

Students' Construction of Academic Success  
in Higher Education

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## **SUPERVISORS' AUTHORISATION**

As the candidate's supervisors I agree/do not agree to the submission of this thesis.

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Date: .....

## **DECLARATION**

**I, Subbalakshmi Deenadeyalan Govender, declare that**

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.....

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.....

**Date**

## A DEDICATION

I dedicate this research study report to my mother Savtri Naidoo, a true educator,

to all those who have contributed to my evolution as a lecturer and a performer including my brother, Prakash,

and especially to Karthy, who has always provided love, support and inspiration, Tarlia Rasa and Yesh who were patient through my many years of study, Omashini, for being another daughter to love and live with and finally to Yaraya Lakshmi , a wise one year old who makes me see everything anew.

*If we really understand the problem the answer will come of it because the answer is not separate from the problem*

Krishnamurthi

## ABSTRACT

This study explored how students construct and perform academic success in Higher Education (HE) in the context of consistently high failure and dropout rates. The South African Department of Education (DoE) reported that of the 120 000 students who enrolled in higher education in 2000, 50% dropped out in either the first or second year of study and only 22% graduated within the specified three year duration for a generic Bachelors degree. Research literature used in this study has indicated that failure and drop out in HE have been the subject of problem based research in South Africa with much more literature exploring the HE dropout rate and its contributory factors.

The main purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of academic success from the successful student's point of view and how comparatively few students constructed, produced and performed academic success within a Humanities undergraduate programme at a South African university. The interest of this investigation lies in the area of the broader academic and social discourses that they, as successful students, inhabited and through which they produced and performed their success in undergraduate studies.

International research literature used in this study indicated that although retention has been the subject of research for over seventy years in the US for instance, drop out rates in HE which are comparable to South Africa have not improved. Originating in the US, The Tinto Student Integration Model explaining student success proved to be useful as a starting point to understand both the way academic success was constructed by the participants in this study and why they constructed it in this way in relation to their social and academic integration at university in the context of their personal backgrounds. The model was supplemented by educational, psychological and sociological theories of epistemological access, motivation, agency and student engagement. This layered set of lenses was further deepened by seeing academic success in the context of Ubuntu, a particularly African philosophy of humanism which completed the conceptual framework of this study.

This research study was located within an interpretative case study design. Four out of twelve successful students were purposively selected for this study. All participants had studied either for a three year BA or B Social Science in either the Drama and Performance Studies

or English Studies programmes at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. A dual method approach was used for the generation of data, including semi-structured interviews with each participant, which took place over a period of twelve months. Data gathering also included written autobiographies and research journal notes. The process of data gathering and interpretation went through various stages to produce a story portrait of each participant which encompassed research journal notes. In using an interpretative representation technique by designing the research instrument (semi-structured interview) around the themes of one of the novels studied by the English Studies students, I was able to access a worthwhile research tool for validation and it added another layer of meaning making in understanding academic success.

The key findings which emerged out of a relational analysis of the narratives were based on a continuous dynamic movement of the successful student between and amongst the different areas of participation and integration at university in order to construct and perform academic success. One salient finding included the fact that while construction of academic success was designed on many levels with various points of entry and while performance was enacted in a multitude of environments (interpersonal, intrapersonal and institutional), neither construction nor performance could be concluded without motivation, self-regulation and agency which presented as elements of personal background of the participants in this study.

I chose to represent the subtleties, multitude of dimensions and the breadth and depth of the experience of the academically successful undergraduate student in the summative illustration of the metaphor of the lemniscate. It captured the backward forward momentum and sometimes hurtling dynamic experienced by the participants of this study in their construction, production and performance of academic success in their undergraduate studies and assists one to navigate this journey the successful students revealed. It also assists in understanding how the participants circumvented dropping out of H E. The topography of the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success typified not only momentum, direction and environment but also encompassed the emotional and psychological aspects which accompanied any movement through the lemniscates of academic success.

**Key words:** Academic success, life history, higher education, Tinto's Student Integration Model, Ubuntu, agency, epistemological access, student engagement.

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This momentous journey, over the past several years, that I have danced through at times and dragged myself through at others, would not have reached its end had I not had support from so many quarters.

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### **To my participants:**

I extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to all of you for participating in this study. You willingly shared your remarkable lived realities in becoming successful undergraduate students in a South African context. You are part and parcel of my success in concluding this study.

### **To the first Higher Education cohort at UKZN and its supervisors:**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

TSIM - Tinto Student integration Model
HE - Higher Education
UKZN - University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)
DPS - Drama and Performance Studies
ES - English Studies
DoE - Department of Education
CHE - Council for Higher Education
DoHET - Department of Higher Education and Training
UNISA – University of South Africa

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# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction to the study**

Research focusing on the efficiencies of higher education in South Africa has come into vogue in the last decade. This was driven by the necessity to review the measures put in place to realise the transformational imperatives that were set in the Department of Education White Paper 3: A programme for transformation of higher education, in South Africa in 1997. While most studies on educational transformation in South Africa had focused on this phenomenon from the negative discourse of illuminating the issues and factors that have hindered the process of transformation, this study takes a different position, that of understanding this aspect of higher education from the viewpoint of success.

More specifically, the study is focused on student academic success within the context of prevailing negative discourses on student access, throughput and completion rates. Much of the literature on student access, throughput and completion rates have focused on the systemic and political ills of the education system with vestiges from an apartheid past with a view to redressing the past inefficiencies and discriminatory practices. This study acknowledges these past inefficiencies and discriminatory practices, but goes beyond this by illuminating how, despite the obstacles, hurdles and political trauma, students have overcome these and achieved academic success. Apart from attempting to understand how these successful students were able to construct success, the study also hones in on why they were able to succeed academically. By taking this stance in this study an alternate view of academic success from a positive discourse perspective is provided.

In this study, the narratives of four students who have succeeded in completing their undergraduate study in regulation or minimum time are presented to illuminate how they have achieved academic success. Through this illumination the study reveals that resilience and support are key attributes that contribute to academic success, shifting the loci of focus on student throughput away from apartheid blame and socio-political factors to the individual and humanistic discourses that influence student throughput in higher education. As such, this study takes on the form of a narrative inquiry through which the data has been produced and

analysed. These studies are influenced by the contextual realities of student throughput and drop-out in higher education, set generally against the backdrop of the transformational agenda of South African. More specifically it is set against that of higher education and the interventions that have been made to address and promote this transformational agenda. It has been noted that less than one third of the students enrolled in undergraduate studies complete their qualifications in minimum or regulation time to completion, suggesting that our higher education system is struggling to achieve its intended efficiency levels. This study contributes to this discourse from the perspective of student experience.

## 1.2 General context for the study

During the last decade and a half, transformation and access have been the focus of attention of higher education institutions in South Africa. Current literature on access into these institutions suggests that, while in most cases, targets in respect of admissions have been met (Cloete & Bunting, 2000), the success rate of these students needs attention.

Table 1 shows some alarming statistics of student admission and dropout rates in higher education (HE) and gives some idea of why the government has had to put R4.5 billion into grants and subsidies in HE with few returns during the cycle beginning in the year 2000 (Simkins, Rule, & Bernstein, 2007).

**Table 1. Retention Statistics 2005**

	<b>Number of Students</b>
Year 2000 enrolment	120 000
1 <sup>st</sup> year	36 000 dropout (30%)
2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	24 000 dropout (20%)
Of remaining 50%	60 000
22% graduated in specified 3 years with a generic Bachelors degree	13 200

*DoE Student Enrolment Planning in Public Higher Education March 2005 (p. 29)*

Table 1 shows that in 2005 the South African Department of Education (DoE) reported that of the 120 000 students who enrolled in higher education in 2000, 36 000 (30%) dropped out in their first year of study and a further 24 000 (20%) dropped out during their second and third years. Of the remaining 60 000 (50%), only 22% graduated within the specified three year duration for a generic Bachelors degree (Letseka & Maile, HSRC Policy Brief, 2008). So of the 2000 cohort of 120 000 students, only 13 200 completed their degree studies in regulation time (by 2003) and 28% were still in the system.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE)'s 2013 proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa mooted a flexible curriculum structure confirms, clarifies and supplements the above statistics in its executive summary (p.15):

South Africa's graduate output has been found to have major shortcomings in terms of overall numbers, equity, and the proportion of the student body that succeeds. Despite there being a small intake that has good academic potential, performance in higher education is marked by high levels of failure and dropout. For example:

- Only about one in four students in contact institutions (that is, excluding UNISA) graduate in regulation time (for example, three years for a three-year degree). (See comparable statistic of 22% in Table 1 above).
- Only 35% of the total intake, and 48% of contact students, graduate within five years.
- When allowance is made for students taking longer than five years to graduate or returning to the system after dropping out, it is estimated that some 55% of the intake will never graduate. (Compare combined 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year drop-out statistics of 50% in Table 1 above).
- Access, success and completion rates continue to be racially skewed, with white completion rates being on average 50% higher than African rates.
- The net result of the disparities in access and success is that under 5% of African and Coloured youth are succeeding in any form of higher education.

These performance patterns are not compatible with South Africa's need to develop the intellectual talent in all its communities. Moreover, there are no grounds for hoping that the patterns are a temporary aberration. They have not changed significantly since the intake cohort of the year 2000, which was the first to be subject to sector-wide longitudinal analysis;

and it is evident that, given the conditions in the education system as a whole, they will not improve without decisive intervention.

Some of the interventions which are already in place will be discussed in the next sub-section which contextualises student academic success within South African HE discourse.

South Africa has a pressing need for more graduates of good quality, to take forward all forms of social and economic development. It also needs more graduates to build up the education system itself by providing a strong new generation of teachers, college lecturers, academics and education leaders.

In the run-up to and following the publication of the DoE report (2005) referred to above, there was a plethora of studies that examined the HE dropout rate and its contributory factors (Letseka, 2007; Sibanda, 2004). This was owing to the problem based approach which was privileged in research in this area. These factors include the notion of students' 'under preparedness' or students not being academically 'strong enough'; their poor prior learning and language skills; their attitude and approach to education and their (unrealistic) expectations (of HE) which ultimately leads to their inability to take responsibility for their learning; and other issues such as personal, social, financial or family matters, some or all of which contribute to their failure (HE Monitor No. 9, March 2010). So we know a great deal about why students fail in HE.

However, despite the many factors identified in these studies which impede student throughput, there are students that complete their study programmes in regulation time. We know less about these students and what contributes to their success and even less about what they think about the whole notion of academic success in HE and how they realise this success, sometimes against daunting odds.

This study, therefore, shifts the lens to this perspective of student throughput by focusing on those who have been successful and how they have constructed and performed their success in Higher Education (HE) and more specifically, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa. It must be noted that the story of academic success is part and parcel of that of retention and throughput as one cannot exist without the other.

### **1.3 Context: student academic success in South African Higher Education (HE)**

In the latest document to be published by the state on higher education referred to above, The Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013) reacted to student throughput signals by mooted another intervention strategy to address a crucial factor relating to higher education. In the interests of educational transformation in South Africa, this document proposes a focus on curriculum in order to address persistently low graduate rates across the higher education system. This curriculum focus had been suggested by an earlier report on a survey on student engagement across a sample of higher education institutions within South Africa (Strydom & Mentz, 2010). It suggested that a four year degree structure for undergraduate degree would assist in achieving greater student throughput rates, especially in view of the poor school contexts that the majority of our students come from.

How have we come to this most recent proposal? As I have already mentioned, the ills of apartheid and the manner in which they have seriously affected the outputs of our educational system have been well documented in more than two decades of writings by both South African and international researchers, politicians and interested individuals. The essence of these inequities are captured in almost all of our policy documents that have been developed and enacted within the education system (Department of Education, 1997, Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education; CHE, 2004, South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy, Council on Higher Education, Pretoria).

The key concerns raised are inequity in educational provisions at South African schools and higher education levels, poor quality of curriculum, pedagogy and teachers and poor socio-economic conditions that marginalized the majority of the country's citizens. The limitations of poor policy-context driven education present an additional concern. All of these concerns are well documented in the two decades of research and publication, and will not be engaged with in this thesis. Rather, a progressive stance will be taken in my attempt to draw a landscape of interventions to change higher education within South Africa. Despite the negative contextual challenges referred to above, I believe this progressive stance will locate my research focus on student academic success, illuminating how some students negotiate their way around these very challenges on their journeys to academic success in Higher Education (HE).

In the post-apartheid era, central to higher education transformation within South Africa was the drive to increase access to university education to population groups who were previously denied this privilege. It did not stop here; however, the measures were designed to create opportunities that would assist students to go beyond access to completion of university qualifications. They were also expected to open up areas of study that would allow these graduates to participate in what were restricted economic enclaves prior to this. These initiatives were expected to contribute to the economy generally and in substantial ways, to lead to a better life for all.

Hence, in the early years of our democratic state, access to higher education became the focal point of intervention. Recognising that the starting points, the educational reservoirs of the 'previously denied' population groups were far from what was required in HE, several interventions were made in order to promote an increase in enrolment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These interventions ranged from place reservations for admissions, development programmes for increasing opportunities for access, support programmes for students that had come into university programmes through alternate access routes and funding opportunities to support their higher education studies. These interventions are also well documented in the literature on South African higher education (Cloete & Bunting, 2000; Cloete, 2006; Ramrathan, Manik & Pillay, 2007).

Through these interventions, there was a noticeable increase in access of previously disadvantaged population groups, especially those from the Black African population, suggesting that access targets of the higher education transformation agenda were being met across the system.

In more recent studies (Letseka & Maile, 2008) and national reports (Department of Education, Student Enrolment Planning in Public Higher Education March 2005; CHE, August, 2013), the way this gain in the access transformation agenda of higher education was being compromised through low throughput and graduation rates was focused on. Drop-out statistics were alarmingly high (CHE, August, 2013). This revelation has resulted in the shift in gaze from student access discourse to student retention, throughput and drop-out discourses.

This shift in gaze opened up a plethora of perspectives, largely through quantitative analyses of trends and patterns on student retention, throughput and drop-out, using surveys as an epistemological lens. Interventions to increase retention, promote throughput and decrease student drop-out became the focus of this access transformation agenda.

Some examples of interventions include those studied by Najwa Norodine-Fataar in Deyi, Simon, Ngcobo, Thole, and Volbrecht (2007), who interviewed academic development practitioners with special focus on the mentoring strategies they employed to support residence students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa. She found that student mentor programmes were conceptualised with a dual focus by these academic development practitioners. These consisted of an academic and a psychosocial focus, concluding that these foci served a positive purpose in connecting the two worlds the student inhabited while they were studying at university. The present study on academic success also privileges the academic and psychosocial areas through the conceptual framework that it uses (see Chapter Three).

One of the foremost debates in HE today was tackled in Deyi (2011), where bi/multilingualism as a tool for teaching and learning, was debated. He examined the discipline of Mechanics 1 at his university in the Cape Province, South Africa. He considered whether the notion of learning concepts in such disciplines as Mechanics 1 at university will be achieved with understanding if the learner is using a fully developed language. If students are able to develop higher order concepts through fully developed language which assists with knowledge processing, they will be better able to achieve academic success as they will be learning with understanding. Earlier, Deyi, Simon, Ngcobo, Thole, and Volbrecht (2007) had pointed out the cognitive advantages of using the mother tongue for conceptualization and teaching and learning. Before this he was supported by a study in teaching and learning in the discipline of Chemistry from the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa. Shembe (2002, p.6) indicated that “the hierarchical nature of chemistry is such that the understanding of certain key concepts (in the student’s mother tongue) is fundamental to the proper acquisition of subsequent knowledge”.

The introduction of this section refers to the difficulties some university students may have experienced in their pre university education and in their environments and clarifies the many manifestations of this concept. For instance, one of these takes the form of the

bi/multilingualism debate. So I began to think about how some Humanities students at UKZN construct and perform academic success and complete their degrees in regulation time despite having to defend themselves from all kinds of ‘violence’ perpetrated against them; educationally, in poor teachers, pedagogy and facilities; personally, in poor socio-economic circumstances and on the macro-level, in having to weather numerous changing and often ill-thought out education policies (Ramrathan, 2013).

It appeared to me that they had to have had a lot to do with their success themselves, so the purpose and motivation of my study was becoming clear. I had to find out how successful students understood success and academic success, what these concepts meant to them and how they constructed or made academic success at university from what they brought with them into the environment. What in the environment encouraged or discouraged them?

Having had access to a number of studies on drop-out and failure, I was clear that I wanted to examine the other side of the coin (retention and success) more closely. In view of the overwhelming drop-out rate (see p.2), I wanted to know if these successful students had ever felt that they had reached a point when they nearly dropped out and what they, the institution, the programme and or the academics did that took them beyond this point or this moment of imminent drop-out and kept them on the track to retention and finally, to academic success.

To summarise, initially the focus in HE was on the two issues; the issue of access and the issue of intervention in order to correct some of the inequities which resulted as a consequence of apartheid. Less emphasis was put on academic success and what it actually meant when seen from the students’ vantage point. The concept was measured rather in quantitative terms from the institution’s point of view and considered students to have met the institution’s criteria for academic success if they completed their degrees in regulation time. While the completion of an undergraduate degree in regulation time also serves as a baseline definition for the identification of successful students (who were participants in my study) this is to be seen merely as a starting point. The purpose of this study is to examine students’ construction and performance of academic success in HE. Its priority is to see academic success from a students’ point of view in a rigorous, systematic, scholarly, empirical manner using qualitative research methodology.

In the past, how students actually responded to HE studies was not considered to be of great importance because they were initially seen by institutions as suffering deficits which they came with. Therefore how they saw academic success and how they constructed and performed academic success was not given much currency.

However especially in the last two years, 2013 and 2014, the CHE has seen the need to focus on this issue in such publications as ‘A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: the case for a flexible curriculum Structure’ (August, 2013) and ‘The Framework for institutional quality enhancement in the second period of Quality Assurance’ (QAP) (February, 2014).

#### **1.4 Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was therefore to explore students’ construction and performance of academic success in undergraduate studies. The unit of analysis was the students who had successfully followed a three year programme with Drama and Performance Studies and/or English Studies as majors at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), and the phenomenon that was put under the microscope was the academic success of these students. My study on academic success favoured a specific vantage point, the point of view of the successful student. Arising from this, the seminal question that turned out to be all-encompassing was:

How do successful students construct academic success in HE?

This question presupposes the sub-questions:

- i) Why do they construct it in this way?
- ii) How do they perform academic success?

Sub-question i) relates to the espoused notions of academic success a student may harbour while sub-section ii) relates to their actual notions of academic success which are uncovered by the way in which they perform different aspects of this academic success in their journey through university which ends in their final attainment of academic success through the commensurate attainment of their undergraduate degrees.

## **1.5 Rationale for the Study**

### **1.5.1 My Personal Rationale**

During the last three decades at university, first at the University of Durban-Westville and subsequently at UKZN, my disciplinary focus as an educator within higher education has shifted from Drama and Performing Arts to the applied linguistic arena of English Language Development and Academic Literacy. During these experiences of teaching Drama and Performing Arts and affording academic support to students, several concerns emerged relating to a diversity of issues that impact negatively on student lives on campus.

Most students experience similar kinds of challenges, yet the responses from students vary. Some students succeed despite the difficulties that they experience, while others drop out of university. A better understanding of how students' academic success in undergraduate studies is constructed, presented and enacted will help to illuminate the issues that impede success and in some instances contribute to the high drop-out rate.

Therefore this study will provide valuable insights into how academic success can and has been harnessed by successful students. It will deepen the understanding of this concept and could contribute to policies in HE which aim to enhance academic success.

### **1.5.2 My teaching/ learning experience in HE**

Success in HE is a holistic concept including the development of sufficient skill to: engage with the academic material presented; socialize with peers, lecturers and other students; identify with the institution, and attain a degree with the possibility of continuing studies and professional training in a chosen discipline.

Essentially this represents a received understanding of the concept of academic success (espoused notion referred to above). I wished to excavate this held notion. In order to do this I had to explore well below the surface in order to get closer to how the successful students constructed and performed their academic success in HE. A rigorous systematic empirical scholarly research design assisted me to achieve this. In following this study I embarked upon

a demanding journey which had begun a long time ago with my intuitive judgments about academic success which I had gleaned from my many decades of engagement in HE.

In approximately four decades of lecturing in HE, I have noticed that the following circumstances can enhance academic success. Before the student is able to access and engage the material, she has to feel secure in respect of financial assistance (economic background, accommodation while at university). She has to also feel secure in her abilities and skills that she has brought to university with her (school background, confidence to succeed). Finally she should be comfortable in the choice of programme she has made (through guidance from others and having had clear information. This should occur if not at the commencement of first year, then within the first semester of the student's studies.

In the next few years leading up to final year, socialization with peers will come with membership of different communities, such as the class one belongs to and the residence one lives at. The class will also support profitable relationships with lecturers and the programme should give further opportunity for this. Playing out the relationship with peers and lecturers will, in the first instance, assist the student to understand her role in relation to teaching and learning in the discipline and how to behave within the academy. This latter understanding does not preclude her from taking a position which opposes prevalent theories and ideas and does in fact encourage non-conformist and exploratory views. After all the university is, in the first instance, the hothouse where innovation and new knowledge is encouraged to grow and flower.

Understanding of other student's viewpoints and their allegiance to other disciplines will assist the student to begin to understand the functioning of the institution as a whole, and will assist her with functioning in relation to other parts of the institution. In participating with non-academic activities, the student will learn indirectly to identify with the institution and its community.

In this community, the student will also learn how to negotiate her many roles as student, friend, partner and caregiver, in order to arrive at a schedule which will allow her to give undivided attention, when necessary, to the study programme. In order to do this, she must be motivated and directed, and display strong agency to persist until the degree has been attained and this in as short a period as possible. In addition, she must be able to be so informed by

this stage with the commensurate support that is necessary so that she is able to see a trajectory that goes beyond graduation. It could lead her to post-graduate studies and/or professional training.

### **1.5.3 Council on Higher Education (CHE): research into success**

In the CHE Report of the task team on undergraduate curriculum structure (August, 2013), Prof Njabulo Ndebele, the chair of the task team, indicates how progress, in respect of the transformation of education initiated in 1994, can be realized. He invokes The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which represents the new political dispensation as a guide to the realization of this initiative. This forms the basis of his understanding of the value and purpose of undergraduate education in South Africa, which brought together the concepts of active citizenship in relation to the value of a good education in the context of a working constitutional democracy. So the state and education were inextricably linked.

In this CHE study, education is represented by an undergraduate system in South Africa which is expected to help the state reach the goals of a post-apartheid South African society. The preamble of The Constitution exhorts South African citizenry to support democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights and in so doing, to ‘improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person’ (see The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, p.1). This is what the negotiated constitution demands from undergraduate education in terms of creating a society in which not only first generation rights (civil and political rights) are assured and protected, but which fights for second generation rights (socio-economic rights) to be afforded to all. This is expected to lead to equality in the long term and education is key.

Within the context of higher education transformation, student access was seen as a measure which could begin to address some of the past injustices of the South African political and educational system. It was seen as a medium through which the unrepresented majority was afforded educational opportunity, so students from disadvantaged backgrounds were targeted for admission into higher education institutions.

According to Cloete and Bunting (2000), the gross participation rate of African students in the higher education sector had grown from 9% in 1993 to 13% in 2000, but they have often

been over represented in the slow throughput and high attrition rates which plague the sector. The 2000 cohort study conducted by the DoE referred to above, presents a disturbing overall picture. By the end of 2004 (i.e. 5 years after entering), only 38% of the total first-time entering student intake into the university sector had graduated. 45% had left their original institutions without graduating and 17% were still in the system.

This report joins the vast literature on access which has suggested that alongside success in achieving this transformational agenda, emerged a growing concern for the small numbers who were actually passing once they had accessed the HE institutions (Scott, Yeld & Hendrey, 2007). As is evident in the introduction to this chapter, this concern related to student throughput, where it was found that the majority of students enrolled do not complete their studies in the minimum time. An even greater concern was that many drop out of university studies altogether. While the focus of subsequent research has been on understanding issues largely related to poor student throughput, little or no research focused on those who do accomplish their degree programmes in regulation or minimum completion time, sometimes against the greatest odds (Cross & Carpentier, 2009; D. Marshall & Case, 2010). This study attempts to contribute to this discourse from a student's point of view.

As my personal rationale indicates, during my many years as faculty I became aware of what I will term probable 'departure points' and how these experiences impinged on the student's goal of attaining academic success. This refers to an attempt to uncover what students did or what others (faculty or staff) or even programmes, did at those points in the student's career when difficulties arose in approaching the next milestone or when the student may have been at a cross-roads and leaving may have been probable (Jenkins & Leinbach, 2008). The privileging of this particular point in the students' career in HE is justified by the unacceptable drop-out rates prevalent within the South African HE system (see p.2).

Departure points and the analysis of this can be compared with what is being called "momentum point analysis", which is under great scrutiny in present HE research in the United States (US), albeit in longitudinal qualitative studies (V. Tinto, personal communication, 9 November, 2011). By analysing term-by-term student unit records (SUR) over a number of years and by incorporating individual student personal details, institutions of HE can create a powerful resource to understand progression and achievement and even success over time. With this understanding, strategies and interventions can be designed to

improve student success. Ewell and Jenkins (2008); Creswell and Clark, (2007); Teddlie and Tashakkori, (2009) present a guide to using such data to measure milestone achievements and momentum point attainments of community college students. Momentum points are measurable educational achievements that are linked with the completion of a milestone. So patterns of student progression and achievement are clarified by the milestone and momentum point data that are gathered.

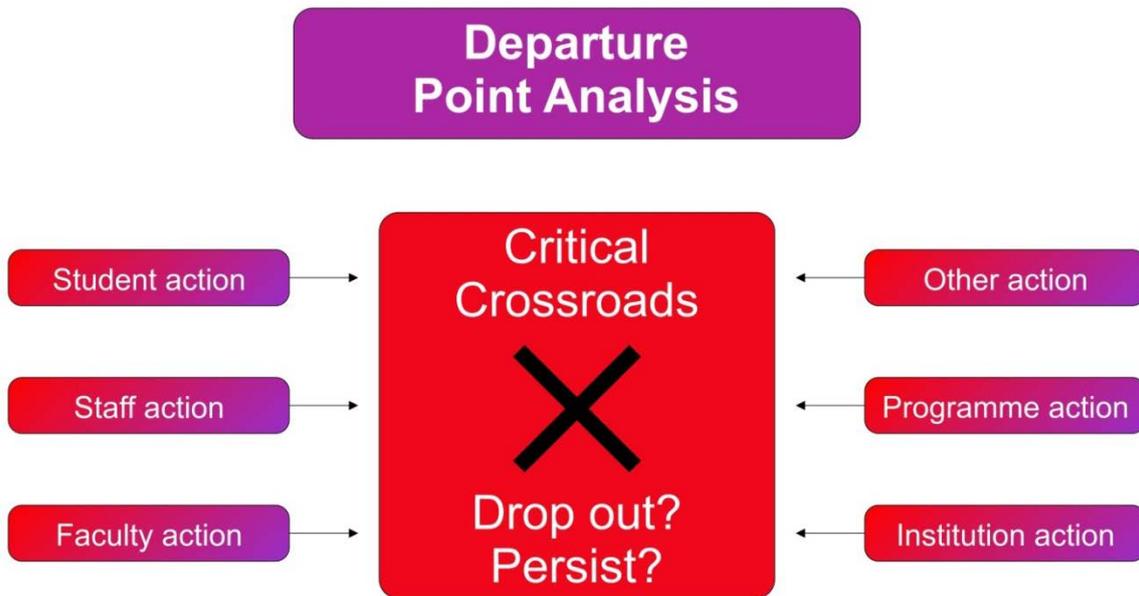
In this qualitative explanatory case study of successful Humanities undergraduates at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the term 'departure point' has been used to serve a particular purpose. It is used to uncover what made students stay and succeed in the programme especially at those points on their undergraduate journeys when events conspired to force them to the verge of drop-out.

#### **1.5.4 International studies in success in HE**

In the US, there is growing interest in analysis as it seeks to identify those points of achievement in a student's passage through an institution whose attainment is critical to further progress. On the other hand, these points could impede progress and even lead to students dropping out. Focusing on those critical points of possible departure one can ascertain if any types of actions or student responses are "characteristic" of successful students. That knowledge can, in turn, inform future practices or changes in practice on the part of staff and/or student and/or institution and this is expected to be amongst some of the important contributions this study has to offer to any research on success in HE. "There is little (qualitative) research on this type of analysis or its impact on college effectiveness" (V. Tinto, personal communication, 9 November, 2011).

To assist me in conceptualizing the analysis of possible points of departure I constructed a mind map (see Fig 1.1) of possible actions that could influence students at the cross-roads that could lead to their departure from university studies. Having faced a point of extreme challenge, the student may reach the critical crossroads where she has to decide whether she should persist in the programme she is in or whether she should drop out not only from the programme but from university altogether. That decision may be affected by what action is experienced by the student from other students, from staff, from the programme, from the

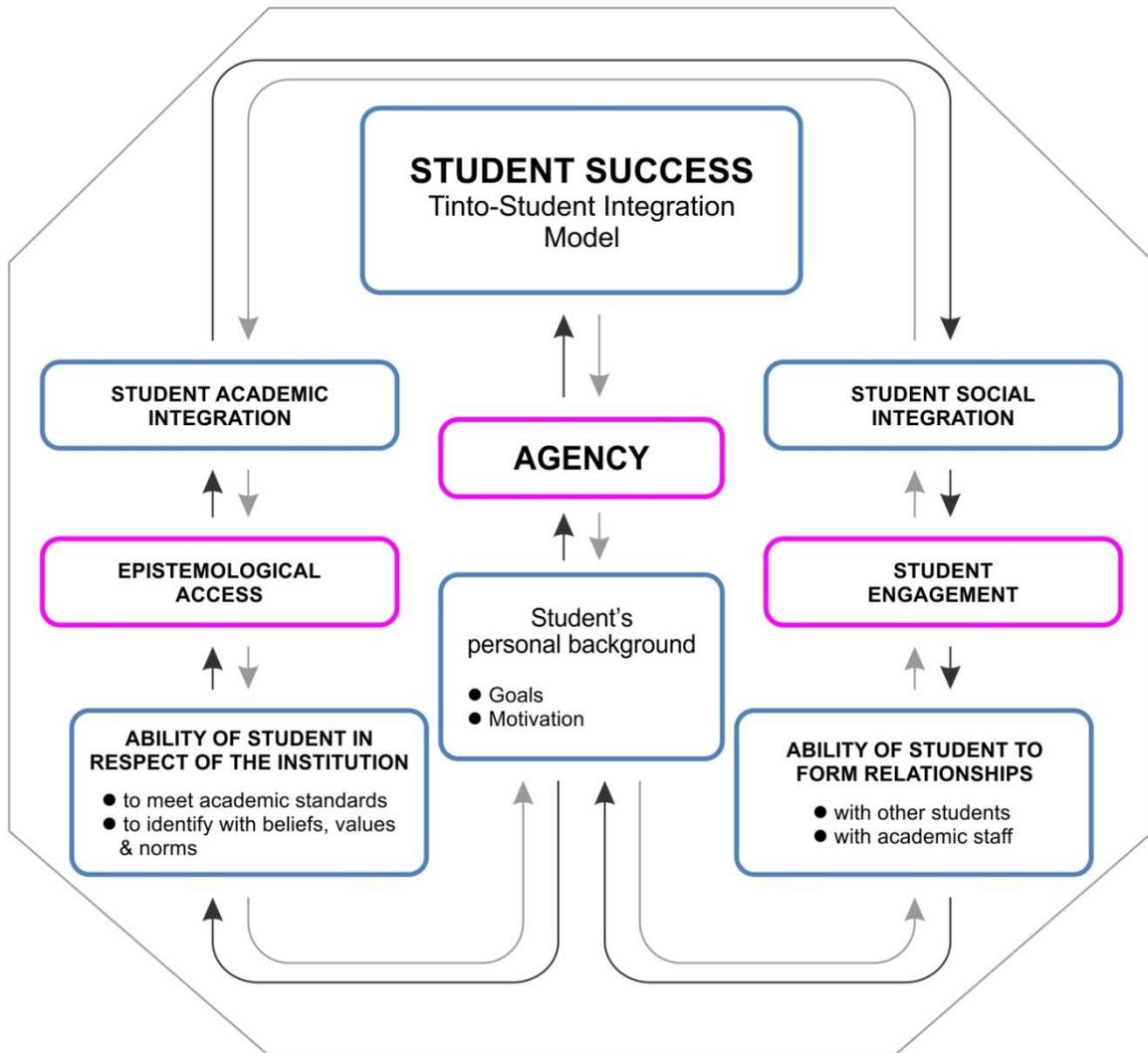
faculty, from the institution and/or any other action that may come from elsewhere in response to the student's dilemma.



**Fig 1.1. Model 1: Illustration of Departure point analysis**

As departure point analysis describes the point at which the student may have been forced to disengage from the institution and in view of the paucity of research in this area, I have decided to launch my investigation into academic success and departure point analysis using the conceptual model of Tinto's widely applied Student Integration Model (first mooted in 1975). This model describes what type of behaviour is expected from a successful student in respect of academic integration, social integration and what I term "personal integration" into the institution. It seemed to me that an explanation of the integration model would provide an appropriate launching pad for research into the opposing concept of dis-integration of the student from the educational environment, which is what departure point analysis is, in the first instance.

The importance of social integration and academic integration into an institution with respect to the academic success of the student is acknowledged and the layered multifaceted nature of the concept of success is fully encompassed by admitting Tinto's Student Integration Model (TSIM; 1975) into the conceptual and theoretical framework of this study (see Chapter Three for further explanation).



**Fig 1.2. Tinto Student Integration Model (with modifications)**

The model identifies five areas that impinge upon student success. They are:

- the ability of students to form relationships and bonds with other students;
- the relationship between academic staff and the students;
- students' personal background, goals and motivation;
- the ability of the student to meet the academic standards of the institution, and
- the ability of students to identify with beliefs, values and norms within the institution.

Students can disengage in one, many or all of these areas and this may have implications in any analysis of points of departure (Fig 1.1.).

The first two areas Tinto classifies as areas of social integration and the last two as those of academic integration. It is no surprise that between these two is the area that covers the students' own personal background, goals and motivation which feeds into social and academic integration in HE. In an assessment of either of these aspects of integration in HE a consideration of students' personal backgrounds and goals and motivation is necessary. In my opinion, this particular model goes only some way in accommodating the multifarious roles played by the student in the context of the university.

Psychological, sociological and educational constructs have been appropriated to supplement the student integration model and they include such concepts as epistemological access, motivation, agency, and student engagement, all of which have their own criteria to judge proper performance in these areas. These will be clarified and presented in the light of how they complement aspects of academic integration and social integration (Tinto's model). In addition, as has been explained above, moments of disintegration (disengagement from the institution) and how these can be stemmed will also be explained within this framework (see Chapter Three).

While the institution and staff and students act in concert in HE, the lens this study will favour, is coloured by the student perspective so the eye of the student is central.

This background of integration and academic success will throw into relief the moments of disintegration and potential academic failure and drop-out. One of these moments is encapsulated in departure point analysis which marks the point at which a student shows signs of not being able to clear the bar at critical points (milestones), in her passage through an institution.

There may appear to be an inordinate amount of weight being placed on the notion of student disintegration in a study on student academic success. This is because adequate recognition is being given to the fact that Academic success often entails the ability to negotiate around potential points of failure and drop-out in the part of the successful student. In this way she is able to reintegrate into the institution and connect with all those things which represent the institution. So some focus on disintegration is necessary to shore up this very idea of how academic success is constructed and performed.

That knowledge can, in turn, inform future practices or changes in practice on the part of staff and/ or student and/or institution which will be capable of enhancing success. In addition, there may be common behaviour that successful students' practise in order to survive and go beyond potentially debilitating crossroads. Clearly, this behaviour should be emulated by students who encounter similar situations and the institution should assist students to do so. Such decisions on the part of HE institutions will have direct implications on retention, throughput and academic success of their students. In focusing on academic success especially its construction and performance, the attainment of academic success has direct implications for throughput and retention.

Tinto's model is also relevant because it arose in an environment which displays the same proportion of dropouts at HE level and was developed to understand student success in such an environment. A communication provided by the US Department of Education, Center for Educational Statistics, reflects that only 50% of those who enter higher education actually earn a bachelor's degree. In 2010 it provided statistics which indicated that of about 2,800,000 students who were from high school this year 1,850,000 were expected to go to college and only 925,000 of these students were expected to earn a bachelor's degree.

Approximately thirty years ago, in 1982, Tinto said, "The national rate of student departure from colleges and universities has remained constant at 45 percent for over one hundred years" (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000, p.1). As we can see from the 2010 figures and Tinto's observation in 1982, not much seems to have changed regarding success and retention in HE in the US for a considerable length of time. As colleges in the US are always looking for ways to retain the students they recruit to academia, and further keep them focused on what they term "personal goal" completion, it would be interesting to examine the nature and effects of the measures they put in place to enhance goal completion and indeed academic success. This would support a comparison of their interventions against the findings of the present research on strengthening student success.

In so doing, this study will contribute to the discourse on what factors propel the undergraduate student towards success, even if they display some of the same difficulties as the 'drop-outs', including those such as financial difficulties and family responsibilities.

At the CHE / University of Free State colloquium in 2009, Kuh, a leading expert on student engagement in the US, discussed how HE outcomes can be improved in SA. He advised institutions to focus on things that students could do to help them to be successful. This relates to what institutions can do in order to provide the environment in which students do the kinds of things they need to do in order for their academic success to be realized. He accepted that “requiring students to do the right things” did not necessarily mean that every student should be required to enjoy exactly the same set of experiences, acknowledging fully the impracticality and sheer expense of this type of provision for thousands of students. Instead, he advised that each institution create its own practicable menu or matrix of different engaging experiences, which will enhance its students’ chances of success.

My study will go some way to assisting the UKZN to design its particular offerings in relation to what it would like its students to be engaged in. As the sample used in the study consisted of successful graduates, the institution will be given the opportunity to hear in the voice of its successful students, what they see as academic success, why they see it and construct it in this way and how they achieved academic success in their undergraduate studies in HE. For me, this was one of the most important reasons for mounting this study and it affected my choice of methodology.

## **1.6 Methodology and Validity of Findings**

The appropriate methodological choice lay within the interpretative paradigm because it allowed me to access deeper meaning and insight into students’ academic success through a study of what the students considered to be relevant psychological, social and educational action as they lived through this experience of performing academic success. Their reality in respect of their experiences in undergraduate studies and academic success was described and how they thought they constructed this success was considered during an interview and in a written autobiography of their student lives.

Both these instruments supported by research journal notes served to create one set of data that went through a number of iterations and was jointly generated by both participants and the researcher. I fully expected a representation of a multiplicity of realities based on differently constructed social frameworks and my choice of paradigm gave me licence to

interpret the representations. Meaning was created by both researcher and participant, and only after many iterations and communications was a final set of data arrived at (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Authenticity, explicit shared trustworthiness between researcher and participant, communication and sensitive observation, are the hallmarks of a good qualitative study and these goals were focused on throughout this study.

As the phenomenon of academic success was being studied within a bounded context, the case study of UKZN and the Humanities graduates who were specialising in English Studies and Drama and Performance Studies was settled on. I encouraged rich and detailed description in interviews which totalled between two and four hours in length and I applied inductive reasoning so that my investigations could be open-ended and exploratory in nature. I found the bottom-up approach appropriate as it allowed me to generate themes which upon examination and excavation, allowed me to hypothesize, explore and develop theory (Cresswell & Clarke, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

As qualitative studies are usually supported by the depth of material as opposed to the breadth of material, my four participants identified by purposive sampling and the depth of the material mined for the purposes of this study, were in line with the requirements of such a study.

To some, this may be considered to be a point of weakness of this study, as generalizability would be restricted. Others would accept this investigation as an explanatory case study which will have strategic importance in relation to a general problem (Jon & Greene, 2003). In this study the problem was that of failure of retention as indicated in the introductory paragraphs of this report but I still felt it was of strategic importance to look at academic success as a phenomenon. This led to a close examination of those who succeed academically and construct and perform their academic success in HE.

Yet others will also appreciate that such an explanatory case study of students' construction of academic success at UKZN could possibly also provide a way of testing Tinto's Student Integration Model as I have adapted it to generate hypotheses regarding successful students' construction and performance of academic success in HE (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The students (participants) in this study were chosen from the cohort of Humanities students with Drama and Performance Studies and/ or English Studies majors, who graduated in 2012. They met the criteria as defined for the purposes of this investigation. They had obtained a three year degree. They had obtained the said degree in regulation time or within the expected time frames (CHE, 2010).

While emphasis was not placed on theorising the specific effects Drama and Performance Studies and English Studies had on the participants' academic success, explicit references to discipline specific teaching and learning which enhanced their success unfolded in both the first and second levels of the analysis of the data. Apart from this, the participants were following general degrees which included the study of a number of other modules from other disciplines which may have assisted them to construct and perform academic success in their undergraduate studies at UKZN.

### **1.7 Structure of the study**

Chapter One introduces the study. It describes the focus of the study and the need to study this particular phenomenon, especially from the vantage point that I have chosen. The successful student's voice is paramount, as explained in the rationale for this study, which emanates from my personal experience and from an educational contextual point of view. There is more literature on failure and drop-out rather than success in HE, and even fewer studies which privilege the lens of the student and the student's voice. This chapter also describes Tinto's Student Integration Model (TSIM) and the adaptations I have effected in order to make the model more efficacious when applying it to the students' construction of academic success in HE.

The construction of Chapter Two must be understood against the background from which this study of academic success emanates. Such a study should stand in relief against commensurate retention and throughput studies and failure and drop-out studies because academic success is obviously on the same trajectory of retention and throughput. Retention and throughput in turn can be seen as the other side of the coin of failure and dropout. Therefore relevant literature from all these areas has to be perused in order to get a fuller contextual appreciation of academic success.

Chapter Two contextualises the study within the current literature, first on success generally, and then on student academic success, making a case for how and why I appropriate specific meanings for key concepts and construct them in the way that I do throughout this thesis. As the model I have chosen to use to explain successful students' construction of academic success originated in the US, a comparison between the US and SA as far as understanding retention and success is concerned, is apposite. Both South Africa and the United States have comparable success and drop out statistics at HE level (see p.18).

In order to explain the reason I made additions (psychological, sociological and educational concepts), to the TSIM, a section on breaches or chasms in research on student retention and throughput is also included. In addition, to provide an appropriate context within which the model I used can be assessed, I examine academic preparations made for success in HE including attempts to enhance epistemological access (one of the additional concepts I used to explain academic integration) and academic support through foundation programmes.

Then from the other vantage point I look at student engagement in HE discourse and chasms in literature on retention and throughput as well as those on drop-out.

Chapter Three presents the theoretical framework of this study. It places retention throughput and success generally in the international arena and refers to the discourse in Australia, the US and South Africa as an introduction to Tinto's Student Integration Model.

In the next section of this chapter, the notions of drop-out and departure are considered as they are, as I mentioned earlier, simply the other side of the same coin (throughput, retention and success). In order to facilitate an understanding of TSIM more fully, a snapshot of departure models is described, including Bean's organisational theory model (1980), (1983); Bean and Metzner's non-traditional student model (1985); a cultural capital generated model by Berger (2000) and finally one created by Kuh and Love (2000), whose focus was the cultures of origin.

Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) put forward a theory to account for student departure from residential as well as commuter colleges and universities using constructs from organizational, psychological, economic and sociological findings.

I then examine a model that is closer to home. Based on Bean (1980), Spady (1970) and indeed Tinto's theories in Tinto (1975), South African Moagi-Jama 's (2009) retention model for non-traditional students is entitled "Circles of Progression". The four circles cover such student experiences as pre-entry, initial entry, teaching and learning experience at university and finally, ongoing social and academic integration.

This leads to an explanation of how I also use Tinto's model as a base but how I appropriate other theoretical constructs, educational, psychological and psycho-social to give me a fuller starting point or more complete conceptual framework from which I could gain better insight into how students explained their construction and performance of academic success in HE in South Africa. These constructs are included in Fig.1.2. (p.16) which represents a modification of TSIM.

The choice of these constructs was informed by literature on retention and success and drop out and failure in HE, the latter being the force that clarified and concretised the former. Included in this section which was designed to contextualize Tinto's model and the constructs I appropriated for use in this study, are sub-sections on the origin of the model related to Spady and Durkheim and criticisms levelled at Tinto by others.

Another sub-section deals with self-criticism by Tinto which I found very instructive in respect to what appeared to be omitted from the model and which provided some of the justification for the constructs I have included to supplement his model.

In the latter part of this chapter I explain how I attempt to Africanise Tinto's model (with my modifications) by placing it in relief against the African philosophical concept of Ubuntu. It is a living concept which many Africans adhere to even in their daily practices. I was able to find many points of connection between different aspects of integration of TSIM and this African philosophy of humanism. Together they formed the basis of my conceptual framework for this study.

Chapter Four describes the methodological design of this study and includes a discussion of the qualitative explanatory case study approach which was used in this study. The sampling procedures, the multi-staged data production process and procedures and the measures put in place to ensure rigour and trustworthiness, are presented. Ethical considerations and

limitations of the study are dealt with and the chapter concludes with a presentation of the steps followed in the data analysis process.

Chapter Five presents the data (from interviews, autobiographies and research journal notes) in the form of a co-constructed narrative of four participants. The story portraits were created in respect of themes which emerged from the data which came from the iterative process of interviewing and the written biographies. Four stories were purposively foregrounded out of a possible twelve, so that a deep explanatory case study could be created about how Humanities students at UKZN created success in undergraduate studies. UKZN was the research site (see Chapter Four).

Chapter Six is organised under the emergent themes: Notions of personal success; Initiatives of individuals and Ubuntu, Opportunities created and seized, Role of a successful student amongst others which emerged from an analysis of the four stories. For this reason, Chapters Five and Six should be read together. Apart from this Chapter Six presents the relational analysis of the themes which unfold within the data across the stories.

Chapter Seven provides a theoretical analysis of the key findings in relation to the theoretical framework of the thesis. It focuses on the findings that provide the foundation of the thesis of this study. The TSIM and the supplementary psycho-social, sociological and educational concepts are used to understand salient themes that have arisen in relation to students' construction of academic success at UKZN. I attempt to harness the dynamic (multidimensional and multidirectional) way in which students construct academic success at UKZN in the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success which creates a visual of a three dimensional figure which is used to theorise about the participants' understanding of how they constructed and performed success.

Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by going back to the questions which underpin the study and discusses them in relation to the construction, production and performance of academic success by students in their undergraduate studies in HE in South Africa. These questions help to uncover how they constructed academic success and why they constructed it in the way that they did. It also helped to clarify their understanding of the concept of academic success and gave insight into the way they went about performing it at UKZN. This chapter also presents some key inferences which come from this study.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Having articulated a rationale arguing for the focus and process of the study in Chapter One, I now turn my attention to crucial key concepts related to this study. Hence this chapter will focus on contextualising the study within the current literature on student academic success, making a case for how and why I attribute certain meanings to key concepts and constructs in the way that I do throughout this thesis.

The broader concept of success, which is at the heart of this study, is, as this literature review suggests, a highly relative and contextually bound concept. It is therefore necessary to pay some attention to this relative and contextually bound concept with a view to exposing its multifarious dimensions that resonate with the individual life experiences of the participants as they recount what academic success means to them.

Three broad perspectives of success will be explored through the first part of this literature review. These perspectives include firstly, a psychological perspective, where the focus is on the individual construction of what success might come to mean to the person; secondly, a sociological perspective of how the individual sees success against society's norms, and finally, that of an institutionalised perspective of success that privileges benchmarks as criteria for success. These perspectives of success have been delimited largely because of the focus of the study and are seen in relation to how the participants narrate their success stories.

After considering the larger parameters of success this literature review will narrow down to focus on academic success the central phenomenon in this study. Like success it is another concept that is highly relative and individually constructed, based on situated realities that may not necessarily be common across situations, contexts and individual experience. Hence, this concept needs some attention with a view to locating the participants' understanding and views about academic success as they present narratives of their academic success.

There are several allied concepts which include persistence, resilience and self-efficacy which will receive some introspection within this chapter as they relate to this study. The next chapter (Chapter Three) on the conceptual framework will further elucidate these concepts in relation to the way they assist me to answer the central questions of my study. The concepts also appear as they should in the penultimate chapter (Chapter Seven) which focuses on the foundations of the thesis of this report.

This literature review chapter concludes with a critical engagement of research on academic success within higher education studies with the purpose of locating this study within the current discourses that are unfolding nationally and internationally. This is the context within which this study would make the greatest contribution. While student throughput and graduating rates are worldwide phenomena that affect higher education, each international context responds to varying issues relative to each of their situations.

This is the same for South Africa in whose case, the central issue is that of transformation of a system of education that was based on the principles and values of an apartheid state within the context of our espoused principles of equality and values of human dignity and respect for all based on our constitution (Constitution of South Africa, Act 108, 1996).

Through this critical engagement of current literature on success and more specifically, on academic success within higher education, notions of success from different vantage points will be exposed. An appraisal of these serves the purpose of illuminating the competing and contesting notions of academic success that result in intervention strategies that may not necessarily resonate with students' needs to achieve academic success. This could hold value for formulation of strategy and policy in HE.

## **2.2 Key concepts: student academic success in HE**

### **2.2.1 Success: a relative and contextually bound concept**

In much of the recent literature on student success, the concept of success has not been sufficiently engaged with. Rather, it has been taken for granted that everyone knows what success is, and in so doing, it is usually associated with accomplishment. In our national

context of higher education transformation, success is related to participation and as such is largely related to the accomplishment of access into higher education institutions by students of all the race groups who live in South Africa.

In other discourses, success is related to accomplishment of a certificate indicating completion of a programme of study. In these iterations of success, concepts related to success are based on completely different things and therefore warrant some consideration as a subject to be explored and engaged with. For example, how to retain students within a study programme or an institution of higher learning becomes the subject of exploration, and the meaning of success is relegated to the generic term of retention, the understanding of which is taken for granted to mean what the institution has power over in respect of the student. In this section, I put success under the microscope to show the varying conceptions of success and how these varying conceptions of success might influence one's notion of success. I attempt to establish if the 'taken for granted' notion of success is, in fact, a success for an individual, an institution or an intervention.

Studies on success are often critical of the fact that this term encompasses simply completing a certain course of study, and takes 'little cognisance of the quality of graduates leaving higher education or their ability to make a positive contribution to society' (Tyson, 2010, p.48). This iteration of success is consistent with the generally accepted discourse of accomplishment being the indicator of success, suggesting that the accomplishment of a degree or completion of a course of study is success.

However, in her study into the practice of successful teachers, Pillay (2003) refers to the complexities of race, class and gender which result in both researcher and participant being confronted with a 'fruit salad' when attempting to arrive at some understanding of the latter's success. In the same way, in order to understand the parameters of this concept, it is necessary to admit that the student plays many roles within an institution and occupies different positions in relation to different sectors of the educational institution.

The idea of success and what it means will depend upon the different interactions within the various and different processes of learning which students experience. What further complicates the matter is that each of these processes is driven by its own values. So how to name the idea of success in relation to the efforts of the student at, for example, a university,

is fraught with difficulty. “Ambiguity, multiplicity and contradictions are inseparable from the form and substance of our identity” (Pillay, 2003, p.26) and in this case, from the identity of the successful student.

As a starting point, however, it is important to differentiate between the terms ‘success’ and ‘persistence’, which are often used interchangeably. However, as Tinto (2006-2007) points out, success is not the same as persistence. This latter term describes a situation in which a student enrolls at an institution over a period of time and not necessarily continuously. In order to understand the nuanced meaning of both these ideas, they are further discussed within the international context below.

Many studies on success in the educational arena are often critical of the fact that this term refers simply to completing a certain course of study (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005; McLeod & Kaiser, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Tyson, 2010). However, Jones, Trier and Richards (2008, p.20) believe that “success is viewed as a holistic concept, encompassing academic achievement and personal growth”. Apart from these characteristics which are related to this study, the same work posits the fact that successful graduates should, therefore, “not only be employable, but also well rounded, responsible citizens who are able to make a positive contribution to society”. Clearly, these iterations point to a perspective that goes beyond the notion of accomplishment (of say a degree). It goes beyond the notion of persistence or the notion of completion; it includes a personal sense of what it means to accomplish something (a qualification, a job, or any other significant attribute) and/or a public sense of duty to society.

This personal sense of what it means to accomplish something has gained currency as a subject of research into the contribution of students in higher education in the last half a century. Trowler and Trowler (2010) support this notion and argue that personal accomplishment by college students is the subject of student engagement discourses since the late 60s. They quote Merwin’s (1969) work referring to “time-on-task” and “quality of efforts” (Pace, 1980), leading to Astin’s (1984) notion of student involvement in their own learning. Hence students’ success seems to be related to their personal engagement in higher education studies. Students’ personal involvement in their own learning, thus, becomes a measure of success at higher education studies, and this success is related to the time they

give and quality of engagement that they involve themselves in. Put differently, it also describes what students can do to achieve success (Jansen, 2004; Kuh, Gonyea & Williams, 2005).

Clearly, personal success is but one aspect of success, localized within an individual. However, in the complex society in which we live, how others in society view individuals also affects the notion of success and how it is achieved and this relates to the public sense of duty referred to above. However the personal sense and the public sense in which success is played out is very difficult to discern as separate from one another. I believe this is part of the reasoning behind the notion that the divide between psychology and sociology is never an easy one to perceive (McLeod & Kaiser, 2004).

These theorists contend that “sociological insight is essential to analyses of the effects of psychological pre-dispositions on interpersonal interactions, status attainments, and other features of the social order because the processes through which those predispositions have their effects are inherently social in nature” (McLeod & Kaiser, 2004, p.638). They also argue that educational attainment is a key predictor of life chances, suggesting that their accomplishment or successes impact on their life chances. Hence, accomplishment of life chances, from a sociological perspective, is considered as success. Clearly, success seems to be relative to the individual and to social norms. To be more specific to the educational arena, how institutions as structures within society view success, is relevant to this particular study.

Higher education institutions have explicit interest in, for example, student success and more specifically, the dearth of student success in HE. This interest in student success is a worldwide phenomenon, and as suggested earlier, the treatment of this long recognised phenomenon has not effected any significant changes across the decades. Two particular gazes or vantage points, from which this success phenomenon has been studied across the decades, are what can students do to promote success and what can institutions do to promote success (Strydom & Mentz, 2010). Student engagement, both from the perspective of the student and from that of the institution, seems to have been an area of great interest in relation to student success within higher education.

Through an adaptation of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), widely used in the US, Strydom & Mentz (2010) attempted to measure the level of academic challenge, the

degree of active and collaborative learning, student-staff interaction, the provision of enriching educational experiences and the extent to which the campus environment is supportive within South African universities to explore what South African institutions are doing in order to promote students' success in higher education studies.

This spawned the SASSE (South African Survey of Student Engagement) report in 2010. The NSSE and the SASSE as instruments suggested or signalled drivers of success for higher education institutions. While success has not been clearly defined in either report, the drivers for success became the central concern that contributes to student throughput and success. From an institutional perspective, then, success is related to student throughput and graduation. The interventions (listed above as the criteria used to measure student engagement) have become the success factors i.e. a high level of academic challenge, a high degree of active and collaborative learning, student-staff interaction, the provision of enriching educational experiences and a supportive campus environment within South African universities. The way in which undergraduate students constructed and performed their success had to be considered against this background so the SASSE report (Strydom & Mentz, 2010) had relevance to this study.

As has been indicated above, the idea of success is a complicated one with different authors using many different discourses as their starting points, some psychological, some sociological and others educational. In introducing his discussion on success, Morrow (2009) refers to the many domains in which success can be achieved. These include sport, art, business, technology and education. In these domains, it can be signalled by a gold medal, an excellent critique, a contract, a new invention or a degree. All of these are signs of an accomplishment and skill, and none of these come without effort. Effort, in turn, is a by-product of agency, a psychological concept which is the catalyst for achievement in any arena.

In the context of higher education, greater or lesser levels of success can result in attaining a degree with a pass, *cum laude* (with praise) usually signifying a 75 to 84 % aggregate in undergraduate examinations or *summa cum laude* (with great praise) usually signifying the attainment of a an aggregate of 85% and above for undergraduate examinations. This is premised on the fact that some are empowered to judge this (examiners and moderators), using particular criteria or standards, and because personal consideration comes into the mix,

these decisions can be contested and subject to discussion. This is so because it is possible to disagree about judgements and because they may be based on inappropriate standards or criteria by which some skill or effort, or even a candidate, is judged. It also stands to reason that a judge's subjectivity may result in a difference between a pass and a fail i.e. success or failure. So a discussion about the whole notion of success and whether success has been achieved at all, has many points of entry because it involves value in criteria and standards and subjective interpretation of these in the personal judgements that are made. Therefore, both the meaning of success and academic success are further layered, making the terms even more complex.

To add to the complexity, Morrow (2009) also distinguishes between educational achievement and academic success. Educational achievement includes a developmental dimension of the student, while academic success is sometimes measured by how well a student has understood and been able to apply the practice of the discourse or discipline without reference to their development as learners of that practice. I disagree with Morrow (2009). I believe that academic success (understanding and practice of a discourse) and educational achievement (student development) cannot exist, one without the other. An academic practice is called a discipline for good reason. What is expected is a systematic engagement with the knowledge content, discourse and practices of a particular subject by which process the successful student cannot help but develop if she engages properly and consistently

In attempting to draw the definition of academic success from the general notion of success I have indicated how fraught the territory is. In order to make some sense of it in the next subsection I home in on the concept of 'academic success' and then follow with some ideas on student persistence, retention and throughput because they often come up for consideration at the same time as academic success (see Chapter One) and these notions, of necessity, permeate the literature review throughout.

Thereafter I look at research in academic success across HE institutions in South Africa and abroad which is necessary in a study of this nature. This is followed by a section on academic support for epistemological access leading to academic success. This includes Foundation programme support. These vantage points of (a) institutional research into academic success and (b) research into academic support for academic success help to identify the gaps in

research on student retention and throughput and following on that, academic success. This is an area which the present study could potentially help to fill.

### **2.2.2 Academic Success**

The concept 'academic success' as noted and experienced by the participants in this study is fundamental to the analysis of the data produced for this study. It is therefore appropriate to understand what these participants came to understand as academic success and how they performed it. The literature on academic success as opposed to success (Morrow, 2009; Tinto, 2006-2007; Yorke & Longden, 2004), presents a diverse understanding of the term academic success. Some theorists suggest that academic success is related to observable accomplishments of events.

Others view it as a process of achievement of general abilities and critical thinking over a period of time (Corbetta & Shulman, 2002; Gellin, 2003; Kuh, 2003; Pike, 2000; Pike & Killian, 2001; Pike, Kuh & Gonyea, 2003). Yet others include practical competence and cognitive development (Pascarella, Seifert & Blaich, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), both of which may be observable as a product. In a sense, in placing the criteria for academic success squarely on the completion of a degree in minimum time, I have adopted a similarly technicist view, but the qualitative approach and interpretative nature of this study militate against that.

The approach embraces a nuanced deep case study which has as its foundation an analysis of life stories of successful Humanities students who have been purposively chosen. These life stories have been produced after many iterations and as a result of lengthy and multistage interviews and the examination of written autobiographies. These life stories have also gone through member checks and several iterations. They have also been supported by complementary material from a research journal and annotated transcripts. Such an analysis by design admits many layers of interpretation and multifarious commentary on the phenomenon of academic success from the successful student's point of view.

### **2.3 Student Success: persistence and retention**

In Australia, 'success' and 'retention' are seen as two sides of the same coin, with retention being vested in the institution which harbours and supports students. They are regarded as successful only when they have met the requirements of the institution, thereby properly progressing from one academic year to the next within the prescribed time limits.

Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2003); Jardine (2005) also conceptualise retention in terms of the actions and responsibilities of institutions, i.e. as the policies, processes and support structures designed by an institution to keep a student enrolled. In contrast, persistence, which is a prerequisite for success, appropriately focuses on the agency of students (a seminal notion of student success) in the institution (Bandura, 2001).

Both agency and student persistence refer to the strategies and behaviours students use to continue with their studies regardless of external influences which may draw them away from their goal of completion. They are regarded as self-efficacious, and Bandura & Locke (2003, p.87) argue that self-efficacious individuals operate as "anticipative, purposive and self-evaluating regulators of their motivation and actions".

To take this further, Yorke & Longden (2004) argue that a key component of academic motivation and success is that students perceive themselves as agents of their own learning. The success of the students participating in this study has been interrogated within the frame of their own constructions of academic success, using their experience in their undergraduate programmes as the starting point.

This in-depth student centred investigation may be mined for strategies that could be considered to enhance the possibilities of success for all students in the higher education sector. Therefore, in favouring the qualitative methodology of narrative analysis (Marshall & Case, 2010), the whole notion of academic success is examined through the lens of successful undergraduate students.

So for the purposes of this study, the term success goes beyond the notion of persistence and will mean not only enrolment in an undergraduate programme at university but also the completion of a university degree within regulation time. Graduation in regulation time is a

“...key measure of the effectiveness and efficiency of a higher education system...which means the number of years a full time student is expected to take to complete a qualification. The expected duration of a qualification is indicated by the formal time allotted to it in the funding framework... a general formative bachelor’s degree should take three years to complete” (CHE, 2013, p.42).

This was the nature of the degree (an undergraduate bachelor’s degree) that was taken by the participants in the present study. This particular way of understanding success may be criticised because it seems highly technicist in orientation and tends to refer only to successful academic integration into the institution. However, the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of this study go beyond this and look extensively at epistemological access within Academic Integration; Social Integration and more closely, student engagement, as well as Personal Background, focusing in on agency and motivation (see Tinto’s student integration model (TSIM) below).

So while I use this accepted definition of academic success as a starting point, I am interested in the layerings and permutations which are presented by the participants in their construction and performance of academic success at UKZN in their journey to attaining their degrees in regulation time.

Most literature, even on throughput in HE, presents the lens of students’ difficulties, challenges, failures and the psychological and sociological impact as experienced by students and institutions (Kloot, Case & Marshall, 2008; Koen, Cele & Libhaber, 2006; Letseka, 2007; Longden, 2004; Sibanda, 2004; Tinto, 1993, 2006-2007). Success stories, especially from the students’ point of view and often against great odds, are less available (Marshall & Case, 2010). By examining how the identities of these successful students (as those who have achieved academic success) are constructed through this discourse, other students who face some of the same challenges may find a way in which to construct their own identities with similar results.

How these students have come to succeed, what they have drawn on and what has nurtured them in preparation to meet the challenges of HE is what motivated this study into academic success.

By listening carefully to the student voice, some possible answers can be provided to the question of how students themselves, staff and institutions, can act to promote greater “purposive and self-evaluating regulatory behaviors” (Bandura & Locke, 2003, p.87) which most probably will lead to success (Tinto, personal communication, 30 May, 2011).

## **2.4 Researching academic success: HE institutions**

As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, researching academic success within higher education over the decades has been related largely to student throughput and completion rates. Implicit in this assertion is the concern that higher education institutions and systems have low student throughput rates, resulting in fewer than expected graduates. This concern relates directly to the health of the higher education system.

From decades of research in this area, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt (2005) believes that the three best predictors of student success are academic preparation, motivation and student engagement. Hence these three areas seem to be the major focus of worldwide research. The predictor of motivation is dealt with elsewhere. In the following sub-section of the literature review, academic preparation for academic success through academic development and foundation programmes with special reference to epistemological access initiates the discussion. Thereafter a discussion of student engagement follows as it is an important factor which can have the effect of increasing success and therefore retention and throughput in HE.

### **2.4.1 Academic preparations for academic success**

The current discourses within the South African context related to student drop-out and student throughput seem to be dominated by poor academic preparation, largely blamed on the ills of apartheid. Letseka and Maile (2008) argue that poor school preparation has been one of the core concerns related to high student drop-out and poor levels of student throughput within South African higher education systems. The poor school preparation for higher education studies has been acknowledged by the new democratic government and several measures have been put in place to address this particular concern (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Higher education institutions have introduced several intervention programmes, like the Upward Bound Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

(UKZN) (Ramrathan, Manik & Pillay, 2007), which bring into the university campuses annually, grades 10,11 and 12 school learners for support in their school subjects (Mathematics, Science, Life Skills, etc.) so that they can achieve greater chances of access to higher education studies.

Another intervention comes in the form of the academic development programmes, which are provided to university students to facilitate epistemological access for those who need academic support in understanding their disciplinary content knowledge (Morrow, 2009). Yet another consists of the Foundation programmes including the Humanities Access Programme which encompasses the study of English Language Development, Academic Literacy, Numeracy, Computer skills, etc. which integrate fundamental learning with programme learning to promote academic success, by focusing on developing fundamental literacies (Tyson, 2010).

This student preparation discourse seemed to be easing up, largely because access targets into university education as a transformational goal, had been achieved (Cloete, 2006; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Ramrathan, 2013). However this transformation goal is being reevaluated and is under threat given low throughput and graduation rates. Less than one third of student enrolled in higher education studies complete their qualification in minimum time (CHE, 2013; Ramrathan, 2013). Therefore the current discourse has now shifted to how institutions can retain students until graduation within the South African context rather than simply providing access to HE.

In developed world contexts like the US, the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, this student retention discourse has been well established in the literature and in the interventions within higher education institutions.

#### **2.4.1.1 Academic support for epistemological access and success**

Epistemological access is not just about introducing students to a set of cultural and social skills and strategies to cope with academic learning. Rather, as the literature below suggests, it is a more complex phenomenon that is influenced by a range of issues and contexts, both within and outside of the higher education environment. An example is the student's ability

to integrate into the institutional culture and its commensurate epistemological stance which is also guided by its mission and vision.

This point is further clarified by McKenna (2004) who studied a certain cohort of students at Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa, who did not identify with the academic literacy practices that performed a gate keeping function for success in HE. As a result they became increasingly demotivated.

This has direct implications for Tinto's normative aspect of academic integration (see Fig 1.2.) where he suggests that students should also identify with the beliefs, values and norms of the institution in order to be successfully integrated into the institution. This has obvious implications for their academic success; a greater level of successful integration into the institution makes for a similar level of academic success.

Epistemological access does not only depend on the ability to read and write at a basic level. A student at university must be able to read many texts with differing points of view regarding the same subject, and is expected to be in a position to critique these different works using her own schema or store of knowledge of the world (Govender, 2014).

A difficulty which arises is that the student often automatically censors some of the values and knowledge she brings, before she takes up a position. This depends on how she understands what counts as knowledge within the institution and how that knowledge is accessed and assessed.

Once the student has negotiated this rather fraught territory, she must commit her views to writing in a form that is acceptable to the university (Cross & Carpentier, 2009). This territory is fraught because there is a mismatch between the expectations of student and university.

Globally and not least in South Africa, "non-traditional" students from the disadvantaged sector of the population are generally poorly prepared for the university environment with its corporate, individualistic, efficiency-driven notions. This conflicts with their understanding and lived experience of Ubuntu (see Chapter Three), the African humanist philosophy with its commensurate notions of collectivism, equality and solidarity. In this case, the "logic of

performance” is on a collision course with the “logic of competence” (Cross & Carpentier, 2009, p.7). Students do not understand the demands of the HE environment in which they are expected to function, and the institution through the staff represents a completely alien world which is out of synch with that of the students’ world. Accordingly, their chances of academic success are severely curtailed.

Boughey (2005) concurs with the view that providing epistemological access is not about “introducing students to a set of a-cultural, a-social skills and strategies to cope with academic learning... Rather it is about bridging the gaps between the respective worlds students and lecturers draw on” (p.240). So academic study implies much more than just learning about discipline specific content. It starts to have serious implications for people’s roles and identities.

The idea of the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, however, is more complicated, as Mgquashu (2009) indicates. His 2005 study, using narrative style technique within a Grounded Theory research design, assisted in the illumination of the practitioners’ understandings and perceptions which affected their curriculum design. He was focusing specifically on the teaching of courses which were designed to support linguistic and academic competencies at the University of Sydney, Australia. He found that the very notion of ‘disadvantaged’ and by extension ‘non-traditional’ was challenged as social class and race had little to do with the fact that first years were ‘outsiders’ in respect of the academic discourses at university.

What ‘outsiders’ who may be potentially successful students, bring to the university and the way they redefine their individual identities to become academically successful university students, bears consideration.

There are particular aspects which make visible and recognizable “*who* we are and *what* we are” as successful students (Gee, 1999). We have to behave, act like and finally ‘be’ or take on the role of successful student in relation to our values, interactions, and use of language, which should be similar to the group that is identified as successful students. If we do not rehearse in role and practice the behaviours that are relevant to a successful student, then the successful student will cease to be one.

This also relates to the activities which are planned for small and large groups, where the student is encouraged to learn the behaviour of a successful student. This learning can be circumvented by students displaying a sense of entitlement which can take them in the direction of failure rather than success. Morrow (2009) explains how his interpretation of entitlement undermines academic values and militates against the achievement gained from practising and participating in the academic enterprise. He develops this concept and suggests that ultimately the responsibility for educational development must be placed squarely on the student's shoulders. So he highlights the fact that if the student truly embraces the many aspects of the role of a successful student, she actually 'becomes' one.

Gee (1999) stresses the notion of values (another layer of academic success) and how important these are to the development of an academic personality and indeed, an academic network. In my study, this will have to be considered in relation to the way the participants perceive the discourse in each of the disciplines they specialised in. The notion of how a topic is talked about, processed and understood, and engaged with, has clear implications for how students practice, within different disciplines, to be well functioning students.

Apart from values being the foundation of an academic personality, Gee (1999) goes further, in observing that in the last few decades many disciplines have turned from focusing on individual behaviour and individual minds towards a focus on "social and cultural interaction" (p.177). What makes academically successful students part of the group of academically successful students is that they use language, think, feel, believe, value and act, in a way that they can be identified as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'. This encompasses and points clearly to the rigours of the academic world which successful students inhabit.

This identity is further clarified. In looking at what all of us do all the time in different ways, Gee uses what he considers to be a clear and dramatic example: he explains that 'being a "real Indian" is not something one can do by oneself. It requires the participation of others. One cannot be a "real Indian" unless one appropriately recognizes "real Indians" and is recognized by others as a "real Indian" in the practices of doing-being-and-becoming a "real Indian"'

In 2000, Gee developed this idea of identity while clarifying the importance of language in interpreting this or any other role. Without language or some sort of representational system, it is not possible to give meaning to the role. Most importantly, that language is developed from practice with other speakers and in this case the ‘group’ of students with whom the successful student interacts becomes all important. Academic success cannot exist as a private enterprise without this. He goes so far as to say that individual students earn recognition through this interaction with others. Failure at this will have implications for academic success at university. Thus the whole idea of taking on the role of successful student has many layers, is often group-dependent and is very complicated (Gee, 2001).

Adding another layer is the concept of self-help alluded to earlier and encapsulated in the observation “In the same way as no one can do my running for me, no one else can do my learning for me” (Morrow, 2009, p.69), which highlights the all-important starting point to successful academic endeavour. The opposite of self-help is entitlement, which undermines academic values and which has gained currency in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Values specifically related to honesty, integrity, diligence, responsibility and respect, are the struts on which self-help is built and developed and which enable students to properly access education at higher levels. These characteristics, in addition to such aspects as compassion, altruism and justice, form an integral part of the academic identity. Epistemological access therefore depends not only on teaching but also on the efforts of the student to build her own knowledge and character (Morrow, 2009).

In order to attain academic success, a student has to become a participant in an academic practice with the assistance of a guide who is knowledgeable in that practice. The students learn how to become fully active and participative. In this way, epistemological access is gained. If a student achieves registration at an institution, it does not mean they have obtained access to the areas of knowledge the institution has authority over. They have to be the agents of their own educational achievement in attempting to learn. So the whole notion of academic success is dependent on the student who is expected to access and engage in the knowledge. The student is responsible for attaining the requisite results within the structures of the institution.

Carpenter (2006), who drew on Clothier (1931) in what was a highly regarded historic notion, argues that extra-curricular activities are important considerations in epistemological access, more especially for their potential to perform as agencies of character development which would assist in epistemological access. He believed that the institution should direct these but in relation to and integrated with the work of the student's curriculum. This was to be in keeping with the values which underpin proper epistemological access, so that the student's initiative, leadership, organizing ability and sense of responsibility would never be compromised (Jablonski, Mena, Manning, Carpenter & Siko, 2006).

Therefore, according to a range of authors, including Morrow (2009) and Gee (2000), in order to be categorised as successful, the student must have gained epistemological access, absorbed certain values and harnessed these in 'becoming' and 'being' successful within the programme of choice, not only within the institution but also personally and beyond it.

#### **2.4.1.2 Academic support through foundation programmes**

In order to increase the level of success in HE, institutions have put many initiatives in place and the full context of the academic endeavour has been accommodated to a lesser or greater degree, depending on which part of the world is being studied. This sub-section draws on studies in Australia, the United States and South Africa.

The IDEALL (Integrated Development of English Language and Academic Literacy and Learning) developed in Australia, is based less on remedial and more on developmental education, focusing on integrating guidance in fundamental academic skills which are related to the curriculum within the disciplinary and generic academic skills (Skillen, Merten, Trivett & Percy, 1998). In this case, academic support and therefore development, is obtained by students consistently through their whole academic careers. This is different from a foundation or access programme, which is a year programme specially designed for students "whose prior learning has been adversely affected by educational or social inequalities" (Kloot, Case & Marshall, 2008 in Tyson, 2010, p.62). An example of this is the Humanities Access Programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa).

In the USA, the International Centre for Student Retention covers research on all aspects of HE that may impinge upon retention, ranging from recruitment and financial aid to student

services and curriculum, leadership and learning. This research supports students at a foundation level by providing material which would encourage diverse learning styles using multiple intelligences and instructional technology.

A further measure to assist in retention in the US is the Pathway to College Network (PCN), a conglomerate of thirty organisations, which prepares disadvantaged students (from poor socio-economic and school backgrounds) for access and success in HE, using university preparatory tools amongst other interventions (Moagi–Jama, 2009, p.26).

In South Africa, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is in charge of students' academic development and supports academic literacy, through foundation and bridging programmes and more recently, extended courses which have developed into an extended curriculum. Foundation programmes or access programmes which have been described above, have evolved into Extended Curriculum programmes in the last thirty years.

The Department of Education (DoE) defines these programmes as “a first undergraduate or degree programme that incorporates a substantial foundational provision that is additional to the coursework prescribed for the regular programme. The foundational provision must be (a) equivalent to one or two semesters of full time study, (b) designed to articulate effectively with elements of the programme, and (c) formally planned scheduled and regulated as an integral part of the programme” (DoE, 2006, p. 2). So a four year rather than a three year undergraduate programme is mooted.

In August 2013, the CHE, (Council on HE) published a report of the task team on undergraduate curriculum structure on a proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa for a flexible curriculum structure as a way to improve graduate output in South Africa. The way to achieve this is to examine systemic obstacles to access and success, to study undergraduate performance in the sector and to analyse how the structure of the curriculum affects student performance, all of which the CHE has taken on board (CHE, 2013). So the debate still rages. How to achieve academic success through not only foundation programmes but through developmental, flexible undergraduate programmes which cater for the diverse student body in South Africa, is an on-going question and my study will contribute meaningfully to such a debate.

Studies which also give grist to the mill are the following, dealing with academic development in respect of various themes. These include epistemological access and what constitutes access in terms of language development. This particular theme was explored in an ethnographic study of a first year political philosophy class at a historically black South African university, and their engagement with learning reported by Boughey (2005). She found that because students drew on other contexts, they wrote in a way that was inappropriate to academia and the context of the university. The question that does arise, however, is whether one particular set of literacies, that is prescribed by the university environment, is the only one that is worth engaging within HE.

The theme exploring the relationship between identity, language and teaching and learning was conducted by a team of eight members at a higher education institution in the Western Cape by Liebowitz (2005). The research design included semi-structured interviews which elicited information of narrative and educational biographies of 64 staff and 100 students. It shows how language is the key factor in identity at an HE institution. It assists as a resource of affiliation and affects acculturation into the academic community.

In 2007, Machika of the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, conducted an evaluative study into the bridging programmes in engineering at his university. The theme of bridging was unpacked in this study which was both qualitative and quantitative in design, so that the thinking and experiences of the students were unearthed. One of the most important findings was that bridging programmes can contribute to the success of engineering students who want to complete within the designated time span and that these programmes, implemented over an extended period, both allow the student access and lay the solid foundations of knowledge and skill required in engineering. The shift from access to success has implications for success in other disciplines in HE intuitions in South Africa and abroad.

Finally, Van Zyl and Rothmann (2012) conducted a study at North-West University in South Africa to examine the relationship between flourishing and academic performance, life satisfaction, and positive affect which is related to such emotions as happiness and contentment. Negative effects include sadness, depression and stressful states (Seligman, 2011a). This was a quantitative cross-sectional study using a convenience sample of 845 university students. The results of this study indicated that levels of flourishing/languishing impact on academic performance of students.

Flourishing is generally a state of well-being which contributes to a purpose in life, social well-being and believing that one is constructively engaged with the larger institution. All of this leads to more effective learning and therefore more positive performance outcomes (Lamers, Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, ten Klooster & Keyes, 2011; Seligman, 2011b). Languishing refers to underperforming or average performance. Howell (2009) found that flourishing students were more in control of themselves, were not likely to procrastinate, and focused and took steps towards reaching their goals so they reached greater levels of academic performance. Ouweneel, Le Blanc and Schaufeli (2011) argued that flourishing students experienced more positive emotions, looked forward to anticipated personal resources and through this exhibited greater levels of study engagement (Van Zyl & Rothmann, 2012).

The paucity of flourishing students in South African HE in at least the past two decades is supported by Letseka and Maile (2008). They refer to the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) published by the DoE in 2001, which places the South African graduation rates of 15% as amongst the lowest in the world. As there are fewer black students at universities, the graduation rate for white students is more than twice the number of black graduates. These inequalities will impinge upon the high level skills base of black students and in so doing, their future. It will also seriously affect the government's economic and development plans for the country. So, in the interests of equity and economic viability, the government decided to increase the access and graduation rates of black students, particularly African students.

Thus the whole notion of access and success and the different categories of differently advantaged students has to be critiqued and challenged before governments, through departments, institutions and educators, dispense remedial and developmental programmes, be it academic support through foundation or extended programmes.

Another factor which can positively affect student success, retention and throughput is student engagement.

## **2.5 Student engagement discourse: HE studies**

Student retention within higher education across the world has been an issue over many decades, even longer in some parts of the world. Concerns about student dropout and throughput rates within higher education institutions had opened up options for research with a view to improving student throughput and completion rates, while attempting to reduce student dropout rates.

Several theories and models have been produced through a sustained research agenda in this focus area. Most research points to a notion of student engagement as key to retention and lowering of student dropout. This section provides some literature on student engagement discourses that have recently dominated the research agenda on student retention, throughput, dropout and departures. In the South African context, student engagement discourse has been heightened as South African higher education institutions and the National Department of Higher Education grapple with the threat to the transformation agenda of the country.

The value of Engagement is no longer questioned in the United States of America since the publication in 1984 of the (US) National Institute of Education's Involvement in Learning Report, where, according to Kuh (2009), p.684, "...virtually every report... emphasized to varying degrees the important link between student engagement and desired outcomes of college".

He goes on to list a string of reports, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002, 2005, 2007); American College Personnel Association (1994); Education Commission of the States (1995); Joint Task Force on Student Learning (1998); Keeling (2004); National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (1997); National Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006), and Wingspread Group on Higher Education (1993), that feature student engagement as the main focus of intervention in retaining students within higher education. In addition, Coates (2005, p.26) lists reports from the UK and Australia which take the "engagement improves outcomes" proposition as read (Brennan, Brighton, Moon, Richardson & Rindi, 2003; Garlick & Pryor, 2004).

In the international arena, especially in the US, student retention (relating directly to student success) as an area of research has been privileged for over four decades, while in South

Africa greater emphasis has been placed on the opposite construct, that of attrition or the drop-out rate and the factors that contribute to this (Hay & Morales, 2004; Letseka, 2007; Sibanda, 2004). This has been the case because the pass rates at HE level, post democracy, were disappointing.

The effects of transformation, with its requisite thrust to include the unrepresented disadvantaged student in HE, had, therefore, to be reassessed in the light of disappointing throughput and drop-out rates. As has been pointed out in the introduction (p.2), not only is less than a quarter of each cohort of registered students in HE passing through a three year degree in minimum time, but students often spend as many as six years completing such a degree.

So most of the problem based research was focused on the factors that affect drop-out, some studies finding that inequality and poverty affected the graduation rates of students in no small way (Letseka & Maile, 2008). The present research, however, is focusing on the small percentage that were successful and how they achieved success in HE in SA. No such study would be complete without examining student engagement which includes an assessment of what students do in order to achieve their goals. This connects directly to the question of how they construct their success which is one of the seminal critical questions on which initiated this study.

As the US appears to have a similar dropout rate to SA in HE (i.e. approximately 50%, see p.18), retention has become big business and many consultants who claim to have the capability to retain students within institutions have set up consultancies across the country (Tinto, 2006-2007). However, even recent statistics on pass rates in HE both in the US (NCES, 2005) and in SA, indicate that there has been little change in the past decades, emphasizing the fact that those responsible have not been able to translate the findings of problem based research and theory into effective practice.

As referred to above, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt (2005) in Strydom and Mentz (2010), observe that “more than a decade of higher education research indicates that the three best predictors of student success are academic preparation, motivation and student engagement” (p. viii), but that the first two factors are really related to selection, and if they are used for this purpose, may have the effect of undermining access to HE. In this study these factors or

drivers of academic success provide a starting point for a discussion from the successful students' point of view of how they construct and perform academic success in HE.

Apart from this, consistent study of student engagement by institutions could assist them to begin to solve the student departure puzzle and retain and support potentially successful students. The concept of student engagement does, however, not only cover what institutions do in order to provide an enriching educational environment in which students can potentially succeed; as mentioned earlier, it also encompasses what students actually do, in terms of time and effort, to drive their educational goals forward.

The South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) (Strydom & Mentz, 2010) report was published by the CHE, recording the findings of a 2009 CHE-UFS (University of Free State) student engagement project which was piloted at seven South African HE institutions (with 13 636 respondents). The project was designed by the CHE in response to a request by the South African Minister of Education to advise on the desirability of a 4 year programme instead of one of three years for the completion of a degree at university.

The SASSE was based on the American National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE), which included an examination of such aspects as active and collaborative learning, student-staff interaction, provision of enriching educational experiences and the extent to which campus environment is supportive. This NSSE survey had been used at 1300 American and Canadian colleges, and 35 universities in Australia and New Zealand; in 2010, it was being piloted at 23 Chinese HE institutions.

The brief by the South African Minister of Education covered an evaluation of the curriculum which included not only the evaluation of the syllabus studied in undergraduate education, but also the practices and processes of undergraduate education. It was expected that the latter would provide a better understanding of the complexities of student engagement and what students actually involve themselves in while they are at university and more importantly, how this might impact on their success.

In addition, the opinions of first year and senior students were canvassed in this survey, including subgroups such as self-reported race groups and gender. While the patterns of

engagement will be dealt with more fully in the findings section of this study, I will refer to some which have implications for challenges we face in HE in South Africa today.

Female students appeared to spend significantly more time studying than male students and less than 10% spent the required 20-25 hours on preparation and study that was necessary. Senior students participate in significantly more active and collaborative learning activities than 1<sup>st</sup> year students, but almost 60% never made a presentation in class and only approximately 30% did so by the time they reached senior year.

A promising finding was uncovered in the fact that around three quarters of the students reported having discussed marks or assignments with lecturers or tutors at some point, while it was disappointing that 44% of the seniors never discussed career plans with HE either lecturers or counsellors. Approximately 80% reported the use of electronic media to complete or discuss assignments. A disappointing finding existed in the fact that only 42% had serious conversations with students of different ethnic or racial groups, and 70% spent no time participating in co-curricular activities.

Based on the results of the study, it appeared that a little more time spent on engagement would enhance student success and a 4 year degree curriculum as opposed to a 3 year one would improve levels of student engagement and consequently, success rates. Time was required to improve the level of academic challenge which would require writing intensive courses and additional support. Active and collaborative learning would be improved by peer collaboration and support but this also would require additional time. It appeared that in the present 3 year degree programme, this would simply bring additional pressure to bear on students' time.

The area of Enriching Educational Experiences & providing a Supportive Campus Environment could be addressed through a 1<sup>st</sup> year front-loaded support curriculum including Academic Literacy, Numeracy, Academic advisement, Writing intensive courses and Community service learning as an area of special focus. (Compare the Humanities Access Programme, Howard College, UKZN, 2014 which is designed using the same principles for under-prepared students except for community service learning.)

In 2009, at a CHE/ University of Free State colloquium, Kuh, (the leading expert on student engagement in the US referred to earlier), recommended that South African HE institutions focus on how to get students to do things that helped them to be successful. He believed HE had to be more active and intentional about student engagement and success.

Requiring students to do the right things does not mean that all students have to experience the same thing. It was impractical and expensive to expect thousands of students to experience the exact same things. In order to improve student engagement and from that success, each institution had to create a menu or matrix of different engaging experiences throughout their undergraduate studies.

While areas such as learning, staff interaction, educational enrichment and environment are just as important, no menu at any South African institution should be without an element of diversity training with respect to inter-racial connections and problematic racial climates on campuses. Especially in view of South Africa's history, no student should leave HE without having interacted with diverse others in order to develop significant understanding of other race groups (Strydom & Mentz, 2010).

Up to this point under key concepts relative to student academic success within higher education studies I have reviewed relevant literature in the following areas:

- Success as a relative and contextually bound concept in order to contextualize the concept, Academic success.
- This is followed by Researching academic success across higher education institutions under which the areas of
  - a) Academic preparations for academic success and
  - b) Academic support through foundation programmes leading to academic successare reviewed. This is followed by a review of literature on Student Engagement discourse within higher education studies which completes this section.

As the conceptual framework for this study originated in the US, the next section of this chapter commences with a Comparison between US and SA in respect of Retention and Success. It is followed by further international perspectives in HE relating to student retention and success in South Africa. An important section on what chasms exist in research on student retention and throughput in relation to academic success is followed by a section

which attempts to answer this question entitled ‘Some studies on success that attempt to fill the chasm’. This chapter ends with Further Theorising and Concluding Remarks.

## **2.6 Comparison between US and SA: retention and success**

In Chapter One observations made by Tinto in 1982 have been highlighted. He observes that the national rate of student departure from colleges and universities had remained constant at 45 percent from 1882 in the US (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000). In 1993, Tinto presented the following statistics for the US: 2 students out of every 10 in a 2 year college programme and almost 3 out of 10 in 4 year college and universities programmes depart during their first year of college. Completion rates hover around 50% for 4 year college and university programmes and 56% for 2 year college programmes.

The US statistics measuring completion and drop-out rates have not changed much in the past two decades (NCES, 2005). If we look at 2010 figures provided by the Center for Educational Statistics (US Department of Education), of the 1 850 000 students who were expected to go to college in that year, only half the number were anticipated to earn Bachelors’ degrees.

As the US appears to have a similar drop-out rate to SA in HE i.e. approximately 50%, a comparison in respect of retention between the two education systems is moot. Although there is so much theorising about retention and a great deal of research has been conducted in the area the statistics remain consistent. There has been little change in the pass rates in the past few decades and the history of failure and drop out in HE in the US precedes the past 30 years by over a century (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan., 2000).

In this section I present some comparative analysis of the trends in literature in the US and South Africa. The US has exhibited the long standing issue of low through put while this is of relatively recent interest in the South African context. A comparison between the ways these two systems have tackled low throughput within higher education institutions will show how, despite the lengthy engagement spanning almost a century in the US, many issues remain unresolved resulting in an inordinately high drop-out rate even today. In the section that

follows, other countries are briefly mentioned to show resonance with the South African and American contexts.

Both HE systems treated the retention of students in the same way, beginning with the 'deficit' model i.e. trying to fix students whose failure was seen as a result of individual attributes, skills and motivation (Boughey, 2005; McKenna, 2004 ). So students failed, not the institution. This was followed by a period of trying to understand the relationship between the individual and her environment and how this affected her efforts in education. In SA in the 1980s, with a Black minority entering White universities, academic support programmes were based on a superficial assessment of student capabilities and related mainly to difficulties in Mathematics and English. The programmes were therefore remedial or transformative in nature. The latter transformed the student with the sole aim of fitting the student into the university. There was never any question of the institution or curriculum being transformed in any way.

In the 1990s, in keeping with the radicalised discourses which accompanied political change, emphasis was redirected to the institution rather than the student. In the past decade, which was styled as the managerialist phase of academic support, throughput rates and skills development were emphasized through policy formulations. In the post-2010 period, institutional discourses started to emerge, looking at curriculum change (CHE, 2010; CHE 2013) and students' experience of higher education discourse (Ramrathan, 2013). It appears that the South African discourses on student retention, throughput and drop-out are now coming into line with developed world contexts.

The different lenses of Support Discourse, Policy Discourse and Capacity Discourse were used to view the whole enterprise of academic development in succeeding decades, the first of which saw the student as needing to be fixed; the second focused on critiquing the policy terrain of HE, and the third focused on the actual skills and how the student was achieving the objectives of academic development.

In making epistemological access one of the struts upon which the conceptual framework of this study is built, the different discourses that students are expected to access and how they negotiate this coming from possibly very different backgrounds, is given attention.

## **2.7 International perspectives in HE: student retention and success**

As Yorke and Longden (2004) point out, despite cultural differences between South Africa, Australia, the UK (especially England) and the US, similar issues plague the HE system in all four countries, although the precise nature of the problem or its intensity may differ. This comes of other similar characteristics they may have in respect of policy, finances and nature of institution. All of them encourage under-represented groups to be part of HE and this presents challenges in respect of retention of disadvantaged groups. Again all of them have difficulties with student funding and finally, they have differentiation in rates of retention and student success across different groups in HE and between different types of institutions.

The problem of retention and success of the disadvantaged in the US for instance, is exacerbated by the fact that 80% of African American students attend mainly white colleges and universities, so their success is comparatively low. Some theorists believe that “financial and academic problems are the root cause of disproportionate failure” (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p.12). A similar picture can be seen in the South African HE context.

In 2001, 645 000 students were enrolled at SA universities and technikons, 59% in-contact on campus academic programmes. 60% of the total, 385000, were registered for 3 year undergraduate degree and diploma programmes. 52% of all students in public universities and technikons were female and 72% were black (DoE, 2001). Generally, 95% of those entering SA’s public HE institutions come from the school system.

During the apartheid years, South African public HE institutions were in race based categories, 17 to serve the “interests of white population group”; 13 “to serve the interests of African population group”; 2 “to serve the interests of the Coloured population group”, and “2 to serve the interests of the Indian population group” (Bunting, 2002). In the 80s and early 90s, these were categorised into 5 groups: 10 historically white universities; a group of 10 historically black universities; a group of 7 historically white technikons; a group of 7 historically black technikons, and a group consisting of the 2 dedicated distance institutions.

From 2000 on, a new landscape of higher education began to emerge through mergers, incorporations and re-categorisations. This new landscape of higher education institutions in South Africa saw the creation of mega-institutions with multi-campus site of offerings, some

that were unaffected, and some that were re-categorised. Twenty three public higher education institutions formed the new landscape of contact and distance education, UNISA (University of South Africa) being the only provider of distance education. The other public higher education institutions were categorised as traditional universities, universities of technology or comprehensive universities. Universities of technology were the former technikons, and comprehensive universities were constituted as offering both traditional university programmes and technikon programmes. In 2004, the UKZN emerged from the merger between the historically black university (originally for Indians), the University of Durban-Westville, with the historically white University of Natal. It presently has approximately 48 000 students across 5 campuses in Durban, an Eastern coastal town in South Africa, and Pietermaritzburg, which is inland and West of Durban (DoE, 2001).

In 2001, 55% of all students in contact institutions in Historically White Institutions (HWIs) were white. Less than 2% of the student population for Historically Black Institutions (HBIs) was white. So higher levels of student retention and lower levels of student drop out were recorded at HWIs than at HBIs.

Based on data from 1999-2001, according to Bunting (2001a) in Yorke and Longden, (2004), 100 000 students dropped out of public HE institutions (15% of the headcount of 630 000.) 90 000 graduates and diplomates were produced i.e. 14% of the annual number of students enrolled. In the national plan for HE, the Ministry of Education states that “ these proportions of students dropping out and graduating is unacceptable because it represents a huge wastage of resources both human and financial...which are likely to be an impediment in achieving the economic development goals of the Government” (DoE, 2001, p.21).

Some critics blamed this abysmal success rate on the policies that had gone before. In 1996, a governmental White Paper instructed that it was necessary to “ redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities” (Ewell and Jones 1996, p.7 in Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 14). It went on to say that it was necessary to “ meet through well planned and coordinated, teaching learning and research programmes, ... high-skilled employment needs...support a democratic ethos and a culture of human rights... contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship...” (DoE, 1997, 1.14 in Yorke & Longden, 2004, p27); however, the plans in place for HE provision were not adequately

designed to realise these imperatives of government policy. In short, the plans were not in place. South African HE is still battling to promote access and equity with sufficient support that will assure academic success, which in turn will go some way to meeting the national imperatives.

From the year 2000, which was when the first higher education cohort was subject to sector-wide longitudinal analysis, performance patterns have not changed. In the opening paragraph of its executive summary of its proposal for the undergraduate curriculum in South Africa, the CHE (2013) observed, ‘South Africa has a pressing need for more graduates of good quality, to take forward all forms of social and economic development. It also needs more graduates to build up the education system itself by providing a strong new generation of teachers, college lecturers, academics and education leaders’ (CHE, August, 2013, p15).

However, South Africa’s graduate output has been found to have major shortcomings in terms of overall numbers, equity, and the proportion of the student body that succeeds. Despite there being a small intake that has good academic potential, performance in higher education is marked by high levels of failure and dropout. We know that only about one in four students in contact institutions (that is, excluding UNISA) graduate in regulation time (three years for a three-year degree). Approximately only a third of the total intake and just below half of contact students graduated within five years while it is estimated that some 55% of the intake will never graduate.

Access, success and completion rates continue to be racially skewed, with white completion rates being on average 50% higher than African rates. So it appears that under 5% of African and Coloured youth succeed in higher education (See Chapter 1, p.3). These patterns have not improved for the past thirteen years and given the conditions in the education system, they are not likely to improve without intervention.

Australia also increased access and participation rates in HE in the last 10 years and has a similar mission to improve retention rates of undergraduate students. While the term ‘drop out’ is seldom used, the neutral terms of attrition, discontinuance, withdrawal and non-completion are preferred in that context. The findings of retention studies in Australia mirror those of the UK. The reasons for discontinuing given by students are financial difficulties and the social side of university taking precedence; poor choice of programme; lack of personal

commitment to study; teaching quality; lack of contact with academic staff and inadequate academic progress (Yorke & Longden, 2008).

While financial difficulties are addressed by bodies such as National Student Financial Aid System (NSFAS) in South Africa, such matters as personal commitment to study balanced by the social experiences of university can only be addressed by mentors and advisors. The latter group with counsellors can also assist with career advice and poor academic progress. This is according to the SASSE report (2010) which has gone some way in addressing these issues, including that of teaching quality which has been highlighted by the appointment of various high level executive Offices and Deans of Teaching and Learning on various South African campuses.

Perhaps South Africa can look to Australia which insists that its undergraduates make career choices from the first year with-out a choice of a liberal arts or general education. According to Long & Hayden (2001), in order to assist students to attain success, Australian universities included a compulsory one hour session study group focused on student learning at university generally, and specifically in relation to their field of study. These so called 101 modules provided a cohort experience.

In addition, they also served the purpose of familiarising first entry students with more self-directed and independent learning. There was also a student support infrastructure that identified students who were at risk of failing or departing at any stage. All these initiatives attempted to address some of the challenges first entry students faced and so could be counted as an early move to retain students and steer them towards academic success.

While access and participation has been the focus of attention across all of these contexts, first year experiences at universities have now garnered greater attention and emphasis as it was noted that high dropout and failure rates were being recorded increasingly in this year of study. Some students find first year a challenging, difficult, intimidating and alienating experience, exacerbated by lack of readiness to cope with the demands of undergraduate study. Shevlin, Brunsdon and Miles (1998) found five, sometimes overlapping, reasons for students discontinuing in a life sciences course, for instance. These included commitment to prior goal, the need for “time out”, the desire to reality test a career, specific academic

difficulties which generated a strong sense of fear of failure, and a range of factors beyond the control of the student such as ill health, family crisis or financial pressure.

## **2.8 Chasms in research on student retention, throughput and academic success**

In the US since the seventies, research in student retention and throughput were largely quantitative in nature and related mainly to residential universities. These studies did not focus on student demographic factors like race, gender, ethnicity, income and orientation. Rather, they privileged statistical analysis outside of these demographic factors. These studies also tended to focus on the involvement of the student in the first year of their programmes. My study is different in that, not only is it a qualitative study, it also explores the phenomenon (academic success, which is an aspect of throughput) through a success discourse from the perspective of the student (graduates in Humanities programmes).

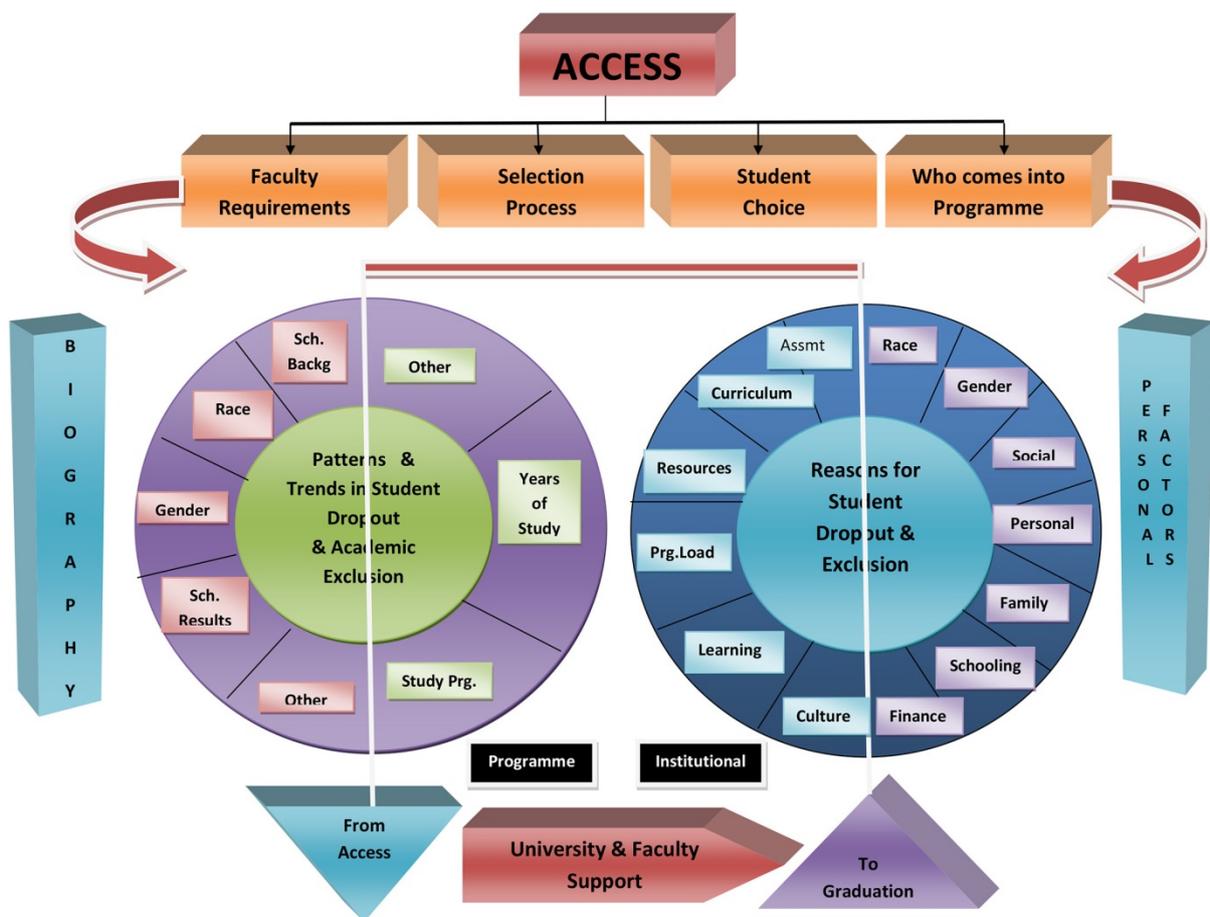
In the early years of the twenty first century, in the US, the differences in student backgrounds were accepted as an influential factor, and these became variables in the analysis of the retention and throughput phenomena (Johnson *et al.*, 2004-2005; Torres, 2003; Zurita, 2005). An example is Torres's study which was a longitudinal qualitative study using grounded theory methodology. Eighty-three first year students of Latino descent from seven American institutions participated in this study which explored the phenomenon of ethnic identity and how familial influences help to situate this in the higher education sector.

In SA, there has also been a greater appreciation of the array of forces (gender, class, income, apartheid education, etc.) which shape epistemological access, retention, throughput and drop-out (compare Berger, 2001 in Braxton, 2000). This array of forces provides a multilayered, much richer exploration of the complex phenomenon of student throughput within higher education (see Chapter Seven for findings and discussion). While much of the research on student throughput within HE in South Africa has largely been through surveys (Ramrathan, 2013), more examples of qualitative inquiry are becoming apparent in order to explore this multilayered, complex phenomenon.

Ramrathan's (2013) model for exploring student throughput within higher education (see Fig 2.1) presents a whole new way of exploring this phenomenon that is influenced

methodologically through a mixed method approach, and institutionally through a more fine grained analysis of both quantitative and qualitative factors that influence student throughput. These quantitative and qualitative analyses focus on three different but related discourses that influence student throughput and drop-out.

These discourses include a biographical discourse, an institutional discourse and a personal discourse that influence one another. Using this model (Ramrathan’s model), one can explore the confounding factors and breaking point factors leading to student drop-out. Once again, Ramrathan’s model starts from a negative perspective of student drop-out in the hope of exploring and finding ways to retain students within higher education. The current study takes on a different approach, the starting point of which is to explore how students, despite the identified and acknowledged challenges, have persevered and completed their undergraduate study in regulation time. This starting point attempts to illuminate how these students (participants of this study) have achieved academic success.



**Fig 2.1. Ramrathan’s conceptual model for exploring student drop-out from higher education (Ramrathan,2013)**

Clearly, there is a space for further issues that require exploration in order to fully understand the performance of student success. In view of the absence of literature which has used the student's point of view (Cross & Carpentier, 2009; Marshal & Case, 2010), my study has been designed to address the gap. It presents the student voice in the context of academic success at university, and must be seen against the background of the challenges Tinto (2006-2007, p.6) describes. What he calls "the lesson of institutional action, can be broadly stated as follows: it is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students to stay and succeed".

Focusing on the successful students and their understanding of what assisted them to get past the 'departure points' when they were closest to dropping out, will go some way to assist UKZN to identify the nature of the institutional action in which it needs to engage, in order to stem attrition and by extension, enhance persistence and success of its students.

This study can enhance the understanding of the range of influences, cultural, economic institutional and social, which come to bear on the shape of success at different institutions generally and on that of UKZN specifically. In the last 30 years, some studies in the US tried to prove that students needed to delink from past communities. It is now clear that continued links to such formations as family, church and tribe can promote student persistence and success at university (Torres, 2003; Waterman, 2004). These factors are explored in this study (see Chapter Three Ubuntu, p.87) and can be investigated with other factors which arise.

## **2.9 Attempts to fill the chasm**

Thus far, much of the recent literature on student throughput, retention and drop-out in the South African context has been linked to the transformational agenda of higher education (see Chapter One). Furthermore, the literature on higher education transformation relating to students has taken on a linear approach, focusing initially on access issues and progressing on to academic support, initially to support the increased access of previously marginalised communities, and later to support epistemological access to university education.

Most recently, the literature has been focusing on student drop-out and factors that could explain such high drop-out rates. Current issues of concern that are emerging are student experiences in HE with the most recent being the exploration of a flexible curriculum for undergraduate studies. In the recent publication by the CHE on this issue of student retention, throughput and drop-out, a discussion document on a flexible curriculum for undergraduate studies has been mooted as a possible answer to the sustained concern for a low graduation and throughput rate across the public higher education system (CHE 2013). This discussion document emerged through a national commissioned study and is discussed in the concluding comments of this chapter as it is the most recent document under discussion in HE towards enhancing the levels of academic success in this sector.

Other factors affecting academic success have also been identified in the relevant literature. Pekrun, Elliot and Maier (2009, p.118) discussed the generic classification of ‘achievement emotions’ which are the emotions related to student academic achievement, to teaching and learning activities and to success or failure in a university setting. Fried (2007) postulated that transformative learning would assist students to achieve academic success. He explained that this type of learning includes having the ability to know and show what they may have learned, the relevance to their lives and how it may have transformed the way they saw the subject.

Personality studies located within positive human psychology literature (Bandura, 1982; Korthagann, 2004) gave us the notion of core qualities which are also styled traits or character strengths. They are greatly valued and include qualities like creativity, trust and courage, which assist the individual to cope in negative circumstances and assist students to achieve success at university (Gable & Haidt, 2005). I see the work of South African researchers Marshall and Case (2010) as an extension of that concept which describes the optimum functioning of students as they engage coping strategies which were developed in a ‘disadvantaged’ social background in order to help them to succeed in HE.

Although they did not refer to positive psychology specifically, one can see how a disadvantaged social background can grow useful resources for students to cope with the challenges and therefore succeed in HE. Their narrative analysis of a single richly detailed interview with a black engineering student led them to focus on the notion of resilience and

what conditions can give rise to successful consequences, even if the student finds himself in the most dire circumstances.

Through this paradigmatic case, they found that “the construction of identity was crucial for mobilizing these resources. The analysis, therefore, raises questions about identity development within higher education” (p.502).

According to Bandura (1982), the core of human agency is self-efficacy, which is related to the ability to produce goals and put plans in place to achieve them. Self-efficacious students are therefore able to organise their cognitive, social and behavioural skills towards attaining these goals. Students who display this kind of behaviour can be termed ‘resilient’ learners (Winfred, 1991 in McMillan & Reed, 1994; Moleli, 2005 in Tshiwula, 2011). These theories connected to human agency can be seen as developments of core qualities theories and those around rethinking ‘disadvantage’. Resilience was categorised further, based on the different arenas in which they exhibited, namely, educational, emotional, personality, home and community.

What also seems to be emerging in this discourse student retention, throughput and drop-out within higher education studies is an interest in the general theme of assessment and its impact on learning quality in education (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Hounsell, 2003); summative assessment at the expense of formative assessment (Yorke & Longden, 2004), and students playing the assessment game and obtaining good marks instead of focusing on lifelong learning (Gibbs, 2006).

Other themes include ICT and the way in which the learner’s development has been supported by this (Nicol & Milligan, 2006). Students’ expectations (Ochse, 2003), pedagogic responsiveness (Griesel, 2004) and pedagogic distance (Hotsetter & Busch, 2006) with the effect of body language (Witt, Proffitt & Epstein, 2004), are other emergent themes.

Finally, in relation to the institutional experiences of successful programmes from the point of view of students passing them, organisational or institutional culture or climate which are contested terms because of their origin in industry, are also under consideration (Higgins, 2007; Thaver, 2006; Barnes, 2007). Some of these studies and their relationship to academic success are described below.

Interestingly, Gibbs and Simpson (2004) have found that students do not consistently perform better in one form of assessment compared with another, so the form of assessment does not necessarily affect their academic success. Another concern is how ICT might be used to support a broad range of assessment processes in large first year classes. An important issue in a large class is how to move students from being dependent on teacher feedback to being able to generate their own feedback on learning.

One of the case studies quoted in Nicol and Milligan (2006), involves elements of self-assessment, peer and teacher feedback, implemented in ways that support the development of learner self-regulation through ICT. The Re-engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) Project's preliminary findings from focus groups and questionnaires show that the students were positive about this learning experience. They appreciated that collaboration amongst peers helped them understand the topic under discussion (92%).

Their confidence was enhanced because of the design of the ICT assessment task and the benefits of learning were enhanced by social contact through the discussion board for social postings. This mitigated against the inhibition of social contact in a large first year class. Learning, self-regulation, peer assessment and social integration through the use of ICT pedagogy in the first year class contributed to successful learning.

Ochse's (2003) study aimed to uncover the relationship between university students' self-perceptions, expectancies, and academic achievement. A sample of 645 Unisa students was divided into three groups: Over-estimators, Realists, and Under-estimators. The findings revealed that, compared to Underestimators, Overestimators (a) expected significantly higher marks; (b) were significantly more confident about their expectations, and (c) perceived themselves to have significantly more ability.

Although Overestimators had more positive psychological profiles than Underestimators, they gained significantly lower marks than Underestimators (47% and 76% respectively) in the examinations. In strong contrast to major psychological theories, the results suggest that in a university context, (a) poor performance is not associated with negative self-perceptions and low expectancies, and (b) overoptimistic self-perceptions and high-expectancies may in fact be maladaptive. According to Ochse (2003), the findings suggest that humble self-assessments may be more conducive to success.

## **2.10 Further theorising: back to the beginning**

Higher education's 'revolving door' is often referred to when describing student drop-out in US colleges and universities. In their studies in this area, Braxton, Hirshey and McClendon (2004) research on retention found four variables that affect first year students' finances, academic ability, social satisfaction and institutional fit. Psychological, academic, sociological and economic stressors which then formed the basis for theories about student retention in much the same way as Tinto's theories (1975), were identified decades before.

In the US, the Higher Education landscape changed as "efforts to democratise opportunity has lowered admission and performance standards while inflating grades" (Duderstadt, 2004, in Steinman, 2007, p.2). In the same way as the doors of tertiary education were thrown wide open in the US after World War 11, the universities in post-apartheid SA colleges and universities had to serve a larger and more diverse student body. Unlike SA, the US government did not interfere in the creation of standards or mission statements or in general operations, for that matter. The one thing that the two education systems had in common was the retention rate of 50% in HE.

In the US, it had remained at this level for 100 years or more. In order to address attrition rates, Tinto (1985, 1993, 2003, 2004, 2005) developed his Interactionist Theory captured in his Student Integration Model which I used as the basis for my conceptual framework (TSIM). Braxton, Hirshey and McClendon (2004), with the assistance of psychologist sociologists and economists, worked on factors that affected student persistence one way or the other. Pascarella and Terenzina (2005) conducted longitudinal studies over three decades on factors which affected student retention.

Berger (2000) examined attrition through a sociological lens attempting to unearth social causes and the persistent effects of failure. He proposed optimizing student social capital for better retention and as a result greater successes in HE. Bean (2005) found that themes like the dynamics of the structure of relationships, intentions and attitudes, institutional fit, psychological processes, student reaction to internal and external environments, social experience, bureaucracy money and finances, affected retention and success and the opposite, failure and drop-out. The actual structure of a university and what function it performs

depends on what the community expects from it. Students require their studies to make them more marketable.

Modern South African and American universities are redirecting their efforts, moving from liberal arts education to vocationalism i.e. from a general education based on superior creative and critical thinking skills to preparing students for the labour market.

Academic success is important to many groupings, society generally, students, funding agencies and the government. This last level of interest comes from expectations that the universities will fill the gaps in relation to any skills shortage in the economy. A student's accountability to the public in respect of academic success was highlighted in a social contact suggested by Tinto in a lecture hosted by the CHE, in Durban, South Africa (August, 2013). This is response to the relative powerlessness relevant authorities seem to have had over a long period of time to retention and academic success in HE.

Other authors espouse similar ideas as Tinto in this regard are Yorke and Longden (2004) who also acknowledge the serious implications that poor pass rates in HE have for any country at numerous levels. These include the constraining of benefits that normally accrue to students who have attained success such as rewarding employment, improved standards of living, better health and, enhancement of social and cultural capital. All these are constrained by poor pass rates.

Thus the sheer complexity of the gamut of dynamic relationships and experiences which is observable in the above theories makes an all-encompassing, grand theory of retention and success almost impossible, especially if it has to be applicable to research and practicable for an institution to apply as part of its general operations. A theory that can be used to predict possible degrees of retention are just as impossible to engender.

If one wants to explain some aspects of retention and in this case, academic success, it is prudent to appeal to a variety of theories (see Chapter Three). This interpretative qualitative case study is paradigmatically skewed towards increasing an understanding of the phenomenon of academic success at UKZN from the students' point of view. It does just this in using TSIM as a base, adding to it relevant concepts from educational, teaching and learning, sociological and psychological theories in order to fashion a conceptual framework for this study of students' construction of academic success in HE.

## 2.11 Concluding Remarks

From the review of the literature, we can see that there is a dearth of personal success stories from successful students using their own perspectives, hence the focus of this study. The approach in my study may be described as a “methodological individualist” or “social psychological” (CHE, 2010) approach, in which the construction and performance of academic success is based on some individual attribute (cognitive ability, reading or writing skills) and / or the student as a member of a certain social or cultural group. It also includes an “institutional” approach but this rests on the student’s performance in relation to the undergraduate curriculum.

As mentioned above, the most recent publication on retention by the CHE is the report of the task team on undergraduate curriculum structure. It was instigated by low throughput and the quality of graduates in the South African public HE system (CHE, 2013). In the first phase of the investigation into undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa in 2013, the CHE presented an updated understanding of the undergraduate performance patterns in the sector.

This analysis was based on quantitative data in the form of detailed longitudinal cohort studies of all first-time entering students in the 2005 and 2006 intake for all three- and four-year degree and diploma programmes. The second phase focused on identifying and prioritising the systemic obstacles to student success in higher education as a basis for analysing what sectors of the system will be able to play a major role in ensuring improvement.

The third phase focused on analysing the role of curriculum structure as a systemic variable affecting student performance. This had implications for student under-preparedness, given a deficient secondary school system. A consequence is that this does, however, open up possibilities for positive action in HE in terms of doing its part to close the gap. The first entry student may be differently prepared for key transitions in tertiary curricula.

A further difficulty is that undergraduate curricula must meet local as well as global conditions, which presupposes digital educational technology and online learning. The report underlines the need to deal constructively with diversity in students’ educational, linguistic and socio-economic background. While most of the current student intake will benefit from

the proposed curriculum reform, at present 27% of contact students in the core degrees and diplomas currently graduate in regulation time; those who are able to graduate in less than the new proposed time should be allowed to do so in the interests of good fiscal control.

The proposal for a flexible curriculum structure was thus mooted and the fourth stage of the analysis focused on the viability of the CHE's task team's proposal. This fourth stage encompasses debate in various fora, including institutions of HE which is being undertaken as this thesis is being written.

Success in HE is a holistic concept including the development of sufficient skill to: engage with the academic material presented; socialize with peers, lecturers and other students; identify with the institution and attain a degree with the possibility of continuing studies/ professional training in a chosen discipline. It is no mean task to attempt to arrive at a "grand theory or model to explain academic success because of the complexity of the concept of success and retention, throughput and drop-out.

"The wide variety of influences on students as they progress through HE suggests that an appeal needs to be made to a similarly wide range of theoretical constructs if a satisfactory theory of retention and success is to be constructed" (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p.75). To this end, many models have been designed in order to try to encompass this wide range of constructs. In the same way, I have used Tinto's Student Integration Model as a base upon which I hung other important cognitive, psychological, sociological, developmental and educational constructs, which I used to conceptually frame my qualitative interpretative case study of successful students at UKZN.

The departure puzzle has been around for 70 years and the converse of that concept, retention, has been theorised about for a similar period of time in the US. Therefore the bulk of retention literature has emanated from the United States. In the next chapter, a theoretical framing for the study will be presented with a view to show how some of the issues relating to student retention, throughput and academic success, can and have been explained in the context of this study. I will use this framing to collect data and to theorise about students' construction of academic success at UKZN. Hopefully it will go some small way towards solving, dare I say it, the success puzzle.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Theoretical Framing**

#### **3. 1 Introduction**

Exposure to the literature on student retention and throughput suggests that these phenomena are worldwide problems, which many countries have been grappling with over decades (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Tinto, 2006-2007; Brennan, Brighton, Moon, Richardson & Rindi, 2003; [Australian] Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). Literature in the United States of America suggests that this problem of student retention and throughput is in fact more than a century old (Swail, 2003).

As these are persistent issues worldwide, it is expected that there is a plethora of theoretical frameworks that have been developed across the world to understand and explain them. It is also logical to assume that some theoretical frameworks have evolved over several iterations through the decades of engagement with these phenomena of student retention and throughput, which have obvious implications for academic success.

This chapter, therefore, presents a snapshot of some of the models used in the explanation of student retention and throughput within higher education with a view to making a case for the choice of Tinto's Student Integration Model (TSIM) as a starting point for this study on academic success. Tinto's integration model will then be presented and the constructs within the model are engaged with the purpose of directing their use within this study. Explanation of the use of the constructs of TSIM also allows space for justification for the inclusion of certain additional concepts within the model. As indicated earlier, theoretical models do have the potential to evolve over time and context. Part of this chapter will attempt to capture this evolution with specific reference to Tinto's student integration model. As with all models, critiques are omnipresent, hence the latter part of this chapter will present some of the critiques of Tinto's student integration model, including Tinto's self-critique of his model showing possibilities for adaptation, not only in the USA, but in other parts of the world, like South Africa. The development and addition of three other concepts to TSIM which have been included in my conceptual framework, can be seen as a response to some of this criticism.

The latter part of this chapter presents the African philosophy of Ubuntu and explains the way it has been used to indigenise and further layer the conceptual framework of this study. This was facilitated by the fact that integration is at the nub of the Tinto model and the African humanistic philosophy of Ubuntu. Accordingly, I found many points of possible connection between Ubuntu (seeing the self in the other) and the generic areas of the Tinto model (academic integration, social integration and personal background). For this and other reasons I used TSIM and Ubuntu to direct the framework within which this study could be conceptualised.

First, I contextualise the Tinto integration model amongst other theoretical frameworks which describe and influence student retention.

### **3.2 A snapshot of models and theoretical frameworks that influence student retention**

The following models of theoretical frameworks may be used to describe student retention and throughput, and indeed academic success, since academic success can be seen as the endpoint of retention and throughput. For retention, the concept of attrition is simply the other side of the same coin. In the same way, throughput cannot be fully discussed without reference to drop out rates. The gamut of models has different disciplinary bases including organizational theory, psychology, sociology and cultural theory with one which calls on a variety of disciplines to support its constructs.

Bean's models of student departure (1980,1983) is based on organizational theory and includes five variables that come directly from Price and Muller (1981), organizational theorists who focus on routinization, participation, communication and distributive justice. Bean added such elements as "grades, practical value, development courses and membership in campus organisations. Finally, kinship responsibility and opportunity can also affect the retention or departure of a student" (Braxton & Hirshey in Siedman, 2005, p.63).

In 2000, Bean together with Eaton addressed the psychological gap in his earlier model by including four psychological theories into their new model. These included elements of positive self-efficacy, (a concept which I highlighted under Agency within my conceptual framework) declining stress, increasing efficacy and internal locus of control, all of which

affected academic and social integration, institutional fit and loyalty, intention to persist and persistence. All these ideas appear in some form or the other in the design of my conceptual framework (see below). Bean's model together with Metzner (1985), which applies to non-traditional students, is discussed under fused models below.

There are many sociological lenses which can be brought to bear on persistence, retention, and success and culture is one of them. This single lens gives a variety of perspectives; for instance, a focus on cultural capital generated a model by Berger (2000) on undergraduate persistence. A focus on cultural propositions generated one on premature student departure by Kuh and Love (2000).

Cultural capital is an extremely important concept in the discussion on academic success in HE in South Africa, because of its history of institutionalized inequality which was sanctioned by the law. It goes to the nub of the matter in the transformation debate because cultural capital concretised in interpersonal and linguistic skills, demeanour and educational qualifications and can be used as a resource to advance one's social status. I appropriated some of the basic philosophy underlying this concept in my thesis which appears in the penultimate chapter this report (see Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success, p.267)

The more unequal the cultural capital is, the more unequal is the potential for social or educational advancement and following that, for social reproduction. The variables which affect student retention are based on congruence between the students' cultural capital and the institution's cultural capital. Different trajectories of history and tradition are embedded and reflected in each of these.

Kuh and Love (2000) considered the cultures of origin of the student and that of existing peer groups and whether this helps them to integrate with or differentiate and fragment from the group. The students' cultural meaning making system affects whether they leave the institution, how they value the education they are getting, and how they negotiate the cultural *milieu* of the institution.

Alternatively, they may choose to become members of particular enclaves within the institution: "...students who belong to one or more enclaves in the cultures of immersion, are

more likely to persist, especially if group members value achievement and persistence” (Kuh & Love, 2000, p.201).

Braxton, Hirshey and McClendon (2004) put forward a theory to account for student departure from residential as well as commuter colleges and universities using constructs from organizational, psychological economic and sociological findings. They focused on the factors that feed the central construct of Tinto’s Interactionalist Theory, (encapsulated in his student integration model), that of social integration. One of the antecedents to social integration is the commitment to the goal of attaining a degree and commitment to the institution. The entry characteristics of such things as race and ethnic background, socio-economic status, education and personal attributes, all affect goal commitment. Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004) explains this relationship further. The student’s commitment to the institution rides on its commitment to the student and its integrity, which is reflected in the quality of its degrees.

The next antecedent to social integration is in the community the student will find in peers. Potential for social connection is imperative. Psychologically, psycho-social engagement and social adjustment are important.

Finally, a student who finds the fees acceptable and can pay is likely to persist. At this stage, Braxton, Hirshey and McClendon (2004) theorise that there will be a second stage of commitment to the institution and persistence is assured. We can see how this model excavates more fully Tinto’s description of social integration in his Student Integration Model (1975).

Before I launch into my explanation of how I have appropriated the Tinto Student Integration model (1975) and other constructs I chose for this study from various theories and from some of the models and theoretical frameworks brought to bear on student retention and throughput, I would like to complete this section by referring to a peculiarly South African retention model. This model, albeit for non-traditional students (who are usually above the age of twenty five, part –time and commuters as opposed to residential), is based on Bean’s (1980), Spady’s (1970) and indeed Tinto’s (1975) theories.

Moagi-Jama's (2009) "Circles of Progression" model consists of four circles, one contained in the other. The innermost First Circle styled "Pre-Entry", includes the non-traditional student's family background with limited resources in terms of linguistic skills, education or finances to help the student into the Second Circle, styled "Initial Entry" into the academic and social life of the university. This circle includes the difficulties of acclimatizing, obtaining financial aid and clear information, and being separated from the family and home environment, which may preclude the student from entering the next phase.

The Third Circle, styled "Teaching and Learning Experience", includes new and elevated content, new teaching and assessment methods, rules, class arrangements and learning materials, possibly leading to alienation, poor academic performance and drop-out.

The Fourth Circle includes specializing within a specific programme, where they are introduced to higher order thinking skills. There may still be financial difficulties; if social integration with peers and role models is not achieved, isolation may lead to poor academic performance and even dropping out.

Initially, the limited resources in various areas brings about difficulties in acclimatizing in the second circle, alienation and poor academic performance in the third circle and disintegration with social peers leading to poor academic performance and even dropping out. All these negative factors focus on the factors at different entry points which limit academic success and which are designed to explain dropout and failure.

This model assisted me to think of the departure points which were necessary to examine as momentum producing experiences which could propel students towards academic success even after they had experienced travelling in the opposite direction in their undergraduate programmes.

Tinto's model focuses on the integration of the student socially and academically and presents a way of looking at retention and success. My study has as its focal point students' academic success and how they constructed and performed this in HE so it can be seen as closely allied to Tinto's model.

### 3.3 Tinto's Student Integration Model

Figure 3.1. below depicts the multidirectional multimodal theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins this study. While it is acknowledged that the institution provides the contextual space in which the act of academic success is played out, it should be pointed out that the point of view of the successful student is being favoured in this study. This means that the role of the institution will be dealt with only to the extent that the participants consider it to be important in their construction and performance of academic success in HE.

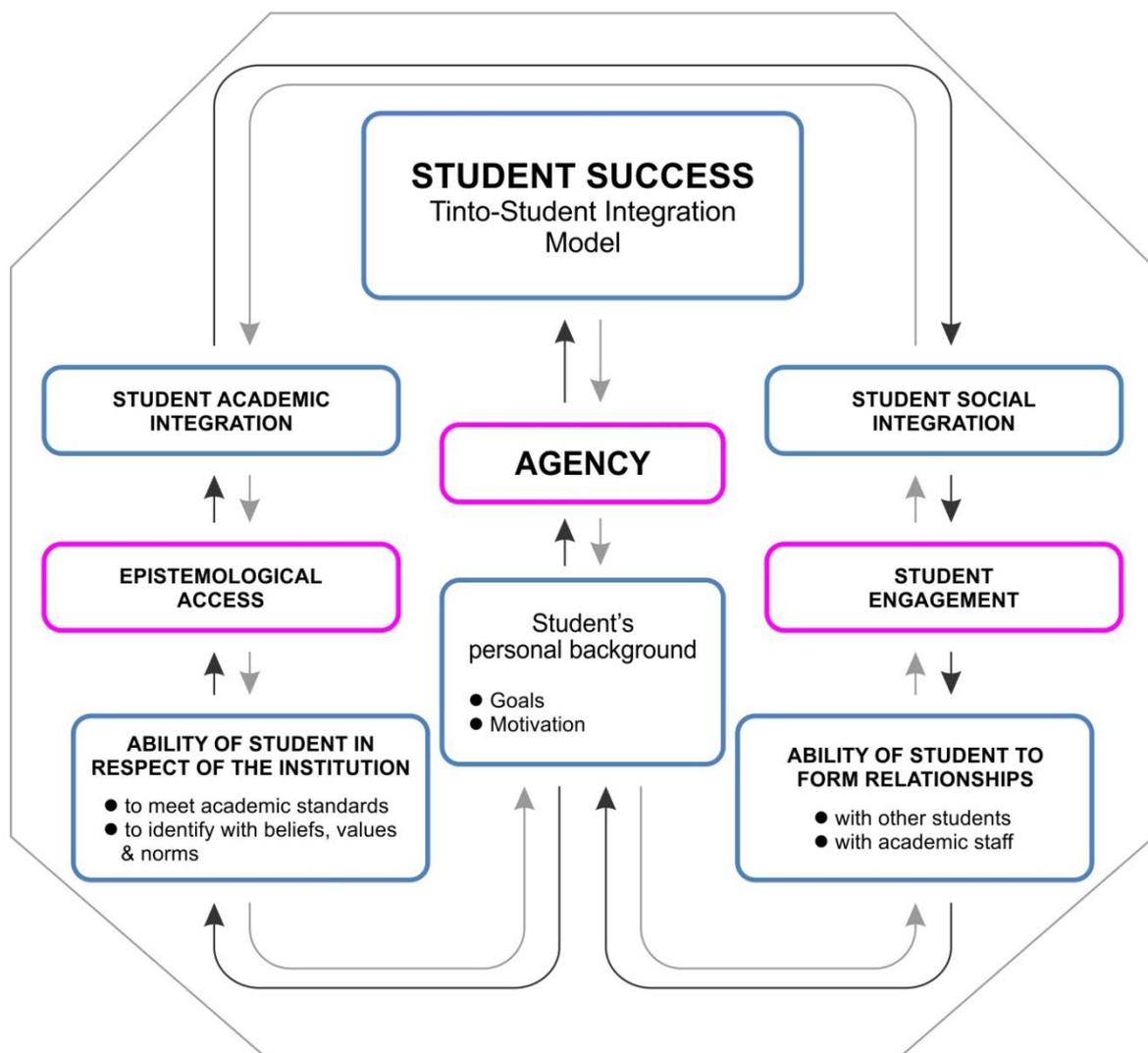


Figure 3.1. Tinto Student Integration Model

### **3.4 The context of Tinto's Student Integration Model**

Of the range of models, some of which have been described above (Braxton, Hirshey and McClendon, 2004; Tierney, 2000; Seidman, 2005; Moagi-Jama, 2009, (based on Tinto, 1975; Spady, 1970 and Bean, 1980), I chose to adapt Tinto's Integration Model as it is one of the most cited conceptual frameworks in the area of success and retention even today. Tinto's Interactionist Theory which has its foundation on a study of the interaction between undergraduates and different spheres and nodes of interaction within any institution is encapsulated by Tinto's Integration Model (TSIM). It is of paradigmatic stature, notwithstanding any of the criticism it may have received. I have taken account some of this criticism in my conceptualisation of the additional concepts used in the theoretical framework of my study and captured in the modifications within the pink rectangles in Fig 3.1.

Tinto's Interactionist Theory allowed me to explore the concept of student engagement amongst other relevant concepts which I appropriated having considered his and other models. These appropriations gave me a starting point from which I could investigate how successful students constructed and performed academic success in their undergraduate studies at UKZN. This research had to give some idea of what form the phenomenon took, both inside the classroom and outside, and how the different geographic and relational environments may have contributed to the participants' construction of academic success in HE.

Apart from this, Tinto also made space for what the students brought into the institution even before they were socially and academically integrated within the institution. This included their individual characteristics, their personal backgrounds and their goals and motivation. All these factors had obvious implications for the supplementary concept of agency which I added to my success model.

Under Tinto's social integration, I included the topical area of student engagement (CHE's SASSE Report, Strydom & Mentz, 2010). Student Engagement can be defined as "the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities (and) is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005, p5).

It is a wide ranging term which includes such ideas as level of academic challenge, which is really what the institution sets up in the first instance. However these boundaries set up by the institution can be challenged and pushed by the student who in so doing becomes a partner with the institution in creating other parameters of academic challenge. Here is one instance in which the institution's role is important and by no means is it the only player in the construction of academic success. What is of greater import within the context of this study however, is the role of the student and the successful students' perception of their roles as makers and performers of their academic success.

Academic challenge in relation to student engagement gives rise to active and collaborative learning which includes intense involvement in class "whether they are involved in tutoring, in community based projects and engaged in out-of-class discussions with others" (Kuh *et al.*, 2005 in Strydom & Mentz, 2010, p.18).

Student-Staff interaction, enriching educational experiences such as internships and community service, through which intercultural knowledge is exchanged and skills are applied, also support student engagement with a range of peers and staff. Finally, a supportive campus environment satisfies students who then perform better and the universities in turn are committed to their success, one action being dependant on the other in a dynamic enriching two-way process. One way in which students achieve this is by inculcating worthwhile working and social relations among different groups.

In this study, I have also used student engagement as a foil to student drop-out, which is essentially a decision by an individual to leave the institution for a plethora of reasons, some of which may be related to personal attitudes and skills or influences or expectations and demands of the university.

According to Spady (1970), the interaction between the students and the university is realised in the assimilation into the academic and social systems of the university and this determines whether the student will be retained in the university. This is the culmination of the partnership between institution and student.

### **3.5 Origin and criticism of Tinto's Integration Theory and other models**

#### **3.5.1 Origin**

According to Swail, Redd and Perna (2003), "30 and 40 percent of all entering freshmen are unprepared for college-level reading and writing and approximately 44 percent of all college students who complete a two- or four year degree had enrolled in at least one remedial or developmental course in math, writing, or reading" (p.viii). This is, in part, an explanation of retention being a persistent problem over the past 100 years in the US including the fact that that it has consistently remained at the 50% mark. "The consequences of this massive and continuing exodus from higher education are not trivial, either for the individuals who leave, or for their institutions" (Tinto, 1993, p.1) and specialists such as Vincent Tinto saw the necessity to theorise this phenomenon in an attempt to understand it.

#### **Tinto, Spady and Durkheim**

Tinto's theory of social and academic integration is the most referred to in the area of student retention was first published in 1975. Tinto had originally drawn on Spady's sociological model (1970) which had applied Durkheim's theory of suicide (1954) to Higher Education and retention. According to Durkheim, the individual's focus is on social bonds which are always seen as regulating individual desires and passions or attaching individuals to collective goals and meanings (Lukes in Durkheim, 1982, p.22). This in turn will affect whether an individual is integrated into society. If they are not, there is a greater likelihood that they will commit suicide, according to Durkheim's model.

Spady (1970) made a comparison in this regard to the dynamic relationship which evolved between the individual student and the university, starting with his interactions in this environment. So essentially, this was a sociological model. The student and all that he brings with him is held against all that the institution expects, and if the student can be socialised into the academy in respect of the community and the academy, then healthy engagement can take place.

Promoting academic and social integration are variables such as "family background, academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, peer

support (and these are seen in association with) satisfaction with the university environment and institutional commitment” (Spady 1970, p.77 in Moagi-Jama, 2009, p.16). The basis of disengagement with an institution which led to dropping out was compared with non-integration into society which could lead to an individual committing suicide.

Tinto (1975) theorises that integration can occur in respect of different aspects of the university “either the academic or the social systems of the university” (Tinto, 1975, p.92). In 1987, Tinto included the three stages of moving from one community to the other.

The student typically goes through separation from one group to join another, then goes through a transition in which he deals with the different unfamiliar codes of conduct in the new group, and then finally is incorporated into the new situation as a working, recognised member of the new group (Swail, 2003).

From a sociological perspective over two decades (1975, 1987 and 1993), Tinto developed a longitudinal interactionist model of student departure which researchers used to work from.

In explaining the departure, Tinto was also pointing to what could contribute to retention and success which is the aspect that I want to take from his theorizing within TSIM. Having been inspired by Durkheim’s (1954) theory of suicide and Genep’s study of rites of passage (1908), he theorised student departure based on the fact that students could not adopt new social values and as a result, could not integrate into their institutions academically or socially.

The opposite of this would be student retention and success based on the fact that students had the capacity to adopt new social values and as a result, could integrate into their institutions academically or socially.

However criticism was also leveled at TSIM and its foundations.

### **3.5.2 Criticism of Tinto, other models and gaps**

Tierney (2000) sees Tinto’s theory as flawed, in that Genep’s rite of passage is intracultural and not intercultural i.e. within one culture and not from one culture (student’s culture) to

another (institution's culture), amongst other things. In this context, I have considered epistemological access within academic integration as a theoretical concept which unpacks this issue in this study on academic success. In fact I consider this concept to be so important to academic success that I have chosen to focus on it and elevated it to the status of an additional aspect of the conceptual framework. (see Fig 3.1. above)

Given the gap in thinking, Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) served the purpose of providing a theoretical framework where there was none. A psychological bent was placed by Bean & Eaton (2000), who in 2004 identified four psychological theories which underlie student behaviour with regard to persistence and success. These are:

1. Attitude behaviour theory, which are related to intentions and can be compared to theories explaining motivation. (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Motivation and agency, in turn, give rise to a number of empowering notions in respect of the student. One such notion involves whether they feel they can make a difference in what they do and how strongly they feel they are in control of what they do, as opposed to accepting or feeling they are victims of circumstance. This is of vital importance to "disadvantaged" students, especially in the South African context. Attitude behavior theory in the form of motivation and agency are included in the TSIM as illuminating concepts. (see p.71)
2. Coping behaviour theory, which regulates the student's adjustment to the environment. This can assist in the explanation of social exchange theory which was also used to underpin a part of the conceptual framework in this study. This in turn relates to malleable self-theorising (Dweck, 1999) as compared to fixed theorizing. Social exchange theory has been included under motivation in which choices are made with respect to how students wish to spend time and this also relates to student engagement (see p.71).
3. Self-efficacy theory, which explains the way in which student perception relates to how a desired outcome can be achieved with effort (Bandura, 1986). This theory has direct implications for Agency and motivation in TSIM.

Attribution theory explains how students may exhibit the ability to control situations or be controlled by them. Marshall and Case (2010) indicate that "disadvantaged" students might

bring with them particular resources that may be mobilised to their advantage in Higher Education. This relates to Practical Intelligence (Sternberg, 1997) and Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1996). It is expected to lead to the adoption of personal learning goals rather than goals relating to the student's own performance as compared with that of others (Dweck, 1999). Thus it is important for students to see themselves as open to development rather than being limited by a set of 'givens' represented by their peers' performance or what the institution may set as a bar to clear in the race to academic success. This has direct implications for student engagement and epistemological access in the area of student academic integration (see p71).

All these theories were canvassed in some form or the other in this study into the participants' construction and performance of academic success at UKZN. Tinto (1993) made an important observation in emphasising the fact that individual actions which come of the ability or willingness of the individual, will lead to successful completion of the task (p.85).

Very few models are mono-disciplinary in character, including Tinto's model which was sociologically based but psychological in relation to the dynamic of the intentions, goals and commitments which positively or negatively affect retention and success.

Astin's (1991) I-E-O (Input-Environment-Output) model includes psychological constructs and behaviour and has elements of economics; Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1992) fused Bean and Mertzner (1985) and Tinto's ideas. This fused model could therefore be applied to older students as the former focused on non-traditional students.

Whether students are traditional or non-traditional in character affected retention and success. Traditional undergraduate students are those who entered HE after high school and attended university full time, in the same way as participants in this study did. Although the definition of non-traditional students has been contested and I have already referred to it above, Bean and Metzner (1985) identified age as an important factor. They were described as those who were over 24 years old, so possibly were adults with work and family commitments competing with the successful attainment of educational goals which they pursued during part-time or full-time study. They would also have been commuters as they did not live on campus. The most important aspect of this model (Bean & Mertzner, 1985) was student institutional fit, which would affect persistence and ultimately success.

In 1980, Bean had originally theorised a psychological model and as such emphasised the importance of what the students brought with them in terms of attitudes, learned behaviour and family background. He developed this concept when he added to his model of retention and success with Eaton in 2000. They began to emphasize coping strategies which students required in order to deal with the new and different environment they were now placed in. Their own backgrounds may have prepared them for ‘institutional violence’ (Ramrathan, 2013). One of the insidious examples of this institutional violence occurs when education systems discriminate directly if not indirectly when they put inordinate and unnecessary challenges in the way of the student rendering it almost impossible for the student to transcend the gap which divides the home culture to that of the university.

This has tremendous implications for the disadvantaged students who are actively being encouraged to enter HE in South Africa, and the way in which their backgrounds, rather than minimising their chances of persistence and success, actually enhances those chances (Marshall & Case, 2010).

Pascarella and Tremezini (1991) focused on the environment as they believed it was active and had a great deal to do with retention and success. It was for this reason that they also emphasised developmental theory. It is clear why Yorke and Longden (2004) believe that student success is influenced by a complex set of considerations which draws from the disciplines of sociology, psychology and even economics.

While many researchers used Tinto’s retention theories inconsistently because of the broad constructs on which they were founded, I am attempting to narrow down the larger constructs in this study. Hence I tie them down to agency and motivation under personal background, epistemological access under academic integration and student engagement (SE) under social integration, although the term itself is fairly broad.

At this point, I want to acknowledge that although the constructs are broad, the plethora of revised models that Tinto’s Integration model and indeed his theories have given rise to, have done nothing if they have not contributed to the discourse of retention, success, throughput and persistence, or, on the opposite side of the coin, failure, drop-out and exclusion in HE.

Social integration relates to the student's levels of social and psychological comfort within the institution's *milieu*. It includes allegiance to or membership of groups of common interest. Common causes exist generally within the institution's social environment and just as many exist within the intellectual or academic environment (Kuh & Love, 2000, p.197 in Yorke & Longden, 2004, p.79).

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction was visible in literature on retention fairly recently in the US (McDonough, Korn & Yamasaki, 1997; Berger, 2000) and in the UK (Longdon, 2004; Thomas, 2002; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). He developed the notion of 'cultural capital' to address the question of social inequality. Cultural capital refers to cultural resources owned by people in the same way as they may own financial resources.

Some students are well off in respect of cultural capital, while others are not. The former may have attained this and assimilated what is expected of them in a particular environment incidentally, whereas the latter not living in a similar environment and not being exposed to similar things, will not.

Individuals who access the various sources of capital constitute the dominant class and are able to use their resources to maintain their position relative to others. McDonough, Korn and Yamasaki (1997) observed that cultural capital has no value unless it can be changed into other forms of highly regarded commodities such as financial resources. The type of knowledge those in upper classes prize, is fairly inaccessible, as it is not taught in any educational institution. So social class becomes a powerful force that can shape retention and success.

It has serious implications for epistemological access in institutions whose culture may differ radically from that of the student. This relates to the notion of habitus which refers to the set of norms and practices of a social group and may highlight difficulties faced by students who are in strange surroundings. In this case, there will be a disjuncture between the student and the group or even the institution with respect to the habitus. If a closer fit can be attained, there will be a greater likelihood of success.

In HE, an institution which is inherently elite will need to provide not only orientation but also grooming for students with quite different cultural codes. It is my contention that these

codes are inherent in the epistemologies of the university; if the home background is so different from that of the university that it is almost impossible for the student to integrate into the institution, she will simply not persist with HE.

Using Tinto's discussion of social integration (1975) as a base, it can be concluded that education systems discriminate directly if not indirectly if they make it more difficult for the student to make the transition from the home culture to that of the university.

While research conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) confirmed that the level of disciplinary learning and general cognitive development was greatly influenced by the way teachers actually taught in the classroom Tinto did not focus on this as an issue that was important to academic success in a clear and full way.

Yorke and Longden (2004) criticised Tinto (1993) for relegating the classroom to simply a site for social engagement rather than foregrounding the importance of pedagogy in enhancing and heightening a sense of engagement.

I think the criticism did not go far enough in not explicitly stating that Tinto tended to ignore the full implications the classroom had for academic integration. However, I believe Tinto saw the error of his omission and went some way to correcting this later in saying, "Two areas, among many, that are ripe for exploration are the effects of classroom practice upon student learning and persistence and the impact of institutional investment in faculty and staff development programs on those outcomes" (2006, p.7). In fact I was at a seminar in Durban, South Africa as recently as in 2014 when he emphasized the importance of classroom pedagogy at a symposium on retention and through-put arranged by CHE in 2014. Obviously, this still is area which warrants research within the discourses on success, retention and throughput in HE.

Engagement can also be described as deep and surface learning, where the benefits of deep learning are described as opposite to the performance of students simply keeping up appearances of being engaged in learning.

So Tinto's Integration model has been criticised for not clarifying the parameters of the social and academic integration sometimes individually and sometimes jointly. Either in response or

simply by way of further personal qualification and explanation, Tinto revised this theory at least twice, first in 1993, when he added four factors which would assist in the application of his theories.

These were adjustment, difficulty, incongruence and isolation (Tinto, 1993, p. 45), which related to transition, academic demand, unsuitability of institution to student or *vice versa* and finally, not being socialised into the different groupings at different levels and within different spaces of the institution.

I have chosen to highlight this, especially because it is significant to the South African HE environment. His emphasis on classroom experience in 1997 as a lens through which the social and academic integration of students can be viewed, is an area I have encapsulated under epistemological access within this study.

Bennett (2003) places issues such academic performance and intellectual development of students, with students' belief in lecturers' commitment to teaching and assisting them, under the generic heading of academic integration. I find that these issues can also be encompassed under social integration because the students' self-esteem is supported by the level of their relationship with lecturers apart from peers. I concur with Yorke and Longden (2004), who criticise Tinto for the unidirectional transition that he presents in his model of social integration (1975). It is inadequate because institutions do change in respect of their vision and mission as well as their student make-up; moreover, academic and social integration exist at one and the same time and it can be seen how factors that influence one generic area (academic integration) can affect another (academic integration) for instance.

Tinto differentiated academic from social systems of institutions but they inter-relate and are connected. While a student may be academically integrated in an institution and she may succeed academically, success will be enhanced if there is peer support as well (even in the area of social integration). This is one of the reasons why in Fig 3.1. (above) which illustrates TSIM I have included arrows going in at least two directions in order to capture the multidirectional nature of the model of student integration leading to academic success. Arguably the arrows can traverse the model and go in multifarious directions (Chapter Seven).

Berge and Huang (2004) and McCubbin (2003) refer to family background (value climates and expectational climates), academic ability, prior education, race and sex (the influence of which is not clear cut), as possible variables affecting how students are socially and academically integrated into the university.

This in turn affects the level and indeed the achievement of academic success at the university. Bean's psychological theory of student retention (1980) also relies on students' background characteristics as important to integration into university, alongside their attitudes and behaviours. This aspect has been accommodated by the Ubuntu aspect of the conceptual framework of this study.

Clearly, there is a space for further issues that require exploration in order to address the question of student success. In view of the paucity of literature which has taken the student's point of view, my study will present the student voice in the context of academic success at university.

This study is to be seen against the background of the challenges to which Tinto (2006-2007) alludes. What he calls "the first lesson of institutional action, can be broadly stated as follows: It is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students to stay and succeed" (p.6).

By focusing on the students and their understanding of what assisted them to get past the points when they were closest to dropping out, this study will go some way to assist UKZN to identify the nature of the institutional action it needs to engage in order to stem attrition and by extension, enhance persistence and success of its students.

The study will also give grist to the mill when concretizing practical measures which will help to operationalise those aspects of students' understanding of their own success, which are not already known. Apart from high school experience and the family context, over which the institution has little influence, those aspects which are illuminated through this research can assist the institution to tap into the issues it will have to consider in order to make it a more enabling environment.

Tinto's model of integration is often criticized for not providing sufficient direction as to what practitioners can do in order to achieve academic and /or social integration for their students. This study is intent on researching how the successful student constructs and performs academic success herself. Thus direction for practioners may come from an unexpected source. Lest they be accused of navel gazing they are advised to hear the successful students' voice and take all they say into account in their ruminations about how to produce academic success. Would it not be wise to hear from the producers of this amorphous commodity as to how it is conceptualized and understood and constructed and performed before making plans to produce it by themselves? While it is not one of the aims of this research to produce practical institutional action to enhance success, it will go some way towards theorizing around this concept from the student participants' point of view.

### **3.5.2.1 Tinto in self-critical mode**

Tinto in a recent self-reflective piece (2006-2007) acknowledges Kuh and Love (2000) and Kuh (2003) in respect of the area of operationalizing and measuring the concepts of academic and social integration, though he points out that "it does not tell institutions how they can enhance integration or what is now referred to as engagement" (p.6).

So it can be seen that Tinto's model is not complete in itself and it is necessary to supplement it in order to make the conceptual framework more efficacious to tackle the investigation I have chosen to launch. I have attempted to deepen it and make it more credible for my purposes by supplementing it with some specific learning, motivational and social cognitive theories. It is for this reason that this research is conceptually and theoretically founded on this model in the first instance, and then supplemented by the concepts of epistemological access which includes the zone of reflective capacity (student academic integration) and student engagement (student social integration), as well as agency and social exchange theory (students' personal background, goals and motivation). This represents the simplest explanation as a starting point for understanding some highly nuanced additional concepts which can appear under one or many of the generic areas of the TSIM. Some of these concepts are further explained below within this context.

My study may assist to clarify some of these measures of integration, certainly in relation to student perception of both generic areas of social and academic integration (TSIM). It will

join the body of work by theorists such as Kinzie and Kuh (2004) and Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt (2005), who have looked into practices that enhance engagement. The institution may also glean some idea of best practice, which will impact positively on student persistence and success.

In the same way as a multi-layered complex set of factors shapes a student's leaving, just as many and varied are those that assist a student to persist and graduate timeously. This study can enhance the understanding of the range of influences, cultural, economic institutional and social, which come to bear on the shape of success at different institutions.

In the last 30 years, some studies in the US tried to prove that students needed to delink from past communities. It is now clear that continued links to such formations as family, church and tribe can promote student persistence and success at university (Torres, 2003; Waterman, 2004). These factors can be tested in the present study and can be investigated in tandem with other factors which arise.

Also under the theme of student engagement is included the work with collaborative groups of adults by Tinsley and Lebak (2009), styled the "Zone of Reflective Capacity". This zone shares the theoretical attributes of Vygotsky's (1980) zone of proximal development as the difference between what a learner can learn through independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.

However, the zone of reflective capacity is specifically constructed through the interaction between participants engaged in a common activity, and expands when it is mediated by positive interactions with other participants in respect of their shared feedback, analysis, and evaluation of one another's work (Tinsley & Lebak, 2009).

The zone of reflective capacity expanded as trust and mutual understanding among the peers grew. The zone of reflective capacity talks back to the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains and within the discourse of the university enhances epistemological access and in so doing, academic integration into the university (TSIM).

This is how the zone of reflective capacity also plays out within the area of student engagement. The close relationship of student engagement with academic and social integration to produce academic success is supported by extensive research literature, which indicates that the best way to predict the extent to which student will learn and develop is to take into consideration the amount of time and energy students spend involving themselves in educationally purposeful activities. (Kuh, Kinzi, Schuh & Whitt, 2005). Simply put, student engagement is what students do at university and how this impacts on their success.

Finally, Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a model for understanding the student decision-making behaviour regarding continuation of study and achievement of academic success. Students have to deal with competing demands to accommodate work, careers and social integration so they have many competing selves: student, worker, partner, parent, child, sibling and friend (McInnis & Hartley, 2000). The theory of social exchange (Emerson, 1981), while commonly employed to examine interpersonal relationships, will be used in this study to examine intrapersonal relationships: relationships between the selves (Horsmanshof & Zimitat, 2003). Apart from the selves which may be operating at any one time, possible selves which may have a positive or negative focus also exist.

The challenge for any potentially successful student is to retain the capacity to remain focused on an active positive self while integrating socially and academically into the institution. This study will be able to investigate how these positive elaborated selves are developed by successful students along the way and what factors they think assist this development.

### **3.5.3 Concluding Remarks: criticism of TSIM and other models**

So ends a snapshot of some of the broader models used in the explanation of student retention and throughput within higher education with a view to making a case for the choice of Tinto's Student Integration Model (TSIM) as a starting point for this study on academic success. This included a discussion of other constructs which I specially chose to complement the model in response to critique levelled at the model. More importantly my choices were made to serve the purpose of conceptually framing my study. It presented a way in which I could begin to deepen my understanding of how students constructed and performed academic success in HE.

While TSIM was developed in the US possibilities, for adaptation and applicability exist in other parts of the world including in South Africa.

The next part of this chapter represents such an attempt at adaptation and applicability of TSIM to South African HE using the African philosophy of Ubuntu as part of the conceptual framework of this study. As integration is at the heart of Tinto's model, I highlighted different manifestations of Ubuntu (for instance seeing the self in the other) and connected the generic areas of the Tinto model (academic integration, social integration and personal background) in order to describe how students constructed and performed academic success.

A fine grained interpretation of Ubuntu also allowed me to see this peculiarly African philosophy in relief against the supplementary concepts of agency and motivation, student engagement and nuances in epistemological access,

### **3.6 Ubuntu Conceptual Framework**

In attempting to accommodate the general theme of integration through the assistance of others, I decided to appropriate the concept of Ubuntu, the African philosophical concept which essentially relates to one's humanness, respect and compassion for others (Louw, 2010).

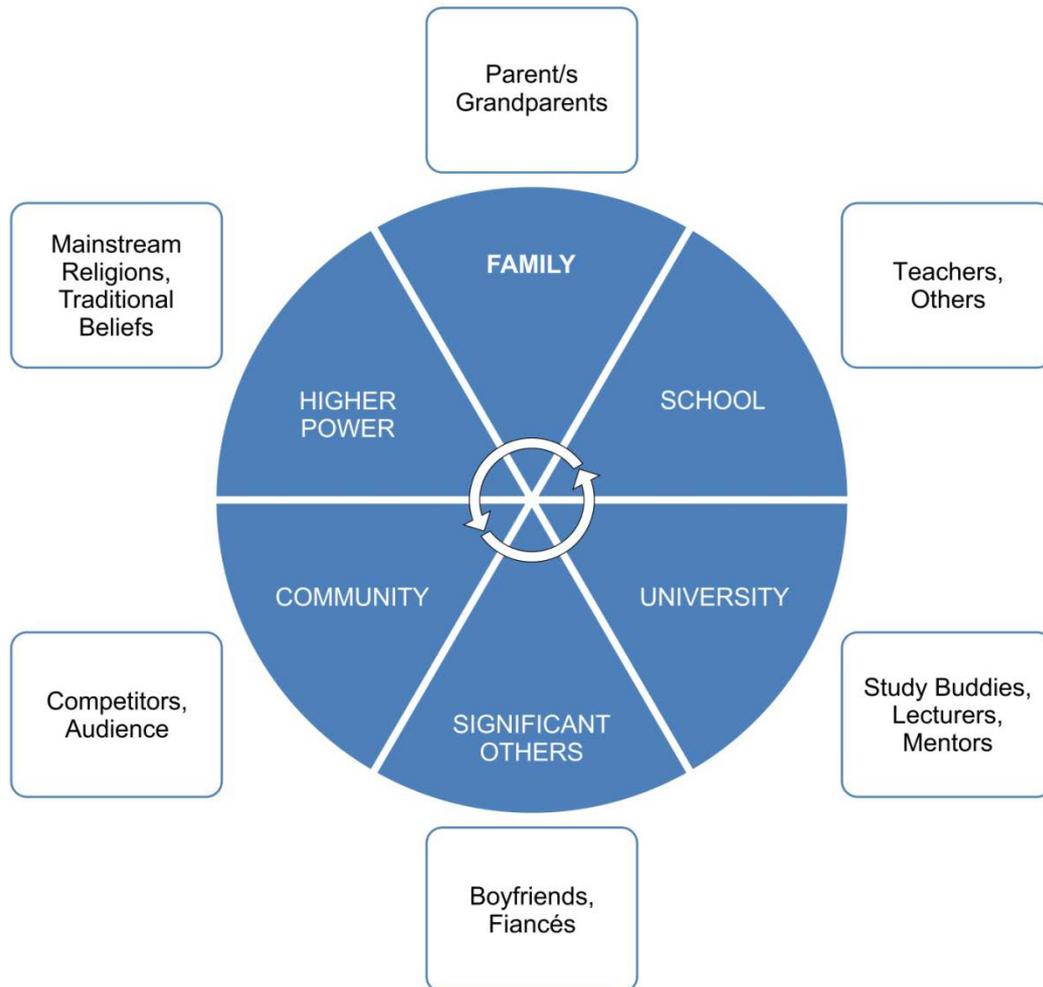
This allowed me to me to theorise around the theme 'the importance of the other', in relation to students' construction and performance of academic success. An advantage was that the addition of this concept indigenised the model that had been created from the hybrid (TSIM), which already included additional concepts mentioned above, thereby making it more relevant to the study of academic success in the context of a South African HE institution.

However, Ubuntu is not a race bound concept so it made sense to use it as a lens to see how participants in my study constructed success no matter what race group they belonged to. As students on a South African campus, they were living an African experience of education as far as the context of UKZN allowed them to on this continent with its peculiar provincial national and institutional culture. They also brought to their educational experience and

therefore to their construction of success, their backgrounds and cultures which they had absorbed, and the values they lived by.

The fact that this term is not restricted to a particular cultural or linguistic group allowed me to appropriate the term in order to connect my study more clearly to my life as an educator in HE in the first instance, and in the second, more generally, it allowed me to connect more fully to HE in my country.

The following model (Fig.3.2) illustrates the different manifestations of the Ubuntu concept as it was placed within the theoretical framing of this study. These are divided specifically in relation to family, school, university, personal relationships, community and higher power and are further described in Chapters Six and Seven. It must be noted that although the pie in the figure below is divided into equal parts these parts may be larger or smaller depending on the influence different areas have brought to bear on the academic life of the students under scrutiny.



**Figure 3.2. Ubuntu model illustrating different areas of influence**

The word Ubuntu is attributed to the isiZulu language, the language of the majority of the people of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Louw, 2002) and to an isiXhosa proverb (Tutu, 1999), (the language of the majority of the people in Transkei, South Africa). It is undeniable, however that it can be considered to be the spiritual basis of African life.

The worldview enshrined in the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, i.e. "a person is a person through other persons" (Shutte, 1993, p.46) is expected to prescribe the manner in which one should conduct oneself in relation to others. So manifestations of Ubuntu exist in the following contexts which affect the students' construction and performance of academic success in HE markedly.

### **3.6.1 Family**

This was the first level at which Ubuntu could have been experienced in the participants' lives. In this study, it was necessary to examine whether the participants were able to engage this experience of family support in mitigating the stress that was created by their construction and performance of academic success at university (Chow, 2010).

In contextualizing the institution of the family within South African society, one part of the HE student community often has absent parents and child-headed or grandparent-headed households: this had to be recognized in how the relevant participants in this study constructed success within these constraints.

What also complicates theorizing about the family and relational support through Ubuntuism, is that many disadvantaged students still construct academic success as individuals in spite of there being an absence of support from the family.

I call this absence which is the opposite of Ubuntu, *ngekomuntu*, which means an absence of people in isiZulu and by extension that can be taken as no support. What has to be unearthed is how resilience capital is built up in this personal environment which is devoid of familial support. This resilience capital becomes an almost individualistic notion but sometimes this void is filled by support drawn from other interactions with other players in the students' environment so how resilience capital and indeed Ubuntu is seen, can be multilayered and delicately nuanced.

This level of family and the next of school which are two of the initial areas in which the concept of Ubuntu is experienced are represented in the first circle which surrounds TSIM in Fig 3.2.

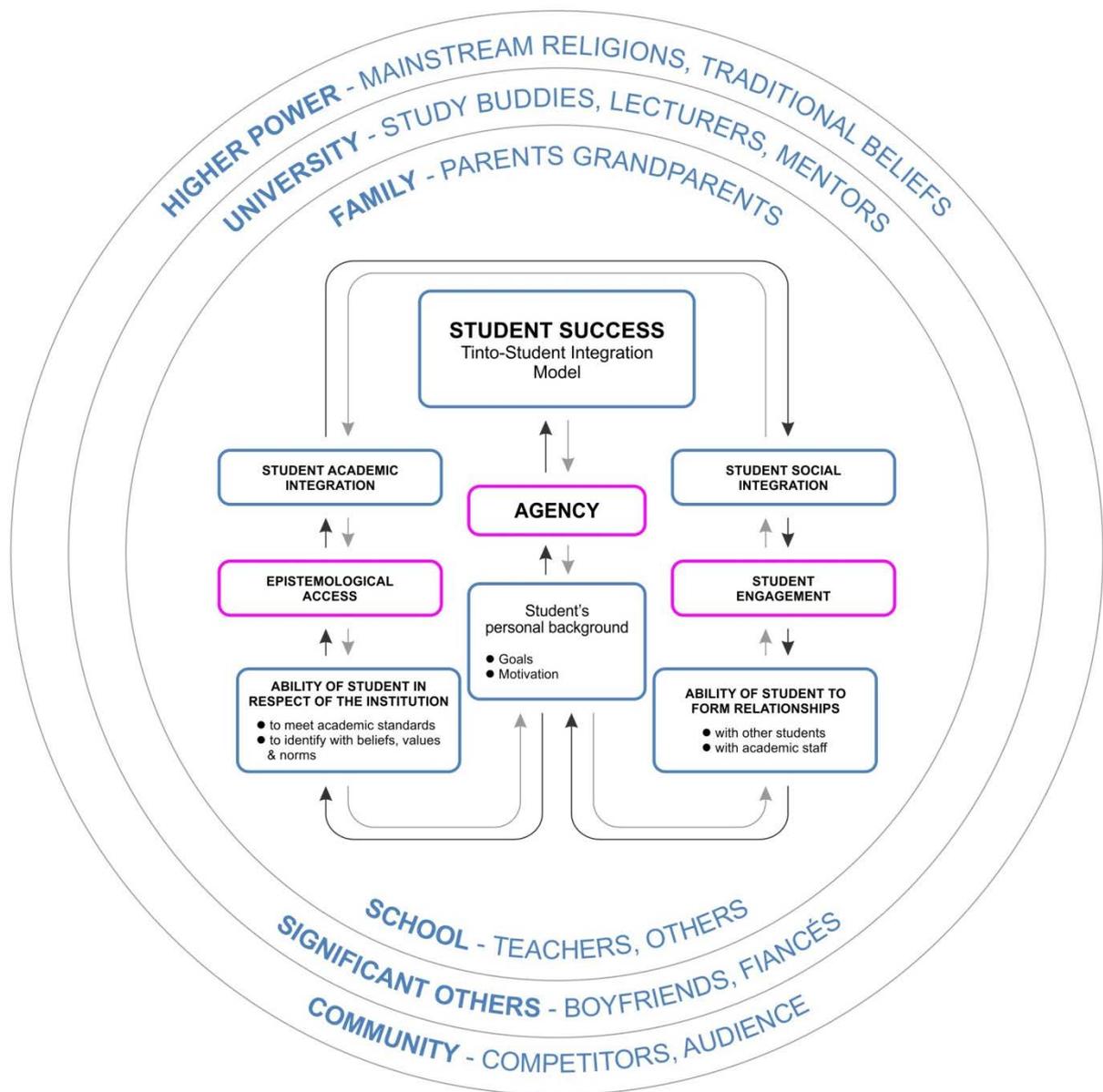
### **3.6.2 School**

School is also one of the institutions in which the participants would have spent long hours and could have constituted what Cotton, Dollard and De Jonge (2002) call the institutional and environmental support. Considering the number of under resourced schools in South Africa, not only in terms of material resources but also human resources, it was necessary to

consider whether this was a possible foundation upon which academic success at university was then built.

Nezlek and Allen (2006) examined negative events in the study environment (in HE) and what can assist the student in these circumstances. What the student may have benefitted from school may prove to be of such assistance. Therefore this manifestation of Ubuntu had to be included in the conceptual framework.

Even the people apart from the immediate family, who assisted the participants at school could have been indirectly assisting the participants to achieve academic success while they were at university. Swanson (2007) notes the adage that 'it takes a village to raise a child' is aligned with the spirit and intent of Ubuntu.



**Figure 3.3. TSIM with modifications in the context of Ubuntu**

### 3.6.3 University

This environment throws up many relational manifestations of Ubuntuism which the participant can experience via peer support and mentors. The sudden adoption of a new identity and role that is demanded when someone is participating in further education is premised on accepting a new, challenging world. This requires personal development (Gee, 2001; Haggis, 2004; Roth & Tobin, 2007). This is sometimes dependent on group membership and rules of engagement.

There are different forces within the university environment which form catalysts for this personal development. The way peer groups at university function is similar to the way in which the mutual goal of understanding (not necessarily consensus) of all members of a group was arrived at under the stewardship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Mann, 2008).

The right to free speech and being heard no matter how illogical the thoughts appeared was sacrosanct. The many different views presented at the Commission were to be respected without dominance of any one viewpoint. A renewed interest in the concept of Ubuntu is often attributed to Tutu's utterings during this commission.

Success means academic integration into the university with the right to personal opinion, free speech without dominance of one way of thinking. This has strong implications for the relationship of students with lecturers and mentors and bears examination. This gives rise to another layer of theorizing which includes that of lecturer as mentor, sponsor and role model (Campbell *et al.*, 2009; Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley & Abarbanell, 2006). One can see how the construction of academic success at university would be supported by psychological well-being, which could be fostered by such positive relationships (Vaez & Laflamme, 2008; Chow, 2010).

So both academic and social integration (TSIM) are affected by the manifestation of ubuntuism within the university environment and in so doing affect the way in which successful students construct and perform academic success in HE. (See Fig 3.3. above in which the second circle encompasses two further manifestations of Ubuntuism in the University and in relationships with Significant others.)

### **3.6.4 Significant Others**

Academic achievement and psychological well-being are inter-dependent concepts. Psychological well-being comes of mitigating stress that accompanies the experience of barriers while striving for academic success, especially in relation to undergraduate students (Cotton, Dollard & de Young, 2002). One of the elements that assists with this mitigation is students' positive relationships with significant others. Thus this personal experience of Ubuntu had to be considered in the construction of academic success by the participants in

this study. It had to be tested with regard to its stabilising effect at possible dropout points in the participants' journeys to academic success in HE.

### **3.6.5 Community**

The community is always present starting from even before school is entered as an institution by its members. It is there from the time of a member's birth.

By the time a member reaches HE she may become less reliant on the community generally as this is replaced by the new community/ communities she has membership of at university. Within the life of members of any community Ubuntu is supported as much by receiving as it is by giving. The philosophy is realized by a member being strong for herself (in realizing her Resilience Capital) in order to be strong for others (the community). Then the act of being strong for others feeds her capacity to be to be strong for herself in turn. So the inspiration is cyclical and can be seen as beginning and ending in both the receiving and giving. These actions in turn find their origin in Ubuntu. Community solidarity is enhanced by individual resilience and vice versa although these concepts may be perceived to be in opposition to one another. This makes for greater nuance and deeper and more complex relationships between the individual and the group.

These nuances are taken to deeper levels and to other dimensions when the following is taken on board fully. A person is not categorised as a person through her relationship with other persons who are only of the here and now. A person qualifies as a member of this illustrious human family because she is also connected to erstwhile ancestors, both living and dead. Many Africans have no trouble believing in God through the ancestors: As far as Africans are concerned, the supreme being, ancestors and humans cannot be seen, one without the other (Louw, 1999). If Ubuntu comes to bear on the understanding and manifestation of the higher power, it starts with supreme respect for the other person who is in fact a representative of a religious other.

In Fig 3.3 the third and final circle which encompasses the Community and "Higher Power" aspects of Ubuntu completes a visual representation of the conceptual framework which has at its core TSIM with modifications. The second and final manifestation of Ubuntu is described below.

### **3.6.6 Higher Power**

In the study of emerging adults from four different cultures by Barry & Nelson (2005), accepting responsibility for the consequence of one's actions was regarded across the board as one of the most important criteria for adulthood. Religion and the relationship to a higher power serve as a yardstick for students to make decisions in which they take responsibility for their actions. While undergraduate students are generally young, as soon as they appreciate the consequences of any action they metamorphosis and take on their role as potentially successful students thereby emerging into adulthood. This state perpetuates consistently responsible decisions which will help them to construct academic success at university.

### **3.7 Concluding Remarks**

Having described fully how I appropriated different aspects of the Tinto Student Integration Model, I explained my motivation for modifying the model by attaching relevant social, psychological and educational concepts to the different generic areas of integration. This was followed by an explanation of how I used aspects of the Ubuntu model above in understanding the conceptual framework of my study and how I expected to apply it in unpacking the notion of academic success in HE. In the next chapter, I will describe how I designed my research instruments and methodology and how I used these in this study towards achieving the end of understanding more about how students at UKZN constructed and performed academic success in their undergraduate studies. These were informed by the foregoing conceptual framework.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter shifts the focus to research design, arguing for the most appropriate methodological choices that I have made in producing the data for the study. In making the methodological choices for the empirical aspects of this study, in this chapter I present the epistemological orientation that guided the process of data production. Hence I describe the interpretivist paradigm, which I have chosen to use, and argue for why it was the most appropriate epistemological orientation for my study.

In Section 4.3, I describe the methodology followed and some of the concerns I have had to deal with in my study on academic success. Section 4.4 details the way in which I chose the participants, how the data was collected and the production techniques employed in generating the data. Finally, Section 4.5 describes how I went about analysing the data and mitigating the limitations of the study. It also presents the ethical considerations I engaged with which contributed to the trustworthiness of this study.

#### **4.2 A qualitative approach to the study of academic success**

Qualitative inquiry was given prominence in sociology by the ‘Chicago School’ in the 1920s and the 1930s, but spread to other disciplines as well, with emphasis being placed on the researcher trying to understand ‘the other’ who was usually foreign or strange in some way. This type of inquiry took many turns during its history, and now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “the narrative turn has been taken” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.3) in which the researcher has to write texts constantly being conscious of where she is located in the text in relation to the phenomenon and the meanings which people actually bring to the text.

As the phenomenon which focused my study was academic success and the microscope through which I was examining it was the student lens, this was the most appropriate approach to use.

The students' understanding of the construction of academic success certainly fell into the category of meaning making of the highest order: successful students become participants in generating the qualitative research which, in turn, gives them power that they have earned through their insight into their success making in HE. This is important if the aim of qualitative research of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to meet the expectations and goals of a liberated "democratic society" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.3) and I was comfortable with this approach because of this.

Another reason that made this type of approach most appropriate was the fact I, the researcher am situated in the world of HE and the phenomenon of academic success is interpreted in terms of real practices that make this world visible.

This dovetailed with my decision to do a case study of Humanities students at UKZN, the research site, since a qualitative interpretative case study admitted representations of that world in interviews, field notes, conversations, recordings, journal entries and in my case, written autobiographies from my participants. These covered the research instruments I had chosen to use under the research design of my study into academic success.

The construction and performance of academic success in my participants' lives represented troubling, complex and yet routinely problematic moments and meanings in each individual's life. Once again, qualitative inquiry allowed me to excavate high points and low points in my participants' journeys to academic success, including the complex experiences they had had when they almost dropped out of HE but were convinced by some positive force that they could persist and succeed in regulation time in their degree programmes.

Finally, my study could only take the form of a qualitative inquiry because clearly it had two of the most salient characteristic aspects of this genre of research. The first was its context and the second was the use of certain empirical materials.

Firstly, in terms of the context, the philosophy that underlies qualitative research is that it involves a naturalistic approach to the world, a natural field setting (as opposed to experimental laboratory work). " This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.3).

I attempted to study academic success in the setting of UKZN to make sense of or to interpret what my participants told me or wrote about their construction and performance of academic success during their undergraduate programmes, so that they could complete their degrees in regulation time.

Secondly, many different empirical materials are collected and specially chosen for use in qualitative research, and these include case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, cultural texts and productions, and observational, interactional and historical texts. I used all these categories of empirical materials in smaller or larger measure in the design and/ or application of a plethora of interconnected modes of interpretative analyses in order to get closer to understanding how those few students who do succeed in HE construct and perform academic success in the manner that they do.

### **4.3 Paradigm**

Qualitative research is based on the assumption that there are multiple construed realities; the task then of an interpretivist researcher would be to illuminate, understand and explain these multiple construed realities and how they were constructed. These are the hallmarks of an interpretivist epistemology, that of understanding and explaining (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

The interpretative paradigm was appropriate for my study for two reasons:

1. It is attempting to understand the phenomenon of student academic success through an investigation of meaningful social and educational action from the perspective of the student.
2. The nature of reality is subjective and constructed by the student in the first instance.

Although this was the case, the data were generated mainly by dialogue between the researcher and the participant, and knowledge was jointly created by both participants and the researcher as the investigation proceeded.

I adopted an interpretative paradigm so that I was able to understand and capture the lived experience of the participants through an examination of the social world of the students and their efforts to construct academic success within it through a number of iterations.

This paradigm allowed me to see, to a large degree, how students interpreted their own worlds in the process of constructing academic success through their undergraduate studies at university and allowed me to admit multiple, equally valid and socially constructed realities.

An interpretative study gives the researcher an opportunity to delve deeply into the data and I was given deep insight and understanding of the participants' points of view and how they used their knowledge and environment to construct and to perform success in HE.

My study attempts to gain a better understanding of the complexities of human interactions so it was necessary to gather information about these interactions, reflect on their meaning with the participants, and arrive at and evaluate the conclusions before a final interpretation of these interactions was formalised (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). This programmatic collection and joint reflection was done qualitatively and led me directly to the interpretative approach. It espoused authenticity and shared trustworthiness in the interaction between researcher and participant, where communication and observation were key.

#### **4.4 Methodology**

In attempting to study the phenomenon of academic success amongst students who had completed their Bachelors qualification within minimum or regulation time, their place of study and the institutional factors that contributed to their academic success necessitated either an ethnographic study or a case study.

Both methodologies were considered, but the case study methodology seemed most appropriate as the influences of success on the participants were beyond just the institution's environment. Hence the case study methodology took on several layers of cases.

The institution was the site from which the participants were drawn. Bounded by the institution, the participants were drawn from two subject specialisations, English and Drama

and Performance. Thus the subject discipline formed the second layer of the case study methodology.

Finally, the participants were considered as case studies, each bringing to the fore the particularities that influenced their academic success.

The methodology encompassed a qualitative approach with an attempt to arrive at an in-depth understanding within a multi-layered case study methodology. Case study methodology also fits into an interpretative paradigm as it is characterised by rich complete and detailed description, accompanied by inductive reasoning which lends itself to being more open-ended and exploratory.

This inductive reasoning as an approach in turn involved a bottom up approach where the analysed data produced patterns and themes which were be used to formulate tentative hypotheses that can be explored and finally developed into a general conclusion or theory (Cresswell & Clarke, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

With qualitative research, data are mainly textual in nature but can take the form of images. In my study, textual data dominated. In addition, qualitative research typically collects in-depth data from a few participants who are selected through purposive sampling, as occurred in my study.

Since student success was being considered mainly within a bounded system, this study located itself in UKZN and as it was, context-specific, institutional provisions especially in relation to the provision of English Studies and Drama and Performance Studies content were examined in relation to how students used these to perform their success.

While the phenomenon was academic success, the unit of analysis is, finally, the lives of four students and their experience of academic success with English and Drama and Performance specialization and this was explored in the context of UKZN. This forms the content of the case study.

The participants in this study were from the cohort of Bachelors students with Drama and Performance Studies and/or English Studies majors, who graduated in 2012 and who had been successful in that they had qualified in the regulation or allocated time.

Case studies by their very nature are defined by their interest in individual cases. My study has as its focal point, academic success at UKZN, and I wanted to elevate my understanding of this phenomenon in the context of this case. Case studies usually serve this purpose with little interest in generalization; however, they may allow the researcher to involve herself in analytical generalizability (Henning, 2004). Accordingly, the findings in my study allow this type of theorising about the construction and performance of academic success within the general landscape of HE in South Africa.

These two descriptors put this research into the category of a case study which is explanatory in nature (Jon & Greene, 2003), and will have strategic importance in relation to a general problem. Case studies provide a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analysing information and reporting the results. They also provide a way of testing and generating hypotheses (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

As this study is examining the nature and performance of the success of 3 year Bachelors degree graduates (Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Social Science), it falls within this category of my chosen research methodology. In addition, case studies are usually described as an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context. (Stake, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the present study, academic success was investigated using the experience of graduates in the context of UKZN.

The popularity of case studies in testing hypotheses has developed only in recent decades. One of the areas in which case studies have been gaining popularity is education and in particular, educational evaluation (Stake, 1995).

The reason for this is that there are many misunderstandings about case study research, one of them being that general, theoretical knowledge is more valuable than concrete practical knowledge, yet all experts come to their knowledge in their areas of expertise only after they have engaged deeply with many thousands of cases within their disciplines. Thus the very

basis of expert activity rests clearly on context-dependent knowledge and experience (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Although the fact that one cannot generalise on the basis of an individual case, and as a result of this, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development, the value of the case study lies in its building on concrete, context-dependent knowledge; moreover, “the force of example” is underestimated (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p.228).

My case study is most useful for generating hypotheses regarding what makes students successful even if they experience the same difficulties of those who dropped out.

Some detractors of this particular method say that the case study contains a bias toward verification i.e. a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions. However, other researchers who have conducted intensive in-depth case studies typically report that their preconceived views, assumptions, concepts and hypotheses were wrong and the case material compelled them to revise their hypotheses on essential points.

“The question of subjectivism and bias towards verification applies to all methods, not just to the case study ....and the possibility is high that this subjectivism survives (in quantitative or structural investigations) without this being thoroughly corrected during the study... (An important aspect of case study is the fact that generally,) the researcher does not get as close to those under study as does the case study researcher and therefore is less likely to be corrected by the study objects ‘talking back’ ” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.235, 236) as in a case study.

Case studies often contain a large amount of detailed, rich, often ambiguous narrative. In writing up a case study, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues how he deliberately tells the story in all its diversity (deliberately avoiding the role of omniscient narrator and summarizer), “allowing the story to unfold from the many sided, complex and sometimes conflicting stories that the actors in the case have told me” (p. 238).

In taking the reader on a journey in which she asks, what is the subject matter of the case, the researcher allows the study to be different things to different people by describing a many-

faceted case so that it finally appears as virtual reality and does not submit to summarising or analysing mutually exclusive concepts easily.

The actual story-telling assists the researcher to make sense of the experience and the description, and the interpretation of the phenomenon is made from the perspective of the participants, researcher and others. Coming at the truth from these many angles makes for a complex, multidimensional research study which is based on a variety of levels of thinking admitted by the case study method.

## **4.5 Participants, Production Techniques and Data Collection for the study**

### **4.5.1 Participants**

In qualitative research, especially with an interpretivist perspective, it is important that one produces the kinds of data that would be sufficient to delve deeply into the process of understanding and making meaning. Hence the source of data and the process of data production has to be carefully chosen, more so within a case study methodology, to produce rich, descriptive data that will enable an interpretive researcher, to make sense of a phenomenon. In this case, the phenomenon encompassed the students' experience and understanding of their academic success as they progressed through their undergraduate study all within the minimum time for completion or what is also termed regulation time, despite the challenges that they faced. The most appropriate process, then, of selecting the participants would have been through a process of purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling, according to Leedy and Ormond (2010, p.212), is “when people are chosen for a particular purpose”. For instance, some people may be chosen because they may be the source of different ways of seeing or thinking about a certain phenomenon and provide opportunity for intensive study.

In this study, purposive sampling was the most appropriate method of sampling, as I wanted to get a deep sense of what academic success was beyond just accomplishment of a degree certificate. I wanted to truly understand how students, despite their challenges, strive to

achieve this academic success and how they construct and perform their academic success in HE.

As the literature review (presented in Chapter Two) indicated, the general view of low student throughput within the South African context is largely due to socio-economic and political issues which are blamed on the apartheid system of governance. Yet there are students who, despite these challenges, have achieved their academic success. The focus of this study is on these students who have completed their Bachelor's degrees in regulation or the allotted minimum time to achieve their academic success; hence the most appropriate strategy for sampling would be through purposive sampling.

The participants for the study were purposively chosen based on the following criteria:

1. They were graduates who had completed their Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Social Science (BSocSc) degrees within a three year period ending 2011;
2. They had specialised in Drama and Performance studies and/or English Studies;
3. They were of mixed gender and race;
4. They were young adults under 25 years of age;
5. They were from different home backgrounds (including urban and rural home contexts).

In order to locate a purposive sample in 2012, I accessed the Drama and Performance Studies Honours (DPS) students from the Howard College campus of the UKZN, and as they were more accessible, Honours students in English Studies (ES) from the Pietermaritzburg campus of UKZN.

Although I initially transcribed all 12 interviews I conducted (4 ES and 8 DPS), I finally settled on two participants from each discipline and, as it happened, from across the two campuses offering these specialisations. I was satisfied in that the point of using purposive sampling was served.

More importantly, I could attempt to answer the seminal question of how students construct and perform academic success at UKZN with a relatively small sample which could be intensely studied. Using such a small number could impact on the trustworthiness of such a study but it was deemed acceptable and, in fact, it is expected that in a qualitative explanatory

case study, there are in-depth levels of excavation of the data milked from relatively few participants. In addition I was comfortable in the fact that the final set of data resulted from a number of iterations.

#### **4.5.2 Data Production**

The following data production process was used to produce the data for this study.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted and their purpose was to gain deeper insight into on how the emergent issues gleaned from theory led to success in undergraduate studies. A valuable production technique proved to be an appropriate manner in which the skeleton of the semi-structured interview was created. Not only was the theorising about retention throughout and success accessed, but I chose to scan the drama and fiction works the participants were studying so that I could find works that tackled the theme of success.

I wanted to use little nodes of meaning in the texts as starting points for the discussion between the participants and myself about how they constructed and performed success in their undergraduate studies at UKZN.

This has been the practice with such authors as Gough (2003), who used the structure and content of a South African novel by J M Coetzee as a significant discourse by which to initiate inquiry into South African curriculum studies.

My decision to use a text as a starting point was based on the principle that, like Gough, I take cognisance of the fact that the meaning of the text cannot be collapsed into the world of the reader or writer.

Ricoeur (1981) points to a third world, which has possibilities apart from the realities of the reader and writers' worlds. I attempted to capitalise on this notion and tried to gain entrance into the third world of my participants in which they inhabited the universe of the university in their quest for academic success.

Thus the themes from the text were extrapolated so they had implications for the phenomenon I was studying within the parameters of the theories I had chosen to contextualise it within.

It proved to be easier to access a text from the ES curriculum than from the DPS because in the latter, the Honours programme had no common dramatic text all the participants were familiar with; their choices of honours modules were varied. I then chose *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai (2007) and mined the modern Indian novel for aspects of success around which I could fashion some of questions for the semi-structured interview.

After a close reading, I engaged the themes of ambition, success, contradictions of success, and challenges and failure amongst others and formulated some questions that expanded and clarified different kinds of successes and concepts which would allow participants to look deeply at their identity as successful students. I saw this novel as a stimulus to help the participants to think generally about the notion of success, and more specifically, about academic success in relation to their own lives as students at UKZN.

Other questions were informed by theories described in my Literature Review chapter (Chapter Two). Individual experiences in terms of academic and social integration and personal backgrounds, goals and motivation, and how students constructed and performed success in their undergraduate years at UKZN, were focused upon.

In addition, participants were requested to write a short autobiography entitled *My Journey to Academic success at UKZN*, starting with their experiences in the first year. An excerpt of the instructions follows:

Include an explanation of the following points:

1. Your understanding of success and academic success if these are different concepts for you, and how this may have changed as you progressed through your undergraduate years.
2. When (in which year) you experienced most pressure and why.
3. Were there any points at which you required support in your academic life? Describe the nature of that support, whether you got it, from where it came and how it assisted you.

4. The moments of what you perceived as success during this journey: a particular episode that may have contributed to your success.
5. The moments of what you perceived as failure or near failure during this journey.
6. Your most successful project in 3<sup>rd</sup> year, indicating why you thought it was the most successful.
7. The highest point of success which you may have experienced.
8. Your understanding of points of challenge and/or failure during this programme?
9. An intense scrutiny on the lowest point of your academic career or the point at which you may have almost 'dropped out'. Give careful attention to the factors that conspired against you and those that assisted you to get beyond this point and back 'on track'.
10. Describe your ideal university. What is your ideal university based on in terms of principles? Why has your university got the rules it has? What is your basis of success? What are the ideals upon which you base the success of your institution?

This part of the data production focused on their lives as students and the construction and performance of their success. The above points enumerated as 1,4,5,6 and 9 and 10 focused on their construction of academic success. This relates directly to the seminal critical question which is posed in this study: How do successful students construct academic success in HE? It also relates to the first sub-question: Why do they construct it in this way? This in turn will give one an indication of what successful students espouse as their notions of academic success. (See Introduction p.8 above.)

The remaining points focused on performance (except point 8 which focused on both construction and performance of academic success) which were expected to mine information in order to answer the second sub-question posed in this study: How do successful students perform academic success? This in turn would give one information about how successful students enact their espoused notions of academic success.

The empirical data collected through interviews will deepen the knowledge of some issues which may be highlighted in the data obtained from the autobiography and other issues which have surfaced in the literature. Individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted using the iterative process so that clarification and deepening of the knowledge about students' construction and performance of success could be achieved. The data from the interview and the auto biography served to clarify and support and even show areas of

conflict in the successful students' understanding of their academic success in undergraduate studies in HE.

In both the individual interview and the written autobiography, special attention was paid to an examination of departure point analysis, which is one of the areas of student success to which this study intends to contribute. Through the participants engagement in the guided analysis of their possible departure points they were called upon to consider what precipitated unstable points at which completion of certain milestones in their undergraduate studies were being threatened and therefore their chances of academic success could potentially be derailed. They were also expected to consider what action on their part, the institution's part, the programme's part and/or other persons or instruments which stabilized them and gave them the tools to meet the challenges and put them back on the path to academic success. In so doing they were encouraged to consider if anything that could have assisted them was not available to them in this time of need. (Compare Jenkins & Leinbach, 2008)

The design of the semi-structured individual interviews allowed a certain freedom in respect of the narrative that was generated, and the iterative process produced rich and complex data which was generated over a period of twelve months. At that stage, it fell to the researcher to decide whether she was dealing with a paradigmatic case (i.e. one which could be used to construct an ideal exemplar or prototype for academic success in HE). Based on what was revealed, I could find 'extreme/deviant' cases which represent unusual cases, maximum variation cases which are cases which differ strongly, and critical cases, sometimes termed 'most likely' or 'least likely' (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

The interviews had to take into account wider aspects of student life in order to unpack their construction and performance of academic success. Marshall and Case (2010) are at one with the philosophy that underpins this study. It is that learning is more than a cognitive process and academic success needs to take account of broader aspects of student experience.

The excavation of the successful students' construction of their identity as successful students is challenging, because apart from the traditional focus on knowledge and skills ('knowing' and 'acting'), as criteria to evaluate whether students are successful or not, the new focus on 'being' a successful student and all that that implies, complicates the matter.

Knowing, acting and being combine to form the basis of a challenging new identity of a successful student, one which requires the advanced personal development that studying in HE demands (Gee, 2001; Haggis, 2004; Higgins, 2007; Marshall & Case, 2010). As I was directly involved in the interviews I also kept a reflective journal in which I recorded my thoughts after each interview. This will also form part of the data.

#### **4.5.3 Trustworthiness and Credibility of Data Production and Analysis**

As I had chosen to examine academic success through the use of a qualitative, explanatory case study within the interpretative paradigm, I had to be conscious of a variety of issues both when I produced the data and when I attempted to analyse it.

In creating the instruments and in gathering the data, I had to be conscious of the fact that, as I was lecturer at the institution (albeit not in the disciplines) the participants attended, there was a possibility of the power relations between us being skewed and therefore tainting any responses they proffered. To begin with, the initial instrument (the interview schedule), which was created with their study text *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai (2007), had to be carefully managed so that it served the purpose of simply starting an open-ended discussion on success and academic success (which was its purpose). I had to be aware that a careful study of the text could limit their responses to what the author (Desai) had preempted in her text, especially for the English Studies students, whose text it was.

In order to make the leap from the world of the characters of the text to their own world of their homes, societies and finally, the university, the questions were carefully designed to follow at least two levels of discussion. The interview started with issues relevant to the notion of success which was thrown up by the text. The second and more detailed level led to how they had constructed and performed different aspects of success and academic success in their own lives.

I had to face the challenge of the Performance and Drama studies students not having a common text that I could use as starting point. I circumvented this difficulty by using basically the same questions to start with, but making no reference to characters or the text. One of the cogent reasons for the use of the text as a starting point in the first instance was so that I started with another author's understanding of issues on the theme of success in any

event. As a researcher I wanted to stay as far away from my own constructions of this notion. I was therefore not uncomfortable about using the same questions for the DPS participants.

This was by way of warming up the participants in any event for the deeper, more detailed questions as to how they had constructed and performed different aspects of success and academic success in their own lives and at UKZN, and how this may have led to the completion of their degrees in regulation time.

Another way in which I supported the trustworthiness of the data was by adding an aspect of triangulation when I requested the participants to write short autobiographies entitled '*My journey to Academic Success at UKZN*' (see p.101). These texts also form part of the data set. My journal in which I recorded my initial observations and my observation notes which were generated when I wrote up the transcripts, supplemented the data set and assisted me to write what was by then the co-constructed stories. This constituted my first level of analysis

The credibility of data production and indeed first level analysis, was enhanced when I sent these stories to the participants I had chosen for the study and asked them to express an opinion regarding the representation of the data they had given me (the transcribed interview, which had lasted between two and four hours each; an autobiography of two to four pages, my research journal notes and my transcript observation notes).

All four participants were happy with the representation, although one participant added some points of clarification and explanation, while two expressed surprise at the detail and veracity in the stories. These conversations helped me to arrive at a negotiated interpretation of all the data, and the challenges were integrated into the stories so the end product held multiple interpretations.

These opinions were expressed in writing and if the details of their stories were properly represented at any point, it was in no small measure due to the amount of time and depth of discussion the participants afforded me in all my interactions with them. Clearly, we were becoming joint producers and owners of what was sometimes an ethereal product, silences and all.

On my side, I transcribed all the interviews personally and allowed myself to glorify the exploits of my participants for a short time. I then consciously wrote their stories without allowing this initial emotional reaction to blight my more objective vision as researcher. I was fully aware of how important this was to the findings and indeed, the whole study I had undertaken.

My second level of analysis came out of the first (the stories) and took the form of themes which showed themselves as I coded the pages of transcripts I had gathered for the four participants, although I had also done this for the other eight I had interviewed.

I had to watch that I was not only coding what presented as out-of-the-ordinary or dramatic events and themes. I also coded the mundane themes as well as both ordinary and extraordinary experiences together often form the bed from which the construction and performance of academic success at university can flower.

The other issue I had to be aware of was whether my thoughts and dreams about the material were intruding on the themes that were actually present and whether any issues were actually arising out of my own biography. This proved to be strenuous as I had to keep a check on my effervescence and consciously stopped myself from anticipating any findings.

#### **4.6 Data Analysis, Limitations and other Ethical Considerations**

The trends, patterns and frequencies informed the qualitative component of the research referred to above and provided themes under which the data will be discussed. Before this, however, a first level of analysis will take the form of the stories of the four participants. As an initial point of entry into the data, I will present a co-construction of the individual life stories of the four participants, using the data obtained from the transcriptions of their interviews, their autobiographies and my reflective journal and observation notes.

I had to take cognizance of the fact that the voices and stories the participants allowed me to be part of, are set against economic, political and personal backgrounds which impinge on the way they look at things and tell their stories. I use pseudonyms throughout, although some of the participants gave me permission to use their names.

I tell these stories in first and third persons, because I have intercepted and mediated my co-authors' (the participants') imaginative reflective telling and retelling of events. The phenomenon under examination and the theories that are attendant upon its content and structure forms a prism which reflects the many vantage points of their stories.

My interpretation of their interpretation of a chunk of their student lives is further filtered at many stages: "when they actually present a persona during the interview, when they are allowed to intercede in the transcription and finally when they present a writer's persona in their biographies" (Samuel in Dhunpath & Samuel, 2009, p.3).

I am comfortable with this dynamic within my constructivist interpretivist paradigm, because my study is not about the precise detail of the participants' life stories: it is about how these life experiences were remembered especially in relation to how they illuminate, interpret and describe the construction and performance of academic success in HE.

The stories include such themes as struggles and triumphs, deepest values, different life quests and challenges, and how these were overcome. The stories are co-authored by both researcher and participant. As all the participants had just emerged out of the undergraduate programme which they were asked to recall, their recollection may have been tainted with the emotion that accompanied some of their deeper, destabilizing experiences. They would find it difficult to be objective because of the lack of distance. On the other hand factual recollection could have been enhanced because of the immediacy of the experience.

The second level of analysis included the filtering of the data through *a priori* categories provided by the theoretical framework and the literature. These were thematically organised across a series of narratives in respect of issues relating to how academic success is constructed, understood and achieved by the student.

This would amount to 'analysis of the narrative' (McCormack, 2000). In addition, 'narrative analysis', which analyses the narrative on its own terms, will be engaged in, in order to properly interpret this data. The rigorous analysis via the relatively explicit analytical route laid out by McCormack (2000) will be used.

The process comprises three dimensions. The first dimension includes identifying the narrative structures that have been used; locating the 'stories' (actual events described) in the narrative; identifying augmentation (elaboration the event); theorising (reflection on events) and argumentation (mobilising stories towards logical interpretation). The second dimension focuses on language and "what is said, how it is said and what remains unsaid" (McCormack, 2000, p.291).

The use of particular words/word groupings could signal particular social relations. With self-narrative, there is a need to look for ways in which relations between the self and society are established. The third dimension explores the context of culture (cultural fictions that narrators draw on to construct their identities) and that of situation (where the narrative is produced e.g. the interview). The interactions, questions and responses would all be relevant. Finally, McCormack (2000) refers to the unexpected 'moments' in the text (stories which have been created out of the transcripts of the interviews and the autobiographies), the epiphanies, the radical turning points, which would have to be carefully observed and analysed in this study.

A limitation of such research is that the conclusions on which it may be based come from information that people take from the environment and that information guides the response they make. The nature of the information may not be clear and it is not always easy to extract information or to see how it may work. In addition, the information may come in parts which add to the difficulty of interpreting it. In designing any research methodology, these factors have to be considered. Also from the outset, modification and selection (mediation) of the stimulus information takes place and this must be considered in relation to the conclusions that are arrived at.

In order to guard against the possible 'strategic manipulation' of the data obtained during the individual interviews thereby rendering it more manageable, the final version of the transcript was co-produced by researcher and participant.

Data was attested by the participants after they had access to the transcripts of their interviews. This mechanism was instituted in order to monitor elements of reliability through document analysis and to balance the fact that any text is socially, culturally, historically, racially, and sexually located. The participants were encouraged to qualify or add to various

aspects of the data in the interests of accuracy, as a designated chunk of the subject's life and educational life history was focused upon.

Through dialogue, conflicting interpretations can be resolved and participants had a right to negotiate any claims made by the researcher. These were made in writing. This also helped to minimize the effect of my being a lecturer at the UKZN where the participants were still studying. The fact that I am not lecturing in either of the departments from which the participants are drawn, also helps to balance out the power relations inherent in such a situation.

An analysis of the narrative data was then undertaken and mined for certain themes relating to the student's construction of academic success in higher education (UKZN). The results were far more credible after the many iterations and therefore considered to be trustworthy. Anonymity was guaranteed by omitting names of individuals, and pseudonyms were used in reference to the individual participants.

Regarding ethics and ethical research procedures, informed consent was obtained prior to any data collection. The nature of the study and the rights and responsibilities of the participants and the researcher were explained. Further explanation was given as to how the data would be used and applied.

#### **4.7 Concluding Remarks**

This chapter sets the scene for my first presentation of the data gathered. It describes the participants, production techniques in respect of data, and my proposed analysis of students' construction of academic success at UKZN. Analysis of the data provided details as to how the stories of the four person sample were arrived at and how themes were induced from the co-constructed stories. This chapter concluded with a brief discussion of the limitations of my study and how I tried to minimise or counter these. It also described the ethical considerations that were attendant upon the study in order to render its conclusions valid.

## **Chapter Five**

### **First-Level Analysis**

#### **5.1 Introduction to First-Level Analysis**

The research reported in this qualitative case study of undergraduate BA students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) uses as its major data sources, the following: four semi-structured interviews that were conducted with Honours students who volunteered to participate in the study, and four autobiographies, written by each of them. This was supplemented by my research journal and field notes, which accompanied the transcripts.

While twelve Honours students were originally interviewed, I chose to use the data produced by just the four who produced autobiographies when requested although the others did so at a later stage. They were selected after all the data was coded but prior to detailed narrative analysis and counted for a third of the number of volunteers from each of the disciplines. There was a male and female from Drama and Performance Studies and two females from English Studies Honours programmes respectively.

They were all registered in the Honours programme in 2012, either in English Studies on the Pietermaritzburg campus, UKZN or in the Drama and Performance Studies programme on the Howard College campus, UKZN.

The semi-structured interview focused on the student's construction and performance of academic success (see relationship to critical questions in Chapter Four). The production and analysis of the data were largely iterative and the seminal instrument was, in the first instance, fashioned from one of the texts in which the English Studies students were engaged within their discipline (see Methodology Chapter Four).

I had intended to make use of a text the Drama and Performance Studies students were studying as a starting point for the fieldwork with them. However, as they were following many different options in the semester in which I chose to conduct the fieldwork, they had no common text which I could use as a starting point for our dialogue about the phenomenon of academic success.

I then chose to peruse the English Studies Honours texts which could serve the purpose for both sets of participants. I chose one which would allow me to initiate a discussion on academic success with a view to understanding how my participants, successful English Studies and Drama and Performance Studies students, constructed and performed academic success at UKZN (see data production Chapter Four)

The schedule of questions therefore remained largely the same for the Drama and Performance Studies students and English Studies students, as different aspects of “success” and more specifically, “academic success”, were excavated. Initially these questions presented an opportunity to unpack personal and family backgrounds and the participants’ experience of going to university to study their chosen disciplines. This was, in turn, specifically related to how these areas of engagement which they had inhabited, informed their understanding and construction of academic success in the first instance. These espoused notions about academic success then became one of the starting points from which a discussion about the participants’ performance of academic success could be initiated.

Attention was also given to how they utilised different learning opportunities in the undergraduate programme and the university environment to construct academic success.

In their autobiographies entitled “My Journey to Academic success at UKZN”, the students were encouraged to share deeper moments of personal growth and challenge, including when they felt they had been closest to dropping out of their programmes. They were requested to focus on what had helped them to meet these challenges so they could get beyond this point and finally achieve academic success.

Through an analysis of the narratives of the participants which was created with the assistance of both sets of data, it is possible to examine how they constructed their academic identities in their formative years in the undergraduate programmes. This includes those aspects which they believe led them to success in attaining a BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree or a B Soc Sc (Bachelors in Social Science) degree in regulation or minimum time. Both were three year programmes.

As I was directly involved in the interviews, I also kept a reflective journal in which I recorded my thoughts after each interview and during my transcription of these interviews. It

also held my notes on observations I made about the autobiographies that were written. This will also form part of the data, some aspects of which have been incorporated into the narrative.

As an initial point of entry into the data, I attempt to tell the individual life stories of the four participants as students, using the data obtained from the transcriptions of their interviews, their autobiographies and my reflective journal. I use pseudonyms, although some of the participants gave me permission to use their names. This constitutes the first level of analysis of data in this, the first analysis chapter in this study.

In the second level analysis chapter (Chapter Six), I provide an analysis of the constructed narratives by pointing to recurring themes that emerge within and across the different narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995; Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). I refer to and discuss links across the six stories, including the silences that emerge, and the opposing themes that may be detected.

Although both levels of analysis (the construction of the life stories and the analysis of recurring themes) admitted narrative processes, their use was more explicit in the second level analysis. Narrative processes include augmentation, theorising and argumentation. Augmentation involves clarification of particular events; theorising refers to hypothesizing and reflecting on events, and argumentation involves marshaling stories towards a specific, reasonable interpretation.

During this first level of analysis (in telling the stories), these three types of data analysis strategies (augmentation, theorizing and argumentation) are employed, using both the participants' and the researcher's points of view. It is during the cross comparative thematic analysis that I will again revert to these strategies, this time from the point of view of the literature review and that of the theoretical framework.

In order to complete this section of analysis of the narrative, reference will be made to the "cultural fictions" that narrators utilise to fashion their identities. This is within the context of culture, which McCormack (2000) places together with the context of situation i.e. the environment in which the narrative was created, in this case, the interview and the autobiography.

For the purposes of this study, both will be examined alongside what McCormack terms “moments” where something unanticipated is taking place in the text. “Sometimes these are radical turning points, or epiphanies; some are unexceptional, but still unforeseen” (Marshall & Case, 2010, p.496) and may be related to dropout points which are described in this study as points at which students overcome the urge to drop out of the programme and choose rather to continue in attempting to attain the commensurate milestones for academic success.

## **5.2 Four Stories of Four Successful Students**

### **5.2.1 Introduction**

In using the first and third persons to tell these stories, I am admitting that I have intercepted and mediated my co-authors’ imaginative reflective telling and retelling of events. Their memories, their immediately unfolding (existential) events and future plans, are elucidated in respect of the phenomenon which is under the microscope.

However, I would like to argue that they themselves are reinterpreting episodes in their lives in relation to the topic that is being discussed so this adds to the levels of telling. The telling is dynamic because during the telling of the tale, the teller “is in constant internal dialogue with herself. The teller of the tale (not only) creatively chooses the kind of relationship she chooses with the listeners of the tale (but also) decides how she wishes to be seen” (Samuel in Dhunpath & Samuel, 2009, p.3).

My choice of using both narrative personae (first and third persons) in the same story allows me to assist the reader to negotiate the different meanings which inevitably emerge from such a layered telling of a student life story. It also helps to commandeer such a telling towards the focus of the study, which is the phenomenon of academic success.

In this particular instance, these narratives are the product of the interpretation of transcripts of recordings of interactive situations (unstructured interviews), complemented by observations of these situations during the interviews and during transcription. These were recorded in a reflective journal, and the narrative is also supported by data obtained from

directed autobiographies. Whenever direct quotations of participants are used to clarify or illustrate the points that are being made, these will be captured in italics.

The constructivist paradigm which is used in this particular study, embraces this ebb and flow between the interviewer and interviewee because it does not depend upon a precise representation of life experiences. It is more about how these life stories are used by others (both the participant and the researcher) for interpretative and descriptive purposes. In this case they are used to illuminate how successful students construct and perform academic success in undergraduate studies in HE.

I consider the life stories of academically successful students to function at the same level as the life stories of elders who have traversed a journey of struggle and who look back on the lessons they learnt with the wisdom of experience and hindsight. I borrow from the spiritual-religious-mystical function of religious life stories to explain how I expect their life stories to illuminate how the student participants construct and perform academic success.

I use different aspects of this explanation presented by Atkinson in Clandinin (2007) to assist me to create the life stories of the four participants I have chosen. He describes the religious life stories as representing a way of "...gaining insight into what peoples' greatest struggles and triumphs are, where their deepest values are, what their quest has been, where they might have been broken and where they were made whole again" (p.229).

The successful undergraduate student's life story will be told beginning with a foreword illustrating what I consider to be one of the most outstanding aspects of each story relating to what is required for academic success followed by a brief biographical profile. The story evolves into a description of the educational quests of the participants and of revealing moments of struggle and triumph. Focus is also placed on how wholeness was regained or lost in the face of great challenge.

While all these elements of form and content of the life stories of the participants have characteristics in common with religious life stories the context is clearly delineated by the critical questions posed by my study. All the stories will be told in relation to how the participants constructed and performed academic success in undergraduate education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and why it was constructed and performed in this way.

Although the power balance seems to weigh squarely on my side as researcher, as I am also analysing the data after most of my participants have left the scene, both of us will co-author the life story. My decision to use member checking to ensure trustworthiness and my choice to use the first and third persons in telling the life story assures this. In any event, the readers will have at their disposal a text that no longer belongs to either co-author. They are at liberty to take whatever interpretation they choose from their own dynamic interactions with the text. Narratives have a life of their own, during, after and beyond the immediate time of data production (See Barthes, 1977).

### **5.2.2 Sandile's Story: The Unlikely Student**

#### **Foreword**

From the start, Sandile's story was unique. Even his membership of the Drama and Performance Honours class was unusual in that he had registered in the second semester and was expecting to finish all his modules only the following year, although he was a full time student.

This was because in the first semester he was completing his third year as he had applied via UKZNs International Student Office to go to the University of Trent in Canada for one semester in his third year. His application was successful and supported by NSFAS (the National Student Financial Aid Scheme), and he was able to travel abroad for the first time ever.

He studied acting and indigenous theatre, (native Canadian Indian theatre) and through that he learnt "*a different way of seeing the world*" and the possibilities North America held for him to follow a career in acting. He was inspired: "*Once you get there and you really are determined....anything is possible*".

Sandile understood the parameters of his studies overseas and what it meant in relation to the BA degree and the Honours in Drama and Performance Studies. This is why, although many other students would never have done this, he refused to let his university substitute the

module he had completed in Canada for one of the modules he required for completion of the BA because he was uncomfortable with that.

*“They wanted to credit me and I said no, how can you credit me for something I’ve never done before, because it will be like you are giving me a third year for nothing... you are passing me for nothing. I’d rather stay. I could have finished the degree but I wanted to cover the semester that I had gone abroad”.*

But let us go back to the beginning, when he tells you how it all started.

### **1. Biographical Illuminations: Struggles and Challenges**

*“My name is Sandile Bekhabantu Ngubane; my grandmother used to say she knew that I was going to be a boy before I was born. I wonder why; it is an absolute truth that our elders can sense when something good is coming. My mother Zethu was still a teenager, very young to be a mother and she did not have any idea what my name was going to be. I was named Sandile Bekhabantu Ngubane by my eldest aunt whom I adore, and I was born on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May, 1987 in the south of KwaZulu-Natal at Port Shepstone Hospital.”*

Sandile was welcomed with open arms as his grandparents did not have a son; they were happy to have a boy in the house. His grandmother believed he was going to hold the family name high. His growing up without both parents was a common feature of Black South African family life at the time and his father worked in Johannesburg and used to “*have money*”. Unfortunately, he met another woman and that put an end to Sandile’s parents’ relationship. It was left to his mother to raise him but she could not be very supportive because she worked in the city and because of this was only able to visit him once a year, only in December. So most of his formative years were spent with his grandmother in her rural home.

*“All the teachings I have learnt were planted by her on me. For my grandmother, Esmerelda Ngubane, I was the best thing that ever happened to the family. Since then I wanted to be somebody and I pursued that dream from an early age.”*

Not unexpectedly, his grandmother had to play a major role in raising him since his mother was not always at home; everything that was supposed to be done by his mother was thus taken care of by his grandmother. At that time, his grandmother had to survive on the pension she received from a company which his late grandfather had worked for while he was living.

He always felt sad when his friends talked about “*wonders their parents perform for them all the time because they are always with them*”. He, in contrast, received clothing, once a year in December, and saw his only parent once a year, also in December. “*It did affect me because today I always have that gap in me. I still miss that love of both parents...(and being able to ask (for) anything I could possibly need as their son*”. He carried this with him through into his life at university.

When he was younger though, he knew he could always ask his grandmother for whatever he needed. Even if she could not afford it, he understood and was still happy. He did very well in school from lower grades. “*There is nothing (more) painful than not having lunch at school while other children are eating something in front of you*”. However, he was proud of his experiences: “*Through all that I have managed to rise above the mountain, I am now doing my second degree. If it wasn't for my grandmother's great teachings, I was not going to be at this level*”.

He always remembered his grandmother's prediction that he was going to be “*different*” to the other children. He exhibited this in his behaviour and the respect he displayed for individuals from the community. He also developed a great deal as he was able to think quickly as to how to resolve any issues he had. He consistently attributed a great deal to his grandmother. “*I always say if I was not raised by that woman I may be in prison...Most of the guys I grew up with are in prison*”.

His friends were spoilt by their grandparents. Sandile's grandmother was different; she was realistic and did not attempt to fill the gap of both parents. She was honest about what she could offer him and he appreciated that. Instead, she gave him her time to grow him and tell him about things that he should be aware of when he got older. She even advised him to have a friend that showed potential. She discouraged him from associating with people “*who do not think progressively about positive things in life*”.

So the young Sandile, remembered the great anticipation his arrival generated and as he said his name, *Sandile Bekhabantu Ngubane* it was clear he was going to remember what his grandmother predicted and especially the aspirations “*the elders*”, but especially his grandmother, had had for him.

## **2. University Educational Aspirations: Quest, Struggles and Challenges**

*“Coming to University for me was a dream come true simply because in my family none of them came to University. I was the only one. I became the only hope for the entire family.”*

So Sandile B Ngubane from Port Shepstone, a little town on the South Coast, seemed happy to carry the ubiquitous responsibility of being the first from his family to enter a university not only in South Africa, but also amazingly, one in North America. *“I strongly feel that it was a plan from God that I will end up at a higher institution, for example; coming to university opened doors for me because I became the first person from the entire family to go (to university not only locally but also) internationally.”*

Interestingly, his family did not show their joy. Although he felt that he was capable, most people in his immediate society did not see him as someone who could get to university. Apart from that, all of them knew that the family was financially unstable and doubted that it was ever possible. However, he was ready to take up the challenge and was happy to represent “*the name of the whole family*”. He knew that once he got to the higher institution *“people want to see your ending and that is why I wanted to do my best so that I receive my degree.”*

Sandile understood that their expectations would be huge, and by the end of the story, he was to try to meet these. He always dreamed about building a new house for his grandmother to thank her for taking care of him while he was “*a little man*”. She had played a major role in showing his society that he had the potential to make things better for the family, the society and South Africa. But he had to get into university first.

*“So I remember 2006, I was a high school student doing my grade 12...I was nineteen... I was so enthusiastic about going to university to study for what I want to be because by that time I was in the High School choir. So... a music instructor there really convinced me that*

*I'm really good in singing, especially Italian opera. So he suggested that I should come to university to study music”.*

But Sandile later found out that “...*honestly speaking, in South Africa, you cannot survive with opera unless if your family is rich, they can take you somewhere, maybe Europe or United States, that's where you can make a living with music, especially opera, because the world of opera was very limited... ”.*

While he was aware that even the discipline he wanted to pursue would present enormous challenges for him, he was determined to go to university. Then he was faced with the additional challenge of finding no support, moral or financial, from the only parent he had contact with.

He finished school in 2006 as a nineteen year old “*at quite a high level*” and was promised financial assistance by his mum, which inflated his confidence and gave him hope and he went to live with her. He auditioned but could not take up the offer of a place for the 2007 academic year at the Music School at UKZN. His mum reneged on her promise of financial help so he had to work to save up for the initial fee.

He applied again in 2008. “*I worked and worked and worked. I wanted to do everything just to stay away from the society during the day. I mean the township*”. Clearly, he had to get out of the environment and all that could drag him down. “*I'll tell you about the society. You know if you go back to my society which is Umlazi, there the life is very rough...especially if you are a young creature with older people. A lot of people are not employed, especially the young people, yet there is always a competition amongst particularly young people (in respect of things they wear); they want to engage themselves with things that are most popular for that moment, they do not think for tomorrow. You'll find them finishing Matric and there's nothing to go forward and the parents don't have anything to support them to further their education and you'll find them involving themselves in drugs and you get used to it.*”

Sandile saw how the unhealthy competition among neighbours in Umlazi led to crime in a disintegrating community. Maladjusted and unhealthy children were and are growing up in such an environment, without a stable family to keep them secure. He felt there was a “*no-*

*win situation in the township where one of my closest friends was dying from TB*". Anger and self-hate were not uncommon, but he had learnt to ignore what was happening each day: *"I felt that if I rely too much on my mother, things will go wrong; I began to stop depending on her"*. Rather, he focused on the fact that he had something *"that was driving inside me to be a better person. I knew I had to work hard at school so that I live a better life"*.

Sandile's maternal grandmother's values about *"the way a human being is supposed to live and how to pave your way in order to succeed"* kept him from being subsumed by the negative atmosphere in the township. He had no tangible guidance at this point and his father was largely absent from both his upbringing and his adult life. *"I couldn't even get a pair of shoes from my dad, even today my dad never bought me anything, I don't know his money, I don't know his support as a parent."*

### **3. University at last, but continuous challenge**

The young student felt broken and *"in pain"* when, having paid the acceptance fee which he had earned, he finally got to university in 2008 and was in the class, but could not complete the registration because he was short of R1500. He spoke of being *"no-one"* although he was in the class because he did not have a student card, the document that could have made him feel at home at UKZN although he came from a community that was very far away from UKZN.

His pain was alleviated when he was assisted by a lecturer who offered to pay the rest of the fees with no compunction to have it paid back. Nevertheless, he did just this, when in the following year he got his first tranche of NSFAS funding. He was accepted to do a Diploma in Music and was finally a student at UKZN!

He celebrated by working hard in the programme: *"I did not think about what will it be to be an African opera singer...the only thing I could think of is seeing myself high there in La Scala, Milan, singing... representing the whole of Africa and my family"*.

After some advice, he realised that the diploma presented few opportunities for further development, as it was a one-year terminal programme which did not attract much recognition. He then changed to a BA degree which he found to be more versatile as a

qualification, and completed the requirements for this degree each year, even though he carried modules in some years.

Sandile took four-and-a-half years to finish his undergraduate degree but he had accessed Higher Education via a diploma programme which took one year. He then entered a degree programme during which he availed himself of the opportunity to study at a university in Canada. As a result, he had to spend an extra semester of six months completing his undergraduate degree. He returned to complete his Honours in Drama and Performance Studies in the second half of 2012. Effectively he completed a BA programme in three years.

#### **4. Moments of Clarity**

In his quest to master the English language, especially after he transferred from diploma to degree, Sandile observed: *“I had experienced most pressure during my first entrance at the university in 2009. The reasons for those pressures were chiefly linked to my limited knowledge between a diploma and a degree. In 2009, I thought there was no difference between those two qualifications. In addition, I had problems with my writing skills. As a result, I began failing most of my work. The stress of being alone grew each day; I had nobody to cry on. I had many thoughts concerning my failure; I thought maybe it was because my journey of coming to tertiary was not blessed by my parents. I experienced more pressure because I had to be very good in speaking and writing of English, which was the biggest problem for me. I could not even write a sentence because in music I was not exposed to much writing and speaking in English. I had endurance in myself and was willing to learn the language. Many people advised me to read more English literature and magazines and also to train my ear to listen to English programmes on television and radio”.*

Drama improvisation played an important role in assisting Sandile to create and articulate his thoughts. *“Academically I was really having a problem with structuring my work and you know when you lose self-esteem...I would feel bothered if I had to do my work, especially with essays. I’m already weak, how am I going to do essays? The worst part is that it was in English and I always feel like I’m nobody, you feel like nobody when these things happen and you lose confidence. In the group I was able to voice my problems. I got more clarity and got other ideas.”*

In contrast, in the Drama Department, he was never made to feel less than his peers, although he often had to practise his English language skills, especially when he was debating with fellow students. He always felt his life and worldview were acknowledged and respected. His confidence was boosted when he was cast in English medium plays. His writing skills improved through continuous consultations with his lecturers on the many written assignments he had to complete.

## **5. Point of No Return**

In his second year, Sandile failed a Drama module in the first semester and was very stressed about his lack of finance and the fact that he seemed to be left alone to face all his challenges. This translated into a quest for survival because he became suicidal. However, because of interventions by his “*god and ancestors*” he was able to unburden himself to his room-mate. Through the timely intervention by the Drama Department, he was taken to a counsellor at the local hospital. Some of the issues which precipitated this episode were dealt with by the counsellor who reconciled him with his mother. For him, the religious significance of this episode was clear; it was one of the moments where he felt broken but was made whole again.

He also attributed his ability to refocus on his goals to the way he thought of academic success. He defined it more as a process than a product: “*It is continuous and does produce products along the way but more or less at the end. I do not consider the beginning (entering university) as a success because you don’t know what you will encounter in the future. The future can unfold differently. It’s important to watch each and every step, if you don’t, you won’t be able to identify what you have been doing.*”

Success in general, as opposed to academic success, was for Sandile located “*in the ability to put effort into what you’re doing*”. For him, “*it is when you pay attention to what is surrounding you. The effort and attention came from the belief that what you want to achieve is possible even with all the things that are going on in your life....It’s not only about living a luxurious life...it’s more about what you do. If you do not succeed in whatever you do it means there’s something wrong with what you are doing*”.

His conceptions about success and academic success had common features. “[*Academic success*] means you have to be able to analyse what you’re doing, pay much attention to yourself, first who you are what you want to achieve in the future. Where do you come from? Why are you here? It’s more a process; you start somewhere to achieve a certain goal. It’s continuous.”

He felt that the foundation of Academic Success is in the society and community, including “*the socialisation of the self (you, it, the person) through the rituals that introduce you to manhood*”. He considered the institution to be another kind of a foundation, an arrival but not the end point of academic success. Being a graduate is the foundation “*which allows you to see the world more broadly...Portray to society that anyone can get a degree*”.

He believed this was the role of the university student. He did not think finishing the degree was an indication of academic success and concluded that the “*role of the student doesn’t stop at university. You still have to apply what you have (learnt). People see an exterior but what is behind that? Make people see that, besides getting the grades and earning money, you must handle life properly and people must see this*”.

Success is very different from academic success for him: “*Success is using the degree to do something worthwhile*”. He included the notion of giving back to the community, as “*Someone must benefit besides yourself*”. And he differentiated personal success by explaining that “*It’s even related to the special dream going on inside you and how that measures up to your efforts in this regard*”. He had always drawn on his grandmother’s teachings when he was tempted with smoking, alcohol and drugs. An inner voice would say, “*What would she say?*” So for him values were very much part and parcel of academic success and any other success for that matter.

## **6. Construction and Performance of Academic Success**

Sandile believed you have to know why you are at university and have a full understanding of what education is. “*Maybe we should intervene in (new students) understanding why they (new students) are here and when we find out that out, we will be able to (say), this is what you should do. Since you are here for these reasons, how should we plan?*” For him, orientation was very important and he recommended an induction into how the new student

should go about actually accessing academic success. He suggested that they be assisted with the whole idea of being a student.

*“Academic Success is more like you delve into your being (understanding)...whatever you want to do, it relies on how it begins. It is time-consuming. If you don’t pay attention you will never succeed. The university is a small place, a very small environment and there’s a lot going on here and in order to achieve academically, I need to put away these things. As a human being, you need to have fun; then there is a point at when you decide this is my life now, this is what I’m going to do. Your aim is not to have parties, life is not about parties. It’s just for a moment of time.”*

He thought his friend, who appeared like he could afford university, failed because he *“lost focus”* and *“forgot what he was here for and where he came from”*. He was surprised that his friend failed from first year when to him first year was the time you displayed excitement and energy and *“you try to impress...yourself”* he quickly added. He indicated that before the lecturers or the institution or anyone else for that matter, *“You want to achieve something, you want to score more, and for me, I had that”*.

If he had just passed, he’d berate himself; especially if he had to share his marks with colleagues, he would be ashamed and utterly dismayed. He used his own standards, watched himself and regarded just passing at fifty per cent an embarrassment.

*“Most students believe education is about...getting good jobs. It’s not only about that, education lights up the way you see things. It broadens the way you see things. It helps in the way that you have many options in life. If plan A doesn’t work, you have the means to go into something else. If I don’t succeed as an actor, I am able to sit down and think about exactly what I’m going to do with what I have. You use your degree or whatever you’ve obtained here to pave your way. It’s not only about working for somebody; you can even do something else with what you have. It doesn’t go by itself, but you use it. Students need to understand that education is some kind of a foundation in seeing the world more broadly”*.

Sandile’s idea of success came from the way he grew up; it was different from that of a *“normal”* kid. He had to grow up from an early age, in fact, *“from the word go”* he had to

think for himself. What he had presented at this point, all that the world saw of him, was as a result of his coming back from the struggles he had had.

*“Struggle sometimes wakes you up. It’s very painful but it prepares you”.* Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (a theatre practitioner and theorist with whom both of us were familiar), was someone from whom Sandile had learnt a great deal. *“Boal prepares for the future. This genre of theatre prepares you to tackle certain issues; how do you change the way people see us, the idea of the stereotype - how do we change that? All these things prepare me for the future.”*

He remembered how as a disadvantaged child, he used to see his neighbours who always had more than he had and how he, in turn, wanted more than they had. He could have stolen cars and been involved in all sorts of crime in Umlazi, and he did try many of the bad habits, but *“The teachings from parents (grandmother) are very important. I was always afraid to be seen with this thing on my head, always afraid”.*

It would have been degrading to himself and his grandmother and her teachings. He respected her so much that he was concerned, *“If she finds out, what she is going to think?”* He also rationalised that alcohol and drugs could make him forget his difficulties but could not take them away. It was important to have someone who really cared about him and who helped him to attain a certain level in education and in life.

He recommended role models in one’s own community who are successful, because they were useful to him. An essential element of his academic success was the role models and competitors he identified. The effort he had put into attempting to beat the latter, automatically stimulated his working ability. This in turn motivated him to *“dream big”* and concretise ambitions about what he wanted as a career. This would have got him nowhere if he didn’t implement his plans. *“Act on it!”* He was so focused on his goal that even when he was reading something, he knew he was doing it for a reason.” *For me all the time when I study, I say I want to be called something, I want to be called Doctor So and So. I want to be called Doctor and I will never leave this university until I am granted the name (title) Doctor.”*

He elicited the help of the Almighty to achieve this. His supplication was consistent because every time he looked into his books, his silent prayer went, *“God, you know how disadvantaged my family is. I’m doing all this for my brothers, my sisters and my granny and especially for my mum. It’s all about them, maybe then next time they can live in a better place. Provide me with the ability but I will also work hard”*. So he maintained discipline and always put himself under pressure. He even referred to deadlines for presentation or submission as *“judgement day”* and he owned up to the fact that he was generally prepared from *“the word go”* each year.

Sandile found it difficult to attain Academic Success especially at tertiary level. *“In High School, you’re just memorising what you’re given but here you are asked, ‘What do you know? Why is this happening? What are you thinking? Why are you thinking this? What are the solutions?’ We do not just talk. ‘Why?’”* He had Drama projects in which he was pushed into thinking at higher and more creative levels because he had to always think about the issues under discussion and he had to try and think about them differently. His *modus operandi* to achieve this included changing things that need to be changed when discussing an issue. When things did not need to be changed, he extended his writing by added more ideas and discussion to the issue.

His learning style started with content as this was very important. It provided the guidelines as to how any topic was to be addressed. Although it was just as important, he found that he applied the knowledge only after he was familiar with the content. *“That’s how I study. If the content is not well known I will experience problems. It’s like a foundation; it will give me detail and to that I will add my own ideas. If I don’t know it I will be saying many things at one time as if I don’t know what to prioritise.”*

As far as Sandile was concerned, people don’t have to fail at university to get a wake-up call, all they have to do is *“just watch themselves”*.

*“I did fail and carry modules and had emotional and psychological problems, but if I wasn’t strong emotionally and mentally I would have dropped out. When I received assignments and I got less than fifty I asked myself, ‘Am I really presenting myself in an appropriate way? Is it because I don’t understand English?’ It’s bothered me before, and I felt very alone. But you don’t realise what your problems are if you get high marks all the time. I knew the problem*

*was content, I repeat myself and I'm all over the place as one lecturer told me. Understand what your story is, what you are going to start with and what is going to be next. First understand the message behind the story... what do you want to say and then how are you going to conclude... Failing brought many questions. I'm so afraid I will not be able to tackle them and what will people back home say. I'm so afraid of going back to my society. I'm so afraid of embarrassing myself. You must have fear like that and (have) pride”.*

He felt nothing could beat him because he was always “*on top of his approach, everything was seen by looking from the top*”. He compared the technique of opera singing in which you approach all notes from the head or the top. Only then will you get the note. “*Try to be on top all the time.*” He advised students to know their weakest points and to find people who were more advanced. He always saw lecturers, especially about writing. When they told him his structure was a problem, whenever he wrote he would spend a great deal of time searching for what was behind this writing. “*What am I trying to say? I write three drafts. The first, it's just normal writing, the second one is to find reasoning behind what I'm trying to say and the third time, I write in more academic language. The readings come first and then academically I try to do my best.*”

He was clear that if he wasn't at UKZN he would have been a reckless person. He was very organised at this institution because the university was very organised. Although other people may not have seen him as important, he saw himself as a very important person in his society. This is why dropping out was not an option, although there was so much missing in his High School education. In fact, he was often depressed because of this. But being afraid of what his family was going to say was extremely important. In addition, he asked relevant questions of himself: “*What am I going to do if I leave this place? How am I going to live in SA if SA requires more than (what I) have?*”

No one can conclude his story better than Sandile, nor quite so poetically:

*“My name is Sandile Bekhabantu Ngubane; my grandmother used to say she knew that I was going to be a boy before I was born. I wonder why; it is an absolute truth that our elders can sense when something good is coming...for my grandmother, Esmerelda Ngubane, for her I was the best thing ever happened to the family. Since then I wanted to be somebody and I pursued that dream from an early age. Coming to University for me was ‘a dream come true’*

*simply because in my family, none of them came to University and I was the only one. I became the only hope for the entire family. Going abroad for the first time was 'a dream come true' for me simply because in my entire family, nobody went overseas before. I believe that God has a plan about my life. I want to make sure that whatever he offers me is well secured. I have a strong feeling that there is lot more coming for me."*

### **5.2.3 Prudence's Story: Against All Odds**

#### **Foreword**

She looked at me squarely and the first thing she said, pointedly, was, "*I am an illegitimate child*". At the age of 4 she was a house slave and had been sexually abused and yet she managed to work so hard at school that she earned a scholarship in Grade 8. But let us go back to the beginning; let us tell you how it all started.

#### **1. Biographical Illuminations, Struggles and Challenges**

##### **The four year old child-adult**

Prudence's life proved to be a struggle from the start; first, there was the issue of her acceptance. Both her parents were eighteen and her mother was in Standard 3 (Grade 5) when she was pregnant with Prudence. Prudence's father denied responsibility and her mother's family wanted her to abort or leave, so when the child was born she was taken in by her paternal grandmother. "*I look so much like her. It's an African thing to look at the baby and see if there is any symbolism (resemblance) to the rest of the family.*" Her cognisance of her culture and traditions presented itself as beliefs which helped to make her whole again even in her most troubled times. When she was four years old, Prudence's grandmother became ill so she had to live in Pietermaritzburg with relatives for two years. There she was starved and used as "*the house slave*". She was sexually abused.

When her grandmother died, her chances of living a better life deteriorated even further as her uneducated, homeless mother could give her no respite. In any case, Prudence's father took full custody of his daughter and denied her mother any access to the young child. "*She*

*became an alcoholic because of some things that happened.*” Her mother was thus largely absent from her life.

To make matters worse, her paternal uncle, the one she later inherited money from, died. *“I felt empty and hopeless at 7 years, returning from hospital after being sick with pneumonia and hospitalised for seven months I came out to bury my uncle who died from food poisoning; to bury the only man who loved me as his child. All this would always come rushing back to me when my academic career was failing...I’m free of it now. I’ve spoken to psychologists. It’s not a burden to me anymore.”* Notwithstanding all the emotional and physical abuse she had undergone early in her life, she continued to display self assurance, maturity and great strength of character although these characteristics sometimes lapsed and let her down especially in her early undergraduate years.

Many people died in her family while Prudence was growing up. *“African stuff”* is how she accounted for the many deaths and this *“African stuff”* was always present well into her adult life. At the age of seven, having already *“lived many lives”*, she had to move to Chesterville, where she was raised by another grandmother, her father’s aunt.

## **2. A taste of success; with or without parents**

Prudence’s family supported her by giving her bread and shelter but she had to work hard at school to get an education because nobody seemed to be concerned about what she wore to school or where she got the books she needed. Her self-reliance and resilience came to the fore when at Chesterville School, she worked so hard that she was offered a scholarship of R25000 to do Grade 8 at St Maritz, a boarding school in Pietermaritzburg. Winning her scholarship gave her the first taste of academic success, and brought triumph through her many challenges. She basked in their admiration when she rose in the estimation of her peers. They joined her community when she was lauded for winning a competition for the Chesterville community library. Through her efforts, *“about 150 books were placed in the library. The prize included some scholarships for children to go out on weekends to other libraries and mix with other children from multiracial schools”*.

Her appreciation of her old school in Chesterville never diminished. Proof of this and her sound values existed in the fact that she even went back there as a university student to do some voluntary work in the school's Arts programme.

She attributed her success to the fact that effectively she did not have parents, *“because as much as my father's family raised me, when I wasn't around, to him, it was like I'm not there. I can't remember my father buying me anything, not even underwear, but he did love me at some point. I really feel that way.”*

Although she was bereft of parental love, attention and material assistance, she was self-sufficient and still found the capacity to forgive. Ironically, she attributed her success to this lack of parenting. She sustained herself by doing housework for people and she got clothes from the Catholic church, St Anne's.

### **3. A mirage in the desert**

Prudence felt that her father was finally playing the role of a parent when on her return from St. Maritz boarding school; he took her back to live with him in Kwa-Mashu. *“My father's Coloured; my mother's an African woman. He started taking me to a white, multi-racial school so I went to Ridgevale College.....it was a stressful year because he would blame me for his financial problems and I found out the reason he took me in was that he was trying to get access to one of my inheritances because his big brother who was a teacher, left me an inheritance.”*

So her chance to regain wholeness was once again diminished and was further exacerbated by the fact that she was regularly beaten *“in the middle of the night”*. She lost her edge educationally when she obtained a condoned pass after having enjoyed a superior educational career in her earlier years.

Her challenges were many. *“I had to clean and cook and iron his clothes although he had a fiancée. I had to go to school and come straight back and they would lock me in the house. I couldn't go to the library. I don't know whether he thought at the age of fourteen I would be wild. I don't know whether it was overprotection or he was taking his frustration out on me.”*

In this way she tried to rationalise her father's actions and through that, her struggles, which took her some time to overcome. By this time, she was at another school, where the last straw that broke the camel's back came. *"One night, he beat me and I ran out of the house; he said I must find my mother wherever she was, because he was not interested in being a parent. When he hit me, I hit him back and he made me wash the blood from his nose off his pants. I told him I'm not coming back and I took my bags and I spent the night in the garden. I stole a blanket off the neighbour's line and put it back at 5a.m..."*

*When the sun came up, I phoned my half-brother to fetch me with my bags. I pulled my bags and books from class to class through Durban Girls Secondary School up to half past three."*

She knew this seminal experience tested her ability to deal with volatile situations and she was able to draw on this ability later in life.

#### **4. Good Samaritans come to the rescue**

The woman Prudence's father had been dating worked as a manager of a large store on the North Coast. She sympathised with Prudence and when the woman's colleague heard Prudence's story, he was impressed by her potential and the way she carried herself despite her plight. This *"good Samaritan"* decided to support Prudence through high school without expecting anything in return, *"least of all sexual favours"*, much to her surprise.

He was one of the *"significant others"* who restored her belief in human values such as protection of the young and weak, respect and altruism. She went back to Chesterville, but her father's *"lady friend"* liked her so kept in touch, bought her clothes and even invited her to visit her on the coast. However, because of the damage that was already done through her roller coaster ride through life, it would take a lot more to make her forget. She embarked on a journey to being whole again that would still take her through numerous challenges and struggles.

#### **5. Educational Aspirations: An end before it began**

When she got to university (UKZN), Prudence started drinking, *"not because of friends; my grades were not good and I couldn't afford to come here"*. She had started much earlier. In

June of her Matric year, she had applied to all the universities and although she lived in Chesterville, she didn't know Howard College (UKZN) was in her immediate vicinity.

*"I just knew what was in my corner and had to deal with what was in my corner. I couldn't be a child. I had to be responsible and then when I got here, I was so frustrated, I started drinking. I used to cry when I was drunk, it was depression, no one spoke to me and I could see my life going down, all my hard work for nothing. I used to go to a restaurant after work (I had worked at a sweet shop in the Pavilion from the age of thirteen), eat and buy myself a glass of wine and come home and cry to my grandmother. I didn't know what was happening to me, why life was so hard. I was hoping this drug would work but it was another way I got to talk".* Prudence felt broken and directionless and used alcohol as a balm to heal her wounds.

## **6. Light at the end of the tunnel**

Fortunately, the priest at St Anne's, the church she attended, called the university and harassed them until they gave her financial aid since they (the church), couldn't, as they only supported orphans. Ironically, she did not qualify as she still "had" both parents.

She had 32 points and a Conditional Exemption; she had applied late and was unsure of her chances. She needed 33 points but got no information from the Admissions Office as to what to do. By chance, one of "*the boys*" in the office asked her if she wanted to take the place of one of the students who had not shown up to accept a place in the Humanities Access Programme which was a one year programme for students who had not achieved the required points to enter a mainstream degree programme. Good grades in the Access Programme would qualify students to register for the mainstream degree programmes. Prudence triumphed over her depression and stopped drinking, having been given another chance to continue on her quest for education.

She flourished and in 2007, attained three As, two Bs and two Cs in her very first year at university. By this time she was more than qualified to enter mainstream university education and enrolled for the BA degree.

## 7. The shadow of the patriarch: Approaching drop-out

*“In 2009 when I turned 21, my father contacted me and I was happy that he was trying to be a father to me, only to discover that he was trying to get the inheritance that was due by then. My grandmother used to warn me about him.”*

When Prudence refused to take the bait, he psychologically abused her, by cursing her continuously *“in deep Zulu”* (something she did not take lightly). *“Every day, morning and night he would send me a text. He also threatened to kill me”*.

The university got involved and helped her to get a restraining order; an interdict was served on him. Although she was highly traumatised once more, she was not about to run away. She was not prepared to leave the university and was sent to counseling services through the university clinic.

*“Some people don’t believe in voodoo. I used to dream the whole night that someone was chasing me and beating me and once my back was green and I couldn’t get up. When I’m stressed and something is a burden to me, I get big...”*

*“My marks were lying at 53 and 52 and I had 2 supplementary exams and an exam I just didn’t write. I also ended up going to the sangoma lady (traditional doctor) because I also had traditional problems and I tried to do some of the rituals. That’s why I’m wearing a skin bracelet and it does not come off. It’s been two years since then.”* She used whatever means she found at her disposal to make herself healthy and whole again.

Prudence acknowledged the oversight role of the Financial Aid Office at UKZN which not only recognises one for good academic performance but when grades go down, it also intervenes.

She was told to see the Dean because she was *“at risk”*, scoring in the fifties when she had scored in the seventies and eighties before. She was sent to counseling services and advised to continue going there. She was pleased that the Dean recognised the negative affect her stress had had on her results but she could not see the psychologist based at the university counseling services when she needed to because these services were always fully booked.

The student counselling staff asked her to return the following month to make another appointment but she did not because she developed other problems in the interim.

*“But I never thought of dropping out because being here made my life the best because my life outside varsity was corrupt. This was my driving force. My life was awful I wanted to kill my family. I’ve never been depressed but I had Cushing’s Syndrome in 2009 and again at the beginning of this year; this is where there is a production of certain chemicals and you get depressed. I used anti-depressants but honestly, since I met my fiancé things are different.”*

### **8. The significant other: wholeness regained**

Prudence continued on her quest for education despite her physical, psychological and emotional struggles with the support of a “significant other” who was “*there for her*”.  
*“...Sometimes lovers are not conducive to studying but we compete, and he gets merit certificates even when he isn’t aiming for them. I come off with an A or a B but he just gets them. He’s gifted with language, French and German. He is Griqua and his home language is Afrikaans. They were raised by Ngubanes; he’s coloured.”*

It seemed that she had met a suitable partner, who not only inspired her to do better but who could be a role model and someone who offered her security through his family. Most importantly, he understood her particular background. But as was her wont, Prudence would triumph over one struggle only to be faced with another.

### **9. Yet another challenge**

*“A lesser person would have dropped out if they experienced what I did in my third year. When I was meant to be finishing my degree, I had 424 credit points and only needed 384 but according to a lecturer, the Dean made a mistake and I was missing 8 points from my second year so I was not going to graduate. The university compensated me by allowing me to do my undergraduate module at the same time as my Honours...”*

*The problem was that I had a scholarship from Psychology and acceptance into that Honours programme (which would have been my choice), but I could not take it up as I had not graduated. I even had 3 merit certificates!”*

She couldn't believe she had a semester worth of credit points above what was required and yet she was not going to graduate because of an administrative error. Finally, she had to take Honours in Drama but couldn't access her scholarship money because she did not have “degree complete”. She felt let down by the institution further when the administrator at the Financial Aid Office refused to attend to her although the Head of the section had instructed that Prudence get financial aid because of her special circumstances.

Finally, her future mother-in-law paid for registration and residence. *“In the second month, I was going to be evicted from res (residence) and the administrator still treated me very badly so I went to Westville campus with my fiancé and someone in administration took pity on me. The SRC also tried to assist.”* Fortunately, she was able to stay at residence and continued to study towards her Honours degree.

#### **10. Moments of Clarity: I was made to be...**

Prudence's plans for the future included working as a psychologist as she had been sufficiently motivated and had proved herself in the discipline in her undergraduate years. During those years, she also felt that her personal experience and her professional experience as facilitator in a university project and as a tutor would hold her in good stead and assist her. She felt she was able to speak to people as human beings, honestly, without being authoritarian. This was borne out by her experiences as a tutor in Drama and Performance Studies.

*“I actually did an improvisation centered on the theme of the pressures of being gay in an African community which hated gay people. One boy was “put in the hot seat” to be the gay character and he told me I'd helped him because he is gay. I just didn't know it and I was glad it turned out positively, because he wrote, ‘Sisi, thank you very much’.”*

Her education taught her tolerance and the ability to help those who were willing to get help. She felt that she had gained greater relevant experience in this area in the Dramaide

edutainment programme run by the Drama Department. She took the opportunity to broaden her worldview when she was exposed to some of the progressive material SARAH (South Africans against Rape and Harassment) publishes in order to educate the community. *“We were paid for the workshops although we did not expect it.”* So she inadvertently also gained financially from a project in which she wanted to serve in a voluntary capacity.

## **11. Role models and counter role models**

Prudence further enhanced her psychology profile when she actively sought and secured a holiday job to conduct research for the provincial Department of Health. She met an amazing role model when she had to interview Prof. B. Gumbi, the CEO of Prince Mshiyeni Hospital, who had risen to this level although she had experienced a very hard life. Her enormous successes in turning around a poorly performing hospital were there for all to witness, including the impressionable young Prudence.

Even in her immediate environment, Prudence found a role model because she was constantly on the lookout for them. *“I went to class with a boy who was teaching, doing his undergraduate degree and working nights at a restaurant and students complain about being overburdened by studying alone!”*

On the other hand she had some very negative experiences with some of her peers. One liked partying with the rich. *“In 2009, when I was in second year she took me to an after party at which guys were ‘picking us’. It was like we were being dished out.”* Her African spirituality and moral fibre rebelled against this demeaning practice. *“I am very spiritual and I also have a particular gift. I can see what is going to happen in my dreams. I am also very sensitive about people. This is why I don’t have lots of friends.”* Her moral stance on the matter was clear and her Christian values supplemented her African ideals (some of which may have had common roots) in keeping her on the correct path.

It was also in 2009 that she got the inheritance her late uncle had left her and she chose to renovate her grandmother’s house. *“I paid R62000 back to financial aid. They pay your fees - not res fees - if you perform well.”* She displayed ethical behaviour when she observed that paying back the fees would allow a needy person to have access to those funds. Although she struggled a great deal through the year, her positive contributions assisted in her healing and

moving forward in her quest to live in better material circumstances which would, in turn, enable her to attain her goals in tertiary education.

There was a positive and negative side to being at residence at university. The positive side, on the one hand, was that it assisted her to focus on her work. *“I was already in res in 2008 and I’d sit at the library even if I didn’t want to because of the pressure of the workload.”* On the other hand, through her responsibility for her floor at residence (Howard College campus), she was often called upon to control people who were drunk, fighting, destroying property and were guilty of other raucous behaviour.

She was upset about the practice of young girls having “sugar daddies”. *“How are they going to speak to their children about morality?”* She made sure she stayed away from bad company, having experienced the detrimental effects of joining such people in the past.

She was disgusted at the deviant behaviour she had observed among students. *“Some people behave like animals and the kitchen sink was broken and once there were faeces in the sink. I’m really ashamed of some of the black kids because they are actually conforming to the stereotypes out there. They think I’m racist against my own people. It’s also about morals and some of us live with grans and married women and people who are as old as our parents. Some things are not about religion; it’s just having morals and principles, you see what is right from wrong.”*

## **12. The role of religion in a challenging environment**

Prudence attributed her strong moral fibre to her religion and proudly announced that she had been baptised in a Catholic Church, St Anne’s. She had received the sacrament and “equiniso”, the isiZulu term which described another sacrament which is earned when a certain level of knowledge of the religion is attained. Both helped her to build strength in her religion. *“The only sacrament that I’m missing is my wedding since my grandmother motivated me to go to church.”*

She could not explain what the church had done for her character and code of behaviour in strong enough terms. There would have been a huge impact if she had missed out on her religion. *“It taught me about roles in society, it gave me the guidance as to how to be a good child to my family and it taught me how to respect others. I would say it actually made me. Church kept me occupied; it made me fear people (respect differences) and reminds you that*

*you must take responsibility for your actions even if you are responding to something someone else is doing to you.*” Her ability to overcome the difficulties and struggles she weathered are also due to her absorption of some of the Christian principles she was taught each Sunday in church.

### **13. The role of Drama in the quest for knowledge**

The process of education through Drama led her to experience and practise social learning and to develop a voice in relation to her own education. *“In every module, it is about assimilation, taking a massive work and relating it to your opinion which is also based on other readings. Your understanding and critical thinking is assessed.”*

The educationalist/philosopher, Paulo Friere’s concept of education is based on the principle of creating consciousness about how an issue related to the lives of those making drama. She applied this to her work as a mentor and tutor: *“I’m not afraid to speak to young people. I’m not here to give bad marks. I’m here to help. Use me as a resource. I will be your friend but you have to do the work. People come with ideas and it’s my job to shift them and expose them to different types of knowledge.”*

### **14. Writing and “seeing” in meeting the challenge**

Even the written word is different from spoken. It took her time to read work with understanding. *“In Psychology, my other major, the concepts were very big and you needed a psychology dictionary to understand the terms. I used the worldwide web on my laptop”.* She was pleased that English was a requirement for drama essays especially, as she had a bit of an edge because she had been to Durban Girls High and the first language she spoke was English because of her Coloured family.

She was quick to indicate that she was not denying her African roots. *“I have a gift in the African family, the gift of seeing. Sometimes I dream and the dreams are complicated. I am supposed to go into training, my path is in prayer. I see some things in advance. I was on family planning when I got pregnant. That’s the fortunate thing; because of my spirituality I can fall pregnant whenever I want to. Unfortunately, I had to have an evacuation, (hospital assisted expulsion of a foetus) although my dowry was paid.”*

She acknowledged the strengths she inherited from both sides of her family and believed that they were instrumental in assisting her to overcome her struggles. She was even able to overcome her sadness at not producing an offspring.

But once more, she had a “*significant other*” in the person of her fiancé who was in Opera, doing his Honours in Music who was able to help her to overcome her difficulties. He was of exemplary character and was raised by his mother, a very strong woman. “*You know they say sometimes when you miss out in some things in life, God has another plan for you: that woman is more than a mother to me.*” So Prudence began to feel whole again as she felt loved and was invited to play the role of a daughter to her new strong surrogate mother.

### **15. Further Construction of Academic Success: process or product?**

For Prudence, academic success was both a process and product. “*If the process is destroyed you can’t produce. People don’t finish their degrees because there’s a problem in the process.*” She believed the best thing about university is that they awarded you for good performance. She had had many high points in her first year on campus because of good marks and in the second year she changed one of her majors, moving from Industrial Psychology to Psychology.

She was depressed because she failed Industrial Psychology in the first semester and had a supplementary exam for Neuropsychology. “*I didn’t do Biology and Neuropsych was an extra module I didn’t have to do, but I was always interested in the mind and the lecturer was excellent. I related to the work and I would actually go – ‘Oh so when I’m angry this chemical reaction happens!’ I found it fascinating!*”

This fascination kept her on the career path of a psychologist although she planned to complete a PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) initially, in order to finance her studies in this area. For her, the epitome of success would be at the point she was addressed as Doctor. “*My friend’s mother had always said “That’s a Doctor, and you know when people say positive things it sticks to you.”*”

Some of her lecturers also saw her potential but she did not do as well in Drama as she thought she would; more importantly, she wasn’t sure why. “*So I even stopped going to*

*lectures but I did all my assignments. But I'm still getting there; I still have to discover who I am and what I really want, even in relation to academics. I still have to figure it out because there are good days and bad days."*

So she left room for change and improvement and she was willing to explore the possibilities which were presented as she continued with her studies.

## **16. Becoming a student against all odds**

She felt it was vital to be acknowledged. *"Nobody at home looked at my marks; they don't give me food, no money for transport; honestly no one at home did anything. My grandmother just tells me to pray."*

Instead she looked forward to the acknowledgement that came from the university administration each year. *"It is because of this that results are important, it indicates how well you understand the subject and it gives you a deadline in the face of all these things."* It was a sign that her efforts were not in vain and helped her to keep on the path of academic success. In hindsight, she noted factors that may have facilitated her success. *"In Psychology and Drama, there are calendars at the beginning of the year."*

She circumvented any difficulties with language she had experienced by working consistently. Although it was necessary to understand what they were asking for, in Drama essays she had a specific way of dealing with them. She began to realise that language was very important and the way things were phrased was just as important as what was being tested in that it assisted her to respond to the challenging questions that were being posed.

*"Sometimes I worked in groups and we exchanged information but people tended to keep talking and I would become distracted. When I was on my own I studied the scope and the course pack. Sometimes the scope was no help in other disciplines but in Psychology it's everything."*

She learnt by "cramming" but before this she went in with a basic understanding of the content. She could not read something just once. For every book she'd read, she had four copies that were hand written, that's how she learnt. In writing and rewriting, she found she

was not just memorising but understanding what was being said. She went to all her lectures and even if she looked stupid, she asked questions. Fortunately, she liked reading a lot and it was fun growing up as part of a debating team where she had practised her debating skills in school.

*“It didn’t matter whether I was a first or second English language speaker because English itself is not a pure language and you have to use a dictionary. Even Whites have to learn English and you can’t say I’m Indian, I’m Coloured, I’m African and it’s not my language. Spoken language is very different from written language, especially academic language.”*

The only way she could attain academic success was to focus on the work and limit her social life. *“Wanting to party and hanging out with friends did not mix with succeeding academically. Success had a cost: there is a reaction to every action.”* Immediately she became a serious student, she had to accept that it was going to take her time. She had friends who were studying because she had to study all the time. She had to adhere to certain principles because those were the *“building blocks”*; she maintained a good learning environment and surrounded herself with things that were part of her work in order to succeed. She had to surround herself with people who were in the same position as she was. Also, they were from the same institution.

*“They understood when she had the light on the whole night. It’s different from High School, where it was taking everything from the book on the subject and writing it as if it is your own. Here you have to read. There’s plagiarism, there’s paraphrasing, your ideas may have been created long time ago, it’s about reinventing and reorganising work. You must be able to explain a concept without reading (in your own words). You must know what it means in relation to what you’re writing about. There is referencing and citing because you’re explaining someone else’s ideas...”*

*Some students in high school can listen to the teacher and they don’t have to study. Varsity is not like that. You have to have a relationship with your course pack and can’t come to the lecture without reading what it’s going to be about.”*

## 17. The quest continues

*“I did feel overloaded but I didn’t feel I had the option to drop out. I kept on telling myself, ‘It’s not forever’”. A lot of Prudence’s life was work but she told herself it was just for three or four years and then she would have the proof “in her certificate” that she worked for that time. “If I dropped out, then what? Was I going to work at Shoprite? Who is going to support me? I didn’t want to start with a R100000 debt.” So she denied herself the luxury of ever dropping out “no matter what.” “My mother is an alcoholic, she lives in a shack somewhere; my dad doesn’t care; nobody cares.” She had to be the one to care.*

She felt the need to fulfil the requirements of certain prescribed traditional rituals which her estranged alcoholic mother brought to her in a dream which recurred, and in which she appeared to be sober and beautiful again. *“Some people must attend to these traditional things if you want your life to go forward. People won’t hire you even if you have a degree because your calling becomes a curse and they react badly to you. I was even told at one point that I would fail, fail, fail until I did this thing and I did fail research (module).”*

She also had another explanation why this may have occurred. *“I had worked hard but I wrote two exams twelve hours apart. You can’t review everything you did in twelve hours.”* Even when she passed, nobody looked at her results at home. She found it necessary to have her success witnessed. It helped and was the balm to any struggles she may have weathered. No-one had ever said acknowledged her hard work. *“My cousin didn’t even congratulate me when I got my degree!”*

So it was important for her to have a career and a good job and material possessions in this modern society. She felt this would finally give her happiness in addition to her educational qualifications achieved at university. She wanted to change her lifestyle and knew that academic success opened a window of opportunity for her. She knew that a university degree didn’t only entitle her to a job but that she could be recruited by various employment sectors for the diversified education and knowledge she had gained through her university education.

Education changed her life. *“It’s beautiful how people acknowledge you just because you have a qualification. Abraham Maslow, a behavioural psychologist, spoke about self-*

*actualisation through which people get something. This is education because people are forever in a quest to find something in their lives.”*

She believed some people were born into wealth and some people were born into good families and some had to work to get a stable home. She had to work hard because she knew “*no-one is going to hand things to you; society owes you nothing*”. If you work hard you get rewarded. When she got to university she found “*a student who went in with an A and got R2000, now you get R5000 for an A. In order to get recognition, or to get help, I have always had to put myself out there*”.

No one can conclude her story better than Prudence Nomfundo Shabalala or quite so effectively:

*“My quest was to change my life for the better through education. In order to do this, I believe I have to be able to answer the question, ‘Where do you see yourself in five years time?’ I have succeeded this far through hard work and prayers and now I believe I have the answer to that question. You must have a mission and a dream. I’m still looking for a job next year while I do my PGCE. I want to be a teacher. I think I can be a good teacher and I will still pursue my Psychology career. I want my own house; I want my children to grow up in my own house. I’m going to change my life now because I don’t want my mother’s life. I don’t want my mother’s life.”*

#### **5.2.4 Iliana’s Story: The Unlikely Student**

##### **Foreword**

No one expected Iliana to follow English Studies at undergraduate level, let alone at postgraduate level. Here was a girl from an Afrikaans family, all of whom spoke only Afrikaans until they came to KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) when she was 7 years old. It was only then that she started learning English. Apart from that she was suffering from dyslexia, a developmental disorder which causes learning difficulties in the areas of reading and writing. So she read words incorrectly and was unable to spell. To add to her difficulties, she

was also diagnosed with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), which is a neurologically-based condition characterised by problems with attention, impulse control, and hyperactivity.

### **1. Biographical Illuminations: School and University Aspirations**

When they arrived in KZN from Pretoria, Iliana's parents, who were missionaries, struggled with English. They thought it best to deal with the challenges that came with this by enrolling her in an English medium school from Grade 1 onwards. The net result of this was that the medium she was being taught in was English, while her home language was Afrikaans. This posed a difficulty especially with homework because her mother, who was at home, could not help her with a language neither of them understood very well.

Iliana attended a German school so was expected to do German and Afrikaans as well. She wanted to take Afrikaans at university although she scored a B in English. She was told by university authorities there were two language requirements for the BA and that she was not allowed to take her home language. So she took English and German and found out only in her third year that she would have been able to take Afrikaans.

She did not feel short-changed, however, because *“My passion for English was rekindled when I did Dr Faustus with an excellent lecturer. The lecturer was very supportive in that when I got an assignment back she would go through it with me and show me where I went wrong and how to improve, so she was like a mentor to me and she advised me to apply for English Honours.”*

Iliana applied for Psychology Honours as well but got into the English Studies Honours programme. When she first started her studies at university, she had wanted to follow a career in Clinical Psychology or Child Psychology so in the first year she took modules in Drama, English and Psychology. She intended to complete triple majors but Drama and English kept clashing with Psychology. *“If I took Drama and English I'd have had to drop Psychology and I didn't see where I could go with Drama in future. I wasn't thinking about teaching High school and South Africa doesn't really have Hollywood although they may have more now but in comparison to when I started...I would have loved to be on stage but I didn't see it as a steady income and financial security is very important to me. Being an actor would be*

*my passion but some months you'd have a job and some months not, and I don't like that kind of insecurity."*

Iliana started her BA degree in 2007, and completed in 2009 with English and Psychology majors. She was accepted into the English Studies Honours programme in 2010, which she completed only in 2012 because the university gave her leave of absence to teach English in Taiwan for a year-and-a-half in the middle of her fulltime programme. While working in Taiwan, she also did a PGCE through UNISA. So there was *"interrupted study but not interrupted effort"*.

*"When I started my degree I wanted to be a psychologist. I hated teaching. I never wanted to be a teacher in my whole, entire life. Basically I'm dyslexic as well so I had troubles with English throughout my high school career. I have a spelling problem. I was tested by the university and during exams I have a time concession; for every hour I get an extra 15 minutes. I've got a spelling concession. Obviously, with English I'm not allowed to bring in a dictionary but with Psychology exams I was allowed to take in a dictionary and I have a person who reads me the questions because I have a problem recognising words because of my level of reading. If I read through something I might take it for another word and that will affect my answer."*

## **2. Struggles with dyslexia and English Support at Home**

Iliana's mother was a *'house mum'* and she invested a great deal in Iliana's and her sister's education. She assisted them with homework although she herself was only beginning to learn English at the time. Iliana's father did not have his Matric when his children went to school. He attained a qualification which was equivalent to Matric after they were born because his own education had had to be put on hold. When he was in Std 8 (Grade 10), his dad had committed suicide and his mother, Iliana's grandmother, didn't have money to send her father to school so he was forced to join the army. In that way, he was able to help his widowed mother to support their household.

Unlike her father, Iliana's mother had a secretarial degree and she had worked for the government. She kept the children focused on the work and that helped a great deal because

she was so interested in their schooling that she went out of her way to learn with them. *“It was not just us learning it, she was also learning it.”*

### **3. The love of languages with or without dyslexia**

Despite all her difficulties, Iliana loved languages. *“I think Afrikaans is a lot easier than English to speak and actually write it. The grammar is confusing and in English there are a lot of words you say that you don’t spell like you say it and in Afrikaans it sounds exactly like you write it. And the rules, there are so many exceptions. So it hindered my learning English because I would write it exactly how I’d say it. What did help was at school I was forced to speak English and my Afrikaans would come in at home but my parents also tried to speak English with us.”*

It was no wonder that Iliana hated reading. Her dyslexia impeded this activity and she took an extremely long time to finish anything she was reading. When she got to Grade 6, her parents sent her on a reading course which improved her reading and made her enjoy reading for the first time. Her dyslexia was only discovered later because her extremely high IQ allowed her to compensate for her shortfall when it came to reading. *“The fact that I had a problem didn’t emerge until varsity.”* Besides a high IQ, the fact that she had friends at school with her constantly, meant that they could discuss the things they were reading so she didn’t have to do such a close reading. *“I don’t have as many people here (Honours) I find, for me to bounce ideas off. In my undergraduate years, there was more time that I spent with people and that contributed to my academic success. We’d sit in groups and bounce ideas of each other; that’s when my memory tends to kick in...”*

*Now in Honours it is a bit frustrating because you get to class and you have a 2 hour lecture and you are tired afterwards and you just want to go home. You don’t really talk about what you are doing in class and then during the week you wrap your mind around it by yourself and you only have your own perspective.”*

She thought people benefitted from tutorials which tied in to her preference for working in groups rather than on her own. In first year, she attended all her tutorials but there were people who had not attended at all; she found that hard to understand because tutorials were there to help students learn about the topics so she found they were useful. For her it was not

just a waste of time. *“There are people in The English Department now who were actually tutorial leaders in my first year and they were very important to me. I like listening to other people’s ideas and comparing them with my own. I then have a deep understanding of what I am studying.”*

#### **4. Moments of Clarity: Quest for Success, both large and small**

Along her academic journey, Iliana had successes both large and small and she believed that these would always change depending on one’s goal in life. *“When I left matric I wanted to get into varsity and when I got into varsity, it was to pass my exam and then to finish my degree and then to pass my Honours. Those were the big successes.”* The little successes included her, as a first year Drama student, being chosen to take part in one of the Honours productions.

Although she considered it to one her minor successes, it was a laudable achievement not only because she loved acting and drama. Out of 100 students, they chose 4 to participate in the Honours productions and she was one of the 4 to be chosen. She was very proud because *“to be chosen was a massive thing”*. She had always taken part in drama activities throughout school and even when she was part of a church group.

For her, academic success was very different from personal success. Personal success was always financial. *“I know it sounds funny but when you come from a family who, by the time I was in Grade 1, was only earning R500 a month with two parents working salaries, you get to a place where financial security is important...”*

*I remember a year when we had no money for Christmas gifts so we would go up to our family on my grandparents’ cost because they live in Pretoria; so the petrol, they would pay and the tolls, they would pay. And I would remember my mum hating going empty handed and we would bake massive amounts of cookies, all different types of cookies and that one year all that we gave as Christmas gifts were cookies.”*

Throughout her varsity career, from the end of Matric year for four years, Iliana worked as a waitress at the same coffee shop in her home town for two full days on the weekend to get pocket money to pay for her cell phone.

Even before that when she was in Grade 8, her school had market day and she sold koeksisters, toffee apples and popcorn which she had made. That's how she had bought her first cell phone. Her parents never bought her one. When she was in second year varsity, during one long holiday in July, she was asked to do filing for a poultry farm. When it came to the December holidays, they were without a receptionist and so she worked for them from the end of November to the beginning of February when varsity started again. From that job she earned about R8000 which she used to buy her own laptop. She had had it for 4 years. For her, those were big successes in her life because her parents obviously could not supply those things and she had to do so herself.

## **5. Opportunities and success**

Iliana believed she achieved personal success in Taiwan when 5 and 6 year olds started in her classes knowing no English, but after a year they could not only speak the language, they could understand concepts or ideas and they could link them with each other. *"I'm very proud of that."* Her own education had been very different from Taiwanese 'cram' school, which is where she taught. *"If you get less than 85% you rewrite the test. 80% is the Chinese 'fail'."* Children were at government school from 7 to 2, then they went to cram school and did homework. After that, they did different subjects up to 9 pm. Even 5 year olds were collected at 10 pm sometimes.

Society did not acknowledge the presence of learning difficulties in learners in Taiwan. In fact, it was regarded as taboo. Children had to be disciplined, they had to strive more but they didn't have a child's life or a social life after school. They needed balance. Her own schooling had that and her mother saw to it that she had a balanced life at home. This had continued into her undergraduate studies and she felt she owed some of her success to this fact. Her experience in Taiwan highlighted that.

*"Then when I came back from Taiwan, I thank God as well, there was a big thing; I brought a dog back because he was basically my sanity in Taiwan."* As she was very connected to animals, she had to get a dog to help her to live there. One Friday she was involved in a scooter accident in which she broke her collar bone. On a Friday she had 6 hours of teaching and another 5 hours the next day. She didn't have sick leave and was worried about not being

paid for any of the days she may have had to be away. She would also not have been able to pay her bills or buy food so she pushed through that pain.

Her doctor had told her not to use her right arm. It was the middle of winter and the pain was excruciating as she wrote, ate, dressed and drove favouring her right hand. This was one of the lowest points she had ever experienced and she coped only because she had her dog and she skyped with her family each day. She would go home and just cry; having the dog with her, kept her in check. He was a large reason for her staying in Taiwan so long. This experience allowed her to reflect on her belief in strength of family and upbringing and how that took her through all her undergraduate studies and indeed her work experiences successfully.

## **6. Further Construction of Academic success: Dropping Out was never an option**

*“I have never failed anything in my life and one year I put in a skeleton draft to an essay and the lecturer said it was very, very good but when I did the final draft somehow it went terribly wrong, and my marks got very low and I felt ‘Why am I doing this? I’m not achieving’; it felt like I was not enjoying the course, I was not connecting with it all. I kept thinking... ‘I have to finish, I have to finish’.”*

It was the first time she had been lectured by that lecturer and Iliana did not know what the lecturer wanted and whether the lecturer’s standard was too high. At times like this, although she was frustrated, she was kept on track because her dad impressed upon her and her sibling the importance not only finishing a first degree at university, but doing much more than that.

He had no qualifications; he was forced to do the job of an unqualified printer. He worked night shift at a blue collar job and earned little money, although he worked such long inconvenient hours.

So getting a Bachelor of Arts at varsity was very important to Iliana although she sometimes questioned her progress in her undergraduate years. When she did this in her Honours year, *“that was when the Lord intervened and I went to Taiwan.”*

No matter how bad she felt during her studies she never thought of dropping out. She would get very frustrated when it came to assignments and exams because she hated doing them. *“I*

*hate exams. If you take Psychology, my Psychology assessments with regard to assignments would reach about 90. I really enjoyed my assignments I liked doing research and it was interesting for me, and when I got to the exam because of my ADD and my dyslexia and the fact that I struggled to learn, in that environment I would drop from high 80s and 90s to 60s for a final year mark and for me it was always very frustrating because I felt it wasn't a true reflection of my capabilities but I can't change it."*

With university and her Attention Deficit Disorder came great frustration especially at exam time, because she could not handle the stress of exams. She struggled to study for exams because of her concentration problem but managed UNISA exams better than the ones at UKZN. *"UNISA didn't just give us a sentence as a question and you had to write an answer of 30, 40, 50 marks. With UNISA they give many questions that would count for maybe 20 marks, they were diverse. It's very difficult (university studies) because people learn differently."*

## **7. Success, Personal Success, Academic Success**

*"Success is achieving what you set out to do. Personal success - you have to be happy. Academic success is different; you can be happy some people are; some people aren't."* Iliana explained how for her happiness was very important. She couldn't understand how one can really succeed in something that one's not happy about.

Her boyfriend's experience was a case in point. *"He's got his Science degree and he's got his Honours and he's got his Masters, he's teaching so he's got his PGCE and he decided no, he doesn't want to teach, he wants to be a doctor. He's very frustrated. He was in the top percentile and he was given an interview and told you're the wrong colour and the wrong age."*

Her friend also had a bad experience: *"I had a friend who got cum laude for Psych (Psychology); she applied for Masters and was rejected. There's a need for psychologists and out of 300 they only take 30 for Masters. It's frustrating. At university it's not just merit anymore; there was frustration, big frustration to me. Don't get me wrong; when I was in high school my best friend was Black and I never thought I was racist."*

She was upset when her classmates of colour were given preferential treatment and lecturers went out of their way to understand if her Black peers did not turn up for a test. She tried to rationalise the situation. *“This affects people’s success and I understand that there was apartheid (believe me I hate talking about it) and there is a democracy now. But I do believe we’re swinging (from one to the other) and there was White power and apartheid and now we are going to Black power and affirmative action. Don’t get me wrong. Sometimes affirmative action benefits Black South Africans. But it is very frustrating where you may sit with great academic results and you know you won’t be accepted into a course because you are the wrong skin colour.”*

Another of her friends who did Drama, obtained it *cum laude*, but half way through the year she had a mental breakdown because she was pushing herself. *“Where’s the success? Are you happy? Why did you push yourself to such an extreme point that you had a meltdown? At the end of the day you go to a job and they say you’ve got the qualification and they don’t say how well you’ve done.”*

As far as Iliana was concerned, success is a process and what success actually means can change. She believed where one came from can provide motivation and strong support in the quest for success. Many who may have come from underprivileged areas had achieved amazing things and she knew people who had been *“from the higher class”* and from wealthy families who *“just partied their whole life away and achieved nothing. So it’s very personal what a person sees as success at different stages in their lives. I think you can have success by achieving great results at varsity but if your personal life is blown to smithereens, is it worth it?...”*

*Personally, if I look at my life and judge success, yes I have my degree, yes I’m working but at the end of the day when I have kids I want to stay home with them because for me money is important, but it was more worthwhile for my mum to stay at home with me and my sister (while we were studying) than to be able to buy brand (name) clothes (for us) and (for me) to have a car when I got to 18.”*

Her wish to be a stay at home mum was exonerated by what she realised from her teaching experience. *“I have kids whose mums are never around and all they need to blossom is love and attention. For me, I would want to stay with my kids from the time that they are babies to*

*Primary school and because I'm a Primary school teacher, I have those hours and I can be at school and my kids can be at school with me. That to me is ideal...I do believe that there should be a balance."*

For her, personal achievement and success was based on two possibilities. *"Does one base it on having a family and staying home with them or does one base it on having a career and earning money? Is it possible to have a combination of both? Some people say one can't be a career woman and have kids at the same time."* Iliana did not believe that.

### **8. Values, Religion and an Achilles heel**

To Iliana, one of the single most important values instilled in her by her parents was never giving up. This helped her to attain academic success. They were intent on (focussing) on both their children's education. They didn't care whether the children attained marks *"in the 80s or 90s"* as long as they passed. The children were affirmed and even if they obtained marks *"in the 60s"*; their parents were extremely happy because they had passed. Iliana felt the effects of this and believed there was great value in being acknowledged in this way.

She also drew support from her religion. *"I'm a practising Christian. I'm a 'happy clappy', I'm a Jesus freak. It's not a religious thing for me where it's like a ritual of being in the church every Sunday. I steer clear of legalism. It's fine if people want to go to church at Easter and Christmas. I try to keep an open mind, I try not to judge but I do pray a lot and ask God to help me in my studies. But I do believe in giving back."* In her undergrad years she tended to *"hang out"* with non-Christians, people who were considered *"heathens"*. She did not judge them. Evidence of her flexibility was clear in the choice of her friends. *"One of my best guy friends smoked pot."* She never had taken drugs and simply regarded it as his prerogative.

Surprisingly, these people didn't distract her from academic success. In fact, this young man himself attained *'80s and 90s'* at the end of the day, even though he smoked pot. She found that he wasn't hypocritical, he didn't put on a show, *"'Oh, I'm a Christian, I'm so godly, look at me, look at me'. I don't like superficial people at all. I'm honest; I'll tell you what I think straight up. And most of my friends were like that."*

Even in her second and third years, she valued her friends, including the “*guy friend... he’s actually a great guy, don’t get me wrong, and it was ironic actually because he stopped smoking around me and I asked him why and he said it was because it made me uncomfortable and because I’d always say ‘no thank you’. I’m not being judgemental but I wasn’t going to change who I am. By me being who I was, I actually changed his life. And after he stopped, (and) his academics went sky high as well.*”

Iliana’s best girlfriend was Lutheran. She had she met her in first year, and she thought so well of her that she chose to have her as her bridesmaid. They were still in touch as her friend had always shown an interest in Iliana’s life, although she was in Pretoria studying in ‘Tukkies’. Her friend had only done one subject with Iliana in her first year and they remembered each other for their brave and outgoing natures, although Iliana felt she actually had no such characteristics. Both kept consistent contact because of the strong connection they felt with each other. For much of the time, she considered herself to be happy and that depended on her relationship with her friends to keep her centered.

For Iliana, being a student in life was a phase in life. She believed that some people grew out of it and some people didn’t. She felt her classification as a student meant she was a student at university and academic success depended upon her passing her exams and getting her certificate.

She had no other connection with the university because she didn’t live in residence on the campus and had to travel for an hour each day to get onto and off campus. She felt that it affected her level of input into her studies because although she had to stay on the campus for the whole day, the computer LAN and library were always full. She resented the fact that she had no place to study or do research, or a place in which she could rest and relax. It was for this reason that the campus was never home to her.

*“I think that had a negative effect on my success. But at the end of the day, people are important to me and I would not have done English Honours if it wasn’t for my one lecturer.”* While she acknowledged the mentorship of her lecturer on the one hand, on the other, she clashed with another lecturer. Being such a fervent Christian, she strongly opposed one of her poetry lecturers who was very “*out there... ‘He taught Ted Hughes’ The Crow and I hated the poem because it was so against everything I believed in and I remember feeling so*

*angry and frustrated at him because he was so sexist . He kept on riling us about our religion; obviously he wanted to get a rise out of us.”*

Iliana found a way to try to be more objective about content and interpretation. She began to understand that there are many roles one plays on campus and students can lose themselves in these roles as she was doing in this case. *“One of my favourite movies is Rocky Horror because the character is schizophrenic. I play different roles on campus and each of them has a part of me in them, but they don’t define who I am.”*

She learnt to keep a distance because she found that when she was a student, many things went against her religious beliefs. *“In the Counter-culture module, I had to look at things not through what I call my life view and my religious view and I had to deal with themes such as transgender and homosexuality. I had to read about a man who would get dressed as Mary and he had clay feet. And I am Christian so I had to put it in a context without my life influencing it. At a personal level, an idea might be repulsive but you are taught to critically analyse it and it may portray another world view; it may not change me and if I look at it, my religion may frown upon it. I create another role for myself and although I don’t agree with Freud’s theories but I acknowledge that he has a place in history and how he has contributed to the development of psychology.”*

She found that texts like Dr Faustus broadened her horizons and she learnt lessons from the books as well as the experiences she had on campus. *“The nature vs. nurture debate and themes of supernatural power and magic open up your perspective of things... In the same way as one person can change another completely in relation to religion and philosophy, education at university can do the same. This can be a cost of academic success in the same way as it can cost you money. Your religion helps you to maintain a distance.”* She strongly believed, however, that knowing and understanding does not amount to acceptance and she was happy for that.

Her Achilles’ heel was reading because of her dyslexia and *“the difficulties with this will stay with me throughout my life.”* She tried to construct essays by understanding many different concepts and then she’d put them together in a whole. She found learning very different at varsity.

She had a real interest in people and behaviour and she noticed that when she studied Sylvia Platt and interpreted texts psychologically, the lecturer encouraged them to bring more literature into it so she had to think in a different way. She realised she could bring her understanding of Drama and Psychology into it.

Dreams and ambitions had played a large role in her attaining academic success. She knew a girl who didn't have such aspirations and failed and she was able to learn from this. Her sister, in contrast, went to Tukkies (University of Pretoria) and tried to get into medicine and did not because she failed a module in the extended curriculum. She got into nursing and now she enjoys it. She used her sister as a role model and learnt a great deal from her sister's experience.

In her first two years at university, a relationship with a boyfriend "*who was not good*" took up her time and energy. "*I knew I couldn't fail because of my parents and the financial constraints.*" Although it was difficult, she remained focused and was not distracted because of her values. There were some very bad influences on campus and she was offered drugs but her strong sense of herself would not allow her to "*get lost*"; in her case, there was no question of dropping out. It would have been equal to failure. "*My parents were behind me and religion helped.*"

## **9. The Quest for Success continues**

From the very first year, Iliana saw a future in the university; she wanted to be a psychologist because of the excellent lecturer she had had and her strong interest in human behaviour. She had never wanted to be a teacher but enjoyed teaching at primary school although she believed education was on the decline in SA. As far as she was concerned, "*what you gain from academic success depends on your self-actualisation. If I can get students to improve, then I am doing an important job because I am teaching to the best of my abilities.*" She always spent enormous amounts of time and effort on her studies because she knew they were the greatest commodities for academic success.

After her first taste of the experience, she wanted to be a Primary school teacher and "*be married with kids who she could take to school with her*". She wanted to contribute to her community like her '*significant other*' whose family is recognised throughout their town, not

only because they occupy important positions but also because they give back to their community, *“not for recognition. My religion teaches me that you don’t look for recognition all the time for everything you do. Doing small acts of kindness is worth the effort. This is success. Your left hand does not need to know what the right hand is doing.”*

Academic success took Iliana full circle. Academic success helped her to get a job as a teacher while her studies in psychology helped her to understand children. She felt qualified to go deeper into fiction and poetry and she even had the potential to become a writer or poet because she now *“enjoys reading books”*. Although she always was and still is dyslexic and has always had and still has ADD, all these possibilities opened up for Iliana because she had the courage to push through and became academically successful at university.

### **5.2.5 Katherine’s Story: Against all Odds**

#### **Foreword**

Katherine’s story reads like creative fiction.

*“In 2002 when I was in Grade 10, I was in a serious car accident which put me in ICU for three weeks and in hospital for over a month. I was placed on life support and it was believed that if I survived I would be a ‘vegetable’. I would certainly never pass Matric, certainly wouldn’t go back to school. Although I recovered I have now got epilepsy and partial paralysis which somebody very rudely reminded me of the other day...*

*This brings with it many challenges. As a result of taking 6 months off school to recover, I had to repeat Grade 10. And I made the decision to stay back because I wanted to stay with science and biology. I was amongst the top performers in the class and I was very good at Maths...This was a huge obstacle in my life as I had to change schools, deal with epilepsy and explain that I didn’t have to repeat a grade because I was stupid. I was lucky to be at my high school which had many supportive teachers and where I had many good friends. I’m a fighter and I still wanted to be a doctor despite what the prognosis was...*

*'No, she'll never pass matric and she'll never do this, she'll never do that': I had a good two and a half years of people saying I can't....so a lot of this (work at university) is-'I'm going to prove to you that I can, I'm going to prove you wrong'. And through varsity that mentality stayed with me 'I'm going to prove you wrong'". I did prove them wrong a long time ago. I graduated cum laude."*

### **1. Biographical Illuminations: Point of no return... and then**

Katherine's career choice was almost inevitable. She had come from a family of medical doctors. Her father was a well-known, highly respected doctor who practised in an up-market suburb west of Durban: "...in fact, he was revered...Even now he's still spoken of; people know who you're talking about (when you mention his name)". Her father's brother was a GP (general practitioner), while on her mother's side, Katherine's uncle was a radiologist. The rest of her family was also highly educated. After the accident she spent a long time in recovery and only went to school when she was mobile, "...and that only socially...Even as a child I dreamed of being a doctor and knew that one had to be very clever in order to achieve this goal. So in junior school, I was always in the A class and I always strived to get to the top".

But following the accident, Katherine realised that she wasn't going to get the grades required for medicine in Maths, Science and Biology on the Higher Grade although she continued to strive and was still very competitive. In addition, "*Having missed 6 months of work in Grade 10, I was told I had to repeat the grade*". So she didn't actually choose the arts but fell into this stream once the '*doctor dream*' fell away.

When her father died she moved and finally settled in Pietermaritzburg (PMB), where she now lives on her own. She is an only child except for a much older step-brother. Although her father had taught her most about success, she always had had her own idea of what success meant and felt that her parents would have been happy no matter what she achieved. She believed that without her mother's support she would not have succeeded. "*She is my rock. Whatever I achieved, in her eyes, was amazing. She just loves me no matter what I do or how I perform. My mum has never ever made me feel like a failure.*"

## 2. University Educational Aspirations: One door closes and another opens

In 2006, Katherine started her Social Science degree at the Pietermaritzburg campus of UKZN and finally majored in History and English. She had expected to go into psychology but “*hated it*”. She enjoyed English and took History as an extra subject. She was inspired by a History professor who was “*a character; he’s incredible and he brings history alive. I have also had the most fantastic English and History lecturers at UKZN*”.

However, she felt that within the degree structure students like her were only offered certain options and were not allowed to extend their experience especially if they displayed superior skills and an interest. “*These are what you can do... ‘alright I’ll do this, this and this.’ The fact that you could write journal articles was never spoken about, and this is something that should be done. There should be connections made between people who are interested in writing so that they can co-author something.*” Notwithstanding the fact that she had not contributed to her full potential, she completed her B Social Science degree in three years and earned this degree *cum laude*.

Katherine wasn’t sure about what to do next but after taking advice from her English lecturer and mentor, she completed a PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education). At the same time, she taught at a school for two days each week. After this she started her Honours in English Studies and then “*half way through my Honours, I got a phone call from the authorities to say I got a job at a school. I made the decision to put my honours on hold, as this would allow me time to ‘get into’ my teaching and have the time to prepare*”.

She returned to UKZN (PMB) in 2012 because this was the last year in which she could come back to complete the English Studies Honours under the scholarship she had won in 2010.

She believed assistance from staff, especially in respect of advice, support, guidance and assistance helped her towards academic success always. She believed thesis writing placed the most difficult demands on a student but because she relished this type of task, she felt she would have liked to have done her Honours in History as well “*...but you can do more with English*”.

### 3. Facing up to the challenge

The fact that most people did not believe Katherine would develop much academically, let alone physically or mentally post-trauma, haunted her. Even after she did what she aimed to do (attain the B Social Science degree *cum laude*), it still stayed with her. *“It was only when I stopped my Honours for the first time that it left me. After I got the cum laude and I started my Honours, I felt I could now sit and enjoy. Although when I was working that hard for the cum laude, I was enjoying it. I loved it. I’ve always been a hard worker and an over-achiever in a way. I’ve always wanted to achieve the ‘A’s’. So I’ve always been there to succeed... I was given the drive. I was given an extra push. It wasn’t about everyone else; it was about me, enjoying my studies and having passion for what I do. If I lived in a rose-tinted world, an ideal world, I would stop working and I would become a full time academic and write papers and publish...I loved my honours thesis, I loved doing every minute of it and the whole process of writing the thesis. I want to go and do my PhD one day”.*

But even after this highly emotional realisation, she drew back, indicating that it would not be a good time for all kinds of reasons. It would be like going backwards, especially as there was marriage in the immediate future. *“There’ll be a stop-go motion. Doing the masters will be going back a bit”.* Success in her academic life was as important as in her personal life.

### 4. Moments of Clarity: The nature of success and how to achieve it

*“Success is about achievements that I know I’ve achieved but also acknowledged by everyone else. When I think of success, I think of academic success”.* The biggest obstacle to Katherine’s academic success was firstly other people’s incompetency and secondly, the fact that she was not a rote learner. She explained that she battled with the PGCE for that reason. Rather than understanding and applying the knowledge, she was expected to regurgitate it. *“Being able to read a novel, understand it, understand the history of it, and know the sequence of events is more important...rote learning is hard for me...”*

*“I think success is different for different people. My boyfriend, for example, is business-minded, so success in his case is success in business, money, owning a big company at age nineteen. I have come to accept that as a teacher I will never be rich so I try not to think about that.”*

She cited a nearby private school which paid the teachers double what she earned. If she got a job there, she surmised, she would have succeeded for two reasons, not only because she would have been seen as someone who was good enough to teach there but also that she was earning so well. But what she was also concerned about was that she may not have been happy. She believed that it was good to have both academic success and financial success. But for her being happy was still extremely important. *“But I think I would make a very poor business woman. I think with the heart”*.

In trying to rationalise why she enjoyed teaching at her school, she displayed her values. Katherine talked of the humility of generally polite and clever children. The boys at the private school were different and from an entirely different social class. Her school was fairly small (Grades 4 to 12 with 810 students). It was very Christian, which was a bit of an eye opener for her since she is not a very religious person. The assembly, which was held twice a week, was actually a church service but she was not against that in any way.

Because of the orientation of the school, the staff really genuinely cared about the children. *“The principal knows the name of every single child. He knows their story. I’ve seen him play skipping rope with the ‘littlees’. It’s just a family atmosphere and staff are lovely and if they see someone going through a hard time, even a teacher, they’ll pray for them.”* She loved that about the school.

While university and school were two different things, both required a sense of community because community was very important to Katherine’s academic success. She referred to the school’s academic support, which with good family support ensured the children’s academic success. *“There’s no pushing... we will help you, we lift you up if we know you can achieve.”* Individual attention was important at university like it was at her school. It was important that someone asked about the student’s progress. *“We don’t have counsellors in school; all the teachers are counsellors (in a sense) although they are very strict”*. In her experience at university and her observation of her colleague’s successes she felt community, family, and academic support with good counselling was necessary.

## 5. Success vs. failure

Katherine clarified her understanding of academic success as anything above a first; conversely, anything below a first was regarded as poor. She observed that for instance in her PGCE year she had been trying to be a teacher taking a class of matriculates and studying for the first assignments that were required.

When she attained 68% in some of the first assignments in that year, her initial reaction was an instinctual sense of failure. On obtaining 70% for the examination, she realised that she had been trying to do too much. While studying for her own exams which included preparing for her assignments, she was also setting a Matriculation paper and the Grade 10 exams. At the same time she was also trying to grade other papers she was marking. When she understood that all this was going on, instead of a sense of failure, she felt she had really achieved a lot.

*“So when you put it into context and you think things through, you realise that you’ve actually done very, very well. So for me, when I looked at it and reevaluated and thought about what I had been doing, I gave myself a kind of a ‘pat on the back’, still with a bit of a doubt but I’ve had to accept it.”* She realized this is what she also had to do when she did not do as well as she wanted to, although she demanded an extremely high level when it came to her own grades during her undergraduate studies.

That was different from her experience of many first-year students who failed because they partied too hard. She believed that they really needed to be advised that this amounted to time wasting and nothing more. She believed they needed to think hard about it as it was their parents or some other party who was paying for their university education.

*“If you look at the suicide rate of students...you don’t understand the pressure that is put on you by parents; not only are you letting parents down, you’re letting yourself down and you’re letting the whole family down; the whole family looks at you for this ‘A’. There is so much which affects what we do, whether we succeed or not.”*

Most of Katherine’s friends were successful mainly because they had supportive families. This did not help those who were caught up in the partying and in new-found freedoms. She

quoted an example of a good friend of hers who started off at Rhodes University and had had to repeat her whole first year for that reason. *“She has achieved now but she had to learn the hard way”*.

There are other factors which can affect one’s success. Katherine used her experiences during her PGCE studies as an example once more. *“It was a nightmare and I say this with such animosity because we had registered and we had paid. Then the varsity said, ‘Sorry you have to go to Edgewood’, so we called the newspapers...It wasn’t the poor department’s fault, most of them were outstanding. They were also thrown, but we had paid for the year so the university had to allow us to stay. I still had to face some difficulties though; I had a lecturer who just would not pitch (arrive to lecture) so none of us did very well”*. She recalled how they had study groups which really saved them because they found these to be beneficial.

It was no wonder that Katherine had experienced the most pressure during her PGCE in 2009. This was because some lecturers were incompetent and disorganised. It was almost impossible to achieve marks of a high standard if those lecturers would not arrive for lectures. One lecturer left half-way through the year and her substitute/replacement spoke openly about the fact that she did not want to teach the class.

*“Although I would never have dropped out, if there had ever been a time to do so, this would have been it. Thankfully there were some lecturers who took on the responsibility of others, who did more than what was required of them and who managed to hold the course together.”*

When she compared this to her experience in her undergraduate studies at UKZN, she realized that, if she had had to deal with this level of difficulty (unwilling lecturers, etc) she would not have attained her degree at the high level that she did.

Although Katherine’s idea of success was academic achievement, achieving a high mark, being placed first or second in class and in some cases, having her work acknowledged by her superiors, her understanding of this concept changed over the years. Her idea of success especially during her undergraduate studies grew to include achievements of not only the academic kind, but also those which involved overcoming obstacles.

## 6. Study Buddy, year in year out

When Katherine came to university, she was fortunate enough to find someone similar to her as far as academics was concerned: she made a study buddy. She was quick to acknowledge the generosity of her school friend, who she adopted as her study buddy for all her undergrad years. He would do things like explain poetry in layman's terms and would share his essays with her. She explained how just talking things through with him before exams, made everything a lot clearer. *"He graduated summa cum laude and got a scholarship to Oxford to do a Masters in Law."* He was unlike a lot of clever people who did not want to share their work. She felt their discussions aided their mutual understanding of the content of the module they were studying and enabled both of them to succeed, he, with a degree *summa cum laude* and she, with a degree *cum laude*.

Apart from this colleague while Katherine was at UKZN, she was lucky enough to have a good group of friends who were all academically inclined. She worked well in a group and believed that peer interaction was the point of studying at a university like UKZN, instead of studying by correspondence.

*"We'd get together not because we're having trouble but because it's nice to share ideas; then you get a better understanding. That's why I'm studying at varsity and not at UNISA. I need something to talk against, a sounding board."*

She had a friend in each year with whom she could test and share ideas and they'd stick together. They would meet at campus or at each other's homes during the day because they had a number of breaks. She spent many hours on the phone sharing notes with a girl who was her study buddy in history. She even took this into her Honours year and would share notes with one of the students in her class because *"Our lecture notes are different, she might have something which I don't. I definitely think having tutorials, especially before exams, can help you prepare."*

Those were the people she was happy to have associated with in her undergraduate years. But she was also quick to observe that there are people one should not associate with *"the dodgy ones. Some peers taught me what I shouldn't do because they partied too hard and failed."*

While she wasn't an outright moralist during varsity, she was a bit of a hermit because she really focused on her work while everything else faded into the background. She criticized herself for having led a very unbalanced life when she was at varsity, though she did go horse riding once a week because it's a sport she enjoyed and one she could still take part in.

When she was carrying a large number of library books she pulled her back and she was bedridden for a while. It was so bad that instead of sitting at lectures, she had to stand. That reminded her of the importance of being physically fit.

She believed that to be academically successful, students needed to do some physical exercise at least once a week, whether it was horse-riding, gym or dancing. She believed it was also necessary to make time to see friends. *"Even now, I say I have a balanced life but I haven't seen my friends in 9 months."* To her, a big thing which she had begun to learn was that while she harnessed all her drive and focus and commitment, she needed to focus on other things as well. Katherine also felt drive could be exhibited in other ways. *"I need some drive. I've started doing 100 squats a day. It's strengthening, and I've been successful in that. I'm doing 120 now; it's going past a goal."*

## **7. Becoming a student and learning the language of academics from mentors**

Katherine wasn't sure that becoming a student would really entail getting into a role. Although she was not generally a very tidy person when she was working, her desk was spotless so she was really organised when it came to her work. *"Sometimes it's organized chaos"*, but even for this she had to have organisational skills.

She described other characteristics which made her a successful student. She had to understand the concept of diligence and hard work. An important consideration was that she learnt to be independent without relying only on the lecturers. She had to be meticulous about in-text referencing, which was a whole new concept to her when she went to university but to which she quickly adjusted. She had never been taught how to cite references and at what stage to acknowledge a source or to what 'in text' references related. *"I decided to teach this to my Grade 10s now, so it's not such a shock when they came to varsity."*

She believed language was important and had wanted to do isiZulu at an advanced level at university, but she could not as she hadn't done it in Matric, although she had wanted to. In fact she'd taken isiZulu up to Grade 7, but her high school didn't do the language, so she was stuck in the A class for Afrikaans from Grade 8.

This had affected her choice of modules in tertiary education. Although she was interested in writing while she was at university, she never sought publications to write for nor did she seek any opportunities in this regard. She really enjoyed some of the modules because she read books she would never have thought to read. Reading was extremely important to her.

It was just as important for her to have an image of success (to visualize and direct her efforts towards) and a role model she could emulate. She described how she signed up for a module because of the lecturer, not the content.

This was because the lecturer was so passionate and so highly intelligent, that she (the lecturer) seemed to have a personal, vested interest in the content. *“So your reading of the book was spot on all the time because she just gave you insight, whatever she taught, she did well. I admired her a lot. My other role model was my study buddy who was also a Springbok cyclist; he was a good looking guy, he was one of those”.*

Mentoring was just as important and at university, she had a lecturer who she spent hours talking to. When she and her friend had problems with the English undergraduate module, they'd go to her.

When she was in third year and unsure about whether she should do the PGCE or Honours, the same lecturer was really helpful. *“I think I described her once as my mentor. This is important to academic success. We need role models and people who can inspire us, whose achievements we may be able to aspire to.”*

## **8. Beating the odds**

*“The accident was one of the things that was a difficult experience for me... I just get sad. I cry when I see Babe (a movie about a pig), every time I see it, and I've watched it 20 times, I'm just a crier. I always have a cry. I cry at stranger's weddings. Maybe I'm just soft. I'm*

*hard on the outside. The Grade 8's are scared of me. But in order to attain success you need boundaries and structure. I think people need to feel some worth. In a way, my story's being told and somewhere along the line you will be able to use it to help others. I think that's why I am a teacher and why I wanted to become a doctor. I think it's important that people know that you care about them, you care about what they do."*

To Katherine, the accident was a real stumbling block but she got round it and progressed to eventual success. In the beginning it was difficult for her to deal with the effects of it which were external signs of partial paralysis of the face, and a neurological disorder and the effect this had on most people. But surprisingly, *"not the kids at school who met me later. They met me with it (outside signs of partial paralysis of the face, etc.), so they don't know me as any different."* They accepted her for who she was and were not sidetracked by any external or observable features which came as a result of the accident.

With her peers at university, many of her friends had come from her school so they knew about the accident already. What helped was that she was open about it and she'd find herself telling people the story: *"...you know I was an open book. The teachers at school knew and talking about it helped me to deal with what was going on. But as far as getting beyond it, it was just me. It's actually never been about my friends, it's never been about that."* This is how she chose to deal with this life changing experience.

## **9. The Quest continues**

In the same way as she got herself beyond the accident, Katherine believed she had internalised the notion of academic success to such a point that she got herself to the finishing line and that, with many accolades. She presently aspires to what she considers to be the epitome of success i.e. the highest possible qualification in a university context, a PhD and a professorship.

Having drawn on her family tradition of successful medical practitioners, she was buoyed by the fact that even after the accident she was able to reach the heights of academic success in attaining the undergraduate degree *cum laude*. She was very aware and present when she *"achieved little successes along the way"*.

She remembered that when she got to university, although she had achieved her degree *cum laude*, her boyfriend didn't go to her first graduation. She also remembered how she had insisted on his going to her PGCE graduation and again she spoke of relative success.

*“The academic co-ordinator was sick for the entire year and the lecturers tried but I feel that I have accomplished more and achieved more although my marks may not have been high. It was the hardest, most difficult, most trying year of my life; not quite, but in my academic life and I felt that I had triumphed.”* She believed that was a tremendous achievement and she enjoyed putting that (PGCE) on her CV (curriculum vitae). She felt like this because although she had achieved well in her undergraduate years, she considered the challenges she had had during those years to be comparatively small. Others may think quite differently.

Her pride in her achievements starting in her superior undergraduate successes doesn't stop her from making more plans regarding her education. It only encourages her to do more. Interestingly, she counts her next step in life as a sign of success. She intends getting married in the near future. *“I have a very successful relationship. We're a successful couple because he supports me.”* She is expected to complete the Honours and looks forward to concentrating solely on teaching after that because she had continuously slipped between her job and her studies and this had been difficult.

She believed that it is easier to be successful when one is offered a prize, but it proved not to be the case for her. Her quest for academic success was internalised. It was important to her to have some sense of competition but again with her, it was competing against herself, always getting a better mark than the last mark. *“I was surprised by some of my English marks. I did very well in third year. I loved undergraduate it was so much fun”.*

The biggest cost, however, was in terms of relationships: *“It's very hard on relationships and you only realise this afterwards”.*

Fortunately, her boyfriend, who she believes is a great success, also served as her role model in undergraduate studies and well into her postgraduate studies. *“When he first started in the property business, he sold his car to put a down payment on his first house. He fixed it up while he drove around in his parent's rickety car. Having fixed the house, he rented it out and got the money to buy his next house. He's just 26 and he's just bought his 6<sup>th</sup> one. He's*

*just amazing. He's got a Business Science degree and actually works in IT. He started reading about property and educated himself about this and made it his business because he is business minded".* She is clearly inspired by her significant other.

No one can conclude her story as victoriously and triumphantly as Katherine Margret James does:

*"My journey to academic success at UKZN has been a long but fulfilling one. I have had to overcome many obstacles but I have ultimately achieved what I set out to do. After being told that I would not succeed because of the accident, I did everything I could to prove people wrong. It drove me to succeed in my life and my academics. I have the most amazing family who has always supported me through everything. My mother in particular has been my rock, since she has always been proud of me regardless of my results. Without her support, I would not have made it to where I am today; a cum laude graduate with a double major, a teaching degree and 3 completed honours modules".*

## Chapter Six

### Data Analysis: Relational analysis of narratives

#### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the stories of the purposively identified participants of the study as first level data analysis using the interviews, written autobiographies and research journal and observation notes as base material. That is intended to help us to understand how each of the participants constructed and performed their academic success in their undergraduate studies at UKZN.

In this chapter another layer of analysis, a second level analysis is attempted. Theoretical constructs of academic success as presented in Chapter Two influenced the organisation and categorisation of the data and the analysis of emergent categories. Tinto's Student Integration Model (TSIM) (p.71) and the Ubuntu model (p.88) frame the way the data is presented and analysed in the third level of analysis.

The present chapter begins with an elaboration of how the themes in this chapter were constructed from the data. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the themes, the theoretical constructs which gave rise to them, why these constructs are important to the construction and performance of academic success and some evidence of the constructs in the stories of the chosen participants. This chapter therefore focuses on a deep analysis of the form and nature of learning and socialisation that the participants engaged in, in pursuit of the construction and performance of academic success at UKZN. The time period that is under examination encompasses undergraduate studies although the participants were engaged with their Honours studies in 2012. Any observation made by the participants about any postgraduate studies will be included only insofar as they may illuminate their construction and/or performance of academic success in their undergraduate studies in HE.

## **6.2 A Description of the Construction of Themes from the Data**

In the report of any research study there is the data and the interpretation of the data. The interpretation of data emerges from a thorough immersion in the data by first transcribing it which I did personally. I then read and reflected upon it many times; after which I segmented the sections. At this stage coding was possible (deVos, 2005). Further reflection on the coding in respect of close observation of patterns and connections of meanings (content) and qualities (form) allowed me to organise the data thematically. The actual data came from the interviews and written autobiographies and my research journal, which I maintained alongside the interviews and which housed notes I made about the autobiographies. First I identified emergent themes to which the data itself spoke. Recurrent themes were identified and inductive coding was used because it allows codes to emerge from the data (Nieuwenhuis & Maree, 2007).

In analysing the narratives, two coding procedures, namely open coding and axial coding were used. The foreshadowed questions served to generate the four main themes. By applying the open coding method, I allocated an identifying pseudonym to each participant. After carefully reading through the responses by the participants, codes were allocated to the sub-themes that emerged. I then categorised the sub-themes according to their properties, dimensions and incidents.

In applying the axial coding method, I identified relationships or connections between the main themes and the sub-themes to assist me in giving meaning to the themes within the context of academic success (Nieuwenhuis & Maree, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The themes that emerged from a thorough immersion in the data follow.

### **6.2.1 Theme 1: Notions of personal and academic success**

The very act of gaining entrance to university in itself can be regarded as a moment of success and all the participants demonstrated that the idea of academic success was not foreign to any of them having encountered this concept before they entered university. They had experienced it in different degrees with all the female participants attaining good Matriculation results while Sandile's story was silent on this matter.

However, clearly he was an agent of his own success because he accessed and passed an audition in order to gain entrance to university. After encountering financial difficulties, he earned his registration fee to get into his first year (Diploma in Music), notwithstanding the fact that his efforts to register directly after High School had been frustrated in the year before for the same reason.

Studies on success (especially in the educational arena) (McLeod & Kaiser, 2004; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2010) are often critical of the fact that this term may encompass simply completing a certain course of study. Many theorists consider success to be two pronged encompassing the notions of academic achievement and personal growth in equal measure. Some of them go further and posit the fact the successful graduates should not only be capable of obtaining a job but they also be well rounded human beings who are aware of their civic responsibility, so that they can make a the kind of positive contribution that is expected of people who have reached this level of achievement (Jones, Trier & Richards, 2008).

The conceptualisation of this study rests on the construction of academic success as experienced by a group of students who have completed their initial qualifications within the regulation time allowed for completion of their chosen degrees at a South African university. Hence the concept 'academic success' as noted and experienced by these participants is fundamental to the analysis of the data produced for this study. It is therefore, appropriate to understand what these participants came to understand as academic success and how they performed it in their undergraduate studies.

The literature (Morrow, 2009; Tinto, 2006-2007; Yorke & Longden, 2004) presents a diverse understanding of academic success. Some theorists suggest that academic success is related to observable accomplishments of events. Others view it as a process of achievement of general abilities and critical thinking over a period of time (Pike, 2000; Gee, 2001; Pike & Killian, 2001; Corbetta & Shulman, 2002; Pike, Kuh & Gonyea, 2003; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Yet others include practical competence and cognitive development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pascarella, Seifert & Blaich, 2009) both of which may be observable as a product of academic success. In a sense in placing the criteria for academic success squarely on the

completion of a degree in minimum time I have adopted a similarly technicist view but the qualitative and interpretative nature of this study militates against that.

### **6.2.1.1 Academic Success, Employability and Balanced personal growth**

From the data produced for this study, academic success for students seems to be individually conceptualised based on their personal circumstances and their experience and association with others within their personal trajectories through their undergraduate studies.

While this study is focusing on students' construction of academic success at UKZN, issues of personal growth, civic responsibility, (see below) and employability of successful graduates did surface as elements which assisted the participants to construct their academic success. Iliana seemed to concur with Jones, Coetzee, Bailey and Wickham (2008) especially with regard to employability being a mark of a successful graduate in that her idea of personal success was equivalent to financial success which in turn was directly related to her academic success.

She was from a poor family and being self-sufficient was all important. *"I know it sounds funny but when you come from a family who, by the time I was in Grade 1, was only earning R500 a month with two parents working salaries, you get to a place where financial security is important."* This is why she worked in her spare time all through her undergraduate years. For her being happy and well-rounded was next in importance. *"Academic success is different; you can be happy; some people are, some people aren't."*

She gave an example of her friend who put herself under such pressure that she suffered a nervous breakdown. *"I think you can have success by achieving great results at varsity but if your personal life is blown to smithereens, is it worth it?"* Success, in this instance seems to be relative (comparatively) to others, suggesting that a notion of success can be redefined as one compares oneself to others.

Pekrun, Goetz, Titz and Perry (2002) discuss the generic classification of 'academic emotions' which are the emotions related to student academic achievement, to teaching and learning activities and to success or failure in a university setting (see individual's core qualities below). In Iliana's friend's case, the student caved in psychologically under the

pressure and anxiety that came to bear alongside her effort to achieve well. As far as Iliana was concerned although her friend achieved ‘*great results*’ Iliana’s notion of academic success had to include good results accompanied by some element of balance so that one’s personal life remained intact. She commented on the complexity of the notion of success and used yet another example of one of her friends who studied Drama, got *cum laude*, but half way through the year she had a mental breakdown because she was pushing herself. She wondered how to weigh that situation up with these questions that she raised. “*Where’s the success? Are you happy? Why did you push yourself to such an extreme point that you had a meltdown? At the end of the day you go to a job and they say you’ve got the qualification and they don’t say how well you’ve done.*” While most curricula vitae may reflect the level of pass, Iliana was illustrating how important it was to her to work for good results but not at the expense of her psychological health.

Katherine, a *cum laude* graduate, also believed that balance in a student’s life is necessary to achieve success. She believed that to be academically successful students needed to do some physical exercise at least once a week whether it was horse-riding, gym or dancing. She believed it was also necessary to make time to see friends. Interestingly at the time of interview she had not seen her friends for nine months. “*Even now I say I have a balanced life but I haven’t seen my friends, I’ve seen my friends once in 9 months.*”

To her a big lesson which she had begun to learn was: while she harnessed all her drive, focus and commitment towards attaining academic success she needed to focus on other things as well. She felt drive could be exhibited in other ways. “*I need some drive. I’ve started doing 100 squats a day. It’s strengthening, it’s a success. I’ve been successful in that. I’m doing 120 now; it’s going past a goal.*” With her particular physical challenges which resulted from the motor accident she had been subject to, she felt she had a right to celebrate this kind of success as well, as it led to an equally strong body to support her already strong mind.

#### **6.2.1.2 Academic Success: process, product or both?**

The holistic nature of the concept of success as explained by Jones, Coetzee, Bailey and Wickham (2008) was in line with the emerging findings encapsulated by Sandile’s construction of academic success in that he experienced it as continuous and as part of his

personal growth. He defined academic success as more a process than a product. *“It is continuous and does produce products along the way but more or less at the end. I do not consider the beginning (entering university) as a success because you don’t know what you will encounter in the future. The future can unfold differently. It’s important to watch each and every step, if you don’t, you won’t be able to identify what you have been doing.”*

Success meant putting effort into whatever he was doing while giving it attention. The effort and attention came from the belief that what he wanted to achieve was possible even with all the negative things that were going on in his life. He was able to do so because he believed he would reach his goal even in the face of numerous challenges. *“There is nothing (more) painful than not having lunch at school while others are eating something in front of you.”*

Sandile believed his idea of success came from the way he grew up; it was different from that of a “normal” kid. He had to grow up from an early age, in fact *“from the word go I had to think for myself”*. He believed whatever he presented of himself in his undergraduate years, all that the world sees of him even at the point at which he was interviewed, is as a result of his coming back from the struggles he had had. *“Struggle sometimes wakes you up. It’s very painful but it prepares you. Through all that, I have managed to rise above the mountain, I am now doing my second degree. If it wasn’t for my grandmother’s great teachings I was not going to be at this level.”*

The continuous nature of the notion permeated his definition of academic success. *“(Academic success) means you have to be able to analyse what you’re doing, pay much attention to yourself, first who you are, what you want to achieve in the future. Where do you come from? Why are you here? It’s more a process; you start somewhere to achieve a certain goal. It’s continuous.”*

Yet in the same breath he observed that once he got to the higher institution *“people want to see your ending and that is why I wanted to do my best so that I receive my degree”*. So Sandile’s construction and performance of his academic success during the whole period of his undergraduate education was a complex, continuous and reflexive one. As such it was complicated by various experiences over time and space. So different expressions of success are present in an individual student’s trajectory in undergraduate studies. Temporal

differences may be observed within the context of considering whether academic success should be considered to be a process or a product.

Prudence felt academic success was both a process and product. *“If the process is destroyed you can’t produce. People don’t finish their degrees because there’s a problem in the process.”* She believed the best thing about university is that they rewarded you for good performance. She had many high points in her first year on campus because of her good marks and in the second year she changed one of her majors and went from Industrial Psychology to Clinical Psychology.

She was depressed because she failed Industrial Psychology in the first semester and had a supplementary exam for Neuropsychology. *“I didn’t do Biology and Neuropsych was an extra module I didn’t have to do but I was always interested in the mind and the lecturer was excellent. I related to the work and I would actually go, ‘Oh so when I’m angry this chemical reaction happens.’ I found it fascinating! I think this fascination keeps me on the career path of a psychologist. I will do a PGCE next year and am completing honours in Drama and Performance studies this year.”* This tremendous interest in the acquisition of knowledge and in various different fields to boot helped her to construct academic success at UKZN not only in her undergraduate studies but also inspired her to plan beyond that.

### **6.2.1.3 Academic Success and responsibility to family and community**

Alongside the theme of academic success and whether it exhibited as a process, product or both, another (theme) emerged very strongly and it was the theme of ‘role of responsible citizen’ who is able to make a positive contribution to society. Once again Sandile placed importance on the unfolding of the event rather than on the start (in this case getting into university) and stressed the importance of being able to identify watershed moments as he progressed or grew.

His academic success was held against the strong presence of his township background. His construction of this notion including the aspect of contribution to his society made him examine his life in the township and how he rose above the negativity that almost subsumed him. *“I always wanted more than I had. I could have stolen cars and been involved in all sorts of crime in Umlazi and I did try many of the bad habits but the teachings from parents*

*(grandmother) are very important. I was always afraid to be seen with this thing (crime) on my head, always afraid.”*

His ambition gave him the strength to substitute work for his antisocial activities; a factory job before he entered university and the fulltime job of studying after that. *“I worked and worked and worked. I wanted to do everything just to stay away from the society during the day...You know if you go back to my society which is Umlazi, there the life is very rough... especially if you are a young creature with older people. A lot of people are not employed especially the young people yet there is always a competition amongst particularly young people (in respect of) things they wear; they want to engage themselves with things that are most popular for that moment, they do not think for tomorrow. You’ll find them finishing Matric and there’s nothing to go forward and the parents don’t have anything to support them to further their education and you’ll find them involving themselves in drugs and you get used to it.”*

Unhealthy competition for material possessions amongst neighbours led to crime in a disintegrating community with maladjusted and unhealthy children growing up in such an environment without a stable family or any other type of security. Anger and self-hate were not uncommon and his close friend died of “TB” but he had learnt to ignore what was happening each day including the diminishing support of his mother, with whom he lived ... *“I felt that if I rely too much on my mother, things will go wrong, I began to stop depending on her.”* Rather he focused on the fact that he had something *“that was driving inside me to be a better person. I knew I had to work hard at school so that I live a better life.”* It was the internalisation of this goal that egged him on not only to construct, but also to perform success in his undergraduate studies.

#### **6.2.1.4 Is Academic Success the same as success?**

For Sandile academic success was similar to his understanding generally of the concept of success and one emerged from the other. It started with a close analysis of where he came from and where he was going. So once more the trajectory and journey was more important than the point of arrival. His success originated in his society, community and his socialisation through his traditional beliefs and particular historical moments. *“The*

*foundation of academic success is in the society and community including the socialisation of the self (you, it, the person) through the rituals that introduce you to manhood.”*

As far as he was concerned his journey to academic success had many launching pads, graduation being one of them. Entry into the institution was a foundational level of success which led him to the next launching pad of graduation. When he reached that destination he had to convince society that anyone could get a degree because he saw this as his mission as a student and as a graduate. *‘Being a graduate is the foundation which allows you to see the world more broadly. Portray to society that anyone can get a degree.’* For him graduation was not the high mark of academic success because his role of student would not stop at university. *‘Success is using the degree to do something worthwhile.’* He seemed to base his construction of academic success in undergraduate studies on the notion of retreating goals and environments. When one success is attained another possibility of attaining further success appears on a newly generated horizon., and so this process continues.

He considered the institution to be another kind of a foundation, an arrival but not the end point of academic success. He believed this notion encapsulated the role of the university student. He did not think finishing the degree was an indication of academic success and concluded that the *“role of the student doesn’t stop at university. You still have to apply what you have (learnt). People see an exterior but what is behind that? Make people see that besides getting the grades and earning money, you must handle life properly and people must see this.”* He specifically referred to the importance of recognition from his community who also provide an audience for his performance of success in this respect.

Sandile included the notion of giving back to the community in his construction of academic success *“Someone must benefit besides yourself”*. He appeared not to differentiate personal success from academic success by explaining the interrelationship of one to the other. *“It (personal success) is even related to the special dream going on inside you and how that measures up to your efforts in this regard (academic success and giving back to the community).”* This took him back to constructing academic success on the foundation of responsibility to the community. This principle fed both his notions of personal and academic success.

Only when he had applied what he'd learnt and people had witnessed that he had got the grades, earned his keep and that he had handled life *'properly'* would he consider himself to be within the reach of real success. This took his understanding of the notion of academic success beyond the precincts of the university but I believe his construction of academic success was nuanced because he seemed to consider that the title afforded by a PhD was worthy of the highest esteem: *"For me all the time when I study, I say I want to be called something, I want to be called Doctor So and So. I want to be called Doctor and I will never leave this university until I am granted the name (title) Doctor"*. It seemed that this would be for him the highest point of success.

Prudence felt similarly. She felt the epitome of success would be at the point she is addressed as "Doctor"; she described how a friend's mother always said, *"That's a Doctor, and you know when people say positive things it sticks to you."* She revelled in the fact that her potential to earn the highest degree conferred by the university was recognised by those around her and because they believed in her, she in turn believed she could actually attain success. This appreciation of a key that opened doors in an underprivileged society helped her to construct academic success at undergraduate level in her bid to fulfil her dreams of postgraduate study.

When Sandile had experienced failure in the first year of the degree he began to understand the value of having the community witnessing his successful performance but also his non-performance. Their constant vigilance to one allowed them to be party to the other and he appreciated how this created a spur to his rejuvenation and rededication of himself as constructor and performer of and eventually participant in his own academic success. *"Failing brought many questions. I'm so afraid I will not be able to tackle them and what will people back home say. I'm so afraid of going back to my society. I'm so afraid of embarrassing myself. You must have fear like that and (have) pride."* That is how he kept himself motivated to perform academically.

#### **6.2.1.5 Community as audience/ beneficiary of Academic Success**

Sandile's community provided a vast audience for his performance of academic success and provided traction for his movement forward. From his community audience he identified role models who were useful to his mission in that they provided an essential reference point as

competitors in his race for academic success. The effort he put into attempting to beat them automatically stimulated his working ability. This in turn motivated him to “dream big” and concretise ambitions about what he wanted as a career. So his appreciation of the fact that he functioned not only as a private self but also as a public self, helped him to create one of the foundations with which he built or constructed his academic success and indeed performed it. His construction was ultimately affected by the fact that his personal and public spheres were intimately entangled.

This would have got him nowhere however if he didn't implement his plans. *'Act on it!'* He was so focused on his goal that even when he was reading something he knew he was doing it for a reason. His mission was ever present. He elicited the help of the Almighty to achieve this. His supplication was consistent because every time he looked into his books his silent prayer went, *“God you know how disadvantaged my family is. I'm doing all this for my brothers, my sisters and my granny and especially for my mum. It's all about them, maybe then next time they can live in a better place. Provide me with the ability but I will also work hard.”*

What also kept him out of trouble was that his grandmother who was also a member of his community and his audience was also *“a guardian angel...It will be degrading to myself and my grandmother and her teachings”*. He was concerned *“If she finds out, what she is going to think? ... I was always thinking about this woman. What is she going to say?”*

She really cared about him and helped him not only to construct but also to perform success by virtue of the many things that she had taught him when she brought him up in the absence of his parents.

Values were very much part of all these manifestations of success as Sandile understood it and he reverted to his grandmother's interpretation of these values whenever he was placed in a compromising position. He drew on his grandmother's teachings when he was tempted with smoking, alcohol and drugs and these temptations resurfaced whenever he was conflicted. But he always found *'An inner voice said, “What would she say?”'* and this is how he tried to attain stability as a student.

So the realisation of values as part of the performance of academic success presented as another emerging key finding. Sandile maintained discipline and always put himself under pressure. He even referred to deadlines for presentation or submission as '*judgement day*' and he owned up to the fact that he was generally prepared from '*the word go*' each year. That was the only way he could pass with the many challenges he had to face.

So we see how Sandile's academic integration and the relationships that he formed and maintained (Tinto's Student Integration Model) within the HE institution were agentised, catalysed or inspired by his personal background, goals and motivation (Ubuntu and his family and community). This fed back to his community and family and assisted him to strengthen the positive supportive aspects he discovered in his personal background to complete the circular construction of academic success in his undergraduate years. Sandile's case clearly reflected South African realities and the use of the philosophy of Ubuntu transposed on to TSIM allows us to assess these realities with respect to this particular study on academic success in HE. This is one of the reasons why the study is particularly valuable.

In summary Sandile saw academic endeavour as part of the whole. It was different from success which was taking the degree (a mark of academic success) and doing something worthwhile with it. He insisted that someone had to benefit apart from himself and once more he placed the beneficiaries, through his family, firmly in the community.

So Sandile constructed his understanding of academic success firmly on the notion of realising his role as a responsible citizen that is able to make a positive contribution to his society. He considered personal success to be just that - a privately kept goal within himself and success was measured by the effort he put into achieving that dream. So his understanding of personal success and the general notion of success which had identifiable elements of Ubuntuism were clearly interlinked and they in turn assisted him to construct the notion of academic success.

Sandile saw it as a continuous dynamic concept not one you could capture in a moment and Iliana understood success to be a process which changes with time "*So it's very personal what a person sees as success at different stages in their lives... Personally if I look at my life and judge success. Yes I have my degree, yes I'm working but at the end of the day when I have kids I want to stay home with them because for me money is important but it was more*

*worthwhile for my mum to stay at home with me and my sister than to be able to buy brand (name) clothes and for me to have a car when I got to 18. I have kids (learners) whose mums are never around and all they need to blossom is love and attention For me, I would like to stay with my kids from the time that they are babies to Primary school and because I'm a Primary school teacher, I have those hours and I can be at school and my kids can be at school with me. That to me is ideal... I do believe that there should be a balance."*

She wondered what personal achievement and success is based on. Does one base it on having a family and staying home with them or does one base it on having a career and earning money? Is it possible to have a combination of both? Some say one can't be a career woman and have children at the same time. Iliana did not believe that. She realised that she constructed her academic success around her long term personal plans. Both seemed closely interlinked, at least for the moment.

Katherine believed academic success was a relative thing. She was very aware and present when she *'achieved little successes along the way.'* She remembered that when she got to university, although she had achieved cum laude, her boyfriend didn't go to her first graduation. She also remembered how she had insisted on his going to her PGCE graduation although she hadn't done as well and again she spoke of relative success in trying to describe what she had experienced as an undergraduate.

*"The academic co-ordinator was sick for the entire year and the lecturers tried but I feel that I have accomplished more and achieved more although my marks may not have been high. It was the hardest, most difficult; most trying year of my life, not quite, but in my academic life and I felt that I had triumphed"*. She believed that was a tremendous achievement and she enjoyed putting that on her C.V. (curriculum vitae) *"I've achieved it already, I've got it. I'm very proud of myself"*.

So her idea of success had grown to include achievements not only of the academic kind which is how she saw it initially but also those which involved overcoming obstacles of poor teaching and poor administration which she had also experienced in her undergraduate years as a student.

### **6.2.1.6 Concluding comments on Notions of Personal Success**

In this study, undergraduate students talked back to their personal circumstances and their experience and association with others within these circumstances in order to explain how they constructed and performed their academic success during this time. They also explained this in relation to their notions of success and personal success.

Emerging constructs from the data gathered included the significance of employability, the necessity of balance between happiness, career and family, academic success as process and/or product and the importance of having an audience to witness the success and sometimes even the failures. The community and/or family provided a point of reference so that the enterprise of academic success could move forward. Academic success was construed by the participants as being complex, continuous, dynamic, relative and personal.

So the first theme and all the constructions that accompanied “Notions of Personal Success”, helped me to understand what the participants meant when they talked about success and academic success. Once I had some idea of what they saw as academic success ( their espoused notions of academic success) it became necessary to follow up with a seminal critical question. How did these participants actually realise their ideas of academic success? How did they actually enact these notions they had. The next theme, Initiatives of Individuals helped me to unpack what qualities they had and how they engaged these qualities in order to attain their goals of academic success. Such aspects as core qualities, self-efficacy, the engagement of resilience to overcome psychological burden leading to rising above the possibility of dropping out, emerged. This presented another piece of the puzzle which I hoped would explain the mystery of the construction and performance of academic success by successful students in undergraduate studies in HE.

## **6.2.2 Theme 2: Initiatives of Individuals**

### **6.2.2.1 Individuals’ core qualities that contribute to academic success**

In reading through the narratives of the participants I had found that individuals’ core qualities as human beings seem to feature a great deal in the examples and explanations that

these participants presented in respect of those aspects which contributed towards their successes in higher education studies.

Core qualities in humans is a concept largely associated with personality studies, located within positive human psychology literature (Bandura, 1986; Korthagen, 2004). Qualities such as creativity, trust and courage, which are also called traits or character strengths by positive psychologists, determine how an individual copes with adversity and are valued in their own right (Korthagen, 2004; Gable & Haidt, 2005).

It is against this strain of thinking that I have chosen to focus my second theme of analysis which is styled individual core qualities that contribute to academic success. Rather than focusing solely on the psychological construct, however, I will be taking an individual experiential, context bound perspective that demands a series of human responses. This forms the focal exploration as the participants present their accounts of their lives and how that impacted on the successful outcome of their higher education studies. These responses are then characterized in this sub-section as the individuals' core qualities that helped them to construct and perform their academic success.

A lack of these would make it easier for students to drop out of university while agency, self-efficacy and resilience could provide the means to help the potentially successful student to turn around any possibility of dropping out. The next sub-section begins with a discussion of self-efficacy as a core quality in academic success as exhibited by the participants and continues with an investigation into their academic emotions related to academic achievement. It ends with an explanation of their resilience and the way it may have circumvented their dropping out of HE.

#### **6.2.2.2 Self-efficacy as a core quality in academic success**

According to Bandura (1986) the core of human agency is self-efficacy which is the measure of people's ability to produce goals and complete tasks in respect of these goals. This means that self-efficacious students must not only know what to do, they must be able to organise their cognitive, social and behavioural skills into integrated courses of action towards attaining set goals. Such a quality would be indispensable in the project to achieve academic

success in university and all the participants used this as one of their building blocks to construct academic success.

Sandile, in his account of his life experiences, demonstrated self-efficacy that grew in strength since childhood. He often had to go hungry but he seemed to have overcome the hurdles which came with a disadvantaged background through developing mechanisms which helped him to cope. Although he felt deprived he maintained his focus on his goals and he still '*did well*' in school.

All the other participants also showed agency and therefore self-efficacy; Iliana overcame her dyslexia and ADD (Attention deficit disorder) and still attained her goals at school and Katherine proved her doctors wrong and passed Matric (Grade 12 examination) after her debilitating motor accident.

*“In 2002 When I was in Gr 10 I was in a serious car accident which put me in ICU for three weeks and in hospital for over a month. I was placed on life support and it was believed that if I survived I would be a ‘vegetable’. I would certainly never pass Matric; certainly wouldn’t go back to school... I had a good two and a half years of people saying I can’t ....so a lot of this (work at university) is “I’m going to prove to you that I can, I’m going to prove you wrong”. And through varsity that mentality stayed with me ‘I’m going to prove you wrong’. And I proved them wrong a long time ago. I graduated cum laude.”*

In the first instance she made a resolution to pass her final examination of high school by sheer strength of belief in her own ability to overcome adversity. This stayed with her through her university career, although she continued to carry the physical and emotional scares of a serious motor accident.

Prudence won through by earning a scholarship at school although she had no parental support and had lost her grandmother and uncle who were her only support early in her life. *“I felt empty and hopeless at 7 years, returning from hospital after being sick with pneumonia and hospitalised for seven months I came out to bury my uncle who died from food poisoning, to bury the only man who loved me as his child, all this would always come rushing back to me when my academic career was failing.”*

I refer to these pre–university instances of agency and self-efficacy which led to personal success because they formed the foundations upon which these participants built their constructions of academic success at university.

At this point I want to focus on one of Sandile’s critical experiences which allowed him to regenerate his self-efficacy. His self-regulatory efficacious behaviour was self-generating and was the catalyst for his propensity for academic success in his undergraduate years. His ability to realise goals and his strong motivation and agency which related to his personal background (See TSIM adapted below) were clearly exhibited when he located, communicated with, and finally was accepted into a Canadian university for one semester during his third year of undergraduate studies.

In order to achieve this he had to apply via UKZN’s International Student Office for financial and other assistance to go to the University of Trent in Canada for one semester in his final year. This speaks to his successful social integration in displaying his ability to form relationships with staff at the International office (See TSIM). His application was successful and supported by NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid scheme), another example of social integration; and he was able to travel abroad for the first time ever. He studied acting and indigenous theatre, (native Canadian Indian theatre) during his sojourn abroad and through that he learnt *‘a different way of seeing the world’*. This made him aware of the possibilities North America had for him to follow a career in acting and he was inspired *“Once you get there and you really are determined....anything is possible”*.

His full academic integration (See TSIM) i.e. his ability to meet the academic standards of his institution (UKZN) was clear in the way he assessed his semester of studies in Canada. He made far reaching decisions based on his understanding of the parameters of his studies overseas in relation to Drama and Performance Studies majors within the BA degree programme. This is why, although many others would never have done this, he refused to substitute the module he had completed in Canada for one of the modules he required for completion of the BA. This can be interpreted in the following way. His academic integration into the institution and indeed HE was so far reaching that he pushed the boundaries by setting his own benchmarks for his academic integration into UKZN which he promptly met.

*“They wanted to credit me and I said no, how can you credit me for something I’ve never done before because it will be like you are giving me a third year for nothing... you are passing me for nothing I’d rather stay. I could have finished the degree but I wanted to cover the semester that I had gone abroad.”*

His multiple sub-skills (core to self-efficacy) were utilised in persuading the International Office to assist him in obtaining a scholarship from NSFAS for his return ticket and his studies at Trent University. While his personal characteristics were in play (agency, goals and motivation, see TSIM) he could not have reached his goals without the International office and NSFAS both administered by the university. So he showed that he was integrated academically into the institution and socially into the institution in that he had formed relationships with the staff of both offices which took his academic enterprise forward (See TSIM).

His ability to garner these contextual resources speaks to Sandile’s social integration (his ability to form relationships with staff and administration) which in turn led to his academic integration. The latter consisted of his ability to meet the academic standards of an international institution and his alma mater which included his negotiations with UKZN regarding his final year credits. (see TSIM). So this led him to success as he exhibited a culture of self-regulation not of entitlement. That he was self-regulatory and did not consider himself to be entitled in any way is clear in his responsible behaviour on an overseas campus and was also clear in his choices on his return. In exercising his self-efficacy and agency in the first instance, he was able to regenerate this particular core quality on his return to UKZN. This helped him to build on what he had already constructed towards his academic success at this institution.

In observing that South African students from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds had a form of advantage in the coping strategies they brought with them when they entered university, Marshall and Case (2010) suggested that in some cases it is much more than that. It is more to do with greater capacity for initiative, sculpting one’s destiny and actually constructing one’s identity (Compare Soudien, 2008).

At one point Prudence explicitly attributed her success at university to the fact that she didn’t have the support of her parents. *“... [A]s much as my father’s family raised me, when I*

*wasn't around, to him, it was like I'm not there. I can't remember my father buying me anything not even underwear...."* Although she was bereft of parental love, attention and material assistance she was self-sufficient so sculpted the materially independent aspect of her identity. *"I sustained myself by working for people and got clothes from the Catholic Church, St Anne's."* Alongside this material independence she fought to generate and maintain an academic identity from the time she was in Primary school (see opposite of Ubuntu, p.89). She took this essentially independent academic identity with her into university although it was often buffeted by the ill winds of poor judgement, family discord, administrative bungles and ill-health.

Although Katherine and Iliana were young white women and would not fit into the category of "disadvantaged" in the first instance because of their race, I want to suggest that their cases could be treated justifiably in the same way as that of Sandile and Prudence under this theme of personal success. They could be treated like this because they were able to construct success although they suffered their own peculiar disadvantages (described above).

Apart from that Iliana was an Afrikaans girl whose poor or disadvantaged circumstances had prepared her for the demands of the academic world in a similar way as Sandile or Prudence may have been, especially in relation to her materially poor circumstances, *"Throughout my varsity career i.e. from the end of Matric year for four years, I worked as a waitress at the same coffee shop in my town"*.

As a second language English speaker, she had also had her difficulties with language. *"I think Afrikaans is a lot easier than English to speak and actually write it. The grammar is confusing and in English there are a lot of words you say that you don't spell like you say it and in Afrikaans it sounds exactly like you write it. And the rules, there are so many exceptions. So it hindered my learning English because I would write it exactly how I'd say it. What did help was at school I was forced to speak English and my Afrikaans would come in at home but my parents also tried to speak English with us."*

Apart from poverty, difficulties with language exacerbated by her ADD and dyslexia, she found that the constraining nature of her religious belief came to bear on her education at university. She had to consciously disengage from her religious awareness and see through the eyes of a critical student (inhabit that role instead). *"I'm a practising Christian. I'm a*

*happy clappy, I'm a Jesus freak. In the Counterculture module I had to look at things not through what I call my life view and religious view and I had to deal with themes such as transgender and homosexuality. I had to read about a man who would get dressed as Mary and he had clay feet. And I am Christian so I had to put it in a context without my life influencing it. At a personal level an idea might be repulsive but you are taught to critically analyse it and it may portray another world view, it may not change me and if I look at it, my religion may frown upon it. I create another role for myself and although I don't agree with Freud's theories but I think about where he has a place in history and how he has contributed to the development of psychology."*

In each of these participant's make-up, it was their greater capacity to understand their circumstances, take the initiatives and follow through, undeterred, to their identified goals. This suggested that their self-efficacy and their belief in themselves formed their core structure to enable them as undergraduate students to achieve the commensurate levels of academic success along their life's journey.

### **6.2.2.3 Resilience Triumph over psychological burden**

All the participants were able to engage their resilience to stabilise themselves and still continue on the road to academic success even when they had to bear heavy psychological burdens. So in particular contexts they used certain materials they found either in themselves or in their environments to strengthen their construction and performance of academic success in HE.

Iliana managed to stay resolute in her undergraduate programme although she didn't always get the module choices she wanted. She adapted the plan and worked on the modules she got (self-regulatory behaviour) when circumstances changed. Katherine wanted to be a doctor but also had to change her plan on account of her accident. She did not let this deter her and preserved in her new discipline in Humanities instead of Health Sciences and attained her degree *cum laude*. Apart from this, like Prudence and Sandile, she carried other psychological burdens into the undergraduate programme. Hers arose out of the doctor's prognosis that she would never be capable of succeeding while Sandile's came from the absence of both parents.

Thoughts of her absent alcoholic mother and persecution by her father even while she was at university, burdened Prudence. Sandile and Prudence passed through a first year of access into the university and then persisted until they achieved their BA degrees in minimum time. This spoke to their resilience which spawned tenacity which held them in good stead as successful students.

Katherine and Iliana went into directly into mainstream first year and achieved success despite their difficulties. This put all of them in the category of ‘resilient’ learners which is also described as those who “appear to develop stable healthy persona and are able to recover from or adapt to life’s stresses and problems” (Winfred, 1991 in McMillan and Reed, 1994, p.137). Moleli’s Study (2005, p.6) states: “resilience is people’s expanded vision, (and is seen) as a series of coping mechanisms and responses by the individual and the environment. It is also complex, its implications shape the way people think of problems, coping and intervention.” Apart from this resilience means that one is capable of overcoming difficulties successfully without causing any harm to oneself or others. It is generally manifested in a continuous process and is a characteristic that needs cultivation from the environment. This is represented by community, families, universities and students peer groups. (see Theme Three below, p197).

There are different types of resilience namely: educational, emotional, personality, home and community and these participants exhibited all of these at some point or other of their university undergraduate careers before they began their Honours programmes in 2012. A consideration of the way in which some of these different types of resilience functioned to assist the participants to rise above the possibility of dropping out of HE follows.

#### **6.2.2.4 Rising above dropping out**

There is a host of literature which presents the lens of students’ difficulties, challenges, failures and the psychological and sociological impact upon them during their studies in institutions of HE. Pocock, Bengesai and Moodley, (2011) have investigated modules which can act as barriers to progression for students while Case (2008) looks at learning from the acquisition perspective and from the participation perspective related to persistence in HE; Koen, Cele and Libhaber, (2006) consider student activism and student exclusions in South Africa while Boughey (2012) looks into what she calls “social accounts of learning”. She

believes this helps researchers to understand success and failure across the HE scenario more fully.

Iliana presented reasons why she could have dropped out throughout her academic career. In her first year she had a bad relationship that drained her emotionally and in another year she wrote a seminal assignment under the lecturers watch and still did poorly. *“I have never failed anything in my life and one year I put in a skeleton draft to an essay and the lecturer said it was very, very good but when I did the final draft somehow it went terribly wrong and my marks got very low and I felt, ‘Why am I doing this? I’m not achieving’, it felt like I was not enjoying the course I was not connecting with it all I kept thinking was ‘I have to finish, I have to finish’.”*

She had also had an accident in another country which could have meant the end of her career as a student. Finally, her dyslexia and ADD posed a problem every year during all her examinations because her class marks would give her a first and the exams would pull her marks down. *“I hate exams... my Psychology assessments with regard to assignments would reach about 90. I really enjoyed my assignments I liked doing research and it was interesting for me and when I got to the exam, because of my ADD and my dyslexia; and the fact that I struggled to learn, in that environment I would drop from high 80s and 90s to 60s for a final year mark and for me it was always very frustrating because I felt it wasn’t a true reflection of my capabilities, but I can’t change it.”*

But in the same way as Sandile thought of his grandmother when he needed guidance, Iliana would think of how important it was to her father for her to get university qualifications. Again familial aspects of Ubuntu supported these participants’ academic success.

Sandile became suicidal in his second year because of his poor marks, his precarious financial standing, his difficulties in English language and his perceived isolation. His prayers, religion and ancestors led him to seek the help of his roommate and through the Drama department he was taken to counselling. Some of the issues which precipitated this episode were dealt with by the counsellor who reconciled him with his mother. For him the religious significance of this episode was clear and this is one of the moments where he felt “broken but was made whole again”.

There was however a silence about the role his religion (Higher powers and Ubuntu) played specifically when he told the rest of his story. It was subtly visible in the continued presence of his grandmother whether she lived with him or not. Iliana was also religious and believed that 'God' intervened when she was on the verge of dropping out: "*that was when the Lord intervened and I went to Taiwan*". She consistently referred to her religious values throughout her story. Both of them, Iliana and Sandile continued on to achieve academic success.

The closest Katherine came to dropping out was during her PGCE studies when she was asked to transfer to the Edgewood campus after registering in Pietermaritzburg. Following a negative newspaper report about her class' treatment by UKZN, the students were accommodated at their home campus. Many lecturers were incompetent, disinterested, irresponsible and disorganised but some were outstanding so the latter took over and she was able to complete the course.

Prudence's drinking in her first year "*not because of friends; my grades were not good and I couldn't afford to come here*" threatened her continuing studies and later her poor marks, which almost led to her dropping out, came as a result of her father's harassment of her during her programme. "*Every day, morning and night he would send me a text. He also threatened to kill me.*" She was sufficiently empowered to seek and interdict against her father with the assistance of the university authorities. In this way she circumvented the possibility of leaving university.

Again, later in her undergraduate programme she experienced difficulties. The incorrect computation of her credits in her final year almost led to her dropping out. "*A lesser person would have dropped out if they experienced what I did in my third year. When I was meant to be finishing my degree, I had 424 credit points and only need 384, but according to a lecturer, the Dean made a mistake and I was missing 8 points from my second year so I was not going to graduate. The university compensated me by allowing me to do my undergraduate module at the same time as my Honours.*" But she also continued against all odds and attributed her strength to her culture, her prayers and her traditional religious "calling" which became a recurring theme in her story. At the same time however she was also a practising Christian (see below Religion, God and Ubuntu, p.217) and this

supplemented her spiritual guidance and gave her strength to overcome any challenge she experienced.

#### **6.2.2.5 Concluding Remarks: Initiatives of Individuals**

So it can be seen that the individuals core qualities are supported or destabilised by what is referred to as “academic emotions”. It is expected that students will be subject to a variety of academic emotions while they are in the university. These are intensified because so much depends on individual learning and achievement. Educational and professional careers, the level of respect one commands in society and the allocation of financial resources are determined by academic learning and individual achievement.

Judging from general functions of emotions for human agency (see below), “it may be assumed that emotions affect students’ cognitive processes and performance as well as their psychological and physical health”. (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002, p.92). Academic emotions have been largely neglected as an area of research with test anxiety being the exception.

However based on many different studies including the results of 11 studies analysed by Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, and Perry (2002) the positive and negative academic emotions of pride, hope, anxiety boredom, relief, anger, shame and hopelessness have been included as taxonomies. Some of these emotions formed the base of positive actions which allowed the participants to deal with the possibility of dropping out of their undergraduate programmes.

Korthagen’s (2004) qualities or character strengths of creativity, trust and courage and the academic emotions of pride and hope are clearly visible in the participants construction of human agency and self-efficacy as they performed their academic success ( see 5.3. 2 above). On the other hand there is evidence of the negative academic emotions of anxiety boredom, relief, anger, shame and hopelessness in various degrees in the testimony of the different participants about when they faced the possibility of dropping out of university. All these academic emotions are closely related to students’ motivation, learning strategies, cognitive resources, self-regulation and academic achievement.

What the participants meant by academic success and what individual core qualities they engaged to take them on their journeys to academic success, and at times what kept them from diverting from their goals, has been considered above. It was now necessary to see the individual as part of the group and this is how the next theme emerged. This presented in influence and/or support from family, school, university (significant others, lecturers mentors peers) the community and higher power.

### **6.2.3 Theme 3: Association with others.**

#### **6.2.3.1 Ubuntu I am because you are**

This theme speaks to what appears to be the centre or catalyst of Tinto's Student Integration Model (TSIM) i.e. personal background, goals and motivation which contribute to the successful student's agency in this context. The emerging theme of agency has been discussed under theme two above which explores the individual's core qualities that contribute to academic success.

Another emerging theme, that of Ubuntu is evident in most participants' responses as they recognised the importance of different people who were responsible for motivating them to enter tertiary education before they went on to succeed academically. 'Ubuntu' is a peculiarly South African word which emanates from the age-old philosophy of humanism. Ubuntu is short for an isiXhosa proverb in a Southern African Nguni language, 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' which means a person is a person through their relationship to others and is a way of 'knowing and being' (Tutu, 1999).

This theme therefore encompasses supportive factors which are played out in relationships with role models. Different aspects of Ubuntu are evident in influences from family, school and university in the form of mentors, 'study buddies' and 'significant others' and relate to the way in which the participants in this study accessed relationships with these role players in their construction and performance of success at university. The community, and on a more spiritual level, religion also played a part in assisting the successful participants to experience support through Ubuntu. In so doing it serves to contextualize the students'

construction and performance of academic success at university in relation to these particular areas of engagement.

Within this theme Ubuntu plays out in two ways, the first being the support and values that sculpt the symbiotic relationships that have been developed with family and significant others. The other is that of a lack of this support and a relationship independent from family with a commensurate lack of ubuntu values. This gave rise to a determination to move beyond the situational context of lack of family relational values and support. Instead they began to strive for better opportunities that would create future beneficial relational values and support. They identified some of these opportunities in their relationship with peers and others in the university environment. Whether the participants experienced the existence or lack of Ubuntu they were still able to construct and perform academic success.

#### **6.2.3.1.1 Family relations and academic success**

With respect to Ubuntu, one of the first environments in which any person starts to formulate a way of “knowing and being’ is within that of the family. In reporting on a study into the academic performance and psychological well-being of undergraduate university students in Canada, Chow (2010) speaks of “how support and well-being are positively linked and that support can buffer the effects of negative events and stress”. (See also Cotton, Dollard, & De Jonge, 2002, who deal with institutional and environmental support; Gencoz & Ozlale, 2004 who refer to Aid Related and Appreciation-Related Social Support; Nezelek & Allen, 2006 who examine negative events in the study environment and what can assist in these circumstances.)

Both Iliana and Katherine had to deal with negative events and stress early on in their lives and even when they carried some of these difficulties into their undergraduate university careers they were able to look to family support.

In Iliana’s case her relatively educated mother, albeit Afrikaans speaking provided direct support while her father, who was not educated, provided indirect support so that she could overcome difficulties posed by her dyslexia and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and was still capable of constructing and performing academic success in her undergraduate studies.

It was no wonder that Iliana hated reading. Her dyslexia impeded this activity and she took an extremely long time to finish anything she was reading. When she got to Grade 6, her parents sent her on a reading course through which her reading improved and that made her enjoy reading for the first time. Her dyslexia was only discovered later because her extremely high IQ allowed her to compensate for her shortfall when it came to reading. This contributed to her success at reading and interpreting concepts so her epistemological access to different discourses she encountered and her academic integration at UKZN were enhanced.

Iliana's father's relationship with his children illustrated another aspect of Ubuntu. It demonstrated how he recognised who he was through his actions which helped his children make something of themselves. He persevered in his role as a parent who provided emotional and financial support although he had had a difficult upbringing, little education and earned poorly. *"When he was in Std. 8, his dad had committed suicide and his mother didn't have money to send him to school so he was forced to join the army to support their family."*

Notwithstanding his struggles, Iliana's father teamed up with their mother and affirmed Iliana and her sister no matter what marks were achieved by them; *"even if we obtained 60s, our parents were extremely happy because we had passed"*. Her mother was a house mum, illiterate in English but with her father *"were intent on (focussing) on our education"*. Iliana felt the effect of this affirmation and believed there was great value in being acknowledged which is why she thrived in an academic environment.

One of the tenets of Ubuntuism is: I am what I am because of who we all are. Out of this arose one of the single most important values instilled in Iliana by her parents who also understood this from their own life experiences. This value rested on the principle of building strength in difficult times. This resulted in them never allowing their children (Iliana and her sister) to give up even in the face of the most daunting challenges. This helped Iliana to attain academic success no matter how great the obstacles were including that posed by her ADD and dyslexia which were congenital conditions.

Katherine's setback was not congenital but was physical in nature. *"In 2002 When I was in Gr 10 I was in a serious car accident which put me in ICU for three weeks and in hospital for over a month. I was placed on life support and it was believed that if I survived I would be a 'vegetable'. I would certainly never pass Matric, certainly wouldn't go back to school."*

*Although I recovered I have now got epilepsy and partial paralysis which somebody very rudely reminded me of the other day. This brings with it many challenges. As a result of taking 6 months off school to recover, I had to repeat grade 10. And I made the decision to stay back because I wanted to stay with my science and biology. I was amongst the top performers in the class and I was very good at Maths. This was a huge obstacle in my life as I had to change schools, deal with epilepsy and explain that I didn't have to repeat a grade because I was stupid. I was lucky to be at my high school which had many supportive teachers and where I had many good friends. I'm a fighter and I still wanted to be a doctor despite what the prognosis was."*

All this time apart from the teachers and friends who also protected her because of the weakness she displayed (partial paralysis and epilepsy). She was also supported and affirmed by her mother without whom she believed she would not have succeeded. Human values such as protection of the young and weak, respect and altruism are all encapsulated in the concept of Ubuntu which sees the self in the other. "...he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are" (Tutu, 1999, p.31).

Katherine's colleagues displayed this particular value in seeing Katherine's difficulties as something they owned as well. This is apart from familial support she enjoyed. "*She [my mother] is my rock. Whatever I achieved was amazing I started Ballet she took me to Ballet classes when I bent down I can't get past my knees but she just loved it. She just loves me doesn't matter what I do or how I perform. My mum has never ever made me feel like a failure and I think that's what people aim to feel like"*. From her father, a medical doctor, she had learnt a great deal about respect and altruism (other values of Ubuntu) and how these brought success and recognition as he had been a highly successful doctor and was greatly loved and respected by the community even after he passed on.

When Katherine went to university she was able to empower herself to the extent that she changed a physical disadvantage into an advantage. Although she still suffers from the effects of the accident she used that as traction for her attainment of great academic success although she believed that her mother's support and affirmation was in no small way responsible for the attainment of her degree *cum laude*.

Many studies show parents support to be one of the most important factors when it comes to the maintenance of psychological well-being of college students. Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris and Cardoza (2003) in Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005) deal with the same theme related to ethnic minority college students. Parent support is often compared to peer support in assisting in the adjustment of the student to higher education although some studies talk of the former assisting more in emotional support while the latter assists in academic support (Tinto, 1993; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen & Allen, 1999).

Iliana's and Katherine's experiences were very different from Sandile's and Prudence's. While Iliana and Katherine had their biological parents' support, Sandile and Prudence had significant others of their family as part of their support structures in place of their parents' direct support.

He [Sandile] felt a yawning gap when it came to parental support. He only reconciled with his mother after counselling which followed his contemplated suicide in his second year at university. Sandile's grandmother had been highly supportive of him from childhood, even if she lived in the direst poverty. Ironically, although he lived with his mother after his Matric year, she (mother) provided no moral or financial support so he looked to the internal moral compass his grandmother inculcated in him in his childhood.

In addition he had to look to himself to support any of his initiatives at the university financially. His father provided no support was absent from his life unless Sandile initiated a meeting, which was as rare as it was uncomfortable. Sandile believed his idea of success comes from the way he grew up; it was different from that of a 'normal' kid. He had to grow up from an early age, in fact "*from the word go*" he had to think for himself.

What he presented at this point, all that the world saw of him, was as a result of his coming back from the struggles he had had. "*Struggle sometimes wakes you up. It's very painful but it prepares you like Boal (Theatre of the Oppressed) prepares for the future. This genre of theatre prepares you to tackle certain issues; how do you change the way people see us, the idea of the stereotype, how do we change that? All these things prepare me for the future.*"

Marshall and Case (2010, p 493) indicate that " 'disadvantaged' students might bring with them particular resources that can be mobilised to their advantage in higher education" which

is what Sandile and Prudence seemed to be engaged in specifically. As Marshall and Case (2010, p 292) say, "... there is a recognition that studying in further education is taking on a new identity, in the world, a challenging experience requiring personal development (Gee 2001; Haggis 2004; Roth & Tobin 2007)."

Without submitting to the deficit paradigm which puts socio-cultural background in the same space as low academic abilities it is necessary to acknowledge that there is also a negative effect of Ubuntu "I am because you are". It can also tie participants into a chain of responsibility for the maintenance of the rest of the family not only after they have qualified but even during their studies. This is the negative face of the Ubuntu philosophy (Tseng, 2002).

Therefore family and college responsibilities often conflict with each other as Prudence found out early in life. *"The family supported me by giving me bread and shelter but I had to work hard at school to get an education because nobody seemed to be concerned about what I wore to school or where I got the books I needed."*

Although Sandile lived with his grandmother her pension did not go far, *"There is nothing (more) painful than not having lunch at school while other children are eating something in front of you."* By the time he was ready to attend university he understood that his family's expectations would be huge and he felt it was his duty to try to meet these. He always dreamed about building a new house for his grandmother to thank her for taking care of him while he was 'a little man'. She had played a major role in showing his society that he had the potential to make things better for the family, the society and South Africa. But he had to get into university first.

He remembered how as a disadvantaged child he used to see his neighbours who always had more than him and how he, in turn, wanted more than they had. *"I always wanted more than I had. I could have stolen cars and been involved in all sorts of crime in Umlazi and I did try many of the bad habits."* But his supplication was consistent because every time he looked into his books at university his silent prayer went, *"God you know how disadvantaged my family is. I'm doing all this for my brothers, my sisters and my granny and especially for my mum. It's all about them, maybe then next time they can live in a better place. Provide me with the ability but I will also work hard."*

So Sandile was aware of how heavy the duties meted out by Ubuntu were. With its respect and compassion for others which can be described as a social ethic and as a rule of conduct, Sandile had to subject himself to the social ethic by which he had to conduct himself at university as a potential breadwinner for his own family including his grandmother, This is something that helped him to construct academic success at university which he saw as possibly the only way he could provide for his family.

#### **6.2.3.1.2 School relationships within the construct of Ubuntuism**

The following extract from Siphos interview supported the presence of a motivational teacher. *“So I remember 2006, I was a high school student doing my grade 12... I was so enthusiastic about going to university to study for what I want to be because by that time I was in the High School choir. So this guy who was a music instructor there he really convinced me that I’m really good in singing, especially Italian opera. So he suggested that I should come to university to study music....”*

In seeing himself in the other, the music teacher saw the potential displayed by Sandile and went out of his way to see how this potential could be realised. In so doing he acted out another aspect of Ubuntu and went as far as locating a possible tertiary institution and department (in this case UKZN’s Music Department) which could give him an opportunity for further training and perhaps even a career. He also went out of his way not only to convince Sandile of the possibilities in tertiary education but also continued to follow his progress after he got into UKZN. Sandile owned up to the fact that although enthusiasm for university studies did exist in high school, it was undirected. It was honed and directed by the music instructor who recognised his singing talent and convinced him of its superiority so that it appeared logical that he should enter university to study music.

His experience was complicated by the fact that his mother exhibited what can be termed ‘phantom Ubuntu’ because she displayed the opposite to his music teacher, did not acknowledge his potential while he was in school and over and above that had made false promises to financially support him after school, through university.

Her inability to deliver devastated him but as a self-efficacious individual (see 6.3.2 he operated as an “anticipative, purposive and self-evaluating regulator(s) of (his) motivation

and actions” (Bandura & Locke 2003, p.87). He showed that he perceived himself to be an agent of his own learning (Yorke & Longden, 2004) when he put paid to his mother’s doubts about his choice of career and came into his own by working to pay for his own registration. Being bereft of emotional and financial support at home did not dissuade Sandile; rather it concretised his potential agency with respect to his own future not only in school but also in HE.

I describe the opposite of support and Ubuntu as ‘ngekhomuntu’ an isiZulu (a Southern African indigenous Nguni language) word meaning ‘no people’ and taken further, no support. There would be no one with the interest or ability to recognise potential aptitude or skill in another; no one with the interest to assist in the creation of any plan or implementation thereof; no one in Sandile’s case who would help him to realise his potential to succeed in HE.

Both Sandile’s and Prudence’s experience in this regard was similar. Both experienced the opposite of ubuntu when it came to family. Prudence’s mother was an alcoholic and absent from her daughter’s life while her father was only fully present when her inheritance became due. Her grand aunt (other grandmother) was there after her paternal grandmother’s death and simply provided the roof over her head and very little support for her person or her education. This did, however, provide a point of reference and a base from which she operated.

Swanson (2007) notes the “adage that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ is aligned with the spirit and intent of Ubuntu”. In Prudence’s case, through most of her earlier years at school she learnt to depend on herself but in high school she was supported by people who were in her environment but not from her immediate or extended family. Assistance in the form of clothes and holiday accommodation came from her father’s girlfriend who worked as a manager of a large store on the North Coast.

There was mutual respect when the girlfriend and her colleague who was financially secure saw fit to assist and protect the young schoolgirl without any reward. The colleague was moved by the way Prudence carried herself despite her plight. He was impressed by her steadfastness and recognised her potential for academic success and this “good Samaritan” decided to support Prudence through high school “*without expecting anything in return, least of all sexual favours*”, much to her surprise.

He was also one of the “significant others” who restored her belief in human values such as protection of the young and weak, respect and altruism. All these values are encapsulated in the concept of Ubuntu which sees the self in the other.

So the above relationships provided strength and direction to overcome obstacles in the path of participants while they were at school but they also allowed the participants to draw from these experiences to pursue their passion for education and academic success at tertiary level.

#### **6.2.3.1.3 University Study Buddy as relational support**

This rather interesting nomenclature was used by a number of the participants in my study to signify other students with whom they had formed close reciprocal relationships while studying similar modules or programmes. It was also one of the sub themes of ‘Ubuntu, I am because you are’ which emerged in the examination of the participants’ construction of academic success.

The interaction between the successful student and the study buddy knits together two aspects of TSIM. The first is Academic Integration in respect of the ability of the student to meet academic standards and the second is Social Integration in respect of the ability of the student to form relationships with other students. While Katherine and Iliana had study buddies who enhanced their chances of success, Sandile accessed alternately a group and individuals within his peer group whenever he felt “*stressed and confused*”. Prudence felt she made better progress on her own.

To explain how Social Integration (relationships between students is negotiated) and Academic Integration (relationships with representatives in the institution) functions in groups or with study buddies I think what the theorist, Mann (2008), postulates is apposite. For a blueprint of constructive communication in any learning community she draws on the communicative conditions of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was chaired by Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu and which was founded on the idea of Ubuntu. These ideas are included: “....the goal of arriving at mutual understanding (not consensus) of each participant’s position and experience; the right of all members of the learning group to speak and to be heard; the possibility to speak in order to tell the story of one’s experience (not to apportion blame or to convince through argument); the possibility to speak—stumblingly, slowly, in an unprepared and sometimes ‘illogical’ way—without

sanction; and finally the assumption that the hurts, setbacks, constraints, difficulties that any one learner or teacher experiences in that classroom are of mutual concern and not simply the responsibility of that individual ” (p.52). He calls for a practice of ‘vigorous, respectful conversation’ (p.58) which aims to clarify rather than dominate, and which holds within it many different voices.

Katherine was quick to acknowledge the generosity of her school friend who she adopted as her study buddy for all her undergrad years. He would do things like explain poetry in layman’s terms and would share his ideas and explain the concepts captured in his essays, many of which she didn’t understand. She explained how just talking things out with him before exams made everything a lot clearer. *“He graduated summa cum laude and got a scholarship to Cambridge to do a Masters in Law. He was one of those.”* She felt their discussions aided their understanding of the content of the module they were studying and enabled both of them to succeed, him *summa cum laude* and her *cum laude*.

She had a friend in each year with whom she could test and share ideas and they’d stick together. They would meet at campus or at each other’s homes during the day because they had a lot of breaks. She spent many hours on the phone sharing notes with a girl who was her study buddy in history. She even took this into her honours year and would share notes with one of the students in her class because *“We have different things, she might have something which I don’t. I definitely think having tutorials especially before exams can help you prepare.”*

Apart from individual study buddies while she was at UKZN she considered herself to be lucky enough to have a good group of friends who were all academically inclined. She worked well in a group and believed that peer interaction was the point of studying at a university like UKZN instead of studying by correspondence. *“We’d get together not because we were having trouble but it’s nice to share ideas then you get a better understanding. That’s why I’m studying at varsity and not at UNISA (a distance education institution). I need something to talk against, a sounding board.”* This generous sharing of ideas helped all of these students to function and see themselves as part of a whole which is what Ubuntu philosophy directs.

Those were the people Katherine was happy to have associated with in her undergraduate years. But she was also quick to observe that there are people one should not associate with “... *the dodgy ones...Some peers taught me what I shouldn't do because they party too hard and failed*”. While she wasn't an outright moralist during her university years, she really focussed on her work and everything else faded into the background. So she pushed back against the negative influences of some peers in constructing her academic success. She could identify those she did not want as study buddies. This was important to her construction of academic success.

In Iliana's case “*one of my best guy friends smoked pot*”. So although her study buddy assisted her in respect of her academic success his bad habits could have destabilised her had she not been as strong as she was. “*If you have a strong sense of yourself you will not get lost ... there was no question of dropping out. It would have been equal to failure. My parents were behind me and religion helped.*” She was consistently vigilant. She never took drugs and simply regarded it as his prerogative especially as “*this young man attained 80s and 90s at the end of the day even though he smoked pot*”. She found that he wasn't hypocritical, he didn't put on a show “*I don't like superficial people at all. I'm honest; I'll tell you what I think straight up. And most of my friends were like that...he's actually a great guy, don't get me wrong, and it was ironic actually because he stopped smoking around me and I asked him why and he said it made me uncomfortable and because I'd always say no thank you. I'm not being judgemental but I wasn't going to change who I am. By me being who I was, I actually changed his life. And after he stopped (smoking pot) his academics went sky high as well.*”

Not only did she stop herself from succumbing to peer pressure, she also pushed back thereby exerting a positive influence upon her peer's behaviour and the level of his academic performance. So another aspect of Ubuntu is illustrated in this sub theme. As Swanson (2007, p.54) observes with respect to ubuntu and the education of youth “Archbishop Tutu urges us to go forth and educate young people into having critical, questioning minds always ready to ask awkward questions...Freedom, he explains, requires eternal vigilance, held accountable by a critical, questioning populace and those who respond to what he refers to as a ‘high calling’ that would educate and nurture a new generation of human beings that would respond to a sense of conscience, and display generosity of spirit, compassion and care (Battle, 1997; Krog, 1998; Tutu, 1999).”

#### **6.2.3.1.3.1 Concluding remarks on University Study Buddies**

The participants experienced the university as a complex multidimensional environment to different degrees. Experiences with peers as illustrated above could give them support or provide lessons as to what behaviour could mitigate against their academic success. All pushed back Prudence used her experience at residence to help her to choose her friends wisely while Sandile learnt through his experiments in the township with his peers and moderated his behaviour at campus parties. Some of their peers had had similar life experiences as they had had, both on and off campus, so the participants could identify with these peers and validate their experiences.

While the participants in this study created their own relationships with their study buddies, whether they were individuals or groups, some HE institutions put such value on peer support that they have formal structures in place to facilitate such support. Bennett (2003) believes this value is correctly placed. He suggests the central concern of the academy should be hospitality and conversation which would provide a safe environment for valuable discussion within groups made up of participants who think very differently (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). Ubuntu expects reciprocity and “generosity, hospitality, friendliness, compassion and care” (Tutu, 1999; p.34).

However at the end of the day in Iliana’s opinion, “*Success depends on the person alone and there is only so much others can do for you*”. At first glance this statement of Iliana’s appears to be flying in the face of the principles of Ubuntu but from the evidence of how she constructed her success at university she fully acknowledged what others did for her.

What was most important for her was that it was up to her how she used this assistance and if she had not made proper use of it she would not have succeeded.

#### **6.2.3.1.4 University Mentors and role models as relational support**

Campbell *et al.*, 2009 place the following under the category of mentors: advisors, supporters, tutors, sponsors and models of identity. The last term can also be called role models as it is by Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley and Abarbanell (2006) including with it

small-group leader, academic advisor, preceptor (teacher) and supervisor under the umbrella of mentors.

The participants in this study also described their mentors in various different ways; 'inspirational role models, guides, tut leaders, and mentors' whose activities served a gamut of student needs ranging from emotional to academic support in interpersonal relationships. In this analysis I would like to use the explanation provided by Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley and Abarbanell (2006, p.345) of "mentoring defined narrowly as a naturally formed, one-to-one, mutual, committed, nonsexual relationship between a junior and senior person designed to promote personal and professional development beyond any particular curricular or institutional goals."

Inspirations and the ability to identify a role model can make a significant difference in one's life and are important considerations in achieving success. Inspirations reflect a deep catalyst at the start of on-going relationships generally leading to some positive outcomes as a result of this close association. Therefore the ability to identify a role model is important at the start of a relationship that is inspirational in nature.

These two concepts associated with relationships in the context of higher education studies form the basis of engagement in the students' accounts of academic success within the context of Ubuntu. The participants of this study have shown how their drive for academic success was clearly influenced by mentors and role models that they identified or who identified them and with whom they formed relationships. Their construction of academic success would have been facilitated by the choices they made to take up opportunities their mentors offered and/ or to emulate the behaviour they displayed.

In Katherine's case, she was inspired and mentored by a History professor who was "*a character, he's incredible and he brings history alive, he's one of the top political analysts in South Africa and he doesn't only write, he kind of 'awakens history'* ". In part the inspirational professor, through his status as a political analyst in South Africa, was seen as a figure head that she [Katherine] ascribed significance to. The professor was successful and recognised nationally as an analyst and this success and recognition was an inspiration to Katherine, as she herself wanted to achieve success and recognition.

In part, the professor's teaching was seen as encouraging and enlightening and this captured her attention. This attention is crucial for academic success as it inspires inquiry into the subject matter of the module taught. This kind of attentive, inquiring mind engages in crucial processes which are required for the achievement of academic success. The ability to recognise the qualities of a true mentor, has contributed towards her academic success. She was able to acknowledge his success in the discipline, his national recognition and his inspirational teaching. *"We need role models and people who can inspire us, whose achievements we may be able to aspire to."*

Forming relations, in this case a mentorship relation, with such mentors is, therefore, a consideration in achieving academic success as it presents opportunities to see success through others because of who they are and what they come to mean to individuals striving for success.

In the case of Iliana, from the very first year she saw a future in the university and she wanted to be a psychologist because of her excellent psychology lecturer who encouraged her to find an even greater interest in human behaviour. Although she had to change her career path she still attributed her interest in teaching at primary school to that of her initial interest in human behaviour. As far as she was concerned *"what you gain from academic success depends on your self-actualisation. If I can get students to improve then I am doing an important job because I am teaching to the best of my abilities."*

She likened her efforts to that of the lecturers who acted as her role models. She always spent enormous amount of time and effort on her studies because she knew they were the most important commodities for the construction of academic success. *"I asked mentors questions but at the end of the day I listened to myself. I know I procrastinate so I watched that in myself and tried not to leave things to the last moment."* She attributed her interest in postgraduate English Studies to an inspirational lecturer despite difficulties in her language learning abilities. *'My passion for English was rekindled when I did Dr Faustus with an excellent lecturer. The lecturer was very supportive in that when I got an assignment back she would go through it with me and show me where I went wrong and how to improve so she was like a mentor to me and she advised me to apply for English Honours'.*

From this account of Iliana, it seems that, while mentors are important in achieving academic success, the ultimate sense making and outcomes of that mentoring relationship is largely dependent upon the individual receiving the mentoring. The *“I listened to myself”* statement by Iliana captures the essence of insights of the mentee in respect of self-actualisation and self-efficacy, suggesting an Ubuntu conceptualisation of the relationship developed with mentors. Her [Iliana’s] ability to allow introspection within the relationship using the mentor, and what she or he stood for, as a sounding board, is a hallmark of Ubuntuism.

This self-actualisation was also evidenced in Sandile’s and Prudence’s choice to return loans that were given to them to support their studies as soon as they were able to. Swanson (2007) refers to this concept when she focuses on Tutu (1999) who explains “Freedom requires eternal vigilance, held accountable by a critical, questioning populace and those who respond to what he refers to as a ‘high calling’ that would educate and nurture a new generation of human beings that would respond to a sense of conscience, and display generosity of spirit, compassion and care” (Swanson, 2007, p58).

Both Sandile and Prudence had mentors who played an enormous role in affording them support. Sandile had a lecturer who paid his fees in the year of his Diploma studies. She did not expect the money back and gave him the opportunity to start his studies in HE. When Sandile transferred to a degree programme and got his first tranche from NSFAS, he immediately paid it back. The lecturer’s mentorship gave him an opportunity to reciprocate showing his deep sense of morality and self-respect.

With a similar sense of responsibility Prudence paid back her loan from NSFAS when she got her inheritance from her uncle while she was in her second year of degree studies. *“I paid R62000 back to financial aid so that some needy person would have access to those funds.”* Although NSFAS cannot be strictly referred to as a mentor I would argue that it can be put into this category because it supports the student (albeit mainly financially) but it continues to monitor progress and even rewards good progress. *“If you work hard you get rewarded. When I got to university a student who went in with an A got R2000, now you get R5000 for an A. In order to get recognition or to get help I have always had to put myself out there.”* If the student experiences difficulties NSFAS puts in place appropriate interventions.

Prudence was told to see the dean because she was “at risk” scoring in the fifties when she had scored in the seventies and eighties previously. She was sent to counselling and advised to continue going there. This is why I believe NSFAS should be deemed to be a mentor intervening when it needed to and supporting and acknowledging students’ progress when necessary. This is designed to assist students to use all the potential they have towards achieving academic progress and finally academic success at university. This is in direct line with what is expected of a mentor.

Prudence’s mentors ranged from the priest at her church who was instrumental in getting her financial aid in her access year to people who helped her buy books and clothes like the colleague of her father’s girlfriend who recognized her potential and who surprised her by not expecting anything in return. Inspirational people she encountered also included her future mother-in-law who was *‘more than a mother’* to her and who because of her great strength acted as a role model for Prudence (Nezlek & Allen, 2006). Her fiancé who was a student, a successful tenor and a high academic achiever also served as her role model, as did Prof V Gumbi, the CEO of Prince Mshyeni Hospital who led by example. She met the latter while doing some research work which she had accessed during her undergraduate programme.

She quoted Paulo Freire and described how his concept of education is about creating consciousness regarding how any issue under examination can be and is inevitably related to the lives of those making drama. She applied this to her work as a mentor and tutor. *“I’m not afraid to speak to young people. I’m not here to give bad marks. I’m here to help. Use me as a resource. I will be your friend but you have to do the work. People come with ideas and it’s my job to shift them and expose them to different types of knowledge.”* So Prudence learnt all the lessons her mentors had taught her simply by the way they had interacted with her in order for her to produce her academic success. She learnt them so well that she was able to apply them when she worked as a tutor.

#### **6.2.3.1.4.1 Concluding Remarks University Mentors and Role Models**

All the participants in this study had mentors who may have been identified by many different names. The one thing they had in common was that all of them assisted the participants not only to construct but also to perform academic success at university and one

suspects far beyond that arena, judging from the depth of their experiences with them. This they achieved through the understanding and acceptance that they were part of a whole.

Inspirational relationships were supported by respect and dignity and regenerated by generosity, full participation and sharing including self-efficacy on the students' part in the teaching learning engagement (See Katherine's account above). All these are basic tenets of ubuntuism which surfaced as elements which assisted the participants in this study to construct their success. It was clear that issues such as care, hospitality, compassion, openness, affirmation were part and parcel of what the participants experienced in their construction and performance of success at university. It is safe to say that some of them even realized the high ideals of Ubuntuism because they rose to a 'high calling' in displaying a strong conscience alongside empathy and compassion for other human beings.

#### **6.2.3.1.5 Significant Other as relational support**

As has been found in many H E studies across the world, including one in Sweden conducted by Vaez and Laflamme (2008), the inability to cope with academic demands and demands to support study can create substantial barriers to a student's academic achievement through the tremendous stress that is created. Therefore it follows that psychological well-being, is commensurate with academic achievement and this is within a context of stress and significant academic demands.

All the women participants in this study believed that their boyfriends, who had in all cases actually risen to the status of fiancé, assisted in their psychological well-being in their undergraduate years. All of them included their ability to maintain a relationship with 'a significant other' (who was also a role model) as an important element which assisted them to construct their academic success in undergraduate studies.

As part of a larger investigation into the attitudes and general well-being of Canadian undergraduate students, Chow (2010) attempted to explore the determinants of academic achievement and psychological well-being. He found that "relationships as an indirect means of support appear to be of particular importance to these undergraduate students...Earlier studies have ascertained that support and well-being are positively linked and that support

can buffer the effects of negative events and stress (Cotton, Dollard & de Young, 2002: Gencoz & Oslale, 2004; Nezlek & Allen, 2006)” (Chow, 2010, p.484).

Katherine was extremely proud of her boyfriend who, in owning a large company at the age of nineteen, she believed had achieved great success. When the interview took place they were planning to marry *“but when he had first started in the property business he sold his car to put a down payment on his first house. He fixed it up while he drove around in his parent’s rickety car. He’s just 26 and he’s just bought his 6<sup>th</sup> one. He’s just amazing. He’s got a Business Science degree and actually works in IT. He started reading about property and educated himself about this and made it his business because he is business minded.”* She was clearly inspired by her significant other.

For Prudence her fiancée presented her with an opportunity to heal herself psychologically in relation to her loss of a mother figure. He was in Opera doing his Honours in Music and his mother began to play a role in Prudence’s life. *“He is a good person who was raised by his mother, a very strong woman. You know they say sometimes when you miss out in some things in life, God has another plan for you: that woman is more than a mother to me.”*

So Prudence kept psychologically strong no matter what happened and stayed on track to achieve academic success. *“I never thought of dropping out because being here made my life the best because my life outside varsity was corrupt. This was my driving force. My life was awful I wanted to kill my family. I’ve never been depressed but I’ve had Cushing’s syndrome in 2009 and again at the beginning of this year; where there is a production of certain chemicals and you get depressed. I used anti-depressants but honestly since I met my fiancée things are different.”* So she continued on her quest for education despite her physical, psychological and emotional struggles with the support of a “significant other” who was there for her.

*“Sometimes lovers are not conducive to studying but we compete, he gets merit certificates even when he isn’t aiming for them. I come off with an A or a B but he just gets them. He’s gifted with language, French and German. He is Griqua and his home language is Afrikaans. They were raised by Mkhizes, he’s coloured.”* Fortunately she had met a suitable partner not only one who inspired her to do better but one who understood her particular background.

Iliana acknowledged the support her ‘significant other’ and his family afforded her. The efforts of his family were well recognised in their town because *“the young man’s brother is a headmaster and the family does work to give back to the community, not for recognition. My religion teaches me that you don’t look for recognition all the time for everything you do. Doing small acts of kindness is worth the effort. This is success. Your left hand does not need to know what the right hand is doing.”*

*‘Success is achieving what you set out to do. Personal success, you have to be happy. Academic success is different; you can be happy some people are some people aren’t’.* Iliana explained how for her happiness was very important and she couldn’t understand how one can really succeed in something that one’s not happy about. She used her boyfriend’s experience as an example. He had all the qualifications he had set out to achieve and yet he was not sure he was a success. *“He’s got his science degree and he’s got his honours and he’s got his Masters, he’s teaching so he’s got his PGCE and he decided no, he doesn’t want to teach he wants to be a doctor. He’s very frustrated. He was in the top percentile and he was given an interview and told you’re the wrong colour and the wrong age.”* Interestingly all three women were in the process of making plans to be married to their ‘significant others’ at the time of the interview, Iliana married her fiancé soon after.

#### **6.2.3.1.5.1 Concluding Remarks on Significant Others**

This study into students’ construction of academic success found that the relationship with significant others assisted successful undergraduate students to construct and perform success at university. These relationships were not just an indirect measure of support; they were of particular importance to undergraduate students as the ‘significant other’ often doubled as role models (see above). This was in accordance with Chow’s study of Canadian undergraduates (2010, p 484) *“Those who reported more positive relationships with their significant other exhibited higher levels of psychological well -being.”* Therefore even if the participants of this study were undergoing any stress related to the barriers they may have encountered against the possibility of achieving academic success, positive relationships with their ‘significant others’ would have mitigated this.

#### 6.2.3.1.6 Community as relational support

The community as audience to both his successes and failures were always in Sandile's thoughts and this egged him on towards success. This was in keeping with his collectivistic orientation. Although he felt that he was capable, most people in his immediate society did not see him as someone who could get to university. They knew that his family was financially unstable. He was ready to take the challenge and was happy to represent '*the name of the whole family*'. His academic success was constructed around providing for his family at the end of the day but he also held great store by the community's admiration of his role of student at UKZN working towards earning a degree. Against all odds he had got in. They saw this as something which would then give him entree to a paying profession.

Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005) refer to the importance of personal and career related motivation for first generation college students although they may be less equipped for HE because of poor high school preparation and because parents and those in their immediate environment lacked first-hand knowledge of HE. Although this was true in Sandile's case he saw himself (through the eyes of his community) as a very important person in his society. This is why dropping out was not an option although he struggled at university on account of his poor high school education which led to difficulties he experienced especially in relation to critical thinking. In fact he was often depressed because of this. But being afraid of what his family was going to say if he did not succeed kept him on track. In addition "*I was afraid that I would have nothing to do if I left the university. If I dropped out it would be impossible to live and earn a livelihood in South Africa...I would be worth next to nothing.*" There was a "no-win" situation in the township in which he lived.

He also knew that once he got to the higher institution "*people want to see your ending and that is why I wanted to do my best so that I receive my degree*". He always dreamed about building a new house for his grandmother to thank her for taking care of him while he was '*a little man*'. She had played a major role in showing his society '*that he had the potential to make things better for the family, the society and South Africa*'. He also recommended role models in one's own community who are successful because they were useful to his planning for, construction and performance of success. What he had found to be an essential element of his academic success were the competitors he had identified. The effort he put into attempting to beat them automatically stimulated his ability to work hard at any academic

project he was given. This in turn motivated him to “dream big” and concretise ambitions about what he wanted as a career. This would have got him nowhere if he didn’t implement his plans. *“Act on it! I was so focused on my goal that even when I was reading something, I knew I was doing it for a reason.”*

Drawing from her experience in a close knit small Catholic school Katherine valued a sense of community because she realised it was very important to academic success. For her the university’s academic support, aligned with good family support, ensured academic success. Individual attention and recognition of individual potential was important. It worked hand in hand with acknowledgement by the community. Discipline and good organisation coupled with good counsel from lecturers assisted her to meet her potential to get her degree *cum laude*.

#### **6.2.3.1.7 Higher Power as relational support**

Iliana and Prudence set great store by their belief in Christianity which helped them to construct and perform academic success at university. Both were practising Christians. Prudence went to church consistently. Both believed that the Lord had assisted them especially when they needed him most (see Barry & Nelson, 2005 for the role of spirituality in the emerging young adult, i.e. those between 18 and 25).

Iliana explained how she drew support from her religion. *“I’m a practising Christian. ‘I’m a happy clappy, I’m a Jesus freak.’ It’s not a religious thing for me where it’s like a ritual of being in the church every Sunday. I steer clear of legalism. It’s fine if people want to go to church at Easter and Christmas. I try to keep an open mind I try not to judge but I do pray a lot and ask God to help me in my studies. But I do believe in giving back.”*

In her undergrad years she tended to ‘hang out’ with non-Christians, people who were considered ‘heathens.’ She did not judge them. Evidence of her flexibility was clear in the choice of her friends. *“One of my best ‘guy friends’ smoked pot.”* She did not take drugs and simply regarded it as her friend’s prerogative and not hers. Surprisingly such friends did not distract her from academic success. In fact this young man attained 80s and 90s and at the end of the day even though he smoked pot. She found that he wasn’t hypocritical, he didn’t put on a show, *“Oh I’m a Christian, I’m so godly, look at me look at me. I don’t like*

*superficial people at all. I'm honest; I'll tell you what I think straight up. And most of my friends were like that."*

Even in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year she had friends including the 'guy' friend; *"he's actually a great guy, don't get me wrong, and it was ironic actually because he stopped smoking around me and I asked him why and he said it made me uncomfortable and because I'd always say no thank you. I'm not being judgemental but I wasn't going to change who I am. By me being who I was, I actually changed his life. And after he stopped his academics went sky high as well."*

In the study of emerging adults from four different cultures by Barry and Nelson (2005) accepting responsibility for the consequence of one's actions, was regarded across the board as one of the most important criteria for adulthood and in this case a potentially successful student. Iliana's religion helped her to see this and therefore she was able to make decisions which assisted rather than impeded her academic success.

Prudence reconciled her traditional beliefs with her having been given all the Christian sacraments. She attributed her superior position as a 'seer' to her religion and also held great store by the fact that she had been baptised in a Catholic church, St Anne's. She received the sacrament and "equiniso" recognition which is given to devotees who exhibit *"spiritual knowledge and (the ability) to build strength in one's religion. The only sacrament that I'm missing is my wedding since my grand-aunt always motivated me to go to church."* The church and traditional religious practice played a great part in her construction of success as both her character and code of behaviour used these as reference points. *"I have a gift in the African family, the gift of seeing. Sometimes I dream and the dreams are complicated. I am supposed to go into training, my path is in prayer."* She also believed she had a gift of prophesy and a calling to be a divine intermediary which got her through the times when she almost dropped out of UKZN.

She described a huge impact when she missed out on religion and neglected to go to church at one stage. *"It helps you to understand the roles.... the guidance, how to be a good child to your parents, how to respect others. I would say it actually made me. Church kept me occupied, it made me fear people,( respect differences) and reminds you that you must take responsibility for your actions even if you are responding to something someone else is doing to you."* She believed that her ability to overcome the difficulties and struggles she weathered

were also due to her absorption of some of the Christian principles she was taught each Sunday in church.

Sandile and Katherine experienced religion more indirectly, the former through his grandmother's upbringing and the latter through the values inculcated in her by her family and later through what she experienced in the Christian school at which she taught.

### **6.2.3.2 Concluding remarks on Ubuntu**

This section has teased out the different manifestations of the philosophy of Ubuntu and described the way in which these have assisted the participants to construct academic success in HE. Described at base as a "way of knowing and being" (Tutu, 1999) this section of analysis focuses on knowing and being in the family, school and university in an attempt to unearth the different terrains in which aspects of Ubuntu were experienced by the participants and which assisted them in their journey to academic success. The community, a seminal concept of Ubuntu in itself, was identified as important to the construction of success and the participants' relationship to a higher power also had its place.

The relationship between the two and how it was seen by the participants is captured in the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Success in Chapter Seven.

An interesting aspect which arose was a lack of Ubuntu which created other levels of complexity in that participants who may have experienced this lack still found it in themselves to push on to success. This is similar to the notion of "disadvantage" and all that is attendant upon it preparing the student for challenges in the academic environment rather than achieving the opposite effect. So looking at the participants experience through the lens of Ubuntu helped to clarify how they constructed success in relation to the TSIM in the first instance.

Up to this point the participants' understanding of what academic success was and how their individual core characteristics helped them to reach this goal in HE, has been explored. In addition the different aspects of Ubuntu and how these manifested in participants' construction and performance of academic success were highlighted. It was now time to

consider other opportunities the participants had accessed and utilised finally to make their academic success.

#### **6.2.4 Theme 4: Opportunities created and opportunities seized to make success**

The notion that academic success at university can be enhanced by activities pursued in a range of environments outside that of the university is not new. Carpenter (2006) quoting from Clothier (1931) observed “The so-called extra-curricular activities should be recognized as potential agencies of character development and should be encouraged and directed by the college but without impairing the student’s initiative, leadership, organizing ability and sense of responsibility. They should be integrated so far as possible with the work of the curriculum” (Jablonski, Mena, Manning, Carpenter & Siko, 2006, p.185).

All the participants had made use of crucial opportunities either presented to them or which they accessed that assisted them in their resolve to succeed academically despite any challenges they may have encountered.

##### **6.2.4.1 Iliana from entrepreneur to waitress to receptionist**

From a young age Iliana knew she had to help to support herself and as a child sold goods at school markets. So she had a strong work ethic both in school and in the jobs she created for herself and this work ethic was exhibited in her consistency and resilience which held her in good stead when she finally went to university. She worked in a coffee shop almost every weekend throughout her university career although she had full days of study at university. In this way she saved up for any extra expenses that may have arisen from her tertiary studies. In so doing she supported herself in respect of anything she required for communication with her peers or study buddies i.e. her cell phone, her lap top and any expenses that may have arisen from that. Although she was working either at university or at her job Sunday to Sunday, she met all the academic requirements and passed her degree in regulation time.

When she was in second year, during the July holidays she was asked to do filing for a poultry farm and when they were without a receptionist, she did reception work from the end of November to the beginning of February when varsity started again. From that she earned

about R8000 which she used to buy her own laptop which she had had for 4 years at the time of the interview. This was evidence of a strong independent streak with a developed sense of pride in her work. For her those were big successes in her life because her parents obviously could not supply those things and she required them in order to perform successfully at university. Therefore making full use of the opportunities presented to her was crucial in providing herself with all the things she needed for successful university studies.

#### **6.2.4.2 Opportunity to be tutor, researcher and leader**

##### **6.2.4.2.1 Prudence as Tutor**

Prudence supplemented any income she may have obtained from such agencies as NSFAS by tutoring Drama students. Prudence worked for SARA (South Africans against rape and harassment) in a voluntary capacity because she wanted to learn from the experience. “*We were paid although we did not expect it.*” So she obtained crucial experience in Drama in Education, an area she later wrote an exam on. She was also educated about Gender Based Violence and how to become an activist in her own right in this area. All the skills she gained in accessing this opportunity assisted her to construct and perform academic success.

She had the advantage of gaining financially as well, so was able to supplement her financial income. Her altruistic character and interest in paying back was clear when as a student she went back to her old school and voluntarily offered her services to teach Arts and Culture because she had found out it was a neglected subject at her school. In seeking out this opportunity to serve her community she obtained greater experience in teaching Dramatic principles and in using English language to teach the pupils Arts and Culture. Although this was not her motive in pursuing this opportunity in the first place, this held her in good stead when she had to write her own examinations at university.

Prudence’s clarity regarding her educational philosophy shaped her role as student and included the notion she culled from “*Paulo Freire ... his concept of education is about creating consciousness ... how an issue related to the lives of those making drama.*” She believed that art often mimicked life and looking at works of dramatic art could educate the dramatist himself about his own life in the most unexpected way. She applied this to her work as a mentor and tutor. She felt that her personal experience that she had accumulated with young people in a university project and with freshman as a tutor assisted her with her own

work. She felt she was able to speak to them as human beings, honestly, without being authoritarian. In any event they had a right to expect this. *“I actually did an improvisation centred on the theme of the pressures of being gay in an African community which hated gay people. One boy was ‘put in the hot seat’ to be the gay character and he told me I’d helped him because he is gay. I just didn’t know it and I was glad it turned out positively because he wrote, ‘Sisi, thank you very much’.”*

According to her, Education teaches one tolerance and she found she could only assist those who accorded her the respect of a wise facilitator and were willing to get help from her. She learnt from this and used this lesson to access academic success for herself. She extended what she learnt as a tutor and applied this to her own studies at university in order to construct academic success. *“In Drama-in-education the child experiences social learning and develops a voice (a right to speak) in relation to her own education. In every module it is about assimilation taking a massive work and relating it to your opinion which is also based on other readings. Your understanding and critical thinking is assessed. I make everyone talk but written work is different from spoken.”*

She felt it was vital to be acknowledged even if was only by the tutor or lecturer. *“Nobody at home looked at my marks they don’t give me food, no money for transport; honestly no one at home did anything. My grandmother just tells me to pray. It is because of this that results (the grades the lecturers give you) are important, it indicates how well you understand the subject and it gives you a deadline in the face of all these things.”* Prudent felt strengthened by structure and was encouraged by any recognition of her efforts. In this way she was able to utilise different opportunities she had in order to help her to construct academic success.

#### **6.2.4.2.2 Prudence as Researcher**

Prudence actively sought holiday jobs and during one with the Health Department’s research section she met *“an amazing role model”* in Prof B. Gumbi, the CEO of Prince Mshiyeni Hospital. Not only were her research skills enhanced and she was able to pass this onto those she tutored in the Drama Department, but she learnt from interacting closely with a role model who had come from poor beginnings. This inspired her to keep her goal of success in focus no matter what challenges she faced along the way.

#### 6.2.4.2.3 Prudence as Leader

She displayed leadership abilities which required her to push against the norms of behaviour presented by some of the students who lived at residence while she was overseer of her floor. *“I was already in res in 2008 and I’d sit at the library even if I didn’t want to because of the pressure of the workload.”* She balanced this against her other responsibilities at residence which also demanded her time. Through her responsibility for her floor at residence (Howard college campus), she was often called upon to control people who were drunk, fighting or destroying property through their raucous behaviour.

She was upset about the practice of young girls having ‘*sugar daddies*’ and about the deviant behaviour she observed. *“How are they going to speak to their children about morality? Some people behave like animals and the kitchen sink was broken and once there were faeces in the sink. I’m really ashamed of some of the black kids because they are actually conforming to the stereotypes out there. They think I’m racist against my own people. It’s also about morals and some of us live with grans and married women and people who are as old as our parents. Some things are not about religion; it’s just having morals and principles, you see what is right from wrong.”*

She was not afraid to commit herself to any action that was necessary to correct the behaviour. She took her responsibilities seriously. She often took on the culprits and pursued the disciplinary processes that were in place even if they did not stem the tide of deviant behaviour. She indicated that this clarified how she should never behave and kept her focussed on her efforts to achieve success.

So all the participants appeared to have been afforded the opportunity to play many roles which enhanced their chances of academic success and these have been described above.

While opportunities created and opportunities seized moulded the role that the successful students played in this study to some extent, further clarification of the role of these students follows. This is related specifically to the way in which language and belief affected their reception and comprehension of the content of their modules. This, in turn, has implications for epistemological access which is necessary for the achievement of academic success in these modules.

### **6. 2.5 Theme 5: Moments of Clarity in learning the role of a Successful Student**

The role of the student and the way in which they act and interact in the context of the university is important to their construction and performance of academic success. Successful students 'become' students and actively 'being' students over a period of time takes them consistently towards their goal of academic achievement. This reference to becoming takes cognisance of the fact that a university student does not have the same demands placed upon her as a high school student. The path to becoming and being a student at university encompasses an understanding of and successful engagement with epistemological access.

Morrow (2007, p.78) explains that "Epistemological Access cannot be supplied or 'delivered' or 'done' to the learner nor can it be automatically transmitted to those who pay their fees or even to those who collect the hand-outs or even those who attend classes regularly. The reason for this is that epistemological access is learning to become a successful participant in an academic practice. In the same way as no one can do my running for me, no one else can do my learning for me".

So learning the role of a successful student involves deep engagement in academic practice. Although Morrow seems to place this responsibility squarely on the students' shoulders, it must be acknowledged that the institution also has to play its part in creating an environment in which the role can be played to the fullest. In order to play this role of a successful student in HE in a composite manner, the student has to understand the elements of such an identity; her relationship to the university, the language of the environment and the manner in which personal considerations and beliefs impinge upon the academic enterprise. Gee (2001) theorises about the notion of identity and different perspectives of looking at who a person is. Following his reasoning the very nature of being a student is seen in respect of or in relation to the university. In this context, the student plays the role as subject to a set of authorities.

In this study the participants are subject to the Council, administration and the faculty of UKZN. Under Tinto's Student Integration Model, epistemological access would fall mainly under Academic Integration notwithstanding the fact that Academic and Social Integration work alongside the Student's Personal Background to give a full picture of success in H E.

So, one way of examining the identity of the successful student is by looking at the power which is vested in these manifestations of UKZN. This power works through the university's rules and its regulations and its principles and traditions. The identity of the student is shaped in respect of these rules, regulations, principles and traditions in relation to her or his rights and responsibilities held against those of the institution. So the successful student performs in relation to all these aspects within the context of the university. All the participants described different ways in which they each negotiated the rights and responsibilities of being a student in order to construct and perform academic success.

One of the most important policies which can radically affect the way a student performs is the language policy. When the participants of this study were completing their undergraduate degrees at UKZN, the medium of instruction was English to the exclusion of all others although South Africa does recognise eleven official languages, with Sign language in the process of becoming the twelfth. The participants described different ways in which they each negotiated the language and content of university education and the rights and responsibilities of being a student in order to construct and perform academic success in their undergraduate studies.

### **6.2.6 Theme 6: Language, Epistemological Access and Academic Success**

In his quest for academic success it was necessary for Sandile to master English language especially after he transferred from a diploma programme to a degree programme at UKZN. Drama improvisation played an important role in assisting him to create and articulate his thoughts. *“Academically I was really having a problem with structuring my work and you know when you lose self-esteem I would feel bothered if I had to do my work especially with essays. I’m already weak how am I going to do essays? The worst part is that it was in English and I always feel like I’m nobody, you feel like nobody when these things happen and you lose confidence. In the group I was able to voice my problems. I got more clarity and got other ideas.”*

*“I experienced more pressure because I had to be very good in speaking and writing of English, which was the biggest problem for me, I could not even write a sentence because in music I was not exposed to much writing and speaking in English. I had endurance in myself*

*and was willing to learn the language. Many people advised me to read more English literature and magazines and also to train my ear to listen to English programs on television and radio.”* His tussle with English language both oral and written continued within the context and environment of the university and the opportunity costs (having fun) against putting aside time for study was a great challenge.

*“Academic Success is more like you delve into your being (understanding)... whatever you want to do, it relies on how it begins. It is time consuming. If you don’t pay attention you will never succeed. The university is a small place, a very small environment and there’s a lot going on here and in order to achieve academically I need to put away these things. As a human being you need to have fun; then there is a point at when you decide this is my life now, this is what I’m going to do. Your aim is not to have parties, life is not about parties. It’s just for a moment of time.”*

He emphasised the importance of seeing education as a foundation for seeing the world more broadly. This would unpack the possibilities it presents not only through success at university but well beyond that, not only in terms of material success but again beyond even that. *“Most students believe education is about... getting good jobs. It’s not only about that, education lights up the way you see things. It broadens the way you see things. It helps in the way that you have many options in life. If plan A doesn’t work you have the means to go into something else. If I don’t succeed as an actor, I am able to sit down and think about exactly what I’m going to do with what I have. You use your degree or whatever you’ve obtained here to pave your way. It’s not only about working for somebody; you can even do something else with what you have. It doesn’t go by itself, but you use it.”* He understood academic success to be part and parcel of the ability to apply the knowledge one obtained in degree studies to various different arenas.

In making the point that the written word is different from spoken, Prudence observed that it took her time to read work with understanding. She described how she circumvented any difficulties with language she had experienced. For essays in the Drama Department it was necessary *“to figure out what they’re asking for, on your own”*.

The language was very important including the way it was written so she found it a challenge to respond to the questions posed. Sometimes she worked in groups and they exchanged

information but *'people tended to keep talking and I was distracted'*. When she was on her own she studied the scope and the course pack. Sometimes the scope was of no help but *"In Psychology it's everything"*. She admitted that she learnt by cramming but before this she went to class with an understanding of relevant material which she got from the course pack. In addition to this, fortunately she liked reading and she read everything. Every book she'd read she had four copies that are hand written; that's how she learnt the content of her modules. She tried to understand what it meant and she explained it to herself in paragraphs. She hastened to add that it was not about memorising because this was not the same as understanding.

She did not hesitate to find out more or clarify anything she did not understand *"I went to all my lectures and even if I looked stupid I asked questions"*. As she had been in a debating team at school she had practised to argue and put her position. So her questions and debating skills helped her with her language skills especially when she was framing questions and putting her point. She felt it didn't matter *"whether I was a first or second English language speaker because English itself is not a pure language and you have to use a dictionary. Even Whites have to learn English and you can't say I'm Indian, I'm Coloured, I'm African and it's not my language.....Spoken language is very different from written language especially academic language."* She consciously practised writing for her assignments and projects.

She also found out that success had a cost; *'there is a reaction to every action.'* Immediately she became a serious student she had to accept that it was going to take her time. She had friends who were studious because she had to study all the time. She had to adhere to certain principles because those were the building blocks in the same way as she did when she was writing essays. She maintained a good learning environment and surrounded herself with things that were part of her work in order to succeed. She had to surround herself with people who were in the same position as she was and from the same institution. They understood when she had the light on the whole night.

*"It's different from High School where it was taking everything from the book on the subject and writing it as if it is your own. Here you have to read. There's plagiarism, there's paraphrasing your ideas may have been created long time ago it's about reinventing and reorganising work. You must be able to explain a concept without reading. You must know what it means in relation to what you're writing about. There is referencing and citing"*

*because you're explaining someone else's ideas. Some students in high school can listen to the teacher and they don't have to study. Varsity is not like that. You have to have a relationship with your course pack and can't come to the lecture without reading what it's going to be about."*

Prudence displayed transformative learning as described by Fried (2007, p.3). "When learning is transformative, students know, can explain, and can demonstrate what they have learned. They can explain how this learning is relevant to their life and explain how this learning has changed their viewpoint on a range of topics."

This last characteristic of transformative learning was clearly evident in Iliana's explanation of her experience of learning at university. Being such a strong Christian Iliana clashed with one of her poetry lecturers who was very 'out there'. He taught Ted Hughes' 'The Crow' and "*I hated the poem because it was so against everything I believed in and I remember feeling so angry and frustrated at him because he was so sexist. He kept on riling us about our religion; obviously he wanted to get a rise out of us.*" Iliana found the way to try to be more objective about content and interpretation. She understood that there are many roles one plays on campus and students can lose themselves in these roles. She consciously acted the role of the critical student.

*"One of my favourite movies is Rocky Horror because the character is schizophrenic. I play different roles on campus and each of them has a part of me in them but they don't define who I am."* She learnt to keep a distance because she found that many things went against her religious beliefs but she had to position herself as an academic in the first instance and not as a Christian.

*"In the Counterculture module I had to look at things not through what I call my life view and religious view and I had to deal with themes such as transgender and homosexuality. I had to read about a man who would get dressed as Mary and he had clay feet. And I am Christian so I had to put it in a context without my life influencing it. At a personal level an idea might be repulsive, but you are taught to critically analyse it and it may portray another world view it may not change me and if I look at it my religion may frown upon it. I create another role for myself and although I don't agree with Freud's theories but I (know) where he has a place in history and how he has contributed to the development of psychology."*

She found that texts like Dr Faustus broadened her horizons and she learnt more about the nature vs. nurture debate and themes of supernatural power and magic, all of which opened up her perspective of things as a successful student. *“In the same way as one person can change another completely in relation to religion and philosophy, education at university can do the same. This can be a cost of academic success in the same way as it can cost you money.”* She strongly believed, however that knowing and understanding does not amount to acceptance and that made her enjoy reading for the first time.

Her dyslexia was only discovered later because her extremely high IQ allowed her to compensate for her shortfall when it came to reading. She became used to playing the role of the superior student even with these constraints. *“The fact that I had a problem didn’t emerge until varsity.”* Besides a high IQ the fact that she had friends at school with her constantly meant that they could discuss the things we were reading so she didn’t have to do such a close reading.

*“I don’t have as many people here I find for me to bounce ideas off. In my undergraduate years there was more time that I spent with people and that contributed to my academic success. We’d sit in groups and bounce ideas of each other; that’s when my memory tends to kick in.”* She felt the benefit from tutorials and from her first year she attended all of them for that reason. This helped her to be successful. She found that hard to understand why some students did not attend because tutorials were there to help students learn about the topics they were lectured on and she got a lot from them each week. For her it was not just a waste of time. *“There are people in The English dep’t now who were actually tut leaders in my first year and they were very important to me. I like listening to other people’s ideas and comparing them with my own. I then have a deep understanding of what I am studying.”*

According to Fried (2007) “Because transformation is generally experienced as an ‘aha’ moment that can happen any-where, opportunities for this learning are best designed by collaborators working both in and outside the traditional classroom. The greater this integration, the greater the likelihood that students will experience the transformation and expansion of perspectives that educators hope for in their students. Through an integrated learning experience, a student’s picture of the world can become more comprehensive and more inclusive and, ultimately, improve their relationships and their life” (p.3).

### **6.2.6.1 Concluding Remarks on Role of Student**

In her study into the practice of successful teachers Pillay (2003) refers to the complexities of race, class and gender which result in both researcher and participant being confronted with a 'fruit salad' when attempting to arrive at some understanding of the latter's success, the ingredients being grade average, gender, race, class and home base (rural , urban). In order to understand how students construct academic success and perform academic success with respect to the participants in this study to this list we must add home language, physical and psychological challenges and this is still not an exhaustive list. In order to understand the parameters of this concept it is necessary to admit that the student plays many roles within both society and within the HE sector and occupies different positions in relation to different sectors of the community and the university.

The idea of academic success and what it means will depend upon the different interactions within the various and different processes of learning which students experience. "What further complicates the matter is that each of these processes is driven by its own values so how to name the idea of success in relation to the efforts of the student at university is fraught with difficulty. Ambiguity, multiplicity and contradictions are inseparable to the form and substance of our identity" (Pillay, 2003, p.26). This is what further complicates the a clear unambiguous understanding of the role of the academically successful student and just how this is played out in HE.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter I presented a second level of analysis which led to an emergence of themes initiated by the theoretical constructs of academic success which underpin academic success in undergraduate studies as it was constructed and performed by the participants in this study. Some relevant evidence directly from the stories of the chosen participants is included.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Key Findings and Discussion**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter provided a thematic analysis of the data that evolved out of the stories and the individual interviews and biographies of the four participants I chose to focus on in this study. Through remembering, highlighting and making sense of their experiences in undergraduate studies in speech and in text they shared their ideas about how they had constructed and performed academic success at UKZN and how they had obtained their degrees in regulation time.

This chapter focuses on the key findings emerging from the previous chapters and a discussion of these findings within the literature and theoretical framings that guided this study. The discussions are presented with a view to answering the questions relating to how students construct academic success and how they explain their academic success in undergraduate studies. In the latter section of this chapter I present a theoretical perspective to the key findings followed by the thesis I have arrived at which is encapsulated in a graphic model entitled Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success.

#### **7.2 Notions of Success**

##### **7.2.1 Academic Success, Employability and Balanced personal growth**

In order to attempt to answer the research questions which focused on how students at UKZN constructed academic success (which for this study meant completing a three year degree in regulation time), it was necessary for me to start with what my participants defined as academic success.

I found that all the participants used their personal experience and backgrounds as starting points in explaining their notions of academic success. Their experience and association with others led them to foreground such aspects as employability and the balance between the different aspects of their lives as main drivers of their success generally, in the first instance

and academic success in the second. Happiness, career, physical exercise and family demands needed to be balanced and this was a foundation upon which academic success was constructed.

Other aspects of academic success which affected the way they performed in higher education included the fact that to them success (and later academic success) was a complex, continuous process not a product. It was an ever changing, relative concept that was highly personal. (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Jones, 2008; Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). So the area of Personal Background (see TSIM) was continuously talked back to and as a result it kept rearing its head, even in this initial stage of the findings.

One of the most outstanding aspects of the theme of notions of success was the existential attitude observable in all the participants' understanding of the notion of academic success. They were concerned with the particular moments and events they were involved in and this made them choose the way in which they tackled things and their moral stance in relation to their worlds.

All of them were forced to look at their student lives in this way because all of them suffered setbacks either because of poor family background, physical disability resulting from a motor accident or a learning disorder which was congenital. All of them constructed their academic success from the outset on what could be considered to be negative foundations.

Iliana for instance disguised her dyslexia and ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) in school with the assistance of her superior intellect. She always caught up and no one noticed. This is how she developed her resilience that allowed her to overcome her barriers to learning and achieving. This practice in catching up shored up her resilience, which later became her capital (strength) and helped her to overcome the difficulties she encountered later at university.

Remarkably her learning disorder was actually only diagnosed during university studies. So although she began her university career with a distinct disadvantage, through her agency and the resilience capital she had accrued, she used all she learnt from overcoming her learning disability and used this to her advantage. She was able to face and actually overcome this challenge and achieved academic success in her undergraduate studies. She owned her

dyslexia and was already accustomed to working hard and finding ways which suited her learning style during her studies at university. Personal Background (TSIM), agency, motivation and resilience, thus, featured strongly in the participants' construction of academic success at UKZN in respect of their definitions or notions of success.

A conclusion that could be reached from this is that these setbacks could be seen as points from which participants could have been propelled forward on the journey to academic success (Compare Marshall & Case, 2010). While momentum points are described as meeting milestones essentially in an HE environment (See Chapter One, p.14), I want to suggest that overcoming setbacks in the pre-university phase of the students' lives can create a momentum which can take participants beyond a point when they may have doubted their abilities and their propensity to be part of a degree programme at university. I also want to suggest that this momentum is not necessarily utilised all at once but can be harnessed for use whenever the participant reaches a nadir in the academic journey.

This, I term delayed agency because it is stored in a reservoir of resilience capital (a concept I coined, taking a cue from Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital – see section 7.2.2 for more details) and released when it is necessary. This is evidenced by the manner in which all the participants reverted to the experiences of struggles they had had before university and used these as buttresses on which they constructed their academic success from the moment they entered university.

### **7.2.2 Is Academic Success the same as success?**

Another dominant constructive aspect of the participants' definitions of academic success was the fact that they agreed that the highest point of academic success would be represented by earning a doctorate and this is what they aspired to. I believe that the choice of a goal like this one assisted in their construction and performance of academic success in their undergraduate degree. The trajectory they saw went far beyond the first degree and this trajectory assisted them to construct academic success, not just as an accomplishment of an event or activity, but as something that is on-going with milestones along its path.

In one case the participant explained how someone prophesying that she was going to get a PhD in the future stayed with her and inspired her and this took her forward in her

undergraduate journey to academic success. She celebrated the fact that her community saw her potential to earn the highest degree conferred by a university. As she perceived its (the community's) belief in her, she was convinced that she could actually attain this academic success of achieving her doctoral degree. So the possibility of attaining a PhD formed a strong fertile bed from which academic success could grow. The idea of it formed the starting point of academic success and the attainment of it would have represented the epitome of academic success.

Visualising both ends of this trajectory assisted the participants to construct and perform their academic success. This aspiration would dovetail with what Academic Integration (TSIM) demands especially in relation to the values and ideals of the institution which would also place the attainment of the doctorate at the highest level of academic success. What can be concluded from this is that the participants in this study constructed academic success on the basis that they also identified closely with the academic values of the institution.

With respect to the general notion of success, participants saw it as different from academic success which included taking and earning a degree. For them to be truly successful in general terms it was necessary to go beyond simply getting the degree. It was necessary that something worthwhile be done with the degree. This entailed such acts as making a positive contribution to society in respect of contributing to education and / or family and community. This showed evidence of the espousal of the communal values of Ubuntu. These values and the way they have been used in the construction of academic success can be found in Chapter Six.

So a successful person was also seen as a responsible citizen who was able to make a positive contribution to society. Academic success was constructed on the participants' understanding of the notion of success in general terms, with the former seen as a forerunner to the latter, one leading to the other. This delineates the parameters of the terms success and academic success within the context of this thesis.

### **7.3 Initiatives of individuals**

Individual core qualities as human beings were often presented by the participants in their narratives, as building blocks for the construction of academic success in HE. Core qualities in humans is a term used in personality studies, within positive human psychology literature (Bandura, 1986; Korthagen, 2004). They include such qualities as creativity, trust and courage.

I found that these qualities were particularly important because they allowed participants to deal with adverse situations which may have side-tracked them away from their path towards academic success. Core qualities are valued in their own right as they determine how an individual copes with adversity (Korthagen, 2004; Gable & Haidt, 2005).

From the analysis of the data, I have identified self-efficacy and internal capacity as two important core qualities that I have considered to be indispensable drivers of personal success which led to academic success later. Many of the participants believed that personal successes gave them the inspiration to begin the process of constructing academic success. Their discussions in respect of this provided some answers to the critical question in this study relating to how the successful students constructed academic success in their undergraduate studies.

#### **7.3.1 Self-efficacy as a core quality in academic success**

In the construction of their academic success the participants' ability to be self-efficacious in that they developed the ability to produce goals and complete tasks in respect of these goals was clearly visible. This means that even after negative experiences in respect of their progress at university they were able to recognise their struggles and utilise the assistance they had received from students, staff, the institution, programmes, faculty or others in order to achieve academic success. After this they were able to organise their cognitive, social and behavioural skills into integrated courses of action towards attaining set goals once more and the participants found this self-efficacy to be indispensable in their construction and performance of academic success in university.

Again I found that participants' life experiences assisted them in developing and strengthening this quality which held them in good stead from childhood through to university. All of them experienced setbacks ranging from deprivation of sustenance and shelter, a poor socio-economic background, educational disorders as a result of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and Dyslexia and one of them was in a serious motor accident which threatened the resumption of her education if at all. These pre –university experiences gave the participants an opportunity to flex their skills and abilities in respect of agency and self-efficacy. This allowed them to construct personal success and academic success on strong foundations upon which the participants in this study built their constructions of academic success at university.

Korthagen's (2004) core qualities or character strengths of creativity, trust and courage and the academic emotions of pride and hope are clearly visible in the participants' construction of human agency and self-efficacy as they performed their academic success. As expected I also found evidence of the negative academic emotions of anxiety, boredom, stress, anger, shame and hopelessness experienced by the participants when they faced challenges which could have led to their dropping out of university.

The participants harnessed all the experiences related to both positive and negative academic emotions to construct academic success. In dealing with the negative emotions they experienced, they were able to propel themselves forward on the journey to success rather than allowing themselves to drop out. (See explanation of momentum through different academic and social experiences at university in the graphic illustration of the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of academic Success presented below). All the emotions are closely related to motivation, learning strategies, cognitive resources, self-regulation and academic achievement. Participants reported an intensification of the mix of positive and negative academic emotions because of pressure to achieve at the institution. Added stress was brought to bear because there was potentially a great deal to lose. The level of achievement in HE could affect the level of respect and earnings they were capable of commanding in future educational and professional careers.

### **7.3.2 Rising above dropping out – participants’ internal capacity.**

Borrowing Bourdieu’s concept of capital, the participants’ internal capacity to overcome particular negative circumstances was found to be contributing continuously towards their academic success. Their capacity to understand their particular circumstances, their ability to take the initiatives and follow through, undeterred, to their identified goals and their belief in themselves from childhood, were continually being developed, thus building up their internal capacity to identify, confront and go beyond hurdles in their lives.

Further, as they grew into adults, the complexity of the hurdles increased and this increasing complexity provided the participants opportunities to strengthen their resilience and internal capacity that prepared them for further more stringent challenges and eventualities. This growth in internal capacity could partly explain their drive to overcome difficulties and succeed in their endeavours. This internal capacity that they had developed out of their life’s experience is, therefore, another core quality that could explain how the participants were able to achieve success and later academic success.

### **7.4 Ubuntu**

This philosophy which is based on the notion of the interdependence of people, was experienced by the participant as support from family, school, university and community. The relationship created between the participant and higher power in addition to all the aforementioned assisted them to construct and perform academic success at university. Interestingly, a lack of Ubuntu something I call ‘ngekomuntu’ or the lack of people to support them in the surroundings or environment of some participants, did not dissuade them from continuing on the path to academic success.

This is similar to the notion of “disadvantage” and all that is attendant upon it preparing the student for challenges in the academic environment rather than being unprepared for these challenges by virtue of being “disadvantaged”. So looking at the participants experience through the lens of Ubuntu helped to clarify how they constructed success in relation to the TSIM as encapsulated in the Resilience Capital Lemniscates model of academic success.

What follows is a discussion of some other crucial elements of Ubuntu that influenced academic success.

#### **7.4.1 Family**

Some parents were totally absent while others were supportive even if they were not English speaking or educated. Different levels of support were experienced at different times in the participants' lives; a poor grandmother who had acted as caregiver and provided a moral compass, a mother championed the cause of a daughter who was likely 'to be a vegetable' and who had already lost a father.

Others felt bereft with no parental support or felt the strain of having a parent harassing them purely for financial gain and yet they found it in themselves to keep their passion for education and academic success ignited and in focus. Some participants drew on others for guidance rather than their parents with one repairing his fractured relationship with his mother after counselling following a planned suicide which was foiled while he was in the middle of his university programme. He only reconciled with his mother after counselling which followed his contemplated suicide in his second year at university.

All the participants benefitted from the context of Ubuntu in which they were either brought up or which they had experienced in their pre-university education. Whether it was a parent, grandparent or others in their environment in the absence of parents, they were afforded psychosocial support which led them to academic success. At times this occurred when they were feeling more intensely challenged or simply when they just required to know there was someone in their corner supporting them. Whatever the circumstances seeing their own lives as students as important to or part of another person's life had its foundation in the philosophy of Ubuntu, 'I am because you are.'

Having these empathetic relationships and having someone else travel the lonely journey through the many years of study with the participant also came from the compassion and humanness which resonates with the tenets of Ubuntu (see Louw, 2010). This support was invaluable and contributed in no mean way to the construction and performance of the participants' academic success at university. With Ubuntu also comes respect which was clearly evident when supporters, through sheer respect they felt for the participants,

continuously supported the participants whether they understood the full implications of studying and all the attendant experiences in the university context or not.

The upbringing and continued support of a rural grandmother was one of the things which helped Sandile to construct academic success while the language barrier and poor education of Afrikaans speaking parents did not preclude them from affording their daughter, Iliana, the kind of support that led her to construct and perform academic success.

As the rich detail above indicates these participants experienced significant familial support fashioned around salient concepts of Ubuntu. These aspects of their personal background assisted them to achieve social and academic integration into the university environment. It also assisted them to generate and add to their Resilience Capital which they accessed in constructing and performing academic success in their undergraduate studies at UKZN.

#### **7.4.2 School**

The ability for a teacher to see a participant's potential encouraged him to enter university in the first place while belief in another participant by her society buoyed her belief in herself and this propelled her towards her goal of academic success. In the first instance the student's actions and deeds in constructing academic success was directly influenced by the school teacher who followed his progress at university as well. In the latter instance, self-reliance was palpable but belief in the participant by the society helped her to construct and perform her academic success with passion and ardour.

A manifestation of Ubuntu would be found in all relationships between good teachers and learners since a good teacher will always see herself in the other (the learner) and continuously and consistently strive to guide the learners to a path which will take them to greater levels of improvement and development. The learner's journey becomes the teacher's journey and as was seen in Sandile's case, the germ of the idea to actually enter a university and begin studies there was planted by his teacher.

Sandile was an average student academically and because his socio-economic circumstances were poor he harboured no dreams of studying at a university. But his teacher saw his potential in music and gave him such confidence in his talent that he dared to dream that he

could be an opera star. He gave himself the opportunity to start with the Diploma in Music Studies for which he did not have to attain high Matric points so he was able to get into the programme. Ubuntu also means continuous empathy and support and his teacher followed his progress through his undergraduate degree studies which he accessed subsequent to his one year diploma.

Sandile believed that this was one of the foundations on which he constructed his academic success at university. 'A person is a person through other persons' (Tutu, 1999) is meant to guide the way people who subscribe to the philosophy of Ubuntu conduct themselves. Sandile's teacher conducted himself within the precepts of Ubuntu contributing fully to Sandile's accessing university education in the first instance and thereafter contributing to the construction of academic success in undergraduate studies at UKZN in the second.

#### **7.4.3 Significant Others**

The data suggests that significant others and their contributions in the lives of participants formed a compass point which guided them to achieving academic success in their undergraduate studies. When participants had no family support 'significant others' in the form of parent's live- in lovers, family friends, the local priest and boyfriends and fiancés helped them to perform academic success.

With some of these relationships Ubuntu manifested itself in the retainer figure (parent's live-in lovers, family friends, the local priest) seeing herself or himself in the participant and assisting with care and /or financial assistance because they saw their existences tied to those of the participants (humanness and Ubuntu). This was clear also in the case of the relationships with boyfriends and fiancés as the participants tended to see themselves in the significant other (Ubuntu) all of whom were academically successful and talented.

They therefore emulated the values the significant others had absorbed from their backgrounds and cultures. With Ubuntu, which encourages close connections in such relationships, it is inevitable that the participants will imbibe the characteristics they admire and begin to emulate these. In fact all of them were elevated to mentorship status as well in respect of the participants' construction of academic success.

So different manifestations of Ubuntu, whether you saw it from the participants' side or the retainers' side, all led to assisting the participants to attaining academic success in HE. Another instance in which a mirror was put up to the participant was at university where 'study buddies' provided necessary sounding boards and they were role models. But in respect of peers at university Ubuntu could produce the other side of the coin. Seeing the negative self in the other also would have had its place. I believe that while other peers were potentially counterproductive as role models, participants learnt what not to engage in from seeing the effects of the anti- social behaviour of the latter. So they negotiated the rough terrain of academia and still managed to perform academic success.

What assisted with this was the choice of friends on campus and learning from the negative experiences they encountered in primary and secondary school. When all of them were faced with potentially damaging behaviour choices they pushed back, chose good friends and made appropriate decisions. The way Ubuntu is understood as part of the conceptual framework, which explains the construction of academic success in undergraduate studies, is not one dimensional and therefore not easily interpreted.

This is borne out by what I found in Iliana's responses. Although in most of her responses she acknowledged her reliance on the relationships within family, school and university which followed the precepts of Ubuntu Iliana placed this reliance firmly in second place, "*Success depends on the person alone and there is only so much others can do for you.*" People in various contexts may have given her a start when it came to achieving academic success but she felt that it came down to her to use these opportunities in the proper way or she would never have succeeded academically or otherwise. They functioned as compass points and gave her direction in her journey to academic success. When she got lost she referred to them and returned to her course and recommitted herself to constructing academic success and so she reached her goal.

Even if the way was plotted with the help of her relationships which were constructed under the ambit of Ubuntu, she had to call on her resilience capital to make progress between the points and with her own effort to pass each point. This is how she came to perform academic success at university.

Ubuntu is a complex term and its many layers are acknowledged in these findings. Not only can the negative side of a participant's performance and behaviour at university be illuminated through an interpretation of this concept but it will also need to be placed in respect to resilience Capital which has been such an important part of my findings. This will be discussed further in the latter part of this chapter.

#### **7.4.4 University**

Inspirational relationships within the higher education institution formed a key element in achieving academic success. This therefore constitutes one of the key findings which surfaces in the many constructive relationships formed during undergraduate studies.

At university various people assisted the participants in constructing and performing their success. They were mentors, small-group leaders, academic advisors, supervisors who sometimes doubled as advisors (professors, lecturers), supporters, tutors, and role models. (Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley & Abarbanell, 2006).

The relationships between participants and these support elements was characterised by factors such as care, hospitality, compassion, openness and affirmation. Clearly these are also characteristics of Ubuntuism and were part and parcel of what the participants experienced as they constructed and performed academic success at university.

Inspirational relationships were supported by respect and dignity and regenerated by generosity, full participation and sharing including self-efficacy on the students' part. Self-efficacy acted as a catalyst in drawing together all the other elements that made for a successful teaching learning engagement at university. (See Katherine's account above)

All these are also basic tenets of ubuntuism which surfaced as elements which assisted the participants in this study to construct their success. It is safe to say the some of them realized the high ideals of Ubuntuism because they rose to a 'high calling' because they responded to "a sense of conscience and display(ed) generosity of spirit compassion and care" (Swanson, 2007, p.54).

In one case a lecturer paid a year's fees but this gave rise to a reaction in which the creditor unexpectedly paid it back when he received his first tranche of NSFAS funding. In this case both giver and receiver were functioning within the strict ambits of Ubuntuism, one responding compassionately and generously to another human being's need by providing the fees the participant urgently required. The other responded with a sense of conscience (responsibility to another human being) and chose to repay his sponsor as soon as he could although he was not forced to do so. In another case the participant paid back a NFSAS loan as soon as she could because she knew how much other students required financial assistance.

Values and morality underpin the philosophy of Ubuntuism (living and acting as part of a whole). This sort of action goes far beyond the university but to the participant appeared to be part of the whole measure of academic success. It was for this reason that a close study of Ubuntu also gave me some understanding of some aspects of what supported the performance of successful participants in their undergraduate studies.

From outside the university a priest supported a participant fully not only in terms of pastoral advice when necessary but also in terms of facilitating financial assistance and support in kind. An unexpected quarter from which support was garnered was from a participant's unsupportive father's live-in girlfriend and her colleague at work. At times complete strangers saw the potential of a participant and would support them. A future mother-in-law provided another unexpected source of support while a hospital CEO became an inspirational role model (Nezlek & Allen, 2006).

Significant others in the form of fiancés who were also students or successful young business people from solid backgrounds countered any stress related to the barriers the participants may have experienced in their construction of academic success by contributing to their psychological health (Chow, 2010). These inspirational relationships which were key to academic success at university one suspects went far beyond that arena, judging from the depth and continuity of the participants' experiences with their supporters. This was achieved through their common understanding and acceptance that both of them (participant and supporter) were part of a whole, both working towards achieving one goal. This is one of the fundamental concepts upon which Ubuntuism is built. The goal was academic success and all

these relationships contributed significantly to the participants' construction and performance of academic success in their undergraduate studies at UKZN.

#### **7.4.5 Community as audience/ beneficiary of Academic Success**

Another central finding which clearly kept participants on the path of attaining academic success was having the community as witness to their journeys to academic success, hiccups and all. So the community was not just witness to the forward journey to academic success, it was also the source of sanction when the journey was not progressing as it should have been. The propensity for fear of sanction through community response to failure and non-performance fed participants' motivation to perform and this helped them to construct academic success. If they were considering dropping out this focus on their actions and negative response would encourage them to reconsider such a decision.

One participant specifically mentioned the fear of embarrassment and recommended that students inculcate this fear in themselves because that is how he rejuvenated flagging motivation and constructed academic success. This fear actually emanated from pride in himself as part of the collective, his community. This was an extension of the notion of 'seeing himself in the other' or seeing how Ubuntu manifested in his understanding of the expectations the community and how his actions had to be subject to his community. It also manifested in how he put himself up for scrutiny and was prepared to be accountable to them.

From a Western philosophical point of view this may appear to be unnecessary obligations placed on oneself in respect of comparative strangers but from the African viewpoint of Ubuntu these ties, one human being to another, and a human being to the collective is non-negotiable and immutable. As Swanson (2007) observes, 'That is, a way of knowing that fosters a journey ... which renders us human' (Tutu, 1999), or in a collectivist sense, a greater humanity that transcends alterity of any form.... Ubuntu is borne out of the philosophy that community strength comes of community support, and that dignity and identity are achieved through mutualism, empathy, generosity and community commitment' (p.53-54).

Role models in the community were also set up as competitors in the race for academic success. I want to suggest that the collective community also presented as a competitor

because participants were able to see in practice how far they had to go to reach their ideals of success relative to the community. In this we see the interdependence between the participant and the community which is another manifestation of Ubuntu. The community through its connection with the participant (Ubuntu) regenerates the participant's motivation, and mission not only to construct but also to perform academic success. Motivation is an aspect of agency which is, in turn, one of the aspects of Personal Background related to goal making within the Tinto student integration model (TSIM).

#### **7.4.6 Higher Power as relational support**

While a discussion of this aspect of the findings may fit more appropriately under a methods section or within discourse on spirituality and such matters, I want to place this under the umbrella of Ubuntu because the participants themselves saw their relationship with the higher power in the same way as they saw their relationships with their families or significant others. In fact when they did not have the benefit of a reflective mirror of an Ubuntu ('I am because you are') type relationship especially within the family, they were forced to resort to the higher power who then became the sounding board and the source of support in the most difficult times. Participants' belief in mainstream religious faiths and traditional beliefs supported the construction of their academic success sometimes separately and sometimes together. An example of this was when participants invoked Christ and Christianity during points of near drop out threatening academic success at university.

One example of such an event was a suicide attempt and another occurred over a period of time when there was excessive consumption of alcohol. In the first instance during the first stages of the contemplated suicide the participant turned to prayer and during this time believed that he was granted metaphysical assistance through his friend and roommate. He believed that obtaining this type of assistance at this stage allowed him to last until the next day when he sought and obtained invaluable assistance from his lecturers and the administrators in his department. Belief in possible assistance from Christ alongside assistance from friends and departmental staff helped the participant to circumvent this, some of the lowest points in his journey to academic success.

In the second instance, a belief in mainstream Christianity alongside traditional beliefs took a woman participant beyond the point of giving up. She accessed this spiritual strength many

times during her educational journey in undergraduate studies when her academic success was being threatened.

I surmise that these participants' ability to take up this assistance, perceived or otherwise provided the momentum to take them beyond the nadir and up towards academic success. Strong relation to the higher power also allowed liberal acceptance of others and their habits such as smoking dagga, while guiding participants towards good conduct in themselves.

As already mentioned the participants' religious identity was also made up of traditional beliefs with one being called upon by the ancestors to be a 'seer' even while she had taken all the Christian sacraments. Traditional endowments including the gift of prophesy and being chosen to be a divine medium helped her to continue constructing academic success in the face of great challenge with possibilities of dropping out. The church and traditional religious practice together became the compass which directed her on their journey to academic success.

In Chow (2008) amongst the other factors that contributed to academic success, 501 undergraduates at a Canadian university placed belief and religious factors high up on the list with such aspects as psychological well-being and educational aspirations.

One of the significant markers of a fully designated role of adulthood is the ability to complete an educational programme which presupposes the ability to take responsibility for one's actions. (Barry & Nelson, 2004 ). This stage, however, can often come after a stage of recklessness (as is evidenced in the attempted suicide and binge drinking experienced by participants in this study). At the same time in attempting to circumvent this type of behaviour the emerging adult can develop an exploration of the spiritual self. This in turn could lead to the kind of positive results the participants cited above experienced and rather than dropping out or worse still, causing physical damage to themselves their belief system kept them on track and on the path to academic success.

#### **7.4.7 Concluding Remarks on the findings related to Ubuntu**

Therefore seeing the self in the other, (Ubuntu), manifested in support for academic success in HE, was variously experienced by the participants through their relationships with family,

school, lecturers as mentors and role models, significant others, the community and higher power. Concern, nurture, openness, affirmation and a sense of conscience, all aspects of Ubuntu assisted in the foundation for the construction and performance of academic success. The manner in which the participants experienced this theme was complicated by the fact that sometimes notwithstanding the lack of a manifestation of Ubuntu, and in fact because of the lack of it, they were still able to construct and perform academic success (compare how disadvantage prepares students for HE, Marshall & Case, 2010).

### **7.5 Opportunities sought and seized**

Another strut on which the construction of participants' academic success was built was seeking out and taking up of opportunities to progress. This presented opportunities to be financially resourceful, to obtain other general skills training or skills that were directly relevant to the discipline that was being studied. In order to identify such opportunities and to make good by them one requires a strong sense of personal efficacy to begin with.

Before an opportunity is seized there are many stages the participant would have to pass through before she finally uses it towards acquiring success in the academic environment of the university. The first stage involves the following; apart from identifying an opportunity it will involve an assessment of its value to the participant; it will then have to be applied for, at times including an interview that will have to be prepared for.

A second stage will include interacting and fulfilling the responsibilities of the job, whether it is voluntary or not and a third stage will include retaining any skills and training imbibed while on the job. Finally, and at times inadvertently, these will be applied to study and other interactions within the tertiary education environment which is complex and multidimensional and requires many different skills and applications.

Sandile's decision to seek a foreign university experience found him applying for a fully funded semester programme at a Canadian university which he succeeded in getting into. He decided to put his final year studies on hold and went overseas. This is how he identified and seized an opportunity. His sojourn at a Canadian university allowed him to experience a different approach to learning than the traditional H E pedagogy he had become familiar with

in South Africa. He applied the theory he had learnt to practice in his discipline and he brought new theory back to his alma mater in South Africa. This gave him confidence to play a leadership role in his group work in Drama and Performance Studies at UKZN and this in turn inspired greater commitment to study and to his preparation for lectures all of which held him in good stead so that he finally achieved academic success.

He mentioned specifically his greater knowledge and acceptance of cultural differences which improved his life skills and interpersonal communication. In fact he became so confident in his knowledge and skills that he was seriously considering following a Masters programme in North America. He developed a sense of ownership for his new community and this allowed him to re-examine and become more confident of his ability to control his educational journey through tertiary studies.

Although he was successful academically in his studies during his semester abroad he consciously took the decision to repeat a semester at UKZN so that he could complete the degree. This was in spite of the fact that UKZN was willing to credit him for his studies abroad. To return and to wish to make up for his absence from his final year programme (as successful as his study away was) points to his sense of self-worth, clarity of vision and strength of purpose regarding earning the degree on his own strength.

So while others may have considered this to be a stumbling block, he wilfully extended his studies at UKZN by another semester and simply started his Honours Studies in the middle of the year following the completion of his undergraduate studies. I have no doubt that in acquiring his new skills he enhanced his cognitive abilities and increased his higher order thinking capacity. His exposure to new and more effective problem-solving skills would have assisted him in widening his coping skills which he could use in order to persist even when he was under stress at university, and even in ways he had not undergone in the past. This gave him new strategies which he could use to integrate into his academic and social environment at UKZN.

The role of complex, multi-level realisation of agency in constructing academic success came to the fore. This was exhibited in opportunities that were sought and seized resulting in enhanced skills training, coping mechanisms, identification with new learning communities and locus of control amongst other things. In short this contributed directly to the building up

of the participant's resilience capital which he used to construct and perform academic success in his undergraduate studies at UKZN.

Other opportunities which might appear to hold less gravitas but which is just as important to academic success is the potential participants showed to earn financial resources to support themselves while in school and university. One went from being school entrepreneur to waitress to receptionist throughout her full-time university career and she supported herself working day in and day out through weekends and holidays. She got her degree in regulation time and also supported herself with dignity. From her success at market day experiences in school she enhanced her cognitive and commercial skills in respect of planning, purchase and sales and accounting and this held her in good stead when, as a student she supported herself by being a waitress for a large part of her tertiary education. She was able to perform in different jobs and even in a managerial position. She learnt a number of skills from these jobs. She was able to keep correct records and had to work as part of a team, both of which she was able to use in her studies and learning within a group at university. Her consistent employment also had the indirect benefit of strengthening her resolve to succeed.

Another participant, Prudence, went from tutor to researcher and on even to a leadership position at university residence. As a tutor and researcher she gained a depth of knowledge in the areas of teaching and learning at university level which she was able to apply towards attaining her own academic success there. Specifically her knowledge of content and difficult material was deepened while her understanding of methodology of paedegogy and fieldwork were broadened.

Informally she gathered problem solving and presentation skills and learnt to work effectively as part of a team and a community at residence on campus thereby enhancing her interpersonal skills. These roles honed her skills, clarified her moral stance, gave her an income and rendered her a role model to other students. In turn it led her to grow cognitively and psychologically and as a consequence of that she was more socially and academically integrated into the university environment. This then led her to academic success in undergraduate studies in no small way because she was given the option to pursue postgraduate studies in either Psychology or Drama and Performance Studies.

Bean and Eaton (2000) feel that one of the ways institutions can affect retention (and academic success) is by creating an environment in which in-service learning is encouraged. This is described as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p.5). We can see how in the case of Prudence, above, she attained similar development and increased learning through the opportunities she sought and seized.

One of the most important effects all the participants felt from the fact that they had identified opportunities and seized them was the fact that all of them felt changes in Locus of Control. In participating in different environments which the opportunities afforded them they realized that one person’s actions can bring positive change to a whole community. “They began to believe that individuals working together can help alleviate societal problems. This belief is contrary to the external locus of control perspective that life’s outcomes are only due to chance and luck. Students realize that by taking charge they can improve their lives” (Bean & Eaton, 2000, p.80).

#### **7. 6 Construction of a Successful student: language, epistemological access to content**

Identity construction has been linked to issues of success (Gee, 2001, Morrow, 2007). In this study it was found that how students constructed the notion of a successful student (identity construction) and how they saw themselves alongside this construction contributed towards their academic success in their undergraduate programme.

For example, Sandile knew that his construction of academic success would have very little foundation if he did not negotiate his way around the use of English language as the medium of communication at UKZN. He used Drama improvisation to build his confidence in spoken English and appreciated the fact that his efforts were acknowledged when he was asked to be a tutor albeit after he had succeeded in improving his English language skills. With regard to written English, he discovered that there was a great difference in the level of writing in his diploma programme as opposed to what was expected in his degree programme.

He then used the group experience in Drama and Performance studies to gain confidence, become more creative and more formal in structuring his written contributions. He identified the fact that academically he had enormous problems with structuring his work. His poor capacity in spoken and written English made him lose confidence but he found that in a group, he improved.

In the end his endurance won through. By immersing himself in English reading material, radio and television and on account of his willingness to learn the language he was assured of academic success in his undergraduate studies. He did not stop there, he continued with postgraduate studies which was a remarkable feat especially as he had entered university effectively via an access programme, the one-year Diploma in Music.

He continued to perform his academic success by understanding the concept of opportunity costs which led him to spending many hours studying instead of using the opportunity to socialise and have fun. This assisted him to construct a strong identity of a successful student who had learnt to become a consistently successful participant in academic practice thereby facilitating his own epistemological access to HE.

After all epistemological access is not given to a student or done to a student; a student attains epistemological access through his own engagement in the academic enterprise. (Morrow, 2007). In so doing Sandile created a student persona (identity) that was capable of accessing the epistemology that was required for academic integration and through that success at UKZN.

Other elements that were necessary to the construction and performance of academic success were participants' ability to be introspective, be focused and pay attention consistently over long periods of time. The introspection gave rise to a broader vision which included the ability to see success at university not constrained to just this arena but it went beyond this, serving not only educational and material purposes but also spiritual and altruistic concerns. True academic success unlocked the doors to a multitude of options not just those circumscribed by the discipline the participants had chosen to follow.

The above opportunities helped to firm up the participants' sense of identity as full time successful students and clarified their rights and responsibilities in respect of the institution,

their peers, the staff and programmes, etc. i.e. in relation to the various aspects of the environment in which they had been studying. One of the most important aspects of the student identity in relation to academic success is that of a language identity which has been already touched upon in relation to Sandile's struggles.

Participants learnt to be confident with language in multiracial first and second language groups by displaying endurance and willingness to learn which may seem a relatively simple concept but was often a problem and of utmost importance to their success. This was indispensable to the construction of academic success because this willingness to be immersed in the medium, which was English, proved to assist reading, writing, questioning, debating and finally answering examination questions in English.

This was only possible through time consuming solo study which assisted participants to understand different genres of text. Another foundation to constructing academic success in English was the appreciation of the difference between speaking and writing. What was also seminal to academic success was being able to understand the concept of opportunity costs in respect of a study time as opposed to time spent on cultivating friendships, and personal relations and generally socialising. What was also necessary was sometimes paying the cost of these excesses and being able to get back on track subsequent to these setbacks. Any serious students had to be disciplined and surround herself with empathetic students who were just as serious about succeeding at university.

One of the most important things academic success was constructed around was the understanding of the place and function of education which participants understood to be an end to a means or a way to open up the options one has in life (see above). Its function was to lead one to transformative learning which can occur in and out of a traditional classroom (Fried, 2007).

Students who had involved themselves in transformative learning were able to show how learning relates to their lives and illustrate how their views may have changed on various subjects. Participants found to be successful students, had to actively become more objective about what they learnt and how they interpreted that. Topics about transgender and homosexuality had to be divorced from one's religious affiliation in order to study these areas in a disciplined and academic manner. *"In the same way as one person can change another*

*completely in relation to religion and philosophy, education at university can do the same. This can be a cost of academic success in the same way as it can cost you money,”* explained one participant. This was how she saw her religious identity wrestling with her academic identity during her undergraduate studies.

Finally proper construction of academic success was based on a broad base acceptance of the function of education. It was meant to make it easier to facilitate understanding the world and its ways and allowing that understanding to improve relationships and the quality of life generally.

### **7.7 Concluding Remarks on Summary of findings**

To describe the elements that are present before academic success is constructed, grade average, gender, race, class and home base (rural, urban) are often included and so are the challenges attendant upon these spaces, all of which bring their own contexts with attending values. The student's many roles in society and within the HE context is therefore interrelated and this complicated matters further.

The description of the phenomenon of academic success and how it is constructed and performed in HE is therefore deeply layered, and multidimensional. Added to this is the fact that the performance of academic success is highly dynamic. What follows is my attempt to put a theoretical lens on the key findings which the participants in my study on Academic success in HE helped me to identify notwithstanding the motility that was involved in the co-construction of the observations every step of the way.

### **7.8 Putting a Theoretical lens to Key Findings**

Drawing from Tinto's Student Integration Model, the findings of the study suggests that Tinto's model could be re-represented as a force field model (see Fig 7.1), leading to my final conception of a Resilience Capital Lemniscates model of academic success. The force field as a construct had been utilised by Samuel (1998) in his study focussing on how student teachers develop professionally, suggesting that their professional identity is at the centre of a

force field between institutional, biographical and programmatic forces. The strength of the forces amongst these different fields, influence how the student teacher constructs his/ her identity.

In the student academic success model that I propose to explain the extrapolation from Tinto's SIM force fields that are constituted from interactions in the personal and institutional arenas, the centre of the field being the student agency. This force field gives rise to the momentum that students need in order to overcome potential departure or drop out points in their academic study. This momentum, therefore, creates the possibility for dynamic movements within the proposed lemniscates model.

In the final version, this model is placed in relief against the different environments in which Ubuntu is played out as has been explained in the conceptual framework chapter (Chapter Three).

In order to clearly understand what I term the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success, it is necessary to show how I arrived at the conceptualisation of the lemniscates model in the first instance.

In this respect, Tinto's framework for student integration was used as a starting point that identified the elements of the forces that impacted on the students (Student Social Integration, Student Academic Integration and Student Personal Background). In addition, through the analysis of the data in this study, other elements of forces emerged that impacted on the student. These elements of forces included the positioning of "I", as in self-agency, and this was found to be the key decision maker in the process of construction and performance of academic success by successful students at UKZN.

Therefore in the representation that follows (Self) Agency occupies the central position within the force field. Other elements include the impact of the relationships with the student classified through the notion of Ubuntu and the psychological issues that impacted on students' academic success in respect of their goals and motivations.

As I explained in Chapter Three (Conceptual Framework) after a perusal of relevant and critical literature on TSIM and other relevant models on retention and success additional

cognitive, psychological and educational concepts were chosen in order to further clarify the different generic aspects of the model (Student Academic Integration, Student Social Integration, and Student Personal Background).

I appropriated and used the educational concept of epistemological access with its many connotations for the purposes of my study and this allowed me to exemplify Student Academic Integration. This generic title generally refers to the institution and covers such areas as the ability of the successful student to meet academic demands and to identify with the beliefs, values and norms of the institution. This assisted me to begin my exploration of the issues which came to bear upon the question of how successful students constructed their academic success particularly within this context.

The appropriation of the educational/ cognitive/ sociological concept of student engagement with its attendant notions allowed me to further clarify the generic aspect of Student Social Integration. In so doing it deepened my understanding of the ability of successful students to form relationships with other students and with staff and what this meant in relation to their achievement of academic success.

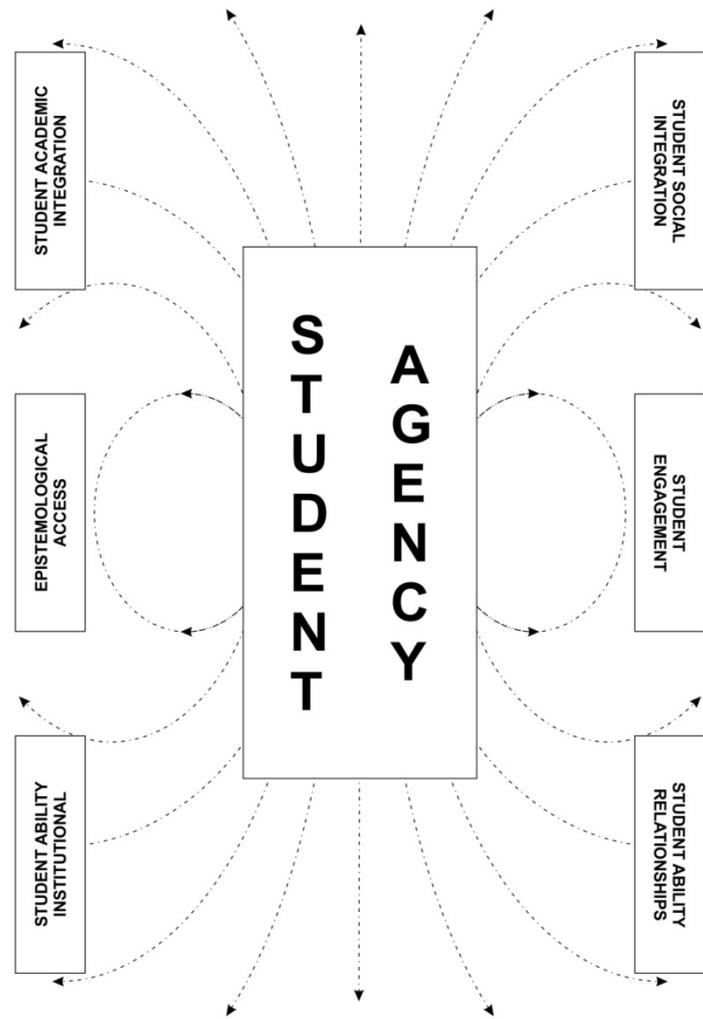
Finally the appropriation of the largely psychological concept of Agency in its many manifestations assisted me to explain the Personal Background element of the model. This allowed me to unpack the notions of goals and motivation which emerge from the personal background of a successful student which conspire together in propelling her towards academic success.

While it served my purposes to place my additional concepts in relation to specific generic areas of TSIM, it must be noted that these concepts can be just as well placed in relation to other generic areas because of the layered and complicated steps that often accompany the whole enterprise of constructing and performing academic success in HE (see below for further explanation).

The next step in the conceptualisation of the lemniscates model was to incorporate the dynamics and fluidity of these elements within the students' lives that influenced their resolve to succeed. These dynamics were incorporated into the conception through the notion of a force field that Samuel (1998) had explored in his thesis on "on becoming a teacher".

Drawing from the analysis of the data, it became clear that the identified elements that impacted on the students' lives and which in turn contributed towards their academic success came at different times within their study programme and had varying degrees of influence. It also became apparent through an analysis of the data that these students (participants) had low points and high points in respect of their academic success during their undergraduate study period. This added a further dimension to the dynamism and these low and high points, therefore, needed representation within the model.

All this could only be represented through a dynamic sphere, further influencing my decision to conceptualise a force field which represents some of my initial thinking when I began to design the lemniscates model. Fig 7.1, attempts to capture this dynamism, using Tinto's elements of forces that influenced student integration, further enhanced by elements that influenced student success from the participants' perspective of influential factors that contributed towards their academic success.



**Figure 7.1. Force Field model**

At this point it is important to take cognisance of two important facts that influenced my decision not to stop at the force field conception of student academic success, but to go further on to show the complexity of this dynamism which resulted in the conceptualisation of the lemniscate depiction of the proposed model on student academic success.

Firstly the fact that the additional explicatory cognitive and/ or psychological and /or educational concepts I have chosen to use are interchangeable within the larger model. To explain, one can see how Epistemological Access can influence Student Engagement and affect, in turn, the relationship between students and those between students and staff (Student Social Integration). That the opposite is also possible is just as true.

Further the fact that Student Engagement could affect students' Epistemological Access and therefore their Academic Integration can be taken as read. In the same way the elements of Agency (in its guises of motivation and goal orientation which emerge from the area of Personal Background), can influence Academic and/or Social Integration and vice versa.

So what has become clear is that the additional explicatory concepts I have chosen to appropriate may have appeared to be closely allied to certain generic areas of TSIM in my initial theorising of academic success in HE. In fact these appeared to be tied to each generic area to a lesser or greater degree.

After a deep analysis of the data what has become clearer is the fact that in order to theorise with more justification about how the participants in my study constructed and performed academic success, it became necessary to accept the incredibly dynamic nature of the TSIM. It appeared that not only could the additional explicatory concepts be interchangeable within the larger model but that, as in any dynamic living activity, in the construction and performance of academic success all the three areas of integration or parts of these could be working together at one and the same time.

So for instance a manifestation of Students' Social Integration measured by their ability to form relationships with other students could affect or be affected by their Academic Integration which is measured by their ability to meet the institutions academic demands. Therefore Student Engagement which I have placed in the Student Social Integration quadrant of TSIM could stand aside the two kinds of integration the student experiences in

an HE environment (social and academic). There are numerous examples that emerge out of the analysis of the data and a way I have chosen to conceptualise the roller-coaster multidirectional ride the student experiences in the university environment is through the Resilience Capital Lemniscates which is described below. That concludes the discussion of the first notion of interchangeability and collusion of some and/or all of the concepts within TSIM that has to be considered in interpreting these findings. This is one of the reasons why I did not stop at the force field model to present my findings in this study on academic success in undergraduate studies.

Secondly, with respect to the way in which I have theorised and appropriated Tinto's Student Integration model, (TSIM) it is clear that those motivations, goals and agency (Personal Background) which the participants brought to their engagement with H E studies or which they developed, was one of the most important elements that allowed the construction of academic success. Whether the participant was absorbed in:

1. social integration thereby creating relationships with other students or staff or
2. academic integration by attempting to meet academic standards or
3. attempting to identify with the beliefs norms and values of the institution,

Agency appeared to be one of the most important catalysts in any of these manifestations of engagement which, in its turn, led to academic success in HE. While it seems that it is a tautology to say that one's Personal Background (motivation, goal orientation and agency) is consistently present no matter what sector of integration a student is involved in, what I found to be continuously and consistently present was not always a passive presence of what the students brought with them. This was detailed in Chapter Six above and is unpacked further below.

Sometimes what carried them through their undergraduate experience was an active engagement with the motivation factor, goal orientation factor and agency factor all of which I call 'Resilience Capital'. In order to explain what meaning I have appropriated to this term and in order to theorise about the construction and performance of academic success at university, I want to defer to Bourdieu. The term 'Cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1971a) was conceived generally to address the issue of social inequality in the first instance.

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction appeared in retention literature in the last two decades or so in the US (McDonough, Korn & Yamasaki, 1997; Berger, 2000) and also only

recently in the UK (Longden, 2004; Thomas, 2002; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Cultural capital refers to the cultural store people have and take into an educational context like a university. Different students bring different amounts of cultural capital to their HE and some may be found wanting depending upon what the university demands of them. What they bring to the educational enterprise is dependent upon what they would have absorbed from the environments in which they lived and experienced.

There are many sociological lenses which can be brought to bear on persistence and retention and success and culture is one of them. This single lens gives a variety of perspectives and a focus on cultural capital generated a model by Berger (2000) on undergraduate persistence. A focus on cultural propositions generated one on premature student departure by Kuh and Love (2000). Both models place great store by the capital that the student brings with them into the university environment. Cultural capital is an extremely important concept in the discussion on academic success in HE in South Africa because of its history of institutionalized inequality which was sanctioned by the law. It goes to the nub of the matter in the transformation debate because cultural capital concretised in interpersonal and linguistic skills, demeanour and educational qualifications all of which can be used as a resource to advance one's social status. The more unequal the cultural capital is likely to be, the more unequal the potential for social or educational advancement and following upon that, for social reproduction. The variables which affect student retention are based on congruence between the students' cultural capital and the institution's cultural capital.

Bean & Eaton (2001) in writing about retention have also come to the conclusion that the most important factors influencing retention (and academic success) are related finally to the individual and individual psychological processes which is where retention decisions actually originate from. My understanding of the term Resilience Capital is based on a similar concept with the students bringing a reservoir of resilience to the HE experience depending on the background from which they had come. Further their own peculiar experiences will determine what resilience capital they are able to draw on when it is necessary.

In other words, Resilience Capital has been conceived by me on the same basis as cultural capital. Individuals who access the various sources of capital constitute the dominant class and are able to use their resources to maintain their position relative to others. McDonough, Korn and Yamasaki (1997) observes that cultural capital has no value unless it can be

changed into other forms of highly regarded commodities such as financial resources. The type of knowledge which is prized and valued by the upper classes is fairly inaccessible as it is not taught in any educational institution.

So social class becomes a powerful force that can shape retention and success in HE. It has serious implications for epistemological access in institutions whose culture may differ radically from that of the student. This relates to the notion of habitus which refers to the set of norms and practises of a social group and may highlight difficulties faced by students who are in strange surroundings and who may not be in a position to relate to these norms and practises of the university which is at base, a social group.

In this case there will be a disjuncture between the student and the group or even the institution with respect to the habitus. If a closer fit can be attained there will be a greater likelihood of academic success. In HE an institution which is inherently elite, it will need to provide not only orientation but also grooming for students with quite different cultural codes in order for them to properly access the education it is offering.

## **7.9 So what?**

### **7.9.1 Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success**

This thesis originated from an attempt to understand the construction and performance of academic success in HE from the successful student's point of view. The findings show that there is a continuous dynamic movement of the successful student between and amongst the different areas of participation and integration at university in order to construct and perform academic success.

Since I found that construction was designed on many levels with various points of entry and departure and performance was enacted in a multitude of environments (interpersonal, intrapersonal and institutional) it required a multi-dimensional model constructed in such a way that it would represent the breadth and depth of the successful student's experience at university. I finally chose to represent the subtleties and many dimensions of the experience of academic success in the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success.

In what follows I attempt to:

1. Describe the construction of a lemniscate and the development of the design of my model explaining why my model is constructed in this way ( including its relationship to the TSIM and my conceptual framework)
2. Apply the workings of the model specifically in relation to what I have uncovered about the construction and performance of academic success at UKZN.
3. Place the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success within the conceptual framework of Ubuntu.

### **7.9.1.1 Construction and design of the lemniscate model**

A lemniscate is a plane shape which consists of two loops that meet at a central point so a figure 8 on its side emerges. The symbol of an "eight on its side" is sometimes known as the lemniscate and is a glyph for infinity or for value that increases without limit. The English mathematician John Wallis (1616-1703) introduced the symbol to represent mathematical infinity in his *Arithmetica Infinitorum* of 1655. The term lemniscate refers to the shape itself, and the Swiss mathematician Jacob Bernoulli (1654-1705) first called the shape, a lemniscus (Latin for ribbon) in an article in *Acta Eruditorum* in 1694. I have appropriated this shape for two reasons.

Firstly according to the findings in this study, the construction of success by the participants went repeatedly forward and backward through the integration in the different sectors of HE until they emerged having achieved academic success. This has implications for both psychological and emotional changes with respect to each participant in relation to the construction of success in the HE environment.

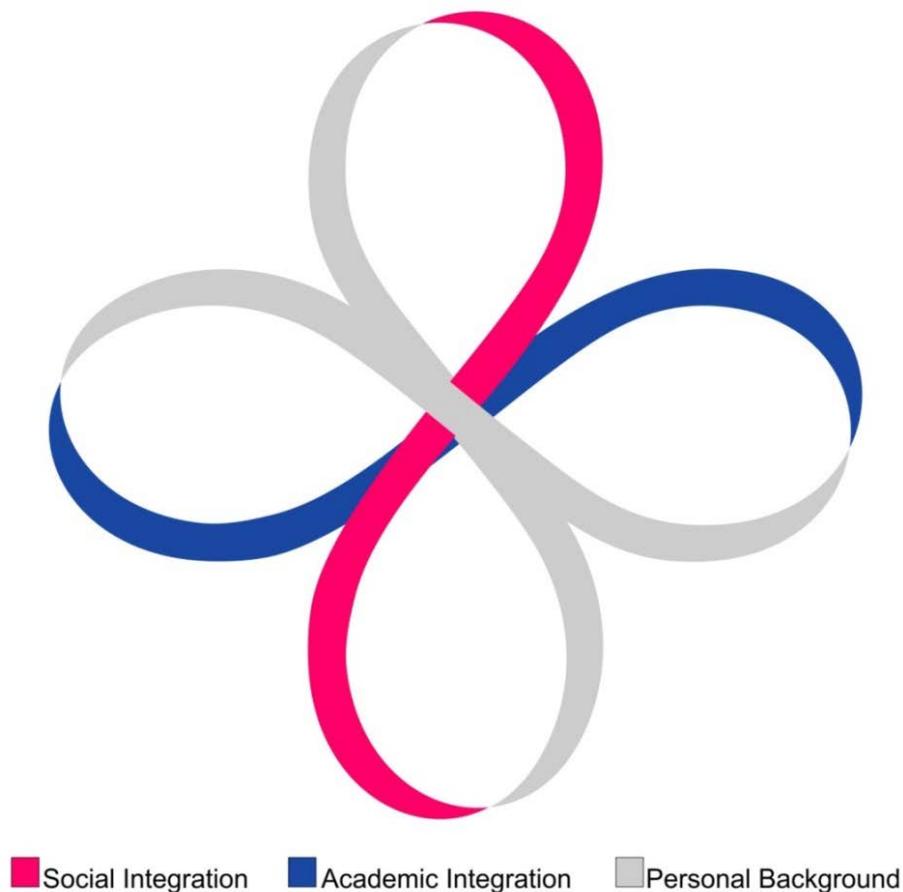
It is for this reason that I also drew on the concepts developed by the movement theorist Rudolf von Laban who also used the model of the lemniscate but synthesised the outer movement, and “another sphere of movement known as dynamospheric (which refers to more fundamental inner forces that involve psychological and emotional dynamics)” (Sutil, 2013, p.173).

Secondly the lemniscate is not simply a flat plane. If you travel across a plane you suddenly discover that you are on the other side of the ribbon. This is because it emerges from the Mobius Strip (see Amin, 2008) which was discovered separately by two mathematicians,

Johann Benedict Listing and Ferdinand Mobius in 1858. The strip is created by taking length of paper giving it half a twist and then joining the ends to form a single unending ring. (Amin, 2008, p.238).

My use of the lemniscate can be seen as an evolution of the Mobius strip in that it has the two sides visible but it presents as the infinity symbol on the x axis. The Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of academic Success has a second lemniscate which lies on the y axis (See Fig. 7.2) Amin (2008) draws from Zinek (2005) in using the phrase ‘Fiction of two surfaces’ to describe the way in which the strip turns over to reveal another side and yet there is an ‘unambiguous line of separation’.

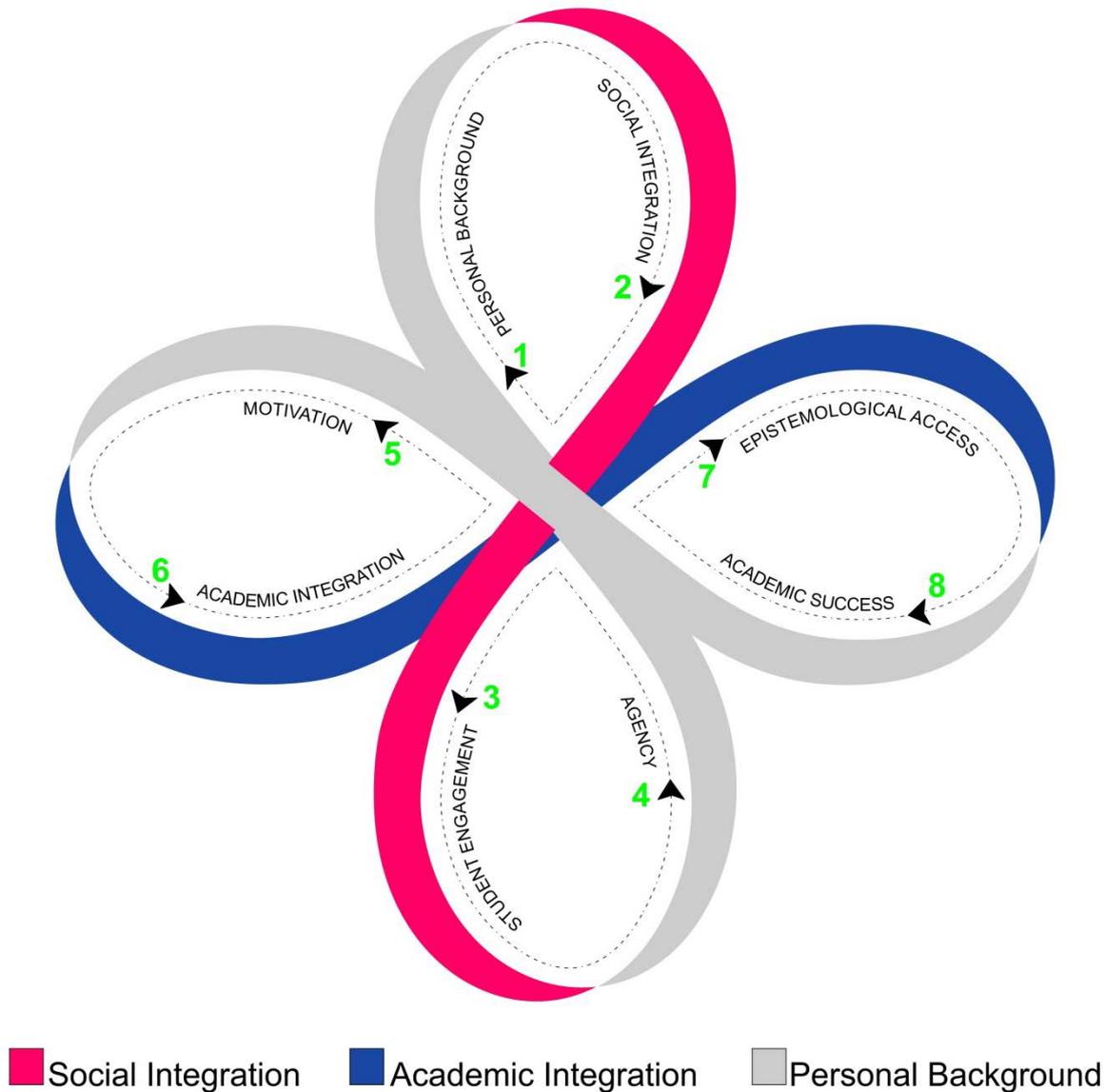
The figure below illustrates stage one in the evolution of the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success.



**Figure 7.2. Stage One: Evolution of Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success**

The second stage of the evolution of the design of Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success is represented in figure 7.3 below.

All the psychological and emotional dynamics can flow through in an unending motion and be exhibited in any part of the lemniscates.



**Figure 7.3. Stage Two: Evolution Design of Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success (excluding Ubuntu concepts)**

Each of the lemniscates both horizontal and vertical always shows a side which illustrates some aspect of personal background. (See grey shaded area in Fig. 7.3)

This particular journey to Academic success (represented in the above model) follows the ascending numerical order, starting with:

1. on the vertical lemniscate, Personal Background which leads into
2. Social Integration and it traverses the midpoint and flips to show the other aspect of Social Integration which is
3. Student Engagement which then flips over to show
4. Agency which is part of Personal Background which could go any way depending on the impetus but crosses the midpoint to
5. Motivation which is another aspect of Personal Background which flips over to show
6. Academic Integration which goes across the midpoint to show
7. another of its own (Academic Integration) aspects i.e. Epistemological Access which ultimately ends in
8. Academic Success which is part and parcel of resilience capital

While this is just one way of interpreting the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success in a particular journey to academic success, the construction of academic success can follow any pathway. This particular pathway may be applied to the participant, Sandile's journey to academic success. The journey of the other participants could also be plotted on this model and may follow a different pathway. Even as it does, no matter what aspect of social or academic integration the journey to academic success exhibits, the other side is always personal background with its attendant Resilience Capital present.

My findings indicated Resilience Capital was one of the most important elements in the construction and performance of academic success in the challenging HE environment and the journey to Academic Success could not be completed without it. This is borne out generally by my findings with respect to the manner in which all the participants constructed their academic success. More specifically and cogently it is borne out by the manner in which they negotiated and got beyond the near departure or dropout points in their journeys to academic success (see analysis Chapters Six and Seven). The uncovering of these survival techniques in what is often a volatile environment is valuable and could play a significant part in enhancing academic success in HE.

### **7.9.1.2 Workings of the model in relation to Academic Success**

The whole notion of agency manifested by resilience capital and the way I saw it in analysing the data was complicated by the fact that it could lay dormant within the participant and remain passive through some undergraduate experiences so that the participants would not engage it when they were faced with challenges and as a result would come near to dropping out of the university.

A salient question would be how institutions assist their “at risk” students either to find and access these dormant reservoirs of resilience capital or to develop and strengthen them so that they may be accessed when needed. The difficulty that may be encountered is the fact that the institution has influence over the student for only a short period of time and resilience capital is often built over a long period of time. This is one of the most important challenges poorly performing institutions have to meet. The important thing, however, in the case of the participants in this study, was that the times they actively engaged agency, motivation and goal orientation, not only would it take them past the point of challenge but it would propel them towards their goal of academic success or nearer to it. The whole journey at university can be seen as forward and backward looped movements (See Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success).

The forward movements could be seen to represent arriving at points of academic success in greater proximity and the backward movements could be seen to represent the points of challenge in the participants’ academic lives. The forward movements could also be seen as high points in the life of the student and the backward movements as the low points. These were specifically described in the autobiographies which generated the data set I analysed.

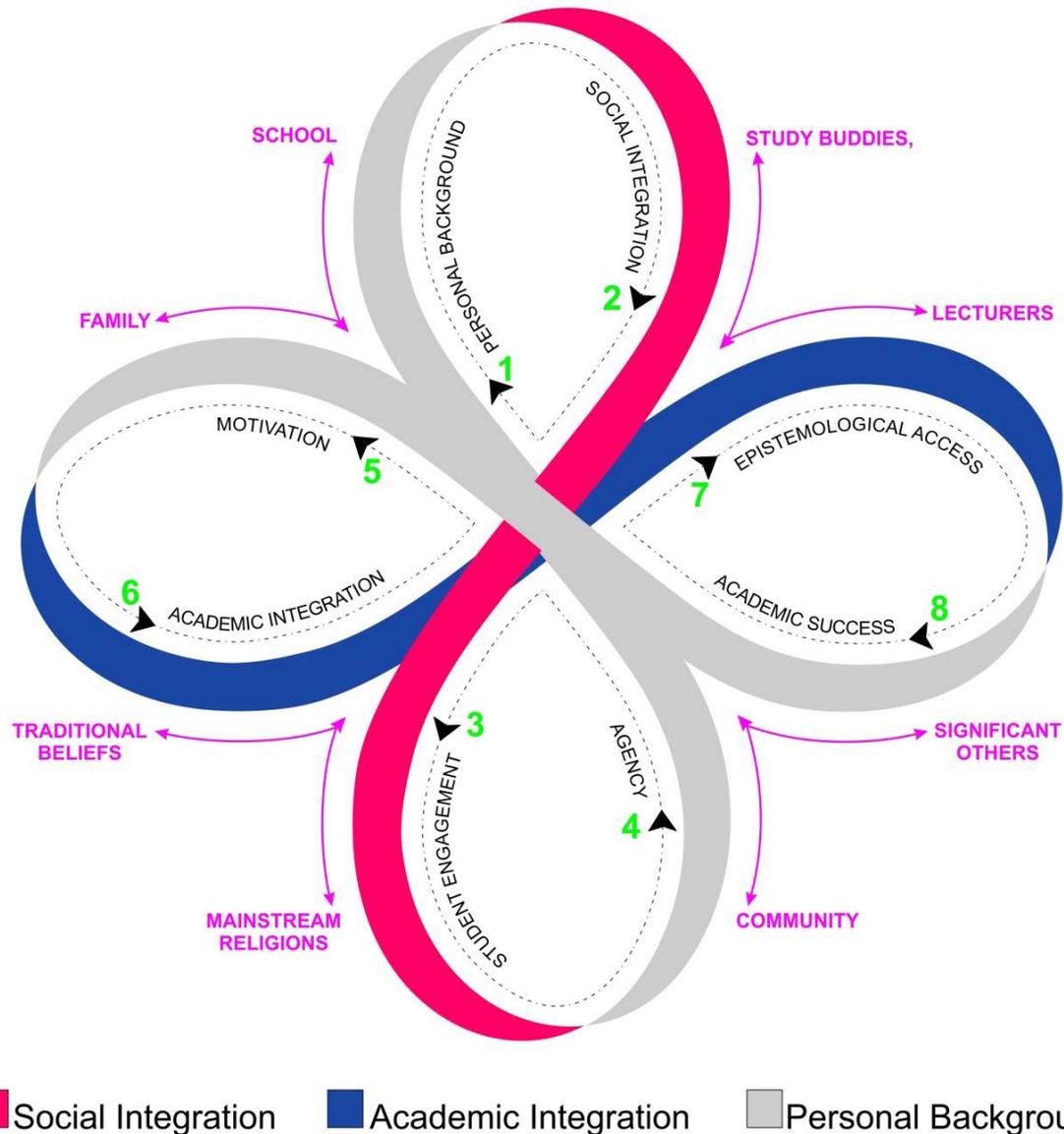
However, the journey to academic success is not one dimensional, taking place at one level. There is not always one for one motions, forward moves representing positive advances towards greater success and backward ones representing failures or near failures. We all acknowledge that in the pendulum swing of student life experience, it sometimes takes a strong swing back to go even further forward with one movement taking impetus from the other and the backward swing being seen as both positive and negative at the same time because of how far forward the momentum can take a student.

If these loops of progression and regression (towards and away from academic success) are superimposed on the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic of Success, it may allow us to make observations of whether regression from academic success came as a result of a participant's difficulties in Social Integration and Student Engagement and /or in Academic Integration and Epistemological Access. In order for this study to fully acknowledge the nuances of the participants' explanation of their construction of and progression towards academic success, it is also necessary to have a clear idea of how they circumvented points of failure and near drop-out of university.

### **7.9.1.3 Putting the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success and Ubuntu**

Finally as my conceptual framework indicated the concept of Ubuntu served the need to explain further, in South African terms, the construction and performance of academic success by successful students in HE in South Africa.

In the final figure of this thesis and to complete the model I have designed to encapsulate the findings in this study on academic success, the elements of Ubuntu are placed in relief against the successive movements that are followed in a possible journey of academic success by any of the participants in this study.



**Figure 7.4. Stage Three: Final Design of Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success including Ubuntu concepts**

As has been indicated above, this is just one way of interpreting the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success and the construction of academic success can follow any pathway depending upon nature of the journey of the participant and the experiences that accompany it. In the same way different elements of the manifestation of Ubuntu can be effective in relation to different parts of the lemniscates.

With respect to the particular pathway to academic success illustrated in Fig 7.3, I considered the following possible connections:

- The alliance between School and Family Ubuntu force field influencing both Personal Background (1) and Motivation (5)
- Study Buddy and Lecturer/Mentor Ubuntu force field influencing the Social Integration (2) and Epistemological Access (7);
- Significant Others and Community Ubuntu force fields influencing Academic success (8) and Agency (4);
- Higher Power Ubuntu force fields, Main Stream Religions and Traditional Beliefs influencing Student Engagement (3) and Academic Integration (6).

In the same way as I indicated that the journey to academic success is not one dimensional when I described my design of the lemniscate, there is not necessarily the influence of just one element of Ubuntu that can be seen to be at play at a particular point in the participants' performance of academic success at university. A number of elements may be engaged at many different levels so the superimposition or layering of concepts related to Ubuntu upon the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success better presents the nuances that characterise any journey to academic success. It's application is as multidimensional and multidirectional as the lemniscates in this attempt to understand the construction and performance of academic success in H E from the successful student's point of view. The continuous dynamic movement of the successful student between and amongst the different areas of participation and integration at university in order to construct and perform academic success is evident in the findings. This is also visible within the construction of the model encapsulating Ubuntu and its effects on academic success.

### **7.9.2 Back to the beginning**

I began this study in an environment in which the targets for access to tertiary education in South Africa were being met but the opposite was true for those related to success. The failure and drop out side of the prism encapsulating HE was favoured as a way to look at this phenomenon in studies over the past few decades. I wanted to see through the success side so focused on the few that succeeded and wanted to understand, from their point of view, how they constructed and performed academic success in HE sometimes against the greatest odds.

Therefore not only did I focus on the retention and success side of the prism but to get a closer more authentic look at academic success, I attempted to see the phenomenon through the eyes of the successful undergraduate student at UKZN. This was the initial stimulus for this study and continues to feed the purpose of this study even in these final chapters.

By the end of the analysis and findings, I found that the lemniscate was an appropriate vehicle to conceptualise and explain the journey students traversed in their undergraduate studies to academic success. It was appropriate for a number of reasons. First it is a three dimensional dynamic figure which accommodates two sides of the same coin pictorially in one image (see description of Mobius strip above).

Secondly and more importantly it is able to represent the force fields between and amongst the complicated backward and forward motions between and amongst the different environments within which the student participant operates in her quest for success at university. These force fields give rise to the momentum or power which propels the participant through undergraduate student life. This momentum or power exhibits as Resilience Capital which is brought or gathered, or both brought and gathered by the student as she passes through the different areas of undergraduate student life (see TSIM).

Of great interest in respect of this Resilience Capital is its ability to both exhibit the momentum or power residing in the student and its ability to affect the level of this momentum by feeding back to it either positively or negatively.

If this Resilience Capital is at its minimum, a challenge to continuance of tertiary studies is posed. The student participant will not have the energy or resilience to pass through these difficult points and her lack of energy and agency manifested in diminished resilience capital will hold her back from being pushed through the moments (experiences) the lemniscates represent finally to reach the goal of academic success.

If Resilience Capital is at its maximum having been gathered and /or brought into the HE environment it will produce the greatest momentum through the lemniscates representing the different HE environments and this will result in academic success in undergraduate studies (completing the undergraduate degree in regulation time). So the lemniscates model seeks to

explain how a student goes beyond difficulty, cognitive and learning, educational, financial and indeed even physical, emotional and psychological, to academic success in the end.

Therefore the topography of the lemniscates is able to typify momentum, direction, environment and over and above these elements, it is able to encompass the dynamosphere (see Sutil, 2013) which can exhibit the emotional and psychological aspects which accompany any movement through the lemniscates of academic success.

Although the model seems to presuppose the progression of one developmental stage to another following the numerical order starting with 1 Personal Background (which has bound within it Resilience Capital), this is not necessarily the order in which the educational experience at university may unfold.

In her journey to academic success the student participant may not necessarily go on an upward trajectory straight to academic success, she may go backwards or down towards a potential drop out point and then ascend towards the possibility of attaining success. There is not necessarily a clear junction between transitions from one developmental stage to another. The journey loops, rises and falls and is propelled along by the life skills that have been gathered through personal, circumstantial, environmental, psychological and academic experiences all of which assist the student participant to push ahead to academic success.

As explained above it is closely related to the Ubuntu model. So academic success is influenced by biography, schooling and the institution the student participant attends, amongst other things such as community, study buddies, higher power, significant other, etc and the lemniscates model allows me to formulate a relational notion of how all these areas play out in the construction and performance of academic success. This is what the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success represents.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Conclusion**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter focused on the key findings emerging from Chapter Six and then presented a discussion of these findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framings that guided this study. This was presented in an attempt to answer the central questions posed in this study relating to how students construct academic success and how they explain their performance of academic success in undergraduate studies.

This led to my thesis on the subject which was also captured in a graphic model representing the multidimensional, multidirectional, educational, emotional and psychological journey which successful undergraduate students believed they undertook in order to purposefully complete their degrees at UKZN in regulation time. The thesis was contextualised within the Ubuntu framework which was included in the theoretical framework which launched this study in the first instance. This graphic model was entitled Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success.

This concluding chapter will place my study briefly within the context of the relevant discourse in HE, condense the key findings linking them to the key questions and conclude with the significance of the study and recommendations in relation to the relevant discourse in HE studies.

In doing so this conclusion attempts to recall the purpose of the study and its research questions with a view to showing how the purpose and research questions were addressed. It also engages with key ideas of the central thesis and shows how these key ideas would be relevant and significant to the various interested groups in strengthening higher education throughput. The chapter concludes with some indication for further research and recommendations.

## 8.2 Context of Study

My study contributes to the discourse of retention, throughput and success in HE in South Africa rather than to the discourse of drop out, under preparedness and failure which is heavily subscribed to in HE research in this country and abroad (see Chapter Two).

It was understandable that the access to HE was the focus of researchers in the first two decades of democracy in South Africa because of the iniquities that apartheid brought to bear on the education of South African citizens of colour. With the meeting of access targets and the poor commensurate success rates in HE in the country it was also understandable that it became a matter of urgency that under preparedness, reasons for dropout and lack of persistence of students in tertiary was focussed upon.

However I wanted to know more about how those few who did succeed in undergraduate studies, how they constructed their success and actually performed it by attaining a bachelor's degree in regulation time. In a qualitative, interpretative case study of students at UKZN, I was able to follow my interest by delving deeply into the experience of a purposively chosen sample of Humanities students so that I was allowed to see through their eyes how they constructed and performed academic success and why they did this in the way that they did, sometimes against the greatest odds.

The proportion of dropouts is high (50% through undergraduate studies with only 22% of the remaining 50% graduating within the specified three year duration for a generic Bachelors degree (Letseka & Maile, HSRC Policy Brief, 2008). The actual point of dropping out was also focussed in this study. What took the successful participants almost to the point of dropping out and what actually kept them from doing so thereby allowing them to persist and succeed was of interest. After all this resulted in the participants obtaining a Bachelor's degree in regulation time. This assisted me to understand more fully how the participants constructed their academic success even when they were challenged by conditions which prevailed during their undergraduate studies.

The success rates referred to above have been further denuded. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training was approved by the South African Cabinet on 20 November 2013 and launched in January 2014 by the Department of Higher Education and Training

(DHET) within the Ministry of H E and Training. It addresses a graduation rate of 15 per cent which is well below the international norm of 25 per cent for students in three-year degree programmes.

The question of poor success rates in HE is not only a local issue. As we see from this study, HE the world over also needs to address the low success rates in undergraduate programmes. The findings of my study therefore has serious implications for discourse in this area of HE studies to which I will return after summarising the findings.

### **8.3 Findings related to the key questions in this study**

The key question which formed the basis of this study was:

“How do successful students construct academic success in HE?” presupposing the sub questions:

- i) Why do they construct it in this way?
- ii) How do they perform academic success?

First the participants believed employability was a way to measure whether they were successful generally and balance between the different aspects of their lives led them to construct academic success which was a complex, continuous process, not a product which could be captured in one moment in time.

Secondly, they continuously talked back to the area of Personal Background (see TSIM). This was because all of them suffered personal setbacks and against all odds constructed and performed academic success. Their setbacks had arisen either because of poor socio-economic family background, physical disability or a learning disorder which was congenital; partial paralysis of the face and a propensity for epilepsy as a result of a serious motor vehicle accident; poor circumstances in childhood and in one case even sexual abuse in early childhood.

These personal setbacks were exacerbated by other difficulties including language proficiency, institutional violence and negative peer pressure. All of them constructed their

academic success from the outset on negative foundations which were complicated by other academic, social and personal experiences in their undergraduate studies.

It was agency, motivation and resilience which propelled them towards academic success and this momentum took participants beyond a point of potential dropout. Always there in waiting stored resilience capital (see Chapter Seven) could be called upon to support the participant in times which threatened academic success. Sometimes this store would be accessed only after a number of attempts to access this resilience capital which had been accumulated and strengthened often during challenging experiences and over a long period of time.

While aspirations to earn a PhD directed even undergraduate academic success, earning this high academic accolade presented only part of picture. The necessity of putting it to use in meeting the community's or family's needs first seemed paramount and this had to be achieved before full academic success could be claimed. So the construction of academic success was closely associated with the general notion of success and it appeared with the notion of Ubuntu.

To construct academic success within the concept of Resilience Capital, individual core qualities of creativity, trust, courage, self-efficacy and internal capacity had to be present and were substantial drivers of academic success. These assisted participants to recognize and utilize the assistance offered by students, staff, the institution, programmes, faculty or others.

Together with this they organised cognitive, social and behavioural skills into integrated courses of action towards attaining set goals even when they were on the verge of dropping out. This overcame the negative academic emotions of anxiety, boredom, stress, anger, shame and hopelessness experienced by the participants when they faced challenges which could have led to their dropping out of university. So constructions of academic success were also indirectly founded on negative emotions.

Some answers to the sub-question regarding why participants construct academic success in the way that they do can be found in the manifestation of the African notion of Ubuntu (the interdependence of people, one seeing oneself in the other) which was a way in which I

explained some of the observations the participants had made about how they constructed academic success.

At the same time I saw how these manifestations consistently upheld and strengthened the idea of Resilience Capital that never left the successful participant. While I will not be referring to this specifically in the following discussion of Ubuntu because of the shortage of space, this must be kept in mind as it is a seminal part of this thesis.

The manifestations of Ubuntu were found in the participants' supportive relationship with family members in the first instance and interestingly even if family did not provide support, participants found the support in themselves or in other relationships. This assisted them to continue to construct and perform success.

Next the school, through mentor-teachers directed them to university studies and significant others in the form of parent's live-in lovers, family friends, the local priest, boyfriends and even a future mother-in-law assisted when times were tough. When participants got to university, study buddies showed them how to achieve academic success although peer pressure with commensurate negative habits could have taken them towards failure and dropout rather than academic success. These mixed experiences and what the participants chose to take from them, helped them to add to their Resilience Capital.

Inspirational relationships at UKZN formed during undergraduate studies were presented as reasons for achieving academic success. These include those with mentors, small-group leaders, academic advisors, supervisors who sometimes doubled as advisors (professors, lecturers), supporters, tutors, and role models that participants came upon during the extra work they did in their disciplines.

The community played three roles:

- 1) witness to the journey to academic success;
- 2) sanctioning body when any difficulty occurred within this journey threatening completion;
- 3) according to the participants it was to act as the beneficiary when they finally achieved academic success in regulation time.

This is why, according to them, the participants constructed and performed academic success in the way that they did taking full cognisance of the roles of the community.

Finally, under the umbrella of Ubuntu, I chose to place mainstream faiths and religions and traditional beliefs (see Chapter Seven for reasons) which sometimes coexisted and gave participants the strength to continue towards academic success even in the face of the most daunting odds.

Apart from Ubuntu and its contribution to Resilience Capital, personal efficacy, an aspect of this capital, was strengthened in no small way through opportunities being sought and seized. The identification, taking up and utilisation of opportunities to learn skills, advance knowledge, become financially secure in some instances and interact in a multicultural environment to enhance life skills and interpersonal communication, all contributed to personal efficacy.

Cognitive abilities and increased higher order thinking capacity through new and more effective problem-solving skills strengthened participants' coping skills to persist in their journeys to academic success even when they were under stress.

Resilience Capital was represented very strongly in changes in Locus of Control which refers to the participants' realisation that it is possible for their actions to bring positive change to a whole community. They become empowered because they believe they can help to alleviate societal problems and that they realise that they can improve their own lives by taking charge of it. This belief contrasts with the external locus of control which gives the participant the perspective that life's outcomes are only due to chance and luck (Bean & Eaton, 2001). So opportunities that were sought and seized contributed directly to the construction and performance of academic success in the participants' undergraduate studies at UKZN.

The last finding was related to the important concept of identity construction of a successful student without which the participants could not attain academic success and which includes such aspects as English language competency and expression (both oral and written), epistemological access to which students can only attain access through their own engagement in the academic enterprise (Morrow, 2009).

One of the most important catalysts around which academic success was constructed was the understanding of the place and function of education. Participants believed that to be successful students, they had to actively become more objective about what they learnt. In order for them to attain superior knowledge they had to separate their academic persona from their personal ones and participate as the former in a transformative teaching learning experience at university.

In respect of the function of education the participants' construction of academic success was broadly based on the assumption that education was expected to make it easier to understand the world and its ways and that would contribute to the improvement of relationships and of the quality of life in the general sense.

The interpretation of academic success and the way in which it is constructed and performed in HE at the University of KwaZulu-Natal was deeply layered and highly dynamic with the journey to academic success often moving backward and then forward in the quest for academic success. The description of my findings about this study of the phenomenon had to be similarly layered, highly motile and capable of independent multidirectional movement.

The mobility in respect of the journey and multidirectional movement in which each participant was engaged was captured in the three dimensional dynamic figure of the Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of academic Success which was able to represent the force fields between and amongst the complicated backward and forward motion between and amongst the different environments (represented in TSIM) within which the student participants operated in their quest for academic success at university.

The experiences in these different environments were complicated by what the participants brought in their understanding and experience of Ubuntu in various other parts of their lives. The momentum or power which provides the propulsion for the continuance of this journey to academic success was seen as Resilience Capital which was garnered by the participants as they passed through the different arenas of undergraduate student life (see TSIM ).

#### **8.4 Recommendations and Significance of the Study**

This study was conducted in the context of a poor producing system which costs government and HE institutions a great deal because of poor student success rates and which also gave rise to substantial equity issues. It contributes to the debates on success, persistence and retention and indeed dropout and failure and will assist institutions like the DHET to find strategies to manage the dropout and failure rate at university.

What students consider as salient features in their construction and performance of academic success in undergraduate studies would assist institutions to design menus of experience which would enhance retention, persistence and following that success. One of the areas which would need strong focus is what to do for students who are on the verge of dropping out and the findings of this study can contribute in this regard.

Interventions also require to be made at a systemic level in the provision of tertiary education so that the success rate of students at undergraduate level within institutions such as UKZN can be increased. This can be enhanced by a re-examination of areas such as funding, effectiveness and efficiency of the system, quality of education including fitness for purpose, transformation, the level of academic challenge, the degree of active and collaborative learning, student-staff interaction and the provision of enriching educational experiences. All this can be reconsidered and new plans and policies can result which can in turn be informed by what students say in the findings of this study as a starting point.

This study fits squarely within the current discourses that are unfolding nationally and internationally in respect of academic success and retention in HE institutions. It will contribute significantly as interestingly the decades of research in this area have not effected any significant changes here or abroad in the areas of retention and throughput.

So within an interpretative paradigm this qualitative bounded case study of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa , in respect of how successful Humanities students constructed academic success in a three year degree programme, with Drama and Performance Studies or English Studies as their majors, contributed to an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of academic success.

In addition it contributes to discourses on the dearth of student success which is a worldwide phenomenon. As student success cannot be attributed to a single factor this study unpacks the other factors which contribute to academic success from the point of view of the student as it sought to understand how undergraduates construct academic success and perform it in the way that they do.

As is borne out by the findings, resilience capital was the centre point on which academic success hinged. My construction of this term came from the fact that it presented in the findings as an aspect of human functioning which draws on personal experience whether it is cognitive, affective, of biological significance, and /or emanating from behavioural patterns or environmental influences.

All these factors interact with each other in concert or with some or others often in a multidirectional. My Resilience Capital Lemniscates Model of Academic Success illustrates this; that these interactions occur in a manifold multifarious environment and the student participant constructs an environment for academic success from whatever is imposed upon her. This is how the participants in this study understood their construction and performance of academic success at UKZN.

The ability to construct such an environment represents a high level of engagement in personal agency and all HE institutions are seeking the key to how they can unlock their students' ability to regulate themselves and their behaviour towards the purpose of achieving academic success (Bandura, 2001). The implications of studies on academic success will become even more important in the future in South African HE as participation rates soar in the next decade and a half, as the following statistics illustrate.

“Participation rates in universities are expected to increase from the current 17.3 per cent to 25 per cent – that is, from just over 937 000 students in 2011 to about 1.6 million enrolments in 2030. As participation increases, universities must simultaneously focus their attention on improving student performance. Improving student access, success and throughput rates is a very serious challenge for the university sector and must become a priority focus for national policy and for the institutions themselves, in particular in improving access and success for

those groups whose race, gender or disability status had previously disadvantaged them.”

The White Paper for Post- School Education and Training, 2013, p.30

My study and other studies like it can complement such studies as the Ashesa Report (2014) which wanted to understand the workings of the academic interventions designed to support and improve student success in HE in South Africa.

Senior managers who were in charge of Academic Development and/ or teaching and learning sections in the 23 public universities in South Africa were targeted for interview. My study hones in on the student point of view and goes beyond the scope of purely academic intervention including personal background and aspects of social integration at university within the context of Ubuntu to understand how students construct and perform academic success at UKZN.

One of the limitations of this study, however, is the fact that academic success is equated to graduation in regulation time. An evolution of this study would be cohort studies which Letseka, Cosser, Breier and Visser (2009) refer to when they criticize the fact that graduation rate remains a proxy for throughput. Cohort studies (i.e. following a student from registration to graduation) would provide a more nuanced and more accurate representation of the throughput rate. The CHE's newly released *Proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa* (CHE, 2013a) is an exception with its detailed analysis of the 2005 and 2006 cohorts.

There is a paucity of these studies in HE throughput and retention discourse at present mainly because access is being focused on rather than graduate output and the salient causes restraining success and competency in the HE sector (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). However in the meantime my study does present some of the complex nuanced understandings of how successful students construct and perform success.

Boughey (2012) refuses to explain poor student success using a deficit model which attributes failure to students' inability to overcome their inadequacies in preparation for HE. My study supports this view and encourages instead a complex analysis of students' experience through their eyes to explain how they construct and perform success in HE.

The findings of this study will support the two different gazes of HE success studies, i.e. what the institutions can do and what students can do to promote success (Strydom & Mentz, 2010). It will also give grist to the mill in the topical debates related to whether institutions are prepared to receive students who are potentially successful and can provide the environment that can take the student towards achieving academic success (Jones, Coetzee, Bailey & Wickham, 2008; Dhunpath & Vithal, 2012).

While a sense of exceptionality in a context of insecurity in which they had to exercise impulse control, made up some of the findings of my study on academic success, the participants in this study saw other ways in which they constructed their academic success.

If these aspects are researched further they should assist the student in undergraduate studies at university to hone the intellectual tools and skills that will assist them to work as developed, refined, socially responsible and politically aware South Africans which is one of the goals of national policy documents including the National Development Plan (2013), the New Growth Path (2010), the Industrial Policy Action Plan (2013) and the Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa 2010-2030 (2009).

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