal articles that may arise, and you will not be identifiable within the study. However, if you elect to use your actual name, you are electing to have your identity revealed in the research study, and any dissertations or journal articles that may arise from the study. You can always change your mind at a later stage regarding the use of your actual name or pseudonym. There are no foreseeable risks to your participating in the focus group discussion. If you experience any distressing feelings during the focus group, due to difficult subject matter pertaining to experiences during the protest action last year, you will be referred to student support services, should you feel the need to go.

## LEARNING DURING TURBULENT TIMES

With your consent, the focus group discussion will be audio-recorded so that the researcher can transcribe and analyse what the participants said.

### Storage of information and accessing more information about the study

The audio-recordings and transcripts from the focus group discussions will be stored in a secure location for a period of five years, after which they will be destroyed. The data will be used for postgraduate student dissertations and journal publications. The data may also be used in presentations of the research findings at student conferences. If you selected to remain anonymous in the focus group discussions, no identifying information about you will be published or presented. If you have any questions about this study, you can contact any of the research team members detailed below, or Ms Phume Ximba of the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (031 260 3587, email [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za)).

### Voluntary participation and freedom to withdraw from the study

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point and for any reason.

A summary of the findings from the research study can be made available to you on request.

If you have agreed to be a participant in the study, but subsequently do not attend the focus group, your participation will be terminate.

### Incentive/Compensation

In order to show our appreciation of your participation in the study, refreshments shall be served at the focus group.

Thank you

Monique Schoeman ([moniqueschoeman@rocketmail.com](mailto:moniqueschoeman@rocketmail.com))

Asthu Mahabeer ([mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com](mailto:mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com))

Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

**Appendix G: Invitation to Prospective Interview Participants**

Dear student,

**Invitation to participate in an interview on the topic of exceptional academic achievement by UKZN students**

I am conducting a research study in fulfilment of a master's degree in Educational Psychology. The study is based on undergraduate students who excel academically at UKZN during protest action. As an undergraduate student who has excelled so far at UKZN, and who has just taken part in the focus group of this study, you are invited to participate in an individual interview on the topic of exceptional academic achievement at UKZN during protest action (see attachment to this email for more information on the interview and the study).

If you are interested in being interviewed, please confirm by filling in the bottom of this sheet and returning it to me. I will then contact you so that we may organise the date, time, and venue of the interview. The interview should not take longer than an hour.

Sincerely,

Monique Schoeman

Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

moniqueschoeman@rocketmail.com

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**I, \_\_\_\_\_, would like to be contacted in order to participate in an interview for the purpose of the above-mentioned research study.**

**Please contact me on: \_\_\_\_\_ (Insert email address/ cell phone number) in order to confirm when and where we can conduct the interview.**

**Sign \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_**



**Appendix H: Participant Information Sheet for Individual Interview**

Dear student,

The research study

We are from the PMB School of Applied Human Sciences, Discipline of Psychology, and are conducting an institutional research study on undergraduate students who excel academically at UKZN. The aim of the project is to explore how undergraduate UKZN students excel academically, with a particular focus on learning during protest action. The results from the study could assist UKZN to understand what facilitates exceptional academic achievement at UKZN, and how this could be encouraged and supported. You have been invited to participate in an individual interview.

The interview

The interview will take about 60 minutes, and will be held in a venue on your campus. The interviewer will ask you some questions relating to your high achievement during protest action, and you should only share what you are comfortable to.

Confidentiality, anonymity, and risks/benefits

You may elect to use your actual name or a pseudonym (i.e., a made-up name) for this research study. If you elect to use a pseudonym, this name will be used thereafter in any presentations or dissertations and journal articles that may arise, and you will not be identifiable within the study. However, if you elect to use your actual name, you are electing to have your identity revealed in the research study, and any dissertations or journal articles that may arise from the study. You can always change your mind at a later stage regarding the use of your actual name or pseudonym. There are no foreseeable risks to your participating in the focus group discussion. If you experience any distressing feelings during the interview, due to difficult subject matter pertaining to experiences during the protest action last year, you will be referred to student support services, should you feel the need to go.

With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded so that the researcher can transcribe and analyse what the participants said.

## LEARNING DURING TURBULENT TIMES

### Storage of information and accessing more information about the study

The audio recordings and transcripts from the interviews will be stored in a secure location for a period of five years, after which they will be destroyed. The data will be used for postgraduate student dissertations and journal publications. The data may also be used in presentations of the research findings at student conferences. If you selected to remain anonymous in the interviews, no identifying information about you will be published or presented. If you have any questions about this study, you can contact any of the research team members detailed below, or Ms Phume Ximba of the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (031 260 3587, email [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za)).

### Voluntary participation and freedom to withdraw from the study

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point and for any reason.

A summary of the findings from the research study can be made available to you on request.

If you have agreed to be a participant in the study, but subsequently do not attend the focus group, your participation will be terminated.

### Incentive/Compensation

In order to show our appreciation of your participation in the study, you shall be offered a choice of either R40.00 in cash to compensate for your time/travel fare, or, a R40.00 meal voucher from the “Hex Cafeteria”.

Thank you

Monique Schoeman ([moniqueschoeman@rocketmail.com](mailto:moniqueschoeman@rocketmail.com))

Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

**Appendix I: Confidentiality Pledge for Focus Group Participants**

As a participant of this focus group discussion, I understand that some people would not want what they disclosed here today to be shared with any person outside of this focus group discussion. Therefore, I agree to maintain confidentiality about what was discussed during this focus group discussion and who discussed it. By signing this pledge, I promise to keep the comments made by the other focus group participants confidential

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

**Appendix J: Stimulus Activity and FGD Semi-structured Guide**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activities and facilitator prompts/questions</b>
20min	<p><b>Part 1: Introduction and consent:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants arrive</li> <li>• Introduction</li> <li>• Overview of study</li> <li>• Information sheet</li> <li>• Informed consent</li> </ul>
35min	<p><b>Part 2: Stimulus activity:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator asks participants to “separate the piece of paper provided into two; on the one half, draw a UKZN space that you think enables students to excel academically; on the other half, draw a UKZN space that you think prevents UKZN students from excelling academically”</li> <li>• Students complete the drawing independently</li> <li>• Each student then takes a turn to show and explain their drawing to the group</li> </ul>
35min	<p><b>Part 3: Open discussion:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is exceptional academic achievement at university? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1. How have your perceptions of exceptional academic achievement changed as a result of the strikes on campus last year?</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

## LEARNING DURING TURBULENT TIMES

	<p>2. What helps you to excel academically in normal circumstances?</p> <p>2.1. Does this change during protest action? If so, How?</p> <p>3. What role does your family play in your academic achievement?</p> <p>4. What role do your lecturers play in your academic achievement?</p> <p>5. What role do resources play in your academic achievement?</p> <p>6. Which groups of students seem to excel more than others? Why might this be so?</p> <p>6.1. Do you think there is a relationship between race and high academic achievement? In what ways?</p> <p>7. What prevents you from excelling academically in normal learning conditions?</p> <p>7.1. What factors constrain your academic achievement during protest action?</p> <p>8. In which degrees/modules is it harder to excel academically in?</p> <p>9. Which systems at UKZN frustrate your attempts to excel academically?</p> <p>10. What could UKZN do to help you excel academically, especially during times of campus unrest?</p>
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**Appendix K: Interview schedule**

1. Introduction, overview of research, and consent
2. Tell me about what you are studying at the moment?
  - a. How did you decide to study this?
  - b. What is your schooling background?
  - c. Where is your family background? (focus on study)
3. You were a high achieving undergraduate student at UKZN in 2016. What does it mean to you to be a high achieving student?
  - i. What aspects of the university do you think help you to excel academically?
  - ii. What do you think negatively affects your academic achievement?
4. Do you think it is important for students to excel academically?
  - i. Why? Why not?
5. Last year, you managed to perform well despite the FeesMustFall protest action. What is your understanding of this protest action?
  - i. How did the protest affect you and your studies?
  - ii. How did you manage to do so well even while there was a protest happening?
  - iii. What motivated you to persist at your studies, even though there were constant disruptions?
6. Is there a relationship between high academic achievement and race/power?
  - i. How do you think the protest action of 2016 influenced this relationship?
7. How did the strikes change the way you think about university?
8. How did the strike change the way you view yourself, as a high achieving student?
9. What could lecturers do in the classroom to assist students to excel academically during turbulent times?

## LEARNING DURING TURBULENT TIMES

10. What could students do to assist themselves to excel academically in the context of campus unrest?

**Appendix L: Informed Consent**

DECLARATION

I \_\_\_\_\_ (full name) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participate in the research project. I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

Additional consent

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio recording of the focus group discussion that I participate in

YES/NO

For my actual name to be used in the research study

YES/NO

Signature of participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix M: Guidelines for Reading Quotes and Transcriptions Symbols used in  
Chapter 4**

Raw data and the source of it is included and denoted in two ways:

- 1) When the quoted speech consists of dialogue or successive comments by multiple participants, the participant pseudonyms are presented before their speech and followed by a colon.
- 2) When the quote consists of one or more comments which were not successive but made by different participants in relation to the same content, then the participant pseudonyms are presented after their quoted speech, in parenthesis.

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Symbols used	Indication
[...]	Some text has been omitted from the excerpt.
...	If at the end of a sentence, the participant did not complete their sentence or trailed off.
[Text]	Nonverbal communication by participant or clarification of pronouns such as he/she/they inserted by the researcher.

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