

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF TAKING A LANGUAGE AND  
MEDIA STUDIES HONOURS SPECIALISATION AT A SOUTH AFRICAN  
UNIVERSITY**

**By**

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MEDIA STUDIES HONOURS SPECIALISATION AT A SOUTH AFRICAN  
UNIVERSITY**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

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**2016**

## **Declaration**

I, **Temitope Oluwakemi Adekunle**, declare that

- (i) The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work
- (ii) This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
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As the candidate's supervisor, I agree to the submission of this dissertation.

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## Abstract

This study focused on international students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Honours specialisation and utilised an interpretive paradigm and hermeneutic phenomenology as a theoretical framework. In order to do an in-depth qualitative study of participants' experiences, a case study research design was employed. Two objectives (to explore international students' experiences of taking a Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation at a South African University and to consider why international students have such experiences of taking the said specialisation) shaped the study. Eight participants, who were international students who had taken the Language and Media Honours specialisation from 2011-2014, were purposively selected to take part in the study. The qualitative methods of data collection (visual methods, open ended discussions and open ended narratives) were used to collect data from participants. The choice of the hermeneutic phenomenology helped the researcher to interpret the data. It also enabled a broadened understanding of the participants' experiences as well as offered meaningful insight into their experiences. The research findings indicated that participants' experiences and the reasons for the experiences were intertwined. The findings revealed that participants had negative experiences with lecturers' teaching styles, the perceived inefficiency of the international relations office and the lack of funding. There were also difficulties experienced with academic writing, a perceived rigid programme structure, and uneasy relationships with their lecturers and local peers, as well as fellow international students. In addition, they experienced initial confusion, loneliness and language difficulties. On the other hand, the findings revealed that participants had positive experiences of gaining work opportunities, which assisted with their funding problems. In addition, the work opportunities assisted in enabling familiarity with the university. Other positive experiences included making friends from beyond their immediate circles, learning new concepts, and breaking barriers, which helped to acclimatise them to their new setting. Ultimately, the findings indicated that various kinds of support are needed to improve students' experiences of international study. Such support could assist future international students' studies and make the institution marketable for students globally.

**Key words:** Experiences, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Visual Methods, Open Ended Discussions, Open Ended Narratives, Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation, South African University

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1. Introduction**

Constant growth and improvement are major global aspects of broad-minded pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (The Center for Global Education, 2012). Global education is thus a potent learning experience that promotes exposure to ‘outside’ occurrences and practices and this experience usually lasts for a very long time in the human mind (Dwyer, 2004). Experiences acquired by global or international students in this period of time is then likely to influence their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes about their education in their host university as well as enable them to build more semantic realisations for themselves about their experiences before, during and after their academic programmes (McKeown, 2009).

This dissertation attempts to explore international students’ experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation at a South African university as well as the reasons for their experiences. This is because the needs and expectations of international students in relation to HEIs in SA and postgraduate studies are of an immense importance. An understanding of international students’ experiences is central to the entire overview of international education and plays an important role in helping to determine the effectiveness of current procedures in academia especially those relating to internationalisation and international students.

The study was conducted in a School of Education at a South African university, and in this particular chapter, discussions will be made about the motivation, purpose, context of this research and overview of studies that have dealt with the topic. In addition, the research objectives and the questions that initiated the research, an overview of the research process, delimitations of the study, and the organisation of the dissertation will be highlighted.

### **1.2. Rationale and Motivation**

According to Burslem (2004), an influx of international students into a country influences the academic, cultural and financial growth of that country over the years and this leads to serious

competition for international students, which still continues to date (de Wit, 2008). Sanderson (2008) recommends that making inquiries into the various experiences of people at different levels aids the understanding of the key impacts and procedures of collaborations and internationalisation in institutions, communities, as well as the host country as a whole; hence, this inquiry into international students' experiences at an international university. Although there are many international students in different countries of the world, the researcher attempted to understand international students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation in a School of Education at a South African university, the same university at which she attained her Honours qualification.

The researcher, an international student, completed her Bachelor of Education (BEd.) Honours degree in Language and Media Studies in the year 2014. Her involvement in the degree, her passion for languages and her intention to become a language practitioner influenced her decision to formalise her interests into this study. This study of international students' experiences was thus aimed at exploring and interpreting experiences of a selected group of international students. It was anticipated that research into this area could enhance the exploration of the experiences of other international students in different specialisations and contexts and that it could enable transferability to other types of studies on internationalisation.

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

Research on international students' programmes has been devoid of the much-deserved focus on their study experiences; instead, much emphasis has been placed on their processes of travelling abroad. Likewise, not many studies have been carried out on international study and experiences in the South African context. These are the major reasons the researcher deemed it appropriate to explore and understand experiences of a select group of international students taking a programme at this selected South African university.

### **1.4. Context and Background of the Study**

According to Lee and Rice (2007, p. 383), the end of colonialism marked the beginning of the process of internationalisation in countries for the main purposes of interculturalisation and

economic improvement. This is because studying internationally aids the process of intercultural associations between diverse groups of people as they yearn for higher career opportunities (Andrade, 2006).

International students choose international universities in which to study based on their assurance that such institutions are rated as credible in their home countries, and offer many beneficial academic programmes, adequate student and staff support as well as scholarship opportunities (Boafo-Arthur, 2014, p. 115-116). Khapoya (1988) explains that international students see studying abroad as a development that can be exciting and quite expensive, considering the fact that many of them hail from underdeveloped or developing countries. Sight-seeing and country visitations are also some of the things that excite these international students as they are enabled to meet new people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Hyland, Trahar, Anderson & Dickens, 2008). Much pride is thus attached to international study by the prospective student's community and family members. These are just some of the major factors that usually lead these international students into studying abroad (Irungu, 2013, p. 166), and it is on these factors their experiences of international study as well as the reasons they have those experiences are usually based.

This research was conducted in a School of Education at a South African university. This university is located in KwaZulu-Natal. The university has a School of Education which offers programmes such as Bachelor of Education (BEd.) degrees, Postgraduate Certificates in Education (PGCE), Bachelor of Education Honours (BEd. Hons) degrees, Master of Education (MEd.) degrees and Doctoral studies (PhD). The School of Education is situated on two campuses (BEd. Honours Student Handbook, 2012).

According to the BEd. Honours student handbook (2012), the BEd. Honours programme aims at providing a footing for research and continuous education in a way that academics, curriculum experts and researchers receive all the support and development that they require.

This study's focus is on the Language and Media Studies BEd. Honours specialisation which is offered on one campus only. The study's participants are international students and they were

recruited from the Language and Media Studies specialisation, in which the researcher also did her Honours programme. They were selected from the 2011-2014 academic sets.

The Language and Media Honours specialisation is one of eleven Honours specialisations that are offered at the university. It takes a year for full time studies and two years for part time studies. In addition, students who enroll for this programme are required to have exposure to the academia which is proven by the possession of a first four year degree, among other requirements. The modules offered in this specialisation are: Narratives in Education, Language in Education, Critical Awareness of Language and Media, and Language Learning and Teaching in Multicultural Societies. Students need to take compulsory modules, namely: Understanding Research and Independent Research Project, as well as one elective module. Each of these modules requires a 50% pass before students are allowed to graduate.

### **1.5. Overview of Key Studies dealing with the Topic**

The key studies from which I drew information for my study include Bartram's (2009) assertion that it is essential to understand international students' reasons and aspirations to study abroad. This is because there are usually pedagogical differences in the host universities and their previous universities (Chalungsoth & Schneller 2011). Redden (2012), Fischer (2011), Erichsen (2011) and Zhou and Cole (2013) found that poor social interaction and isolation are major forces behind international students' experiences of studying abroad. This thus explains why Huang (2012), Sicat (2011) and Nambiar et al. (2012) solicit adequate support and mentoring for international students. These studies, and others, will be extensively dealt with in the Literature Review.

## **1.6. Research Objectives and Questions**

### **1.6.1. Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study are to explore international students' experiences of taking a Language and Media Honours specialisation at a South African university and also to consider why international students have such experiences.

### **1.6.2. Research Questions**

Drawing on the objectives above, the research questions that drove this study are:

1. What are international students' experiences of taking a Language and Media Honours specialisation at a South African university?
2. Why do international students have such experiences of taking the Language and Media Honours specialisation at a South African university?

## **1.7. Overview of the Research Process**

This study is interpretive in nature as it seeks to understand experiences of a group of people. Therefore this study was supported by the interpretive paradigm which resonates with the choice of the case study design. In order to derive rich and in-depth responses from participants, the researcher used the qualitative approach which accommodates the use of data collection methods that enable participants to freely respond to questions during the research process. These data collection methods are the visual methods, open-ended critical discussions and open-ended written narratives. The findings derived from the data analysis were then used to arrive at conclusions and recommendations. The research process is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

### **1.7.1. Ethical Clearance**

The researcher has obtained gate-keeper permission from the Registrar of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (see Appendix Ai - Gate-Keeper Letter of Approval). Thereafter an application

for ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal was made. Ethical clearance was also granted by the office of the Dean and Head of the School of Education (see Appendix Aii - Ethical Clearance Certificate). The recruitment of participants commenced (see Appendix B - Letter to the Participants) and they were requested to participate in the study. On agreeing to participate, information letters as well as consent forms were given to the participants and they were assured of all ethical requirements in accordance with the university's ethical considerations (see Appendix C - Consent Form).

### **1.8. Delimitations**

At the onset of the research, it was anticipated that the experiences of only eight international students who have undergone the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation could prevent the results from being generalisable. This is because it has been found that studies using the purposive sampling technique are often not considered to be generalisable (Flick, 2014). Nonetheless, this study's participants are considered to be a representative group of international students and it is possible that the results derived may be transferable to other contexts. Hence, only international students who had enrolled for the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation in the selected School of Education from the year 2011-2014 participated in this study. This is a delimitation of the study.

### **1.9. Organisation of the Dissertation**

This dissertation has been divided into five chapters in order to ensure clarity of each of the sections. The first chapter is the introductory chapter of the dissertation while the second chapter examines studies that have been done regarding international students' experiences. The following chapter deals with the chosen methods that were used to carry out the research as well as the theoretical framework that underpins this study of experiences; after which is the fourth chapter, which is the data analysis section that presents the analysis of the data. The fifth chapter synthesises the main findings that were realised from the analysis, considers the theoretical and

methodological implications, reflects on the study from an insider perspective, contemplates areas for future research and provides recommendations.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

Generally, people decide to study abroad for different reasons and as such, usually have different experiences during their stay and studies in their host country. Experiences are thus fueled by diverse factors. People either decide to study abroad to improve academic performances, hasten their programme duration (in the case of countries where lecturers strike based on failed government promises), and acquire international certificates, among others. Hence, differences in experiences and performances may be noticeable in all cases. A review of studies dealing with international students' experiences of undertaking academic programmes at international universities will be discussed, while also considering the reasons for these experiences which leads into the influences of provided services and international students' acclimatisation to their host institutions.

#### **2.2. Literature Review**

##### **2.2.1. Introduction**

Andrade (2006) states that international students have huge economic impacts on their host countries and besides their economic impacts, these international students often come with considerable academic input to their host country. He explains that this is evident in the way they widen the perception of their domestic peers and their teachers (Wang, 2012) while also contributing economically to their host country (Tange & Jensen, 2012) and education generally (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). Moreover, King, Findlay and Ahrens (2010) note that the magnanimous number of international students does not enhance their presence in their host country; one of the reasons being the constant change and introduction of Western education in institutions which may cause an irredeemable decline in the curricula and then the economy of the country. More significantly, just as beneficial as international study is to the host country, so

it is to the international students themselves who see it as an opportunity to have a brighter future (Furnham, 2004).

Russell (2005) hints in his study of international students in the United Kingdom, that not much research has been conducted with regard to international students' experiences of courses taken abroad, their achievements, and the reasons behind their academic failures. Rather than studying international students' experiences of studying in the United Kingdom (Hyams-Ssekasi, 2012), much focus is usually placed on merely the fact that they are studying abroad alone (Irungu, 2013; Lee & Opio, 2011). Therefore, in order to explore, interpret and understand the experiences faced by international students, it is essential to understand international students' reasons and aspirations to study abroad (Bartram, 2009 and Dwyer & Peters, 2004), problems that they face with regards to their academics, pedagogy and interculturalisation in the new environment. This may be efficient in furthering more interest in international studying and partnership.

Not much research has looked into international students' experiences in the South African case and due to this, research conducted in other countries and contexts in relationship to international students' experiences will be discussed in this section of the study. An in-depth discussion of reviews on international students' experiences of undertaking academic programmes at international universities worldwide will be discussed as well as the reasons for these experiences as they influence services rendered and the students' acclimatisation process.

### **2.2.2. International Students' Experiences of Undertaking Programmes at International Universities**

Constant mobility is observed in international thirst for education for international students as they also gradually become informed of the expenses and privileges involved in studying abroad. The knowledge of this vital information is mostly gained from the internet, selected universities' websites, through friend/peer discussions and through travel agents as this helps the students in making a choice of institution, programme et cetera (Godin, 2012, p. 21). Research shows that countries such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom are the most widely

sought after study destinations for international students. The United States has been seen as a study destination for international students in times past, in the past decade, however, its market share of 23% gradually declined to 17% (Institute of International Education, 2011) of which, without the timely admission of Chinese and South Arabian students, would have negatively affected the total number of international students present in United States institutions (Institute of International Education, 2011). As a result of international students' presence in international institutions, research has been done and is still being carried out with regards to investigating international students' experiences and performances (among others) in their studies abroad.

In addition, studies that have focused on international students residing in the United States of America indicate a likelihood that international students go through difficulties while trying to adjust to their new environment (Klineberg & Hull, 1979, in Klomegah, 2006). Some of the negative experiences have to do with isolation, academic difficulties and hostility (Cross & Johnson, 2008, p. 311 and Sam, 2001). Ward et al. (2001) affirm that international students have experienced many issues that go with being an international student; one of which is their 'foreignness' and its impact on their studies. International students also experience psychological issues like depression from all kinds of frustration (Ward et al., 2001). Drawing on Furnham and Bochner's (1986) findings of experiences that international students have in an international institution, such as issues relating to identity and personal development in a new environment, academic challenges, insufficient linguistic and cultural skills and ethnic or national roles, Ward et al. (2001) confirm that these variables can indeed be evident as barriers for the international students in the host country. Studying in a foreign country may be burdensome as a result of the differences in linguistic and cultural patterns (Smith & Khawaja, 2011 and Gullekson & Vancouver, 2010). Since most of these linguistic and cultural problems are not avoidable for many international students, frustrations may set in, thereby, making the students feel unwelcome (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Likewise, Glass, Buus and Braskamp (2013, p. 6) explain that these reasons and several others could lead these international students into an astute academic backwardness, dislike for the domestic students (and non-students) and they may then drop out of the university; thus, the beginning of more academic upheavals.

Another issue is linguistic barriers, as accents go a long way in working as a major challenge for international students who were not native language speakers of the English language or who did not have adequate prior exposure to it before going to the international institutions. This makes it impossible for them to have clear interactions with the people in their host country (Fischer, 2011; Mwaru, 2008 and Kettle, 2011). The impact of insufficient linguistic skills in students' lives cannot be over-emphasised. Language enables the introduction of 'ours' and 'theirs', impacts on a person's identity (Akhtar, 1995, p. 1070-1071) and fuels success, failure, harmony, conflicts or turmoil. Ward et al. (2001) claim that communication barriers can undeniably affect students' academic progress as languages are used variably in different places and all kinds of conflicts can emerge when communication barriers are not addressed. That is, international students in foreign countries including South Africa may experience many problems which may also affect their academic performances. When international students encounter new terminology, they get even more isolated in the learning process (Sheridan, 2011). In South Africa, this may be due to the number of languages spoken and what it might take to learn, understand and use them while still in the country in order to prevent alienation and separation (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989, p. 110).

Likewise, Poyrazili (2003), in his study of international students' success rates, indicates that English proficiency impacts students' successes and this can also be said of their acclimatisation to the new learning environment. Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) also state that students' lack of knowledge of the English language often causes uncertainties, anxieties and confusion while engaging with class tasks, presentations and other aspects of the content of the programme. However, Andrade (2006) in his study argues that language aptitude has no negative impact on international students' experiences and that reasons behind experiences go beyond language differences. Dunstan (2009) and Sheridan (2011) explain that there is a huge difference between what is expected of the students academically and what the students can indeed offer academically, and this should be critically understudied. Nevertheless, in a bid to avoid focusing on only language issues as in previous studies (Andrade, 2006 and Biggs & Tang, 2009), other academic aspects that have an effect on international students will be discussed including their host countries, academic pursuits, challenges and achievements (Boylan, 2002).

Countries have diverse, standardised and unique procedures of educating students and these procedures are usually guided by the educational policies of those countries. This indicates that there is bound to be pedagogical differences between the international students' previous education and the one they have come to receive at their host universities. This supports Chalungsoth and Schneller's (2011) claim that there are usually pedagogical differences in the host universities, and their study on international students reveals international students' unfamiliarity with the pedagogy employed by their host universities. It is therefore significant to inquire what impact these pedagogical differences may have on international students as well as their contentment with the new teaching approaches (Nieto & Booth, 2010, p. 66) they encounter as this will also automatically affect their academic lives, either positively or negatively.

Bartram (2009) notes that when students are content with the education that they receive, it indicates quality as opposed to excessive focus on quantity in the academic sector (Bartram, 2009). Critical engagement is being advocated and practiced in higher education in recent times (Prosser & Miller, 1989) and this allows students to think deeply and formulate knowledge as they are being facilitated by the teacher. This indicates that only the students who are able to think deeply in the learning process will eventually scale through academically (Prosser & Miller, 1989). This might be disadvantageous to international students because of the differences in the academic sectors per country, and these international students often feel compelled to be strong, independent, critical thinkers and writers as a result of the set expectations (East, 2001; Hellsten, 2010; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011 and Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson & Pisecco, 2002), some of which can result in stress (Zhou, Frey & Bang, 2011). They are obligated to familiarise themselves with new coping and learning strategies, and Huang (2012) refers to this as 'learner shock'. This may be shocking to the students because academic writing processes as well as a newly introduced method of language use are usually major obstructions and frustrations to the learning processes of these international students (Yeh & Inose, 2003 and Gunaratne, 2004).

In contrast, Huang (2012) supports the critical engagement of students in the classroom. He affirms that when international students are allowed to actively participate in class discussions and tasks, they are able to construct their own knowledge. This productive knowledge is thus

ensured when their cultural sensitivity and sufficient information about teaching practices and learning cues increase (Huang, 2012). Hence, advocating for the continuous practice of intellectual reasoning that will make each student (domestic and international) an author of his own thinking process. At this juncture, it is pertinent to understand the reasons behind international students' experiences of undertaking programmes in international universities.

### **2.2.3. Reasons for International Students' Experiences of Undertaking a Programme at International Universities**

Researchers (like Tsiligiris, 2011; Morrison, Merrick, Higgs & Le Métais, 2005; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000) have specified various reasons for international students' experiences. These reasons may be political, economic, academic, unfamiliarity with the cultural and linguistic patterns of the host country, among others. Research conducted by Beoku-Betts (2006) about African students in England found that many international students are usually surprised when they get to England to commence their studies. They are surprised by the fact that there are many differences between the news they heard (before journeying into England) about the structures of the buildings in England and the kinds of interactions they would have with the domestic students. This is because these international students are seen as the minority group, immediately tagged 'the foreigners' and faced with the challenges of blending in with the new culture and pedagogy of their environment (Beoku-Betts, 2006). The most crucial aspect of an international study is usually the teaching approaches in the international universities.

Sicat (2011), in his study of the cultural adjustment and coping strategies of Timorese, Nepalese and Indians, and Koreans enrolled at Tarlac State University, observed a variety of expectations that international students have of their host universities. Sicat (2011) explains that international students are usually expected to follow and know the set procedures of the programme that they have been admitted into, whereas the students usually have language, food, weather and pedagogical related problems in their new environment. Likewise, Morrison et al. (2005), in their study of international students' academic performance in the United Kingdom (UK) and affecting factors, state that the students who came from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and even students from the United States of America (despite the fact that they were also English first

language users) had lesser performances than the students who reside in the UK. Morrison et al. (2005, p. 327) also note that “both the mode of study and the highest qualification on entry appeared to be significantly associated with the performance of students.” They explain that the previous institutions students attended may have played a huge role in the performances and experiences of these international students as well as their individual linguistic abilities, entrance credentials, pedagogy and other administrative services.

Moreover, a United Kingdom study of Greek students in the country indicates that lack of cultural integration to the new environment contributes to international students’ low levels of social interactions (Pantelidou & Craig, 2006 and Chen & Lewis, 2011). They explain that the lack of adequate inter-cultural relationships between international students and their domestic peers may be caused by the fact that these international students already found it unnecessary to invest their time and energy interacting with people of different backgrounds from theirs since they were in the country temporarily and for study purposes only. In the South African case also, evidence of the several xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals possibly affects the nature of relationships that can be built by both international students and their domestic peers, and prevents profitable social and cultural associations (Trice, 2004; Novera, 2004; Brown & Aktas, 2011; Kim, 2005; Harris, 2002; Landau, 2011; Pithouse-Morgan, et al; 2012), as well as discourages students from coming to study in South Africa.

While looking at the concept of ‘foreignness’ in the South African context, Ward et al. (2001) state that the closer a country is to another country (that shares the same borders geographically and culturally), the more privileges or affinity it extends to it than other countries that are not close to it. Examples of such neighbouring countries are Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Botswana among others; and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries like Congo, Tanzania, Angola and Malawi to whom certain subsidies and scholarships are extended (Ramphela, 1999); rather than countries further away like Nigeria and Ghana. Ramphela (1999) explains that this gives grounds to making many affected international students to, as a result of this policy, feel discriminated against and discouraged academically.

A perceived discriminatory policy is the issue of differences in fee payment by both the domestic and international students. Hyams-Ssekasi (2012) notes that during the early post-colonial periods, the international and domestic students paid the same fees; this was mainly because the international students were being encouraged to study abroad in order to contribute to the cultural, political and economic positioning of those host countries (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008, p. 75). Manyika (2001) also confirms that many African leaders received their education from international institutions after the colonial era and there was a relatively small amount paid by both the international students and the local students before 1967. Suddenly, in the 1970s, international students were made to pay higher fees than previously and also much more than their domestic peers (Wedderbm, 1979). In that period, this led to the gradual decline of the interests of many Kenyan and Indian students in studying abroad. The continuous fee increment by governments then caused much diplomatic conflict between nations as the international students were made to pay fees which were over 13% higher than the amount that the domestic students were paying (Chandler, 1989, p. 1). Chandler (1989, p. 1) explains that by 1983, an attempt to ensure diplomatic ties between nations led to the introduction of scholarship opportunities which would include both the international and domestic students. This attempt at that time encouraged international students all over the world to study in the United Kingdom, as an example.

In addition, Kift (2009), in a study of international students at an Australian university, observed results that indicate that remoteness among teachers, local and international students do impact on experiences. They also found that the international students received little or no guidance from their not-so-experienced lecturers, there were inadequate facilities in the institution which could have facilitated their learning processes and there was an extremely strong language barrier which made it difficult for them to interact appropriately with their lecturers and colleagues. Bekhradnia (2013) notes the concerns of the lecturers regarding their own approach of teaching as well as international students' inability to reflect upon things critically as well as their unclear handwriting.

Contrastingly, in a study by Douglas et al. (2006) of international students' satisfaction at a UK university, the employed pedagogy was satisfactory and beneficial to the international students.

Douglas et al. (2006) thus opine that pedagogy impacts on the level of satisfaction of international students and this is related to the environment. Hence, learning outcomes (positive and negative) are judged from experiences and these positive learning outcomes undoubtedly influence international students' experiences and the reasons behind the experiences (Karuppan & Barari, 2011). Suggestions have thus been variedly made (Hovland, 2006 and Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2013) as to the fact that international students' experiences of study abroad are usually irregular and that what works for A does not necessarily work for B. This may be because students hail from different cultural, national, linguistics, religious and socio-economic backgrounds (Hovland, 2006).

Besides these discussed reasons, is the influence of lack of finances which pose a difficulty for the international students, especially the Black-Africans (Ritz, 2010; Zhai, 2004; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Fischer (2011) states that the financial expectations of the host countries about these international students is that of people who are from wealthy backgrounds judging by their financial requirements upon their resumption in higher institutions. This expectation is not always eventually met in all cases (Cathcaert et al, 2006 and Manyika, 2001). This is because 85% of the Black-African students in the United Kingdom were found to be from less privileged and rural homes (Hyams-Ssekasi, 2012). Likewise, the National Union of Students (NUS; 2014, p. 26) posits that only a few international students have financial funding from their country's government and even those few may end up not receiving the funding as a result of unreliable arrangements plans, thereby leading to financial difficulties. Hence, fee payment poses a huge challenge to many international students as 91% of those students were discovered to have lived or to be living with financial concerns about living expenses and fee payment (Maringe & Carter, 2007). On this note, Maringe and Carter (2007) confirm that the financial worries affect both the students and their parents/sponsors. This is because they feel strained when their expectations of being sent money by the students during the course of the study are not met (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). These expectations may also be as a result of their assumptions of the early provision of jobs and scholarship opportunities by those international institutions.

Therefore, Huang (2012) solicits adequate support and mentoring for international students. This can be achieved by ensuring a completely safe environment (Nambiar et al., 2012) that will aid

students' learning and practice of English as well as promote discussions and a non-condescending interaction in the classroom. Otherwise, being in a foreign environment, international students may continually have problems if there are inadequate academic support systems (Smith & Demjaneko, 2011), and this support, if provided, will encourage more international students to have an interest in studying abroad. Hence, the students and institutions are responsible for making the study abroad worthwhile as a result of this issue of diversity.

#### **2.2.4. The Impact of Acclimatisation to a Foreign Environment on Experiences**

Challenges await international students who are just coming into a new country because of the need to make adjustments which must suit the new environment educationally, culturally and socially (Borrett & Zysk, 2007, p. 45). According to Van Genep (1960), adjusting to a new environment entails three phases, which are: separation phase (that the students have to depart from their homes), which is usually strenuous (Grayson, 2008 and Tinto, 1987), transition phase (embracing the concepts of the new environment almost to the detriment of their home concepts), and incorporation phase (allowing themselves to be integrated into the tenets of the new environment). Mushibwe (2009) asserts that the incorporation phase of internationalisation indicates the students' stability and acceptability in the new environment as well as a sense of responsibility and compliance with set standards.

Lee and Opio (2011) explain that for international students, the incorporation phase is an extremely difficult phase because the students usually find it difficult to adjust to the new settings and thus have many problems with stability in the host country. Such problems range from pedagogical differences, financial issues, communication problems, accommodation and concerns for the family they left behind in their host countries (Hendrickson et al., 2010 and Furnham, 1997). Similarly, Boafo-Arthur (2014) points out international students mainly face challenges which are related to family issues, discrimination from staff and domestic colleagues, financial worries as well as a feeling of loneliness or isolation. These challenges, according to Lee and Opio (2011), are usually critical issues for international students in the United States as many students did not have prior experience of prejudice or information that they would be discriminated against in their host countries.

According to Haigh (2008), besides the classroom, the environment plays a huge role in the teaching and learning experience of international students. Adjustment is an active, complex change towards self-discovery (Tran, 2011) which involves both cultural and mental transformation (Berry, 2005). According to Calvez (2008), familiarising oneself with the host country helps in settling in and understanding the host culture. This, of course, is not to the detriment of the international student (Wang, 2009; Ramsden, 2003; Cemalcilar et al., 2005). However, adjusting to the host culture may be hindered by certain home factors as well which prevents international students from having healthy relationships socially (Evans & Stevenson, 2011). Hill (2012) thus asserts that internationalisation can only be advantageous if all parties understand the importance of open-mindedness, globalisation, mental interdependence, as well as relationships that are devoid of cultural bias and prejudice. On the other hand, more about the experiences of international students is being researched despite the fact that several details indicate that the international students have a lot of difficulties acclimatising to their new environment and the concept of studying abroad (Boafo-Arthur, 2014).

Boafo-Arthur (2014, p. 118) also explains that quite a lot of stereotypes are associated with the Black African students that are studying in America and this is a challenge for acclimatisation of these students as they hardly feel accepted into the system due to these challenges. Fischer (2011) nonetheless states in his study of some Ghanaian international students at a United States institution, that some of the international students had prior knowledge and anticipation of discrimination; to these few, the actual occurrence of it may not be surprising or extremely hurtful.

Manyika (2001) adds that while racial discrimination is prominent for international students in the United States, it is social class that poses more challenges in the United Kingdom. In Beoku-Bett's (2006, p. 154) study, a black female African complained that fellow international students felt secluded or disliked as a result of the discrimination they were faced with in the United Kingdom as they are perceived as being of a lesser and inferior racial or tribal group. Due to this fact, international students experience difficulties in their academic pursuits in their new universities abroad (Abdullah, Ismail, Aziz, Latiff & Ibrahim, 2014). However, Maringe and

Carter (2007) had little or no response on discrimination and prejudice in their study on the experiences of international students in the United States.

On another note, Zhou and Cole (2013) explain that there are usually uneven experiences in students' narration of their experiences at international universities. This is noticeable in the different responses that are given during interview sessions about occurrences and their acceptance of them. International students' irregular experiences are easily distinguished in their engagement with their studies (Zhou & Cole, 2013), and this may be hugely detrimental to their studies as well. Lack of academic engagement has been said to be caused by the fact that they hardly feel safe and secure in the environment. Many of the students in Redden's (2012) study claimed to feel unsafe with being with people of different cultural backgrounds; portraying a likelihood of institutional discrimination towards a particular group of students. This thus highlights an important need for the creation of student orientation strategies that aim at improving better interactions among students and their institutions.

Fischer (2011) and Redden (2012) explain that ill-social interaction and isolation are major forces behind experiences of international students studying abroad. This has been observed in the universities in the United States and Glass and Westmont-Campbell (2003) assert that it should be looked into, as a feeling of communal acceptance often influences students' educational performances. Studies also confirmed that this factor leads to international students showing considerable detachment from their environment and their studies when compared to their domestic colleagues. Some of the students in Glass and Westmont-Campbell's (2003) research were international students from China, Saudi Arabia and South Korea.

Similarly, Sheridan (2011), in his study of international students in Ireland, states that international students' experiences of the university setting cannot be divorced from their academic achievements. This is opposed by Douglas et al. (2006) who note that teaching and learning are more crucial to international students than their physical environment because they may adjust to the environment with time. Sicat (2011) explains that as soon as international students feel very relaxed in their host countries, they are likely to ignore formerly annoying issues and relate better with one another and the locals as well. This is seen as the psychological

stage of adaptation where people both consciously or unconsciously decide to adapt and adjust to the new setting that is available to them. All anxieties will disappear and the international students will start getting accustomed to the set codes of interaction in their host country (Sicat, 2011). At this stage, the cultural patterns gradually start being perceived as relative and not absurd and then suitable relations and interactions start (The Center for Global Education, 2012).

In Braskamp, Braskamp and Merrill's (2009) study, some international students confessed to their acclimatisation to the new environment and their notion of diverse cultures during and at the aftermath of their studies abroad. Sutton and Rubin (2010) also note that the international students in their study showed a level of admiration for the diverse cultures they encounter as they relate with each other. Klomegah (2006) explains this transformation as an occurrence that takes place when international students get more ingrained into the system and graduate; they start getting familiar with the environment and cultures. There is usually a reduction in culture shock as the students are eventually able to stay longer in the institution or country (Curtin, Stewart & Ostrove, 2013 and Wang et al., 2012). Andrade (2006) also confirms that international students have been found to engage more with their studies than their domestic peers; changes in students' experiences are bound to occur with time (Kelly, 2010). Campbell (2010) also notes that the students in his study found that although acclimatising usually takes a long time, it enhances new and positive results for them in their studies in the long term.

Baxter and King (2007) term this as a crucial aspect of interpersonal growth which has the ability of encouraging human respect for oneself and other people in such a way that a profitable relationship is formed and nurtured. Pizzolato (2010) however suggests that this might be a bit difficult for international students as they come with different experiences, have different exposures and may definitely have different notions of growth and development. On the other hand, an inadvertent transfer of these different exposures into the new environment with the aim of learning and knowing the new people, concepts and environments usually enhances students' "self-authorship" (Homak & Ortiz, 2004). This is because by this, they may get to add new knowledge to the already possessed knowledge. All these are possible via the formation of healthy relationships.

Failures have also been accounted for in international students' experiences and according to Mudhovozi (2011), international students' failure may have been caused by the fear to fail as a result of what they see and hear about the institution and the environment. In as much as familiarisation to the host university is essential for the international student, it is also crucial that the academic staff familiarises themselves to pedagogy improvement (Tran, 2011) in such a way that will suit the international student and enable the much desired engagement with the curricula. That is, international friendly curricula should be ensured. More so, the presence of the international student in the classroom adds to the classroom diversity and enables diverse perspectives and knowledge to be shared. This means that both the international students and their domestic peers stand to gain in the euphoria of knowledge that diversity enhances (Andrade, 2006).

Hence, acclimatisation can be enhanced through the initiation of active participation in the classroom (Hwang et al., 2011 and Knight, 1997) and so international students should not be seen as the 'pitied' ones (Bartram, 2009). According to Jayanti (1998), Mahat and Hourigan (2007) and Domonic (2011), the possession of pre-conceived thoughts about the host country or institution usually leaves the students disappointed when things do not turn out as expected. Hence, such possibilities should be properly catered for beforehand (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008) and adequate support should be provided via appropriate socio-cultural interactions between international students and the local students (Evans & Stevenson, 2011). On this note, Bartram (2008) recommends that adequate initiations into the host institution should be done in time and in such a way that international students' diversity is infused into the teaching styles.

### **2.2.5. Influence of Provided Services on Experiences**

Satisfaction of students is dependent on their experiences of the host institution environs and the services which they receive in that setting (Elliot & Healy, 2001). This satisfaction is largely tied to the kinds of available social, physical, spiritual and pedagogy employed in the institution. This is because international students are known to come from different places and have different exposures, and this is worthy of a huge amount of consideration, as Redden (2012, p. 14) asserts that an institution's readiness to consider international students' diverse cultures and perceptions

enhances “a process of intercultural learning.” Satisfaction is also dependent on the availability of staff to students’ needs, provision of infrastructural facilities and adequate welfare and communication patterns (O’Driscoll, 2005) as students’ views are aired and worked on.

Glass and Westmont-Campbell (2013) also state that a fresh perception of concepts is an easy solution to the teaching and learning difficulties which are generally experienced by students. Thus, inquiries into the influences of the services provided on international students’ experiences as well as their satisfaction with these services are vital when exploring their experiences. This helps to establish the kind of impact that these rendered services had or are having on the students’ performances during the course of the programme. These services which may include those rendered by teachers, administrative staff, teaching styles, library and internet facilities as well as other support systems (Navarro, Iglesias & Torres, 2005) are known to boost an institution’s integrity. Coates (2005) asserts that a known administration technique is the supply of staff maintenance services that manage the well-being and co-ordination of international students. On the other hand, staff may not be able to understand students’ experiences and so it is essential that support groups view students categorically and as individuals (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000; Nambiar et al., 2012).

Bekhradnia (2013) opines that international students yearn to be attended to (by their lecturers) and generally accepted in their new academic environments; yet, pedagogic, linguistic and academic competence continues to be a huge challenge. University tutors and lecturers have been alleged of lackadaisical attitudes when dealing with international students as they are made to feel incompetent both culturally and linguistically. This aspect of international students’ challenges is linked by researchers (Armitage, 2008; Beoku-Bett, 2006; Lee & Opio, 2011) to certain stereotypical perceptions about these students’ nationality. Likewise, in Bekhradnia’s (2013) study, the international students who were interviewed complained of inadequate guidance and support from their peers and lecturers, scarce academic facilities that may have enhanced their academics (if they were available), as well as the language barrier which made it difficult to interact with their teachers (Nayak & Venkatraman, 2010) and peers and also comprehend what was being taught.

On the other hand, the teachers who were interviewed in the study also indicated their worries about the employed pedagogy in their institutions; they explained that they were also concerned about the international students' lack of critical thinking skills as well as their unsatisfactory academic performances. This indicates a bridge in the teaching and learning relationship and it may not really be a misnomer judging by the fact that there is an environmental change on the part of the international students and a learner-group difference on the part of the teachers. Thus, Neumann and Neumann (1993) advocate a policy of curricula flexibility whereby international students are contained, feel accepted and are included in the learning process and styles. This, according to Massy (2003), breeds quality education via a consistent reviewing and adjustment of course content, assessment (Fleischman, Lawley & Raciti, 2010), teaching styles and study materials in a bid to ensure an inclusive education for both the domestic and international groups of students; thereby, facilitating their future prospects.

Ensuring an inclusive education also involves adequate communication between teachers and teachers as well as between teachers and students (both domestic and international students) in order to create a safe and positive learning environment for students (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). After all, inclusive education, good teaching styles, library space, internet facilities and pleasant environments (Pierce, Matzdorf & Agahi, 2003) are usually the factors that attract international students to choose an institution in which to study. Similarly, Tsiligiris (2011) advises that relationships should be observed via students' ideas and approaches to learning, as this observation may provide solutions to the academic challenges that these students might be facing as they are also 'consumers' in their new academic environment. That is, it is important to have an appropriate knowledge of diversity management through the provision of essential services if there is to be any improvement in international students' academic performances (Schmitt, 2003). Nonetheless, Eagle and Brennan (2007) argue that although an awareness of students' needs is crucial, less emphasis should be placed on 'the consumer approach'. Smith (2007) also expresses that tagging international students merely as 'consumers' and their host institution as 'the provider' may be detrimental to the relationship of the two groups. That is, educating students should be jointly done by all the affected quarters.

Also, Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) advocate that a positive relationship should be promoted between the students and their host institution, otherwise frustrations and boredom may lead to unsettling conducts (Andrade, 2006). Such frustrations are usually caused by international students' high stress levels, which are majorly influenced by the home pressures to succeed (Andrade, 2006) and then aided by the various unanticipated gaps and problems encountered in the host institution. Correspondingly, many social, financial and personal investments are placed on students, their families and supporters when embarking on a journey to study abroad (Evans & Stevenson, 2011), and moving to a new environment can be disconcerting sometimes for an individual; this can also be challenging for international students (Brown & Holloway, 2008, p. 339).

In addition, in view of the fact that the international students are in their host countries temporarily, they keep in touch with their families and home country (Gribble, 2008). This seems to be the point where the host institutions are supposed to relieve them of the migration stress, especially psychologically (Zhou & Todman, 2009, p. 63) and financially. Such psychological stress is usually caused by home sickness (Chalungsoth & Schneller, 2011), culture shock (Christofi & Charles, 2007; Tran, 2011) and adaptation (Zhou et al., 2008) to the physical and academic environment. Financial stress on the other hand is caused by students' inability to meet up to the financial obligations of their host institutions (Lim KokSen, 2013, p. 127), which may include fees, accommodation fees, international levies, health insurance, among others. This is in support of Lim KokSen's (2013, p. 127) qualitative inquiry into the factors that contribute to international students' satisfaction of institutional quality in Malaysia, findings which indicate international students' dissatisfaction with issues regarding lack of funding and its impact on their academic performances. He then proposes that international institutions should make an effort to also (alongside domestic students) grant their international students financial aid as well as other amenities that can enhance their studies because there is significant impact of funding (and lack of it) on experiences, learning and study outcomes. Mavondo et al. (2000) also confirm that providing funds to students minimally reduces their stress levels of debt payment, enhances their studies, and grants them opportunities to afford any study material that may benefit their studies.

Several studies have discovered the challenges that international students (in the United States and the United Kingdom) have with cultural and linguistic acceptance in their host countries (Boafo-Arthur, 2014) and it is worthy to posit that international students often seek solace in each other's company rather than utilise the counselling services of the institutions to air their problems (Fischer, 2011). However, Fischer (2011) states that international students usually make all forms of adjustments in order to fit into the structure of the new environment, which Mwara (2008) claims are usually high and difficult adjustments. International students always attempt to sort out any detected dissimilarities in cultural patterns and then adjust to these differences, which may be influenced by both educational and cultural interactions. This confirms the findings of Constantine, Okazaki and Utsey (2004) in their study of homesickness when they discovered that African students, of all international students, feel more comfortable hiding very important information about themselves, and this may, as Wallace and Constantine (2005) suggest, be as a result of their spiritual, cultural and communalism upbringing and commitments. In other words, these international students found support from students who they felt were 'in the same boat' with them and would understand their situations better. These coping strategies between international students then aided their ability to identify, share and bear one another's burdens which worked as a credible motivational factor for them to continue with their studies abroad (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008, p. 1). This may eventually be to their detriment as it might not always work in their favour especially in extreme cases of need.

Another observation by Andrade (2006) is that the institutions usually have a pre-set construction of what international students need for counselling purposes and how to engage with them without thinking that these students come from different cultural backgrounds and may require different means of counselling. Despite the fact that many institutions usually conduct new students 'Welcome Programmes' before the commencement of a new academic session, it is discovered that international students consistently worry about starting their studies in a completely strange environment (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008). It is therefore a collective responsibility of both the international students and the domestic students to fully and conveniently integrate into their institutions (Philips, 2007). If there is a disruption between the connections of these two groups of students, studying abroad will be a curse rather than a blessing to international students.

On this note, Hyams-Ssekasi, Christine, Mushibwe, Elizabeth and Caldwell (2014, p. 10) explain that despite the fact that some institutions refer the students to counselling units when they have issues, the international students usually complain about getting inadequate support from the counselling units based on the perception that the services rendered there are hardly of help. This, according to the students' responses, was because of their culturally different tenets with those of their host institutions. Hyams-Ssekasi et al. (2014) thus recommend that institutions may need to devise more diverse, culturally acceptable ways of attending to international students if the rendered counselling services are to be of any use.

Still on international students' welfare, sufficient communication and support systems, Brown and Holloway (2008) propose that a university representative should be on the ground to inform students of necessary institutional details before they leave their home countries, and also receive the students as they enter the country and through the process of their academic pursuits in the host country (Owens & Loomes, 2010). This is supported by Ballard and Clanchy (1995) who argue that international students will be able to fully acclimatise and study well if they are properly introduced to the institution's practiced culture and tenets.

On this note, Andrade (2006) stresses that adequate support is needed for students to settle in suitably and perform successfully. Andrade (2006) explains that adequate orientation about the benefits of international studies should be provided to the students. Dunne (2009) also indicates that this information may enable international students to take advantage of the privileges of being in a culturally different environment. This is further reinforced as Pherali (2012) notes that adequate knowledge and promotion of diversity in the host country and interactions should be emphasised to the international student. It is also crucial that several programmes which are intended to help the international students to acclimatise to the new environment are introduced (Eseonu et al., 2011; Kift, 2009; Bousquet, 2012) as these may enable them to feel welcome and appreciated in their host institutions.

## 2.3 Conclusion

International study indeed seems complex and demands much preparation from various angles. It is significant to note that due to the largeness of the world as well as reasons of linguistic and cultural diversity, it may be difficult to do a holistic study of international students' experiences when studying abroad/internationally (Maringe & Carter, 2007). In addition, due to the complexity of international study, experiences of students may not be common.

In this chapter, reviews on students' experiences of undertaking academic programmes at international universities as well as the reasons for these experiences as indicated in various studies have been discussed. Besides experiences and reasons is the importance of the impact of familiarisation and provided services on international students' experiences, which have also been elaborated on. It is thus significant to note that in each of the studies used, data derived is usually a pointer toward several factors of global education which jointly make or mar students' international study pursuits. Some of those factors are the students themselves, their lecturers, their domestic peers, their host country's or institution's show of acceptance and accommodation as well as other help or services (socially, psychologically, financially and academically) rendered to international students. Researchers have, as a result, suggested that the host institution, the international students and the domestic peers all have a role to play in enhancing the development of a successful global education (Smith & Demjanenko, 2011). This is important in a bid to ensure positive experiences, positive academic outcomes as well as continued international study interests. The next chapter will focus on the methodology that will be used in this study, its suitability in the research process and the way in which the research was conducted.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

The nature of this study implies that the choice of methodology needs to yield rich and in-depth information from participants, as this enhances the validity and trustworthiness of the research. Its theoretical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology enabled the researcher to have a reasonable understanding of and interpretation of the experiences of the international students used in the study. Since this study aims to explore international students' experiences of undertaking a module at an international university, this chapter will give an overview of the theoretical framework that will underpin this study of international students' experiences. In this section of the dissertation also, details are given of the choices and processes through which data was collected and analysed by the researcher.

#### **3.2. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is phenomenology. Phenomenology (a Greek word 'phainen') was used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Immanuel Kant as a theory that human thoughts create the phenomena and that this thought creation is usually based on awareness of certain things that surround them (Rockmore, 2011). Patton (2002) states that phenomenology is a framework that deals with inquiries into experiences. It is a philosophy that believes in questioning in a bid to come to terms with human awareness and experiences. Hence, phenomenological research targets, determines and describes the core of human experiences. This is because determining the heart of a thing can only be achieved once the governing principles that bind that phenomenon are identified. Phenomenology therefore aids the enhancement of an in-depth study of how people experience things especially as it has to do with their experiences. Dahlberg et al. (2008, p.37) explain that a phenomenological study has a certain goal which is to understand the various notions and experiences of people in certain circumstances, since it is well known that people usually have different experiences of a phenomenon. As a result, phenomenology will ensure

accurate delineation and interpretation of people's experiences of this study's phenomenon (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007).

One of the benefits of using phenomenology is that it helps to see things for what they are and as they are observed and analysed in a way that deepens understanding of experiences. Any research that is based on a phenomenological report is devoid of the researcher's or participants' manipulations and it usually produces valid data since the experiences are typically evident in the awareness of situations (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 37). It is with this in mind that the researcher decided to use a framework that deals with human experiences as a phenomenon in order to derive reliable and valid results. The use of phenomenology as a theoretical framework enables proper investigation of human experiences as a result of participants' revelations via narrative and/or written means.

There are several philosophies of phenomenology (Moran, 2000); they are: transcendental, existential and hermeneutic philosophies. Despite the fact that these phenomenological philosophies exist, each of them critically ensures an in-depth study of experiences (Langdrige, 2007). Some of those philosophies deal with: the researcher's withdrawal of himself from the research while gathering other people's experiences in order to maintain objectivity (transcendental philosophy), the researcher's focus on his own experiences (existential philosophy), examining of participants' experiences as lived daily, regardless of previous theories or assumptions (descriptive philosophy) and interpretation of participants' experiences (hermeneutic philosophy), which goes beyond a mere description of human experiences (Langdrige, 2007). Thus, this study will employ the hermeneutic philosophy, as it is essential to do an objective study of participants' experiences and afterwards, do an interpretation of those experiences.

Earlier studies into phenomenology were proposed by Husserl (1931, p. 44) with focus on the description of experiences. It was later developed by Heidegger, his student (Van Manen, 1990) who focused on the interpretation of the experiences and named it hermeneutic phenomenology. This was born out of the understanding that language, history and culture influence and develop human experiences of a phenomenon and position in their immediate environment. Hermeneutic phenomenology is also termed 'a study of actuality' (Connell, 2003). This actuality is usually not

detected immediately, but after data interpretation of detected themes (Van Manen, 1990, p. 170), and this provides meanings which are attached to derived experiences that are reflection-based.

Hermeneutics is a Greek term 'hermeneuin', meaning 'to interpret' (Pehler, 2003). Its profounder, Heidegger, explains it as the inseparable relationship between humans, their experiences and the contexts in which those experiences took place (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 175). On this premise, people who come together with their various experiences with an intent to explore those experiences, eventually establish an understanding of themselves in the process. In addition, Lindseth and Norberg (2004) explain that hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of experiences via the analysis of documented data. These experiences could largely be the researcher's and the participants' history, and this level of data collection hugely strengthens an experience-based research (Koch, 1994). It is, however, not aimed at solving problems. This is why personal questions (such as: what is the essence of participants and so forth) will be asked during the data collection process in order to guide this study's understanding of what it takes to be an international student studying a programme at an international university. After each participant has expressed his/her experience, it is then possible for the researcher to do a full exploration of the 'internationalisation' phenomenon as well as the reasons for the experiences, which naturally emerge from collected data. An experience-based phenomenological philosophy thus will focus on meanings as presented and acted upon because people cannot be divorced from their experiences of phenomena.

Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology will be suitable for this study as it proposes the appropriate data collection instruments that can best capture an understanding of participants' experiences and the reasons for those experiences (Jasper, 2004, p. 3). Hermeneutics is an understanding and analysis of writings (Mautner, 2000, p. 248). That is, the interpretation of textual data enables the development of facts from the international students. The texts/data derived from the critical discussion, narratives and visual methods will also be analysed following the tenets of the hermeneutic phenomenology in such a way that each participant's experiences as well as reasons for those experiences will be derived. The participants' experiences will be derived from many modes of communication - written, visual and spoken.

Van Manen (2007, p., 17-18) notes that knowing the power inherent in language aids the derivation of rich information from and an understanding of any underlying information. Therefore, it is intended that this phenomenological philosophy will create awareness and enhance understanding during and after the course of data analysis. Meanings will therefore be attached to the experiences as all the data (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) is being interpreted. This will also enable the researcher to interpret, extricate and expose obscured meanings via the use of the multiple data collection tactics, analysis and description (Omery, 1983, p. 15) as it is believed that reality is dependent on an individual's understanding of the truth (Connell, 2003, p. 33).

The hermeneutic philosophy also enables the researcher to focus on the participants' world as they express their experiences of it (Maggs-Rapport, 2000, p. 220) rather than how their experiences should have been, while also aiming at detecting any possibility of prejudice or bias. Wojnar and Swanson (2007, p. 175) assert that the hermeneutic phenomenology entails that the participants and the researcher approach the subject matter with fore-knowledge and understanding of their backgrounds and core values because a person's experience cannot be divorced from their cores and history. Participants' trust is thus paramount in order to ensure objectivity and an appropriate researcher-participants relationship, which also imparts on research trustworthiness and rigour. This is because of certain non-linguistic messages that body language, silence and tone convey during data collection and their significance during interpretation (Van Manen, 1990, p. 96) as they enable the researcher to hear and see beyond the granted information. This enhances the discovering and understanding of these experiences of international students as a way of knowing participants' understanding of their own experiences, as Gubrium and Holstein (1997, in Connell, 2003) state that it is essential to ensure sufficient understanding and awareness of the phenomena before explorations and explanations or predictions are made.

### **3.3. Research Paradigm**

The interpretive paradigm was employed in this study. The interpretive paradigm is defined as a process that ensures an understanding of all underlying factors that influence meaning formation, human understanding and behaviours (Creswell, 2003). Cole (2006, p. 27) explains that the

interpretive paradigm adopts the qualitative approach as it helps researchers to probe during the research process in such a way that in-depth responses are collated. Creswell (2003) clarifies that unless a researcher interprets collected data, he may not be able to discover new knowledge. Furthermore, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) add that the interpretive paradigm aims at understanding human experiences of situations in their natural settings. This is borne out of the belief that perceptions are usually constructed by the society in which humans live (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). The interpretive paradigm helps to take a close look at the study based on what kinds of experiences participants are able to relay (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). This paradigm works for this study as it is in line with the study of people's experiences of a shared programme as well as reasons behind those experiences. Thus, using the interpretive paradigm made it possible for the researcher to collect, interpret and understand the selected students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Honours specialisation at the South African university.

### **3.4. Research Design**

Research influences our understanding of phenomena (Pillay, 2008, p. 46) because diverse methods and approaches are usually used in research. A research approach is thus based on the researcher's resolve as to what fits into the work being studied as well as ways in which the study's research questions can be answered (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 600). A research design is thus an organisation of research as a whole (Bryman, 2008, p. 698). A research design is also said to be the researcher's presumption of the achievement of the study's objectives, aims via the research methods and the employed theoretical framework (Bush, 2010, p. 143). Therefore, different types of designs exist (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 600), some of them are case, participatory, survey and action research. Case study was employed in this study in order to achieve in-depth exploration of the phenomenon being studied.

#### **3.4.1. Case Study**

Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 25) define a case as a phenomenon that occurs within a specific setting. This is in agreement with Yin (2003, p. 364), who states that an investigation of real life events in their situational context is well done via the case study design; the real life events and

their situational contexts in this case, being international students' experiences and the location of the research. The case study design aids the exploration of a phenomenon within a particular setting via the use of multiple data collection instruments; this enhances research credibility (Yin, 2003). The effectiveness of a case study design is seen in its impact on educational curriculum as well interrelationships between humans (Scott, 2005).

Yin (2009) states that the case study design helps in the exploration of occurrences in their immediate contexts. He explains that the case study investigation usually searches for themes as it follows basic research guidelines and questions, which according to Flyvberg (2006) forbids it from being used in all kinds of research. Best and Kahn (2003) also note that some things are considered when using the case study design and they mostly have to do with suitability with this type of design. Although results are ungeneralisable using the case study design (Anderson, 1993, p. 163), the design thus aids reader-clarity and knowledge derivation about the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005, p. 364). The case study design is efficient in thoroughly exploring events in their situational contexts (Rule & John, 2011, p. 4). This also enables an understanding of causative effects of these explored phenomena. It enables the phenomenon to be viewed via diverse means and this is based on the use of multiple data collection instruments (Baxter, 2008). In this way, the topic is well investigated and its research aims achieved. Yin (2003) states that case study design can be used in studies that focus on 'hows' and 'whys' of issues, studies whose participants cannot be manipulated, whose settings are major considerations for the topic chosen and studies with no clear cut boundaries, phenomenon and settings. Hence, the context of the research is crucial.

There are many types of case study, some of them are: explanatory (Yin, 2003), exploratory, descriptive, multiple case studies (Yin, 2003), intrinsic, instrumental (Stake, 1995) and collective (Yin, 2003). This study utilised the exploratory case study. The exploratory case study is usually employed during an exploration of contexts where there is no clearly anticipated outcome of the phenomena under study (Yin, 2003). So, only derived information is analysed and assessed. The cases in this study are the experiences of international students from the academic years 2012 to 2015 in the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation at a South African university.

### **3.5. Research Approach**

This study is qualitative in nature, therefore, qualitative methods were used to collect data in order to ensure accurate explorations of participants' experiences. Polit and Beck (2008, p. 17) assert that a qualitative approach is scientific in nature because it ensures clarity of ideas and adequate probing, which usually provides well-grounded data. On this point, Sekaran and Bougie (2013, p. 147) explain that qualitative research usually yields more resourceful results than other methods of inquiry. For this reason, the participants were informed of their roles in the research because their experiences would attach significance to the research. There is thus a need by a researcher to seek for rich and deep accounts of things for the purpose of a clear exploration and classification of literary, communal and cultural events. Using qualitative methods helps in identifying and understanding the world as construed in certain locations of which calculation of quantity is needless (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 35). This is the major reason behind the usual consumption of time when qualitative research is being carried out (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013, p. 147), thus ruling out a need for result generalisation. This being the case, the data collection strategy in this study was achieved through the visual methods, critical open-ended discussions on themes that emerged from the visuals produced and open-ended written narratives about their experiences.

### **3.6. Site Selection**

Agreeing with the participants about the place in which to conduct the research was essential to the nature of the research to ensure the participants felt relaxed and expressed themselves in an environment that was devoid of distractions and noise. This is in accordance to McCann and Clark's (2005) suggestion that a relaxed environment is the most suitable for research to be conducted. Seven participants were attended to on the university's premises and in rooms that comprised only the researcher and one participant at a time, while one participant was communicated with via email as she and her family had relocated farther from the premises of the institution. The participants who were physically available expressed their satisfaction about the venues and mode of interactions as they stated that they did not feel under any stress whatsoever and there were no danger or fear issues.

More importantly, the researcher ensured that they focused on their experiences of the module, which according to Banks and Mackrodt (2005, p. 76) is essential in the creation of a notable consciousness of their experiences. Due to this possibility, the researcher was careful and patient with the participants. A number of the participants showed emotion while answering the questions relating to their experiences, however, that did not deter them from continuing with the research.

### 3.7. Recruitment of Participants

Angel (2009, p. 25) defines a population as the total number of anything. A research population is the total number of the participants that are suitable to participate in research (Zikmund & Babin, 2013, p. 312) and this indicates the number of people the researcher deems fit for the actualisation of the research aims. This knowledge is ensured before the study’s sampling commences (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006, p. 27). The members of the study population are international students who have undergone the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation at the selected international university.

#### 3.7.1. Biographical Information

Eight international students who have undergone the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation were contacted. For the purpose of abiding by the promise of anonymity and confidentiality made to the participants, their identities have been coded as Participant 1 to Participant 8 in the transcriptions of the recorded open-ended discussion. The following variables were noted: gender, age, year of study, type of study, marital status, nationality and home language. For ease of analysis and clarity, their biographical data is stated as follows:

**Table 1: Participants’ Details**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Year Of Study</b>	<b>Type Of Study</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Stated Nationality</b>	<b>Home language</b>

Participant 1	Male	30-40	2012-2013	Full-time	Single	Nigerian	Igbo and English
Participant 2	Male	30-40	2012-2013/2014	Part-time	Married	Nigerian	Igbo and English
Participant 3	Male	30-40	2013-2014	Full-time	Single	Nigerian	Yoruba, English and French
Participant 4	Male	30-40	2013-2014	Full-time	Single	Nigerian	Yoruba and English
Participant 5	Male	28-40	2013-2014	Full-time	Single	Nigerian	Yoruba and English
Participant 6	Male	30-40	2013	Full-time	Single	Nigerian	Yoruba and English
Participant 7	Female	28-40	2013-2014	Full-time	Married	Arabian	Arabic
Participant 8	Female	28-40	2014	Full-time	Single	Nigerian	Yoruba and English

As seen in Table 1 seven of the participants were Nigerians and 1 was Arabian; these were all the international students that did their Honours programme in the department within the study periods under investigation. While Participants 1, 3, 4 and 6 are pursuing their doctoral studies presently, Participants 2, 5 and 8 are currently doing their Masters programme, and Participant 7 is not studying at the moment due to her stated reason of being busy with family duties. Based on Table 1, it is obvious that all the participants (Participants 2, 4 and 7) studied during various years and some of them had to retake some modules, hence increasing their supposed year of study by an extra year.

### **3.7.2. Gatekeeper Approval Letter**

Before the commencement of this study, gate keeper permission was given by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Registrar and Dean and Head of School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2015, after which an approval for ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal was also granted. Once the research was approved by these committees, the recruitment of participants began.

Creswell (2009, p. 22) asserts that ethical guidelines (like autonomy and non-maleficence) must always be respected in research, this, as Norman (2008, p. 48) adds, enables researcher-participant trust and respect which in the long run impacts on the research process. The researcher made contact with the participants and explained the study to them. They were then asked to participate in the study. As soon as they agreed to participate, information letters as well as consent forms were given to them and they were assured of all ethical requirements in accordance to the university's ethical considerations. The recruited participants were assured of their ethical rights like anonymity (that participants' names would not be used in the research), confidentiality (that the information given during the research process would be kept secret and not exposed to public scrutiny), informed consent (that participants' consent and agreement to participate in the research would be sought before they could be used as study participants) and maleficence (that the research would not cause any harm to the participants) as well as their rights to withdraw from the research if they felt uncomfortable (Clarke & Iphofen, 2006a) with proceeding with the research process. These are also the requirements of the university's ethics committee. Thus, pseudonyms were used for all participants in order to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of both the institution and the participants during the process of the research.

Research findings were disseminated to participants when the data analysis was completed in order to enable them to provide further input and verification, as it was important that the researcher had honestly articulated their stories meaningfully and as they would have wanted them portrayed. These research findings were given to the participants for thorough digestion in a hard copy/print format and they were each given time to go through it and return it to the

researcher after they had given approval and once all corrections had been effected where necessary.

In fulfilment of research ethical codes, it was ensured that research-related documents were treated in the strictest of confidence. As per prior agreement, all data was given to the researcher's supervisor and they will be stored in the supervisor's office in a locked cupboard for five years in compliance to the university's standards. Thereafter, the data will be destroyed: print data by shredding and tapes by incineration. Also, the researcher ensured that the dissertation and any other work published from this research maintained the anonymity of the institution and the participants by not using any identifying information.

### **3.7.3. Sampling**

According to Sekaran (2006, p. 33), a sample is a selected few from the target population as a result of their fitness to take part in the research. Yin (2003, p. 262) explains that having rich data is enabled by a deliberate selection of fit participants; this most importantly generates in-depth data for a qualitative study (Tashakkori & Teddie, 2010, p. 3). It thus helps to derive definite and accurate information from specifically selected participants (Chamaz, 2006, p. 18).

The sampling technique that was used in this study is purposive sampling as it is the most appropriate technique for an inquiry that uses the interpretive paradigm. The choice of purposive sampling for this study was also because the researcher deemed each participant fit for the study. Chamaz (2006, p. 18) defines purposive sampling as a technique that is used by the researcher to select the participants that he/she thinks are suitable for the study. These participants are then seen as representative of their population. Likewise, Creswell (2007) states that purposive sampling is the best technique to use, depending on the researcher's realisation of the participants' suitability for the study. The researcher employed this technique in order to ascertain if the participants would fit into the scope of the research.

This approach of sampling suits the nature of this research because the study participants were specifically chosen as they were deemed fit for the study. It was largely dependent on the following reasons:

- a) The university records indicate that from 2012 to 2015 there were eight international students who took the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation and there was an intention to work with all of them.
- b) The participants all had to be international students who had undertaken the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation at the university being considered.
- c) Only the international students who were willing to participate in the study were recruited.
- d) The year of commencement and completion of the programme was considered.

These variables aided the in-depth exploration of the reasons for the answers that the participants gave of their experiences.

In addition, it was found the participants were all over 25 years of age. In addition, Burns and Grove (2003, p. 257) assert that since the qualitative method places more importance on quality than quantity, the number of selected participants, regardless of how small or large, does not affect the validity of results. Creswell (1998, p. 89) also states that for a phenomenological study, five to 25 participants may be used while an adequate number of three to five participants may be the sample size of a case study research. Therefore, the sample comprised eight (six men and two women) international students aged between 29 and 40 years. In addition, this particular Honours specialisation was the first attempt at international education for the participants.

### **3.8. Data Collection Strategies**

As previously mentioned, the data collection methods utilised in this study are visuals, open-ended discussion and open-ended narratives due to their suitability for a study that is underpinned by interpretive/hermeneutic phenomenology. Data collection commenced as soon as the participants showed consent to participate in the research and availability to have the questioning done at a time, on a date and in a place convenient for them (mostly within the

university's premises). The entire questioning process (visuals - 10 minutes, discussion - 40 minutes and written narratives - 10 minutes) took a maximum of 60 minutes for each participant.

### **3.8.1. Visual Approach**

Eisner (2008) states that spoken language is not able to independently express all forms of knowledge; he explains that visual images are reminiscent of certain expressions that verbal language cannot make. Images probe and reveal diverse kinds of meanings and consciousness (Prosser & Loxley, 2008) and they aid the researcher in eliciting rich and in-depth information from participants. Some means of visual approaches are: images that are found on the internet or in books, images drawn by researchers and images drawn by participants. Many of these images or visual representations are based on responses to requests for research (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). According to Cilesiz (2010), the use of a visual approach may play a vital role in the understanding of human thoughts and experiences of a particular phenomenon. Cilesiz (2010) explains that ideas and materials have a basic connection and innate meaning. Creswell (2007) asserts that collected data and their interpretations must reflect events and occurrences; thereby making the visual aspect of this research significant and reflective as there is an "internal act of consciousness" which relates individuals to their experiences (Langdridge, 2007, p. 57).

The usage of this data collection tool encouraged a lot of thinking and reflection on the part of the participants who felt the need to answer questions carefully as they wanted to produce a clear expression in order to prevent confusion during interpretation and discussions (Gauntlett, 2007). In this way, the participants saw the necessity of deep-thinking and they were not afraid to share their experiences about the phenomenon. This also enabled acute participation during discussions as the researcher pushed for in-depth detail of the visual representations and the reasons behind the illustrations. In addition, it enabled an easy analysis due to the production of clear-cut answers since the participants had been initially assured of their anonymity.

According to Bagnoli and Clark (2010), recently, people hardly desire to participate in sit and talk studies as they prefer to do more interesting things like being active participants. This seemed to have strengthened the participants' interest and responsiveness in the study, especially

the types who would usually avoid getting involved or find some sort of difficulty in engaging properly during verbal interactions. However, the researcher, having ensured that the participants were relaxed in their own comfort zones and times, conducted the research without interruptions or noise.

The visual instructions were the first to be carried out in order for the impending discussions to be centred on the drawings that the participants had made. The participants were asked to make visual representations of their experiences; this enabled the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences via the comparison of responses received in the three data collection instruments supplied by each participant during analysis. It was also anticipated that using this method would possibly give rise to a detection or identification of themes and codes that could be used to probe the participants further during the open-ended discussion segment as the researcher gradually gained more insight into the participants' experiences based on the visual representations that had been made available by them. The participants were also told before the commencement of the research that they could draw anything and that an artistic expertise was not as important as the expressions of their experiences. This made them feel more free to use any kind of drawing which according to them, helped them to express the various stages of their experiences. Hence, different kinds of drawings (like cartoons, graphs, mind maps and trees) were made after which the open-ended discussions commenced.

### **3.8.2. Critical Open-Ended Discussions**

Open-ended questions, according to Cooper and Schindler (2008, p. 23), are questions that are structured in such a way that participants are able to freely express themselves without space or time limitations. Using these forms of questions thus aids the derivation of in-depth answers from participants, the formation of new questions from participants' responses and an enlightenment of the researcher and participants about the phenomena and about things that still need to be discussed. The prepared questions that the participants were asked birthed further questions and the participants made every attempt to answer each of the questions as they were asked. Some of the prior prepared questions are:

- a. Please explain your visual image to me.

- b. What does each aspect signify?
- c. What prompted you to choose such images?
- d. Do you believe you have omitted anything significant in your image? Why do you think you omitted that aspect?
- e. What are your experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation?
- f. Why do you think you had such experiences?
- g. Could you please critically reflect on the entire experience of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation?

These open-ended questions were asked continuously throughout this session, as Sammons (2007) affirms that open-ended discussions facilitate the promotion of collective learning and the revelation of experiences through unobstructed inquiry. The discussions were recorded because recorded discussions are usually a one-on-one productive data collection method (Jary & Jary, 2000, p. 314) which aids rich data collection. It enables sufficient connections between the researcher and the participants (Johnson, 2000). In this study, discussions were encouraged once the participants had expressed their experiences via the diagrams. The discussions were based on the emerging themes from the visuals produced; this was stimulated so that besides the visual representations, participants are able to speak more about their experiences both in relation to the diagram and even further, via continuous probing during the process. Hence, having a critical discussion with participants on the produced visuals was really aimed at deriving rich and in-depth information from the participants (Webb, Gill & Poe, 2005).

An experience-based phenomenological approach was used in order to focus on meanings as presented and interpreted. This is because people cannot be divorced from their experience of a phenomenon. Using hermeneutic phenomenology in this study therefore enabled the researcher to detect if any information was being stalled by the participants as well as reveal this information via the means of extensive examination of participants' collected responses.

More so, conducting a critical open-ended discussion in this research encouraged the participants to explore diverse means of explaining their visuals per word after the structural representations, as they would be enabled to verbally and confidently discuss the concept that informed their

drawings. Via this approach, the researcher was able to have a rich understanding of participants' experiences (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2008, p. 3-4). All the questions that they were asked as well as their responses to the questions enabled the researcher to examine individual differences as reflected in participants' responses. This is because results always materialise from the information that the participants give about their experiences (Seidman, 2006) and this may not have been possible if the participants had not spoken about those experiences.

Even though hermeneutic phenomenology does not aim at critiquing or making changes, it often produces positive results (Kvale, 1983). It presumes a significant attachment of meaning to people's experiences that might not be obtained if participants are not sufficiently probed or asked questions (Cohen & Omery, 1994). This is why it was important that people were asked questions that would make them talk during the course of the data collection process. A focus on this aspect of the research was aimed at understanding these participants' experiences as they really wanted. This understanding, according to Mautner (2000, p. 578), aids the acquisition of human knowledge and then an interpretation of it; which is also in line with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. Mautner (2000, p. 248) defines hermeneutic phenomenology in this regard as a theory that interprets produced transcripts, the human behaviour and basically diverse cultural tenets. Seidman (2006) thus proposes the importance of the researcher's ability to create a friendly atmosphere that enables the participants to communicate freely. This was achieved via proper introductions and proper explanation of the research concept to the participants which in the long run enabled them to be attentive, ready and committed to the research. The open-ended discussions were tape-recorded because it was deemed to be the best method of storing a large quantity of information, and a lack of recorded data may have posed huge difficulties for the researcher who was busy writing participants' responses while also asking questions. It was also important in order to keep all collected data safe for referencing and verification purposes. The recordings enhanced clarity during the transcription stage.

### **3.8.3. Open-Ended Written Narratives**

Storytelling helps in attaching meanings to people's experiences. The utilisation of written/narrative texts in a study that aims at exploring human experiences is extremely essential

(Carson & Fairbairn, 2002). Encouraging the participants to write a narrative of their experiences was thus focused on making them attain self-authorship of their situations at a particular moment in time. Lindseth and Norberg (2004) explain that hermeneutic phenomenology helps to find meanings in written texts and their interpretations. This is in accordance to Gubrium and Holstein's assertion that an understanding of world qualities helps in explaining and transforming them (Connell, 2003). Similarly, Wojnar and Swanson (2007) state that hermeneutic phenomenology helps to clarify the significant information passed by the participants about their experiences. This indicates that people are able to tell their stories, and if explained meaningfully, this can aid proper understanding of human experiences.

It is thus the duty of the researcher to trust the power inherent in language and its use in order to understand the written texts (Van Manen, 2007, p. 14). In other words, writing is an inseparable part of research and written texts usually provide a platform for a proper understanding of the phenomenon. It is also essential for assimilation (Cameron, 2001) as well as for a safe documentation of responses. Therefore, narratives are important in this kind of study in order to capture in full detail what sorts of interpretation participants' expressions deserve, further encouraging an exploration of their experiences.

Narrative inquiry is a general expression for a research into human experiences, the time of occurrence, as well as the context in which those experiences occurred (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In a narrative inquiry, data is systematically collected as expressed by participants and then analysed. Hence, narrative inquiry looks into participants' experiences as described by the participants to the researcher. Writing conveys precision and excitement to human existence (Cameron, 2001, p. 4). It promotes understanding and enhances an appropriate interpretation of human experiences. Polkinghorne (1995) explains that stories are usually a window through which people can be viewed, in relationship to their social constructs. This is because narratives are representatives of participants' social reality (Etherington, 2004, p. 81) and they reveal participants' experiences in an in-depth manner as a result of the format of interaction via the use of language, which was also considered in this study.

The study's theoretical framework also influenced the in-depth manner of the phenomenon's exploration and the way to go about data elicitation from participants (Jasper, 2004, p. 3) in a way that enabled an appropriate understanding of all the responses provided.

The participants were implored in a sentence to:

***Please write openly and freely on your experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation.***

They were also (in order to avoid a situation whereby the participants would get confused about the length of the narrative, language use and any other kinds of restrictions) informed that their writings were:

***Unrestricted and unlimited but should accurately and freely reflect your experiences.***

Hence, the participants, in this study, were made to reflect on their experiences in this process because it was important for them to give doubtless responses that were not based on speculations. On this note, the participants and the researcher reached a mutual level of agreement that they were free to express themselves however they wanted, in order to prevent any ambiguity that could have been caused because of restrictions. In this way, trust was achieved and the participants freely divulged information on the phenomenon. Emphasis was thus placed on meaning construction between the participants and the researcher because the researcher collected and embraced the participants' expressions exclusively in a bid to avoid any form of subjectivity which could affect data collection and analysis. This also facilitated the tallying of the analysis stage of the research to correlate with the data collection phase as they were not supposed to be entirely independent of one another. The philosophical root on which this kind of narrative is based is constructivism, which according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), signifies that experiences are human creations through personal beliefs, and these experiences range and differ over a period of time. The participants were thus encouraged to share their narratives freely.

### **3.9. Data Analysis and Feedback to Participants (Oral Feedback; Debriefing)**

Data analysis of data derived via the use of case study design is methodical (Best & Khan, 2003, p. 28). Yin (2003) emphasises the significance of well-arranged data. He explains that the use of a database aids an independent assessment of data and enhances research reliability so that all collected data and materials can be easily found when needed. A study that has hermeneutic phenomenology as its framework, rather than to evaluate results, maintains an uninterrupted focus on the collected data, re-reading of transcripts and closeness with the study's participants in order to ensure an accurate collection and analysis of participants' responses. The data collected during the research with the three methods was done independently and then viewed together before arriving at the results. As soon as the data collection stage was accomplished, the researcher ensured that a thematic analysis of the derived data commenced immediately. Thematic analysis of data enables one to deal with identified themes as they emerge. In this case, the data speaks for itself, because themes (strong or weak ones) were easily detected while situating the context of research around the participants' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation.

#### **3.9.1. Visual Methods**

Data derived from the visual approach was analysed alongside the transcribed discussions and narratives. During the analysis of the visual methods, the researcher looked for possibilities of hidden information and also attempted to derive a full understanding of the phenomenon under investigation from the participants' perspectives (Frith, Riley, Archer & Gleeson, 2005, p. 187). Afterwards, in order to neatly and clearly separate themes, data was coded. This was in alliance to Chamaz's (2006, p. 13) encouragement of the use of coding in the analysis of visual methods so as to arrive at valid deductions, and thus, results. Possible contradictions and similarities were identified via the categorised themes and recurrent patterns such that each response becomes a characteristic or a representative of participants' illustrative expressions. The structural components and purpose of the visual texts were branded, compiled and re-checked to detect any possible relationship or contrast between the visuals and the written narratives. This was necessary in order to confirm their links with the research questions and aim.

### **3.9.2. Critical Open-Ended Discussions**

Most researchers start analysis once they listen to the recorded conversations that they had with participants (Creswell, 2005). In this study, however, analysing the recorded critical discussion of the themes emerged from the visuals produced, the recorded discussions were transcribed, reviewed, emerging themes detected, encoded and categorised (Terre, Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006, p. 252). The recorded discussions were transcribed by the researcher in agreement with Gilham (2005) that the researcher is better prepared for analysis if he transcribes the data by himself. Data was read meticulously in order to identify any developing and recurring themes. There was a thematic separation and analysis of participants' experiences, the meaning of those experiences, and the reasons for the experiences. Themes were also identified, encoded and subdivided into sections (major or minor) (Terre, Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006, p. 252). After which theme-coding was done so as to ensure quality of response. In addition, descriptive statistics were used to depict certain variables like sex, age, year of enrolment and graduation year, and content analysis procedures were followed in order to assess, interpret and understand the coded themes. There was data reduction and explication (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 113). Data was systematically reduced during the process of thematic detection and then interpreted. The study's research questions were used as a guideline during the transcription and analysis phases (Creswell, 2003, p. 89) to ensure connections with the data. Data was then arranged thematically so that re-emergence of any sort or repetition would be aptly detected, after which charts were used to depict derived results.

### **3.9.3. Open-Ended Narratives**

To analyse the open-ended narratives as well, emerging patterns/themes were noted and counted; the variables were also compared in order to detect intervening variables, to create categories of themes and then the conceptually ordered themes that emerged from the data were revised. In this way, the meaning constructed during data collection between the participants and researcher was brought to light.

The derived data was consequently thoroughly triangulated in order to aid adequate phenomenal examination and revision (Hong & Espelage, 2012). This was carried out using the multiple triangulation approach, which according to Halcomb and Andrew (2005), guarantees research rigour, credibility and trustworthiness.

Research findings were then disseminated to participants as soon as data analysis was completed in order to enable them to provide further input and verification, as it was important in ensuring certainty that the researcher had accurately and honestly articulated their stories meaningfully the way they wanted them portrayed. More importantly, pseudonyms were used for all participants, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of both the university and the participants.

In addition, the researcher was certain to note that the anonymity and confidentiality of the results of the dissertation, any other work published from this research, the university and participants was maintained by not using any identifying information. Research findings were given to participants for thorough digestion in a hard copy/print form and they were given time to go through it and return it to the researcher after they had given approval of correctly captured responses and when corrections had been effected where necessary.

#### **3.9.4. Thematic Analysis of all Data Derived from Research Methods**

Thematic analysis is used in analysing data in qualitative research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) and according to Ryan and Bernard (2003, p. 85) social science research centres on theme identification, without which there is no data to clarify, portray or judge against. Doing thematic analysis in this study enabled the researcher to discover consistent themes that appeared in the data and theme identification was done in a period of a week in order to pick up any theme that must have been overlooked previously. Subsequently, the transcribed recorded open-ended discussion was manually categorised separately, which according to Bernard and Ryan (2010), helps in forming themes from statements derived from the transcriptions and is suitable for a study that utilises the phenomenology as a theoretical framework. Manual categorisation and analysis of themes were also done in order to attain a good level of familiarity with the collected data (Grbich, 2007). This enabled a further enlightenment of the phenomenon under study.

Grbich (2007, p. 33) explains that this process of data sorting enables the identification and break-down of lengthy statements into themes. This explains the reason why lengthy statements from the narratives and the transcribed open-ended discussions were cut and pasted in Chapter 4 of this thesis and then broken down to thematic strands; after which they were restricted to the context of the research. Once this analysis was complete, several themes were discovered and they will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

### **3.10. Rigour, Credibility and Trustworthiness**

#### **3.10.1. Rigour**

Rigour in studies that have phenomenological backings are ensured by the choice of qualitative methodology and maintained via ascertaining the position/role of the researcher during the research process, the structure and clarity of the visual methods, critical open-ended discussion, the open-ended narrative schedule (that enables participants' reflections) as well as triangulation and continuous reviewing of data (Bitsch, 2005). The rigour of research in a qualitative study confirms its trustworthiness and it enhances research credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Schwandt, Lincoln & Guba, 2007).

It was ensured that the research questions and the research instruments were open to the researcher's supervisor and peers for the accumulation of suggestions regarding the suitability and precision of data collection and analysis methods. Data was closely and appropriately reviewed and managed up to the result-derivation stage of the research (Pitney & Parker, 2009). This process was continual in such a way that all themes are thoroughly collated and repeatedly illustrated. It aided a helpful examination of the themes that emerged from the transcripts in such a way that similarities and differences in patterns were duly observed and illustrated. This process contributes to trustworthiness in research. Therefore, to ensure result validity, there was a continuous review of the research instruments (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 95) in order to determine their correlation with the participants' experiences, which forms a part of research rigour. Russell et al. (2005) explain that multiple checking of coded responses by other researchers also aids adequate testing and interpretation of coded themes and this enhances the validity of research.

### **3.10.2. Triangulation**

Greene (2007, p. 13) states that triangulation is essential for qualitative studies. Triangulation helps in the re-examination of research methods (Hong & Espelage, 2012). In addition, triangulation entails the use of diverse methods of data collection in order to achieve research validity, reliability (Taylor, Kermode & Roberts, 2007, p. 54; Halcomb & Andrew, 2005), trustworthiness (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 35) and also transferability. When triangulation is encouraged, responses are diversely viewed which then make them more precise (Moss, Phillips, Erikson, Floden, Lather & Schneider, 2009, p. 501). There are different forms of triangulation (investigator, theory, methodological and data triangulation), the most appropriate for this study is methodological triangulation which aids reliable and valid results (Halcomb & Andrew, 2005, p. 32).

Methodological triangulation is done via the use of diverse research methods to arrive at results that can be recommended and transferable to different contexts (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 54), which in this study, are the visual illustrations, open-ended discussions and open-ended narratives. As soon as all transcriptions were done, there was an immediate attempt at identifying and gathering the themes that each method contained per participant. There was consistent data reading and comparison of the information given by participants in each of the methods in order to detect any regularity, repetition, or inconsistency; and in the occurrence of such, to determine the reason behind such similarities or contradictions. This gave room for the much-deserved evaluation of the three data collection methods that were utilised in this study.

### **3.10.3. Credibility**

The certainty of the reliability of research findings is known as research credibility (Macnee & McCabe, 2008). One important factor that enables credibility in research is triangulation. Triangulation is a process which involves the usage of more than one research instrument in confirming result credibility (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p. 239).

The researcher had the collected data triangulated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) via the use of all three research instruments (visual illustrations, open-ended discussions and open-ended narratives) which were used for data collection. The use of triangulation thus helped to prevent or reduce maximal cases of bias and any other form of researcher influence during the data collection period, because according to Phillimore and Goodson (2004), the usage of at least one triangulation technique is encouraged in research as it enhances research credibility; this was the case in this study.

Reliability and validity are also significant in research as they indicate the level of the researcher's objectivity as well as the trustworthiness of the research (Bell, 2007, p. 42). This thus impacts on the possibility or the extent of the transferability of the research and this explains why proper data analysis and reviewing is necessary. After the transcription of the recorded open-ended discussion, the collected data was read meticulously to maintain accurate gathering and separation of themes per data collection method. This was also done in an attempt to gain the much deserved in-depth understanding of the participants' responses, which also included the moments of emotional shows, pauses and laughs. For this reason, the research results were shared with the participants in order to correct and avoid any form of misinterpretation, as this was expected to make the participants feel actively involved in the research process.

In addition, the use of written language in the visuals, narratives and the open-ended discussion enhanced thorough data examination (Krefting, 1991), re-examination, comparison of participants' responses per method (i.e. narrative versus transcription versus visuals), as well as analysis of data, more importantly, encouraged credibility of findings. DePompei and Hotz (2001) explain that the use of both verbal and written language aids the provision of enlightening facts that can be used for analysis. It also enhances research reliability and credibility (Clarke & Iphofen, 2006a).

Furthermore, in order to achieve research credibility, the research approach used in this study worked well with the research questions and objectives. According to Malhotra (2010, p. 318), the maintenance of the research's consistency with the research aims when transferred to another context is known as reliability. When research instruments tally with the research aims and

research is purely objective, results may be said to be valid (Bearden, Netemeyer & Haws, 2011, p. 67). As a result, drawn conclusions and recommendations were derived from the analysed data.

#### **3.10.4. Trustworthiness**

Silverman and Marvasti (2008, p. 295) assert that when research has a good theoretical backing, generates realistic, dependable and usable results as well provides means for empirical usage and improvement in policies, that research is trustworthy. Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 42) also assert that reliability and validity are important to any research and they make such research trustworthy based on the extent of objectivity that the researcher displays during data collection. Likewise, before trustworthiness can be attained in research, its findings should attain an utmost level of transferability in order to determine the extent to which the results can be generalized (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 42). Nonetheless, the level of trustworthiness of research is determined by its validity.

In this research, as previously mentioned, data was triangulated via three different approaches which were used to collect data. When data is collected from more than one source, comparing and contrasting is possible and the removal of varying details is easily done. The triangulation of data in this study thus aimed to enhance its trustworthiness. In addition, the data collection instruments in this research were utilised systematically in such a way that they were effective in capturing participants' responses. This emphasises the importance of the use and benefits of triangulation in research (Patton, 2002, p. 546). Triangulating was done in expectation of the yielding of trustworthy results which can enhance transferability of findings into other contexts. Also, the use of case study in this study enhanced its chances of generating trustworthy results. This is in line with Russell, Gregory, Ploeg, DiCenso and Guyatt's (2005) assertion that when research uses the case study design, has clearly written questions, uses purposive sampling and uses appropriate methods of data analysis, it is trustworthy.

### **3.11. Problems/Limitations**

The experiences of only eight international students who have undergone the Language and Media Studies module may be different from other students from other countries and may prevent the results from being generalisable. This is because it is a pre-conceived notion that a study which uses purposive sampling may not be generalised (Flick, 2014). However, the fact that the participants are only a representative group of other international students who have done the Language and Media Studies specialisation enabled a keenness that the results derived would be transferable in other contexts.

Similarly, it was anticipated that because many of these participants may be studying for higher degrees (Masters and PhD), it could be difficult to persuade them to participate in the research. This of course influenced the time schedules and venue of data collection. Nonetheless, the participants were encouraged to give the dates, times and venues which would be convenient for them and they showed up as promised.

It was also expected that the participants would want to hide some truths for the sake of fear or uncertainty of confidentiality of responses. However, prior to the actual commencement of the research process, the participants were informed of their ethical rights (autonomy, the right to withdraw from the research at any time they felt uncomfortable, anonymity, confidentiality). The researcher also implored the participants to express themselves freely and after they had settled in and fully understood the nature of the study, they were asked questions that prodded them to keep talking. This then enabled them to feel free during the process and give rich information about their experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation. Thus, the participants were given free rein and expressed themselves generally unhindered.

The researcher expected that issues regarding the visual illustrations would arise. That is, it was anticipated that the participants may not be inclined to draw, not know how to draw, or not be able to express themselves adequately via drawing. Nonetheless, they were assured that their drawing abilities were not being judged; rather, it is the concept behind the drawing and their explanations of the drawing that were important.

These are some of the anticipated limitations that were thought could attempt to impact on the study and the methods with which the researcher overruled some of them.

### **3.11.1. Methodological Delimitations**

A limitation could be the fact that the study's participants comprised international students from only two countries, of which the majority of the participants were from one country while only one participant was from another. This indicates that the one participant's experience may not be completely representative of other students that come from the same country; this also may have impacted on the generalisability of the research findings.

Likewise, one of the participants was only able to write out her narrative and did not do her visual representation and open-ended discussion at the time of data collection; this may not have fully represented her overall experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation.

In addition to this is the fact that international study is usually a broad topic of research, thus this study's findings may not be generalisable because the study was conducted in only one department of the university. Hence, it is possible that the derived results may have been different or more comprehensive if it was a broader study on internationalisation that dealt with many departments at the university or even different universities.

The purposive sampling used may not be representative of all the international students' experiences in South Africa since only one department (which graduated only eight international Honours students from 2011 to 2014) on one campus, at one university in one of the South African provinces was worked with.

### **3.11.2. Bias and Eliminations of Bias**

Creswell (2014, p. 186) states that qualitative researchers sometimes have a responsibility to reflect on the study they are conducting and note their role as well as the role their personal notions, culture and experiences may play on the research process and the results of the study.

### **3.11.3. The Researcher**

The researcher in this case is an international student who studied the Language and Media specialisation in the year 2014 from the same institution where the research was conducted and graduated with an Honours degree in 2015. This is important as the participants may be more open to respond to questions due to their understanding of ‘sameness’ with the researcher, who according to Liamputtong (2008), is expected to show some level of cultural awareness and sensitivity. For this purpose, the researcher during the course of the research may not have been able to ignore some personal notions about the phenomenon being studied.

Although attempts were made by the researcher during the research process to bracket any personal or subjective bias or notions, the study may not be completely rid of subjectivity. Some of the researcher’s experiences may have affected the interpretation of the collected data and certain expressions may have been foregrounded during the gathering of themes due to familiarity with some of the stated experiences. The fact that the data collection and analysis were also done by one person (the researcher), according to Ryan and Bernard (2003), may have prevented the collection of a variety of rich thematic categories. However, objective efforts were made to ensure the precise reading, understanding and analysis of the participants’ responses in a way that does not compromise the aim of the study as well as the study’s research questions and aim.

### **3.12. Conclusion**

In this section, the methodology and theoretical framework that was used in this study to gather data was described. The chosen research methods via a view of the information provided by the

participants were found to have given way for the derivation of possibly clear and honest responses on which the participants based their responses, thereby enabling grounds for a solid discussion of the findings which is presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

The study attempts to explore international students' experiences of undertaking a study at a South African university. This chapter presents the data and the analysis of the data derived via the use of the chosen research methods. This chapter presents the two main themes that were derived from the collected data, the subthemes that were derived under each of the major themes, detailed discussions of the themes, as well as a hermeneutic summary of the dominant themes derived from all the methods. The analyses of the findings have been divided based on two major themes that emanate from the research questions:

- International students' experiences of taking a Language and Media Honours specialisation at a South African university.
- The reasons for international students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Honours specialisation at a South African university.

#### **4.2. International Students' Experiences of Taking a Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation at a South African University**

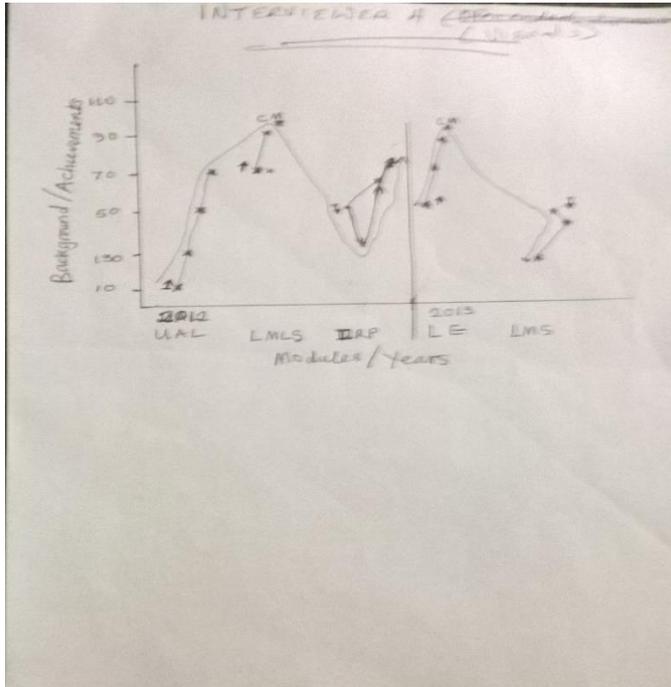
As previously discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, researching international students' experiences is paramount to understanding what these students passed through or are passing through as foreign nationals in their host department, university and country. In their visual illustrations, open-ended discussions, and written narratives, the participants showed familiarity with the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation and they appeared to remember the programme quite well:

*PARTICIPANT 3: The first image shows the lecturer in front of the students. It shows the regular class we had during our Honours time and most we had a two hour lecture ... I put the timetable at the end so I don't have to.... Then the second one is about presentation. We normally*



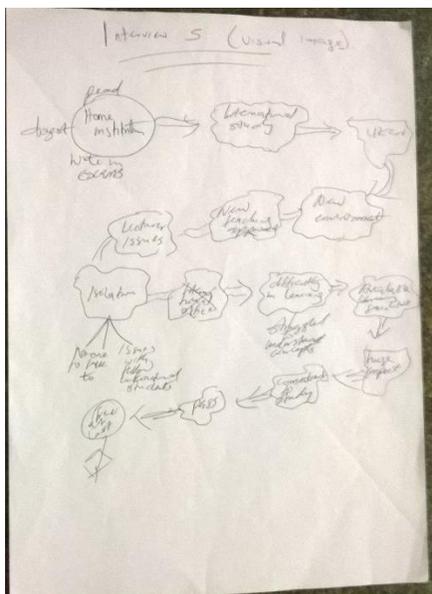


**Figure 3: Visual Illustration by Participant 4**



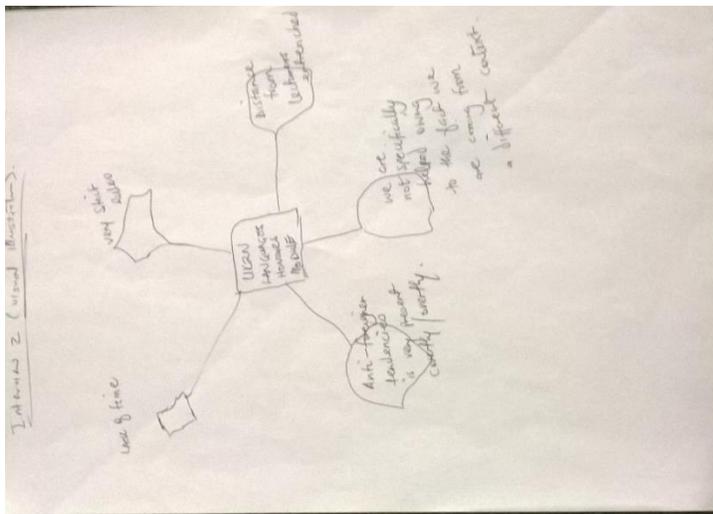
Participant 5 also used a mind map (see Figure 4: Visual Illustration by Participant 5) to show his experience of the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation, which started from his exit from his home country, admission into the international university and the various issues that he faced up until the completion of his study.

**Figure 4: Visual Illustration by Participant 5**



He had positive experiences such as available LAN and internet facilities and negative experiences such as issues with lecturers, new teaching styles, new environment, as well as a lack of help from the international office, difficulty in learning and isolation. Likewise, Participant 2 drew a mind map (see Figure 5: Visual Illustration by Participant 2) which he said enabled a link between various aspects of his experiences.

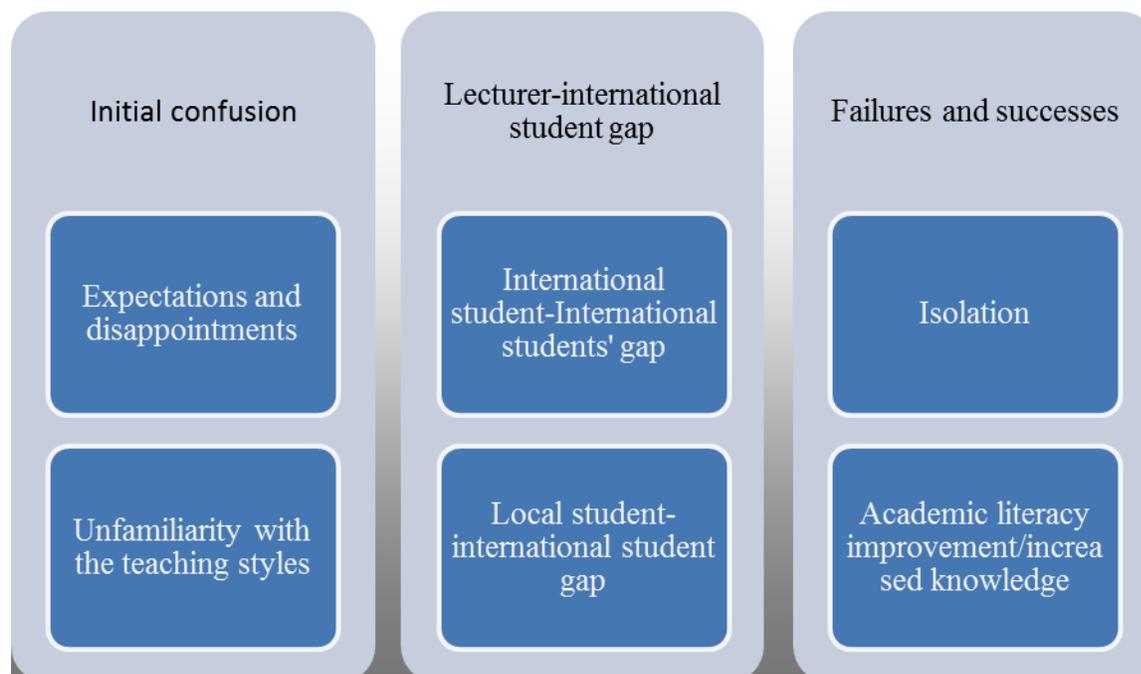
**Figure 5: Visual Illustration by Participant 2**



He linked all the stated experiences (*lack of time, very strict rules, anti-foreigner tendencies, distance from lecturers, as well as the academic structure which is different from that of the home university*) to the university and the programme he was doing at that time. This participant did his Honours programme as a part-time student and before going deeper into the explanation of his visual illustration, he clarified his type of study and marital status during the period of his Honours studies, which he also specified influenced his experiences of the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation. In the same light, Participant 3 explained his diagram by firstly making mention of the various classes that were conducted in his Honours period as well as the times. This was the same with six participants and it shows the level of familiarity that they possibly still had with the specialisation which they had completed three years ago. It assured the researcher that no guess work would be used by the participants when answering the questions which they would be asked. The fact that six of the eight participants focused on the workings of the timetable could imply that they recognised how the specialisation structured their week and days and how this structure shaped their time.

Some subthemes were realised from the study's major themes, as highlighted in Figure 6. These subthemes emerged from the participants' responses regarding their experiences. An analysis of each subtheme follows:

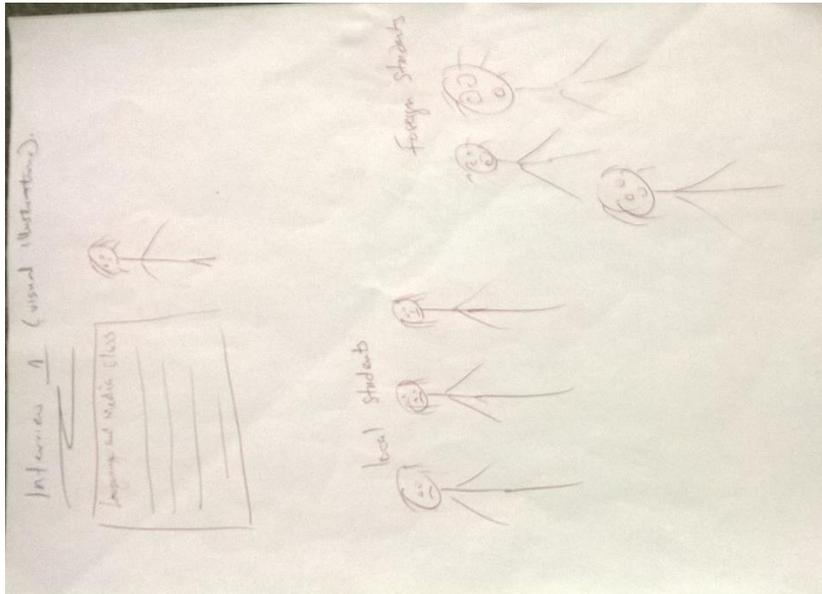
**Figure 6: Participants' Experiences**



#### **4.2.1. Initial Confusion**

In the visual illustration, Participant 1 attempted to draw a lecturer standing at the blackboard, three students (which he explained were international students) standing alone and three local students whose eyes he drew bigger than their local peers (see Figure 7: Visual Illustration by Participant 1).

**Figure 7: Visual Illustration by Participant 1**



This he said signifies international students' shock at the cultural disparity of the host institution and the other not so big eyes of the local students signify joy at the cultural familiarity.

*PARTICIPANT 1: As you can see there, the class is always divided into two, we have the foreign students and the local students. As you can see in the picture, they are confused, that is, shocked. Some of them .....the local students are smiling...*

In the researcher's bid to seek clarity, the participant tried to explain further the concepts of 'smiling' being the fact that the local students were in their comfort zones since they were in their home country while they, the international students, felt confused at the realisation of their newness to the setting which was also culturally different from their home universities.

*PARTICIPANT 1: Because it's very difficult to study far away from home, their loved ones and their comfort zones. So there are new experiences which could make them shocked. Some of them it was their first year, so these are things they have never seen before. So it's really quite difficult to fit in when it's your first year in any country. First year is the hardest. That's why they are always confused and always shocked by some of the experiences in the classroom.*

By first year the participant possibly meant the first year of study in a new environment. This difficulty that he mentioned international students may be having in their first year could thus have been influenced by the new environment, concepts and peers, among others. Participant 3 also reiterated this in his response to the interview with regards to his initial shock at the writing style and his proficiency in academic writing and language use.

*PARTICIPANT 3: ...the one that has to do with the challenges of actually doing the actual work. Trying to get materials from the internet, read and read through, paraphrase and you know. So all these, they are...*

Participant 3's assertion echoed that of Participant 2 but in a slightly different way, in the sense that the differences in the environment may possibly connote that the international students might have had issues with the learning/instructional equipment in the environment. This fits into Christofi and Charles's (2007) depiction of culture shock, being the result of people's unfamiliarity and incomprehension of a new environment as well as what they are supposed to do or how they are expected to cope with their host institution and local peers. This was repeated by Participant 8 who described the stages of her acclimatisation to the university and the new environment in stages, calling the first stage the phase of confusion where she struggled to find a footing.

*PARTICIPANT 8: My experience was from a confused stage at first because where I am coming from, you have to read and give back what you read or were taught in class. It was different during my Honours because I had to really think, deal with authors' works, think along their line and then critique them. This was new to me...*

Here, the participant indicated that the utilised activities in the lecture room were an indication of the international students' unfamiliarity with and newness to the learning environment as well as the learning tasks and the activities. This finding was also echoed in Sicat's (2011) study on international students' level of acclimatisation to their host institution. On this note, Participant 2 expressed the view that international students should be allowed to fully acclimatise to the university system in order to interact well with everyone including their local peers.

*PARTICIPANT 2: ... people need time to acclimatise, to get used to the way things are done. Some people in Nigeria are not used to using the computer for everything, typing things, every assignment they have to do and they have to come and you expect them to jump in and start doing that and you expect them to submit their first work power point and these are things that maybe the person is not used to, so it should be better if there are people who are assigned to international students to specifically help them to start.*

This clarifies his indication that international students had difficulty with the learning facilities that were made available by the university. The students had no sufficient prior knowledge of computer usage and this affected them more negatively than positively at the start of their Honours programme. Hence, the students might have felt thrown in the gap, making their studies somewhat frustrating with little or no guidance from their host university, which also probably did not realise what challenges the students were facing. This explains Bousquet's (2012) assertion that some sort of scaffolding (the use of specific support systems to teach in the bid to enhance students' learning processes) is necessary in order to help international students get accustomed to their host institution's literacy system, and according to Kift (2009), due scaffolding should be encouraged when international students are just starting their education, especially in their first years.

Participant 2 also pointed this out during the open-ended discussion where he expressed that studying would have been a lot more enjoyable for him if he had been 'helped to familiarise'. This was repeated by other participants such as Participants 1 and 3 in the open-ended discussions and the narratives as well. The issue of scaffolding may as a matter of opinion be a great move for the host institutions as a way of helping the international students to get acclimatised to their host university, and the participants' experiences may have probably been different in this regard had they been adequately or gently led into the various stages of their international study.

Climate differences between home and abroad countries were also mentioned by one of the participants (Participant 3). He explained that the climatic differences stood out for him as an initial shock when he started his Honours programme and that this affected him negatively

because he was unprepared. This may have been because he was not used to the weather in his new environment. This however did not come out in any of the other participants' responses, which indicates that the weather issue for this participant must have been an overtly personal one.

#### **4.2.2. Expectations and Disappointments**

Many expectations trail the international study experience and international students always come with different sets of expectations to their new environment, as East (2001) asserts that having expectations directs one through a proper assessment of experiences. One expectation is that studying abroad affords international students the opportunity of getting gainfully employed and being proud owners of respected certificates (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). This is why international students often have expectations that their host institutions would treat them well (Hellsten, 2010), and when this expectation is not met, they get diverse forms of negative emotional feelings about the situation (Mahat & Hourigan, 2007). This study's participants expressed much disappointment about the way the modules were structured, stating that certain expectations that they had of the programme were not fully met. One of them was Participant 1, who did his study as a full time student. Participant 1 expressed that there was not much practicality in teaching some of the modules in the specialisation. He however excluded a module (from his 'list of disappointments') in which he was taught a topic called 'the semiotic analysis of media' because it had to do with images and its teaching was mostly practical. He stated:

*PARTICIPANT 1: The good part of this module though is the semiotic analysis of media (images).*

Pointing this out was important for the participant. It indicates that certain good memories are able to linger with students depending on the module, the teacher and how it was taught. However, regarding the participants' disappointment with modules, another participant (Participant 4) explained that he felt that the modules that were taught mainly focused on theories and not much practicality was involved:

*PARTICIPANT 4: So we thought that we had this, can I call it a belief that we were expecting, we had this expectation that after this programme we would have ... we should be able to acquire more, but we just discovered that at the end of the programme, all that we're being taught ... is just theories. Everything is theoretical. The modules did not really prepare us for the teaching of English.*

This indicates that the participants must have had different expectations of the specialisation, which they felt were not met and it may be because of the outcomes of each of the modules. This assertion made it seem obvious that the participants perhaps had clear perceptions of what could have worked or not while doing the Honours programme, especially with regards to the structuring of the curriculum. It is therefore essential that the curriculum is constantly adapted to the context and culture from which students originate. The need for the incorporation of practical application into the specialisation was also repeated in the other responses from the discussions and narratives that were undertaken by Participants 1 and 2. It is advocated (Tran, 2011) that the entire body of university staff should come on board to evaluate the approach to teaching because the currently used approach may not culminate in rich learning experiences for students. The curriculum must embody an entire, more holistic view of students and their expectations, needs and wants (Tran, 2011).

This study's participants explained that based on their expectations of the programme, which involved much critical reflections as well as critiquing of works, it was difficult to cope at first but this changed as time went on. That is, some of their reservations about the academic literacy practices of their host institutions changed as they kept seeking more knowledge and working hard to achieve success in their academic endeavours. From this data, it is clear to deduce that the participants' expectations of the academic literacy practices of their host university were perhaps based on their previous qualifications as well as what was acceptable at their home university.

*PARTICIPANT 3: Here, it's more of research based learning where you are left alone to reason critically, and where you have the facilities.*

The participants explained that they did a lot of critical thinking in their host university while they just needed to read and regurgitate what they had written in their home universities, and Participant 3 specifically indicated that there were facilities ready at the host university. This makes known the difference between their home and the host universities, facilities-wise. It may thus be necessary that universities embrace a transition pedagogy that transitions from a myopic view of student academic progression to a more integrated curriculum. This curriculum must employ the use of appropriate technology (Knight, 1997) and takes into account diverse needs of international cohorts (Ramsden, 2003). It is hoped that this will enhance and make more effective the network of relationships between learners, teachers and other organisers of learning. That is, learning must be done through integrated support for richer communication and activities.

In contrast however, some of the participants (like Participant 2) highlighted that they had pleasant experiences and that they found the specialisation interesting; they then suggested that some of the modules should be taught in other departments as electives because they are necessary for educators. This indicates satisfaction on the part of the participants concerning the Honours programme and this is despite their stated challenges.

*PARTICIPANT 2: Yes, I think it was eye opening, it's something that for me, the module shouldn't be limited for those in languages because of the academic importance of...because if you look at postgraduate studies, most of them are based on critical understanding of saved work, most of them written. Yea, and you see that it is in language that that is so emphasized, so maybe it should be an elective...maybe people should be asked to do electives from the languages even in their Honours programme whether in science or social justice or gender or whatever discipline they are in. That might help in getting everybody in line into the, I don't know how to explain this, but getting people more conversant, more attuned to thinking academically in a literate way.*

This is also an indication that the Honours programme was beneficial in the learning processes of the participants in the end. That is, based on their expectations of the host university, the participants were disappointed when they did not seem to achieve some of their expectations, after which they started seeing some breakthroughs which enabled them to experience

satisfaction on completion of their studies. This is in agreement with Domonic's (2011) assertion that the possession of pre-conceived thoughts about the host country or institution usually leave the students disappointed when things do not turn out as expected; thus confirming Zhou, Frey, and Bang's (2011) opinion that those expectations can result in stress. This relates to Participant 5 when he said that on completion of his Honours studies, he felt a sense of relief as soon as the programme was completed. This finding also depicts that unmet expectations could have probably led to this participant's stress level, and he perhaps may not have been as satisfied with the programme as the other participants were.

He also reiterated this in his narratives when he said: *"So I felt free, as I wrote there after my exams and assessments had been completed..."*

This could also possibly indicate that not all of them actually had a pleasant time during their studies and that those who did not have enjoyable experiences merely struggled to survive the learning process. Hence, some of the participants who had unmet expectations of the programme opined that some improvements should be made to the content and scope of the modules in a way that embraces international students, their experiences and their future aspirations.

Another instance of unmet expectations was seen in a few of the participants' (Participants 5 and 2) revelations that they were unable to make friends with their local peers.

*PARTICIPANT 5: Before coming here, I thought I would be able to make a lot of local friends but the language issue just seems to be a huge blockade in making friends. Because I could not interact freely without feeling like a foreigner and you could see it in the classrooms too. People would sit with the other people with whom they share a common language and this prevented a lot of social interactions...*

Participant 2 also reiterates this in his interview responses:

*PARTICIPANT 2: No, anyway, from my own experience, most local students... sometimes when you are working with them in groups or something, there tends to be so much use of isiZulu and when you don't speak isiZulu, you find out that you are the odd man out so it doesn't really*

*help... You know, like my experience of international people, when they go to international universities, they should be welcomed in a way where they are helped to get used to the way things are run in the university but here you don't find that much, here you find that, I don't know ... you find that people are not so comfortable with you around, you know, so they are rather among themselves, the same language group, the same racial group, that kind of thing. So sometimes you find out that every time in class, you are alone and if you want to get people who would help you do something, you don't get anybody. So, you are almost entirely on your own without any help...*

Healthy relationships with local peers may have been a way of getting international students settled into their host environment and making them feel comfortable or welcome. This finding is in agreement with Cathcart et al. (2006) who in their reports of international students discovered that the international students had a failed expectation when it came to the prospects of making new friends in their host environment. The feeling of not being included may have disappointed these participants based on their expectations of making friends abroad, even before they left home to study at this international university.

#### **4.2.3. Unfamiliarity with the Teaching Styles**

Participants in their narratives as well as during the open-ended discussion explained the impact of the new environment and teaching styles (which were different from the ones to which they were familiar back home) on their experiences and academic success. They explained that they had problems coping because they had gotten used to their previous ways of learning. This was reinforced in the data collected from the narratives where Participant 8 clarified that her previous programme only enabled her to regurgitate what the lecturers taught them, which is not the same as the expectations of the host institution. All these expectations seem to have been exclusively caused by the participants' previous qualifications as well as their newness to the host environment and academic requirements which are different from that which they had experienced in their home universities. This thus highlights the impact of the past academic experiences of international students on their current and/or future academic pursuits.

*PARTICIPANT 8: My experience was from a confused stage at first because where I am coming from, you have to read and give back what you read or were taught in class.*

Hence, this emphasises the importance of pedagogy in the teaching and learning processes. This indicates that when students are not familiar with or acclimatised to their new teaching environment, it can possibly impact on their experiences more negatively than positively. Thus, it is important that the host institution relates with these students in a way that they are able to know and understand their plights, this may enable the determination of what help or intervention needs to be positioned for their easy acclimatisation in the system. The international students may also need to be more expressive so that their host institution can know when, how and what to do to make them familiar with the environment.

#### **4.2.4. Lecturer-International Student Gap**

The participants in this research indicated that they could not relate properly with their lecturers. Two participants (Participants 2 and 3) believed that the lecturers created that gap while another participant (Participant 8) noted that her inability to relate adequately with her lecturers started from when she was doing her previous programme where students usually had no sufficient time and interaction with their lecturers. This finding contradicts that of Zhou, Frey and Bang (2011), who report that the international students in their studies expressed the immense support which their institution's academic staff rendered during the course of their studies. The contradiction is such that lecturer gap issues had been in existence for Participant 8 since she was an undergraduate student (in her home university) and this must have had a major impact on her relationship with her lecturers when she was doing her Honours programme. This was repeated by Participant 2 in the transcripts, where he explained that he felt that he could not approach his lecturers as he would have wanted, in cases where he needed more explanation about content in his modules.

*PARTICIPANT 2: So you see that there is a lot of gap between you and your lecturer.*

Participant 3 also had a similar response when he asserts that:

*PARTICIPANT 3: ...some lecturers are ready to help and some are not ready to help...it's not that they say they don't want to help you. ...if for example you want a lecturer to help you and the lecturer gives you, beforehand, some excuses why he will not be able to help...*

The possible reasons for this may be a lack of trust between the students and the lecturer and preconceptions of what the lecturer's answer might be if she/he is asked for help. This thus produces a question: how does the lecturer know you have a problem with the contents of a module when she/he is not informed about it? This finding also agrees with Curtin, Stewart and Ostrove's (2013) study, where they found that international students had a slightly better relationship with their local peers compared to their lecturers. This also accentuates the role of the students and educational system and how both factors can either deter or push students into taking certain steps like probably initiating healthy and productive relationships with their lecturers in a way of eliminating probable disadvantageous preconceptions. This is because these students perhaps considered it impolite to express their misunderstandings about issues. This is likely to cause gaps in the learning environment. When Participant 3 was asked why he did not seek clarity about some of the academic challenges he experienced, he responded that:

*PARTICIPANT 3: They are my elders; I just didn't want to be rude.*

Cultural issues thus set in here (the use of not being *rude to my elders*) as the participant may have allowed his culture's reservations to prevent him from communicating with his lecturers. This also clarifies Mahat and Hourigan's (2007) description of the international student as one who avoids being assertive with their academic leaders as they perceive it as being confrontational. This may also be because of the historical, academic background, as well as the cultures of these students, as Trice (2004, p. 683) asserts that the impact of languages and cultures on individuals cannot be ignored. This is evident in the participants' indications that they did not have close interactions with their lecturers in their home universities as well as the lack of credible reading facilities in their home institutions.

#### 4.2.5. International Student-International Student Gap

The lack of a tightly knit relationship among international students was also recorded where none of the participants asked for assistance from their fellow international students in the form of academic, financial or emotional support. This confirms the findings of Dwyer and Peters (2004) in their study of international students at an Indonesian university, where they found that many international students preferred to carry their burdens alone without attempting to find solace among their fellow international peers. This study's findings thus contradict that of Fischer (2011), who argued that international students often seek solace in each other's company. This is exhibited in Participant 3's explanation of the time he had tried to seek financial help from another international student and was refused; he stated that he never attempted to share his plights with or seek solace from another international student after that incident.

*PARTICIPANT 3: ...I remember making an effort to talk with one of my international colleagues, a friend in the same Honours class. The person said: "Hey sorry, I cannot lend you money, I don't, I cannot lend you the specific amount of money" I wanted him to actually lend me. He said 'no'...*

This indicates that the student was cash-strapped and this was the only participant who attempted to find financial solace in another international student of all the participants who took part in this study. This finding indicates that not many interactions really existed between the international students (as none of the other participants mentioned associating with his fellow international counterparts) and this may probably have impacted on their stay and study abroad. This also indicates that other students perhaps did not need financial help and so there was no need to ask for support.

In contrast, with regards to academic and emotional support, data was gathered from Participant 8 in her narratives and visual illustration, where she drew pictures of students who seemed to have encouraged her during her stage of initial confusion (see Figure 2: Visual Illustration by Participant 8 - Page 59). She also explained in her narrative that she received emotional and

academic support from fellow international students. This shows that not all the participants had similar issues of abandonment by fellow international students.

#### **4.2.6. Local Student-International Student Gap**

Nieto and Booth (2010, p. 66) state that the style of learning in an educational environment provides an accommodation of diverse views and knowledge which are gained via adequate construction, teamwork and relationship formation. Therefore making friends in the host country and with fellow international students is one of the ways in which international students avoid being in a lonely state for a long period of time (Hendrickson et al., 2010). It is thus expected that productive relationships should be formed between international students and their local peers. According to Pantellidou and Craig (2006) in a study of Greek students studying in the United Kingdom, a lack of cultural integration into the new environment contributes to international students' low levels of social interactions in their host institution. Similarly, Erichsen (2011, p. 126) in his study on international students studying abroad, found that international students positioned themselves among people of the same culture as theirs despite the fact that they were in a foreign land. Contrastingly however, three of this study's participants explained that they did not have good relationships with the local students. This possibly may have been related to the various accounts of xenophobia that had taken place in recent times (Landau, 2011) in the country. Another reason could be that the international students were probably unsure of how to mingle with their local peers as well as the language differences that exist between local and international students.

*PARTICIPANT 1: Maybe like other...like social factors like xenophobia. You know social factors like you are not being accepted, like feeling of not being accepted, like this is not home. You know all these things like, physical, social factors that confront you and fight against... (Pause)*

Xenophobia (hatred for foreigners) and its cases in the South African context may have truly deterred these international students from interacting as productively as they should have, based on the feelings of not being wanted, as pointed out by this participant. The fear of not knowing what to expect from the environment and local peers because of xenophobic incidences, may

have also played a major role. Nothing, however, about this was repeated in participants' narratives. Even so, during the open-ended discussions the participants emphasised that they did not have close relationships with their local peers. This tallies with Pantelidou and Craig's (2006) assertion therefore that poor adjustment levels are seen in international students who constantly feel lonely and excluded from their new environment. Hence, adjusting for these students is often impossible if they are not to eventually lose their own sense of cultural identity (Chen & Lewis, 2011).

#### **4.2.7. Failures and Successes**

All the participants had something to say about their successes or failures during the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation as having been influenced by some of their lecturers at some point, and as a result of some of the aforementioned experiences. The open-ended discussions revealed that participants who experienced failures and successes in certain courses recognised them as a result of lecturers' teaching styles or ways of interacting with them in the class. Three of this study's participants (one of which is Participant 2) explained that they experienced levels of stereotyping concerning their speaking styles.

*PARTICIPANT 2: Sometimes maybe when you speak in class, they would want you to repeat and repeat and I mean, you might have a different accent but almost everybody does, so that shouldn't affect the...what you want to communicate.*

The narrated situation above may have influenced the participant into thinking that his language usage was being unfairly judged by the lecturer(s) in question. A situation such as this is likely to cause a student to withdraw from the learning process due to an inferiority complex that such reactions may start building in him. It may also cause some students to become hurt or defensive even to their own detriment in a way of shutting them out of the benefits of international study, thus leading to failures. This finding agrees with the results in Lee and Opio's (2011) study where the international students explained that they had experienced some form of stereotyping and that this prevented them from enjoying their studies to the extent to which they would have wanted. This study's participants also linked their experiences of stereotyping to contributing to

their failures in some of their modules. Interestingly, international students' experience of discrimination to the point of violence perpetrated against them has been reported over time (Armitage, 2008). This includes anti-social behaviour such as verbal abuse, physical assault and rape (Lee & Opio, 2011). A participant (Participant 4) during the open-ended discussion explained that he was constantly verbally assaulted by a lecturer:

*PARTICIPANT 4: ...on the second assignment, the same thing happened, and the woman, she almost failed all of us ... all the Nigerians, and she came to class, and she said 'some people do not know how to write. You need to go to Howard College [writing centre], go and meet those people there'. You know, it was embarrassing, she couldn't encourage us...it started from 50% here with my knowledge of writing and everything, and it dropped to around 40% to 30%, that is my interest.*

It may be expected that such carelessly picked words are capable of making students fail, especially out of disgust for the lecturer's comportment, and they may begin to dislike the module altogether. Participant 3 also had, what he termed, a terrible experience:

*PARTICIPANT 3: I also had a terrible experience especially when I was doing my second semester with one of the lecturers who did not give me a good mark in my media, in one media course ... and I have to, you know, be going to the office and complain. I remember her telling me ... am I the one that wrote a particular word? I just was thinking 'who could have written it if not me'. So, some of those things are the kind of things that get me pissed off at times. It's not as if I don't see myself as having some faults when I look at the assignment, but I just felt that the judgment of this assignment does not correlate with the mark I got, and there was a kind of debate on that, and all that .... So, meaning that my ability was undermined.*

Such feelings of being disliked can also lead to students failing modules, fearing the lecturer, feeling inferior or undermined and getting distracted, which are all likely to lead to students' failures of modules.

Going forward, Participant 3 noted that another lecturer on the other hand, would just encourage him and the other students and offer guidance when needed and this enabled much productivity and academic exploits:

*Participant 3: One of these lecturers was very kind enough to encourage me and she even helped me so much, to the extent of helping me to check my work before I did the final submission. I can never forget her. She made it very... she made a lot of impression on my heart, yes so, so I really have so much love her, since then I keep talking about her, just because of that, just one act of kindness, she was able to... she was my lecturer, she took my work, corrected it, she gave it back to me and I submitted. It was fantastic.*

This finding indicates that not all the lecturers that taught these international students in that particular year were entirely dismissive of students. While some lecturers attempted to help the students acclimatise and feel loved, others did not. For the lecturers who had attempted to help, the students received valuable guidance, and from the others, derogatory remarks and reactions; and these actions caused some of the participants to either fail or pass their modules.

#### **4.2.8. Isolation**

Eagle and Brennan (2007) explain that if the students are made to feel neglected, this could cause them to be alienated from the entire purpose of taking up the programme in the first place. Some of the participants (like Participants 2 and 5) indicated that they experienced isolation during the process of their studies. This was repetitively discussed by the participants who explained that they were all alone in the new environment and they had no one with whom to share their travails. Similarly, Hendrickson et al. (2010) claim that the feeling of isolation or loneliness can cause ill health and sadness for the students, many of this study's participants expressed certain moments of sadness and loneliness. Participant 5 pointed to feeling isolated even from his own fellow international students and noted that: *"I did not have very good interactions with my own people."*

Participant 5 kept talking about his perceived inefficiency of the international relations office, negative issues with the lecturer and his inability to relate well with his fellow international students during the course of the programme and related it to his feelings of isolation. On this note, one may assume that this participant could have been partly responsible for his state of being as he seemed to have had problems with everyone during his studies.

Besides just feeling lonely, some factors are likely to contribute to the participant not being able to interact well, one of which is the newness of terms, coupled with the participants' inability to seek clarity in due time. This was expressed by Participant 2:

*PARTICIPANT 2: ...the terminology used in teaching, because those are what we are going to use, those are what we are going to be assessed on and at this time you are still trying to find your footing, you are still trying to find acceptance and at the same time you are being assessed. So it creates a very difficult scenario in which you cannot, you are not able to operate...*

This response may have been prompted by the participant being involved in various activities at that time, as he had previously stated that he was working, studying and had a family to which he was also committed at the time of the Honours programme. Another reason is perhaps the fact that he (as an international student) had an entirely different educational process during his previous programme. This too was observed in Sheridan's (2011) study where she found that the use of unfamiliar terminology could heighten the experience of loneliness. Thus, Sheridan's (2011) opinion is that when international students encounter new terminology, they get even more isolated in the learning process where new terminologies and pedagogies are introduced. This point may be true of this particular finding and it is further discussed in the latter part of this chapter.

#### **4.2.9. Academic Literacy Improvement/Increased Knowledge**

Five of the study's participants (Participants 2, 3, 4, 6 and 8) explained that they had increased knowledge during the programme. This confirms Bartram's (2009) assertions that when students are content with the education that they receive, it indicates quality as opposed to excessive focus on quantity in the academic sector. Despite this study's participants' initial helplessness

concerning academic writing, their narratives indicated that those experiences of academic writing are still helpful to them even after the Honours programme ended.

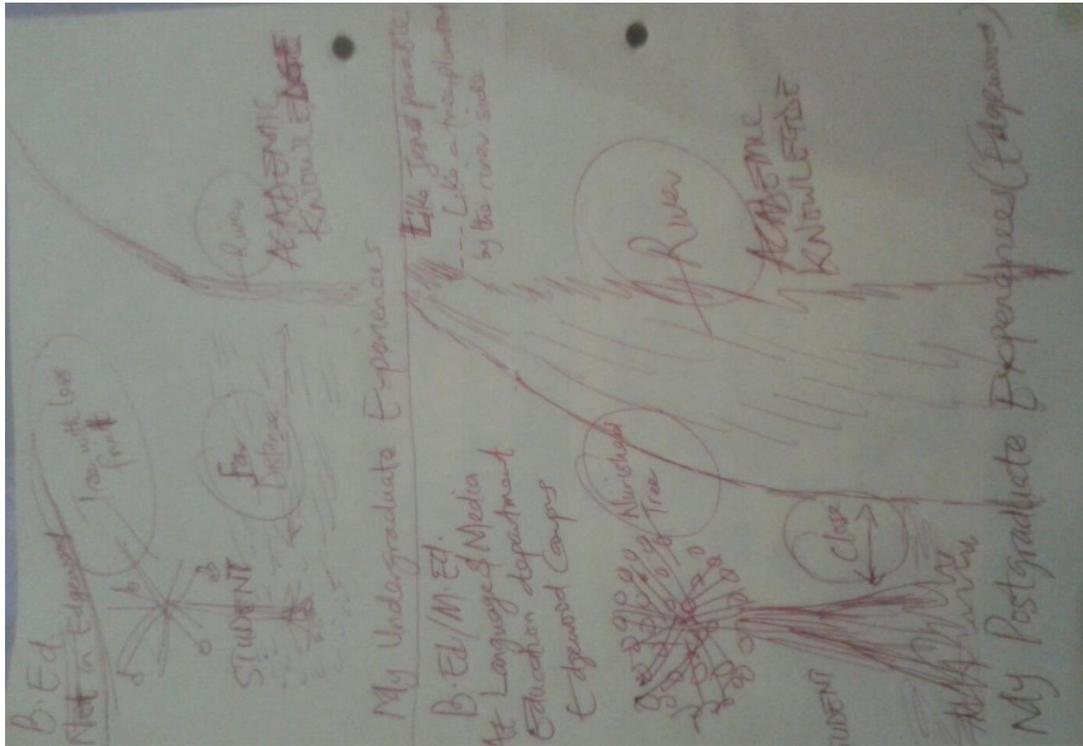
*PARTICIPANT 4: ...with the independent research here, with my knowledge of understanding of academic writing or academic literacy, I knew how to write ...*

This seemed to have been the beginning of a completely new process for this participant. Despite previous challenges with academic writing, he was eventually able to thrive and build on his knowledge of academic literacy. This also indicates that some of the modules had information and connections which helped the participant to find his footing academically. Besides this, in a unanimous view, the participants stressed that they found the programme ‘eye-opening’ and interesting.

*PARTICIPANT 2: Yes, I think it was eye opening.*

Stating that the programme was eye-opening indicates that they learnt a lot from it, which they may not have learnt if they had not undertaken it. This is also evident in Participant 6’s depiction of his academic experiences during the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation as a tree which is nourished by a river; signifying that he is the tree while the academic resources that were available during his Honours programme are the river that brushed up his academic skills and love for academia (See Figure 8: Visual Illustration by Participant 6).

**Figure 8: Visual Illustration by Participant 6**



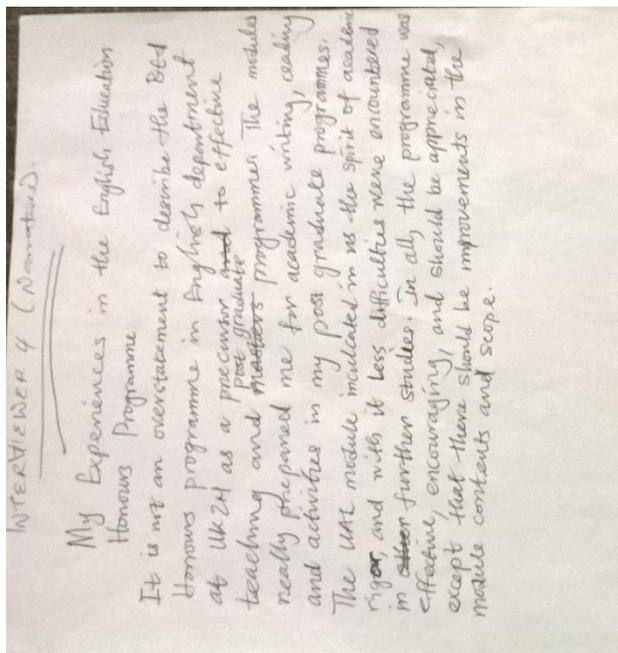
The tree diagram, though not expertly drawn (drawing expertise was not the aim), depicts a comparison between his first degree and his BEd. Honours degree, both drawn as trees. While one looks malnourished and withered (BEd.), the other looks well nourished (BEd. Honours), as if it is growing higher. The latter is also surrounded by a few of the modules that he had taken at that time, as well as the knowledge that he gained from them. Participant 6 and some of the other participants (like Participant 5) also reiterated in their narratives that they had a pleasant experience during the programme and that their experiences seemed to have prompted them to pursue further studies.

*PARTICIPANT 5: But coming to the department, I am proud to say that I learnt a lot, though I was nervous initially. However, I got my bearing and scope...*

This also indicates acquired knowledge by this participant and a positive re-direction. Participant 4 also saw the programme as a deeply enlightening one that to date, still influences his academic

thirst as a student and a teacher. He too made mention of the academic writing skills that he acquired during the course of the programme.

**Figure 9: Visual Illustration by Participant 4**

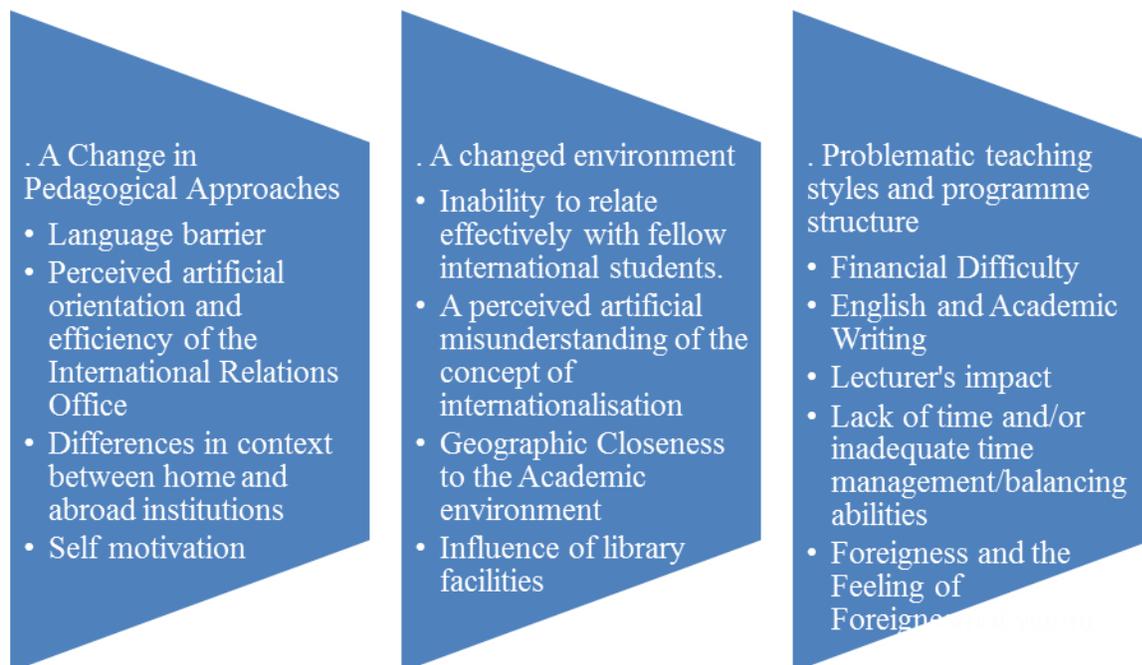


It is important to note that some of the participants (Participants 2, 6 and 8) are currently doing their Masters programme and Participants 1, 3, 4 and 5 are also doing their Doctoral studies. They are of the opinion that their academic literacy and academic performances improved while they were doing their Honours programme. This indicates that their experiences of the Honours programme must have encouraged them to study further at the same department, despite the stated difficulties they experienced during their Honours programme. As a result of the impact of the participants' experiences of the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation, some of them (such as Participants 2 and 3) recommended that some of the modules that they were offered during their Honours programme should serve as electives for students in other specialisations in the School of Education at the South African institution being studied. This shows the positive impression that the specialisation had on these participants' education and the realisation of that. This also seems to be one of the reasons which make this study into international students' experiences worthwhile.

### 4.3. The Reasons for International Students' Experiences of Taking the Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation at a South African University

While analysing some of the experiences given by the participants, it was discovered that many of the experiences considered above are intertwined with reasons for those experiences. The participants' reasons for their experiences have been displayed in Figures 10a and 10b.

**Figure 10: Reasons for the Participants' Experiences of Taking the Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation**



#### 4.3.1. A Change in Pedagogical Approaches

Many of the participants explained that they had difficulty coping due to the lack of adequate knowledge before the commencement of their programme.

*PARTICIPANT 3: Of course, coming from a country where you are not exposed to some of these things, coming from a country where you don't sit down in groups most times to discuss, where the lecturer does not, you know, ask you questions most of the times, they just throw the question*

*at you. It's not easy, so as an international student, I discovered that I, on my own, personally, I have to prepare at times, ahead of the class, do some little reading, do some things that will make you to talk in the class. That, talking in the class was something quite challenging for me, talking before people...*

This could have made this participant feel that he was thrown into a strange space as well as make him feel shocked at his new environment as it was an obviously different academic setting (drawing from the earlier mentioned experiences) from his home institution. Because of this, a few of the participants (like Participants 2 and 3) had an extra year because of some of the modules that they found difficult. However, Participant 4 explained that he found ease with some of the modules because he was used to them from home, but that he experienced difficulty with others because they were new concepts to him.

*PARTICIPANT 4: Now in 2013, I had Language in Education.... Language in Education is more about readings, it's more about theories of language acquisition and language learning. How children learn language and what can be done in teaching language. So, because of that, there was a kind of similar experience with what I had in Nigeria, so it wasn't difficult for me to cope. So I was able to cope, so I started with, I think, 50% and it was increasing from 50% to 70% from 70% to around 88%, from 88% to 90%. So here I also had a certificate of merit... I think I was the best student in my class, because everything has to do with a lot of talking and talking in the class and cramming. Yes, I was very good when it comes to cramming (laughs)...*

The participant's success in this module indicates that similarities with past and current educational experiences have a way of influencing one's success academically. This is because this participant obviously enjoyed the stated module because it seemed to be a sort of continuation from a module in his past qualification. That is, the requirement of passing the stated module (cramming) fit into what his previous qualification required of him to pass and he utilised this to achieve success in that particular module.

#### 4.3.2. Perceived Artificial Orientation and Inefficiency of the International Relations Office

Besides the mentioned issue of insufficient knowledge before their Honours programme, some of the participants (such as Participant 6) explained that the inefficiency of the international relations office contributed to their inability to productively acclimatise with their new setting. This tallies with Gullekson and Vancouver's (2010) statement that cultural differences and adaptation to the new culture and environment are capable of making international students perform well in their studies as well as settle in faster. Participant 6 responded in the affirmative when they were asked if they did not deem it necessary to visit the international relations office for some sort of help or consolation, after which some negative emotions were expressed by these students:

*PARTICIPANT 6: International office is just there to collect international fees and medical health insurance fees ... they should put someone who understands international students there...*

This indicates that some of the participants may not have had the much-needed assistance from the international relations office when they needed help. This is because certain tasks like overseeing international students and orientating them to the requirements of their new environment could have expectedly been assigned to the international relations office; but according to the participants, they found no solace from the office.

Inadequate interactions with the international relations office could have probably made it difficult for the international students' experiences or views to be heard or even worked on. These kinds of unheard experiences may thus make it difficult for 'producers' to make provision of appropriate amenities (Schmitt, 2003) because people's needs and issues are not being communicated as they want, and there are no listening ears to solve their issues. This also may have contributed to the participants' (like Participant 2) claims that they were "*in a foreign land where you don't feel so welcome.*"

Nonetheless, getting international students integrated into their host institution helps to overcome the feeling of being the visitor (Cathcart et al., 2006). This is likely to impact largely on their experiences of the education attained. This supports Wang's (2009) assertion that getting

involved with the operations and affairs of international students is vital in knowing what is required of international students in their host institutions. As international students, some of the participants (like Participant 2) felt thrown into a strange space as a result of what one of them termed an ‘artificial’ orientation which did not help them to acclimatise especially in terms of technology use.

*PARTICIPANT 2: Someone flies from Nigeria, arrives here, starts the Honours programme, you know, after that orientation, which is so artificial because a lot of people are lumped together, questions are answered as quickly as possible, there isn't... people need time to acclimatise, to get used to the way things are done. Some people in Nigeria are not used to using the computer for everything, typing things. Every assignment they have to type. They come ... and you expect them to jump in and start doing that and you expect them to submit their first work ... power point... and these are things that maybe the person is not used to, so it should be better if there are people who are assigned to international students to specifically help them to start. I mean, because at the end of the day, it's all about helping this person to understand what he or she has come to do and do it very well.*

This indicates how overtly needy (especially academically) international students can be as a result of their previous lack of exposure to certain kinds of technology and how they are expected to get acclimatised as soon as they step into their new environment. This finding also portrays international students as being disadvantaged and capable of frustrations if not initiated well into the host university. The participants articulated that they expected an orientation which would take into consideration the issues of diversity, their home institutions, as well as what their host institution would have done. This, according to Christofi and Charles (2007), can be seen as an aspect of culture shock because of the participants’ feelings of uncertainty and foreignness to the new environment. This study’s finding also agrees with East’s (2001) assertion that international students have certain expectation of the kinds of services that they want to receive in their host institutions, and as Jayanti (1988) claims, when these expectations are not met, there are usually negative consequences, reactions, experiences or feelings. This thus implies that the learning community is not always a learning and innovation ground for diverse groups of people from different places. It is also evident in the participants’ responses to issues regarding facilities

and learning, among others. One of the participants stated that many of them did not have competencies regarding typing facilities, PowerPoint, and oral presentations prior to their study abroad. All these added to their initial struggles and confusion when they first got to the university to start studying, and yet there was no adequately accommodating orientation being done.

*PARTICIPANT 2: ... if you don't understand methodologies and technologies involved and everything, I mean, that can make you to fail. So that now becomes strenuous because that person is trying to read all the notes given to him, that person is trying to do whatever. At the same time he is trying to understand how the computer works, he is trying to understand all he sees ... So that now creates a burden in the student which ... could be the genesis of his or her failure.*

In this case, unfamiliarity with the teaching concepts used in the host university may have been a burden on some of these participants because they come from an entirely different place with overtly different concepts. The thoughts of not having enough initial guidance while trying to meet up with registration and assessment deadlines may have thus been problematic for these international students. On this note, Bartram (2008) recommends that adequate initiations into the host institution should be done in time and in such a way that international students' diversity is identified and infused into the curriculum. Some of the participants (like Participant 5) however, noted that this discrepancy was later corrected by the intervention of the library staff during the library orientation programmes:

*PARTICIPANT 5: As I said before, I had difficulty in learning because of teaching styles, language barrier and inability to interact with people. So I just struggled to understand the concepts. Thank God for the available resources like the library and LAN facilities ... maybe I would have dropped out like some of my colleagues then.*

Based on this information, it is important to note the usefulness of an international relations office in getting international students settled into their host university in time and before they delve into their studies. This may enable a much easier blending in of these students.

### 4.3.3. Financial Difficulties

Financial difficulty is another experience that the participants expressed that they passed through during their Honours programme. This was especially a huge problem to some of the participants who had to re-do some modules that they had failed based on their perceptions of not being properly treated, assessed and understood by their lecturers. A participant recalled having to study with the anxiety of how to pay his study and accommodation bills while also struggling to meet academically with the new things they were being taught in the new environment. He explained that he had financial issues which he felt caused or could have caused a draw-back for his academics. Participant 3 explained that he had financial challenges which impacted on his experience of the programme and affected his concentration:

*PARTICIPANT 3: I would be in class and be thinking of the debts that I owed, I couldn't concentrate.*

That indicates a loss of concentration in the class as a result of the debts owed and the financial constraints that the participants had. Financial issues affect not only the student, according to Maringe and Carter (2007); the financial worries affect both the students and their parents/sponsors. This is because they feel strained when their expectations of being lent money by their fellow international students during the course of their study are not met and the students also feel strain when they are not being sent money from home. This confirms Ritz's (2010) assertion that basic amenities like food and housing are major challenges that international students experience in their host institution. Lack of such basic amenities can thus impact on their acclimatisation to the environment (Zhai, 2004). An instance is seen in Participant 3's revelation that he was once refused financial assistance by his international peer. He later asked his brother from his home country for some money and thereafter had to borrow some money from an organisation which he had to repay. This sort of experience could really be a burden on the students who are still struggling to get a grip on the various dynamics of studying in a new environment, with a different culture and language(s), and with a different pedagogy from that which they are used to.

This also confirms Evans and Stevenson's (2011) statement that adjusting to the host culture may be hindered by certain home factors (such as finances) as well, which are capable of preventing international students from having healthy relationships socially. Likewise, Participants 1, 2 and 3 explained that they were equally deeply affected by lack of sufficient finances. However, one of the participants (Participant 7) explained that her experiences of the programme did not include that of finances, as she was financially stable during the programme because of the scholarship which was provided by her country, Arabia. This confirms Maringe and Carter's (2007) affirmation that the lack of finances poses a difficulty for the international students, especially the Black Africans. This study's participants who had financial problems are all Black African students. This finding thus illuminates the importance of financing and scholarships for international students because fewer worries surrounding financial issues may obviously be able to make these students focus more on their studies.

#### **4.3.4. Differences in Context (Between Home and Abroad Institutions)**

According to the participants (Participants 4 and 2), during the course of the Honours specialisation, differences between the participants' home institutions systems and that of the South African institution played a major role on their experiences of undertaking the specialisation. This confirms Chalungesoth and Schneller's (2011) claim that there are usually pedagogical differences in the host universities. The participants explained that the differences in context had a huge impact on their studies during their programme, whereby they felt lost along the way, as to what to do exactly with the new knowledge that was being acquired:

*PARTICIPANT 4: The modules, everything is just focused on South African education and we just came here to study. We are still going back to our various countries. Then when we get there, are we going to be teaching the people South African education?*

The participant implied that the Honours programme focused more on the South African context; this must have created a huge gap with their previous knowledge before enrolling for the specialisation. There seemed to have been a gap between previous knowledge and the one which was being acquired in the Honours programme, hence making adjustment difficult. This agrees

with Bousquet's (2012) finding in his study on international students that the curriculum which was being used in the host institution was difficult for the students to adjust to. This study's participants explained that they came from countries which still largely utilised the teacher-centred rather than the learner-centred approaches. This seemed to be the case with all the participants as they expressed during the open-ended discussions that they only started doing some class activities such as group tasks and PowerPoint presentations from their Honours modules:

*Participant 3: When I was doing my studies at home, the lecturer, they teach quite well too. They give, they deliver ... most often we were not in groups, but here ... most often we are put in groups. At times the lecturer sits with us which makes it lively and it becomes a kind of talk ... I talk in the group and all that ... he or she starts posing questions and all that. Another thing here is we did presentations more than I think I did at home...*

This statement indicates the participant's experience of the awareness of the change of pedagogy per institution. It also depicts the noticeable instructional differences in both his previous and Honours programmes. It is important to properly assess situations such as these so that international students are taken step by step into the acclimatisation process.

#### **4.3.5. A Perceived Misunderstanding of the Concept of Internationalisation on Both Sides (The Lecturers and the Participants)**

The study's participants (Participants 4 and 2) expressed their thoughts on what could have negatively affected their relationships with some of the lecturers who taught them and their expectation as learners. Sicat (2011) explains that international students are usually expected to follow and know the set procedures of the programme that they have been admitted into, whereas the students usually have language, food, weather and pedagogical-related problems in their new environment. This brings to mind the issue of the perceived racism that the participants raised. Lee and Opio (2011) note that racism usually takes place in universities worldwide and according to Armitage (2008), this is usually saddening for international students as they are being treated in an unfair way while also making an attempt to fit into their new environment.

The participants mentioned that they felt that some of the lecturers were being racist based on some of the comments that were made about their writing:

*PARTICIPANT 4: She said we should go and meet them at Howard for them to help us with our writing...*

This must have been embarrassing to the participant and remarks such as this are sufficient to break people's confidence levels. However, despite the possibility of such a sentence to cause a discouragement, it could also be an initiative to support students. It thus depends on the means of the transmission and reception of such information by lecturers and students respectively. Some other participants (like Participants 2 and 3) stated that the lecturer's remark did not sit well with them as many of them ended up failing the module, except Participant 4 who had just above 50%. This confirms Glass, Buus and Braskamp's (2013, p. 6) assertion that these reasons and several others could lead international students into an astute academic backwardness. Likewise, Erichsen (2011) affirms that international students' failures are caused by the fear of failure and as a result of what they see and hear.

Participant 2 also mentioned some observed issues of stereotyping and the need for the lecturers to be evaluated monthly or quarterly as a way of knowing what needs to be modified or worked on (in terms of lecturers' and students' knowledge or teaching deficiencies) before the students are finally assessed.

*PARTICIPANT 2: ... and most times, these educators ... these lecturers are only assessed at the end of the module. If there is a possibility that some lecturers are assessed even if there is a quarterly assessment where if a lecturer is not doing well for students, the person can be changed at a very initial stage.*

It may be essential to take this measure of early evaluation of lecturers as a way of monitoring the teaching and learning processes that take place in the departments and host university. Hellsten and Prescott (2004) assert that it is valuable to the teaching and learning processes if there are regular amendments and reflections on teaching practices in a way that suits the

students' needs. This is because there is a huge difference between what is expected of the students academically and what the students can indeed offer academically (Sheridan, 2011). This should be critically ascertained by school authorities.

When asked what steps were taken to communicate with the lecturer regarding this issue, Participant 3 explained that he tried not to be rude *because she was an elderly person* and so he decided to overlook the situation. This finding reinforces Novera's (2004) research on international students in Indonesia when they expressed their dislike for confrontation and rather preferred to embrace decorum at all times. It is possible that these participants' avoidance of confrontation was culturally influenced. Likewise, based on this finding, it is possible that due to the fact that the participants were avoiding confrontation, they may have lost some level of confidence or assertiveness as well as the advantages that could have risen out of expressing their experiences to the appropriate quarters at that time. A lack of adequate communication gives way to having misunderstandings regarding certain issues (Kim, 2005) that international students encounter in their host universities. It is thus important that communication is encouraged at all times, in that while being assertive, the affected participants could still have been as polite as possible and made their feelings known in order to have certain identified actions or misconceptions (by both the lecturers and the students) duly corrected.

There was also a discussion about other lecturers who had taken modules, and the noticeable differences in students' performances, which according to Participant 2 was based on the lecturer's teaching approaches and the different handling of students:

*PARTICIPANT 2: ...even though I repeated some courses ... and when I did repeat them, because the lecturers changed, it was easier even though I was still doing the work. So, sometimes it depends on the particular educators ... who make things difficult...*

This change in the way different lecturers approached their work could probably have been as a result of those lecturers acknowledging the presence of diversity in their classrooms and the fact that the students needed to get used to the way things were done in their new environment but in a less difficult way. This is because acclimatisation to the new environment is usually a difficult,

long process for the international students (Hendrickson et al., 2010). This process also goes a long way in altering values and the perception of reality (Erichsen, 2011) which then leads us to the concept of having forbearance and an accommodative spirit. This may expectedly enable a lot of awareness and acknowledgement of the differences that exist in international universities as well as a healthy way of handling and productively utilising them. It is only when this is acknowledged that international study can be worth its purpose; if students have to fail at first, it should be due to their lack of seriousness or unpreparedness for assessments but not because of a lecturer and the other mentioned issues.

Having to repeat a class was debated, as Participant 2 opined that other avenues should be sought rather than the student repeating and using a lot of money to re-register the following year.

*PARTICIPANT 2: ...there could be one more chance to repeat either one or two assignments or given another way to assess your understanding of the work rather than judging you based on that. Because it doesn't completely mean that you are not learned enough or you have not understood enough of that module because you might have understood it, you might have understood all the tenets, all that you are expected to... but then due to the way..., sometimes it could even be the context, it could even be the time-frame.*

The finding here indicates some pain that the participant experienced when he had to repeat some modules and he must have felt that he was assessed without consideration of his past knowledge or degree. This was reinforced during the open ended-discussions when the participants (especially Participant 4) explained that they felt that many of the things that they were being taught were entirely new concepts and so they found it difficult to familiarise themselves with those concepts. Concepts in this case may connote the teaching terminologies and the learning outcomes and expectations of each of the modules. As discussed previously in the section on participants' initial shock, concepts and familiarisation to them may have prevented the much-deserved learning that was expected to take place for these participants, hence, leading to failures and repeating of modules and/or academic years. On this note, Wang's (2009) suggestion comes to mind, where he emphasises the importance of international students' prior preparation before entering their host institution in order to gain full awareness of the

changes that they are bound to make in their lives. That is, even as host universities prepare to receive diverse groups of students from different nationalities, those students should also be knowledgeable about the university's procedures, prepare for unforeseen circumstances and determine ways of handling them.

#### **4.3.6. Inability to Relate Effectively with Fellow International Students**

Besides the other stated reasons for international students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation, findings on some reasons which seem a bit external, on the relationships between international students, were gathered. One of the participants explained (Participant 3) that during the course of his programme, he experienced a considerable level of distance from his fellow international students when he was in financial difficulties. Having asked for help once and not received it, he decided against doing so again; this also led to him not feeling at home. This could possibly have influenced the participant's experiences negatively in the sense that he had to sort things out on his own without asking both new and old international students for guidance.

Likewise, none of the other participants mentioned having productively engaged with fellow international students, despite the fact that they were all encountering difficulties at different levels. This thus makes it clear that for these international students, personal issues usually remained personal as they thought they would be able to sort out their own problems without sharing with others (Bousquet, 2012); just as Participant 3 noted that he was *not really comfortable telling people about his issues*. Hence, there appears to be both an internal and external indication of international students' inability to familiarise with and 'feel at home' in their host institution.

#### **4.3.7. Language Barrier**

Some of the participants (like Participants 1 and 2) expressed that they felt unwanted by their local peers both during the hot periods of xenophobia where foreign nationals were being attacked by the locals and transportation to and from university was difficult. Xenophobia,

according to Harris (2002, p. 169), is some form of animosity towards foreign nationals that is caused by a detestation of their presence in another country. These feelings of fear for these international students thus existed before and after these incidences due to the language barrier that existed between themselves and their local peers. This is in agreement with Chen and Lewis (2011) who state that when there are clashes, international students find it difficult to adjust to the new setting .

This study's participants (for example, Participant 2) also noted that due to some of these incidences, a language barrier existed between themselves and their local peers. Language-related issues make it impossible for international students to have clear interactions with the people in their host country (Fischer, 2011). The participant explained that even in group tasks, the local students knowingly or unknowingly would switch to their local languages regardless of the fact that there was a non-language user of that language in their midst.

*PARTICIPANT 2: ...most local students ...sometimes when you are working with them in groups or something, there tends to be so much use of isiZulu and when you don't speak isiZulu, you find out that you are the odd man out so it doesn't really help...*

This finding indicates the feeling of loneliness that the participants may have been exposed to, because the language differences had automatically led to the case of “us” and “them” in the class. This agrees with Brown and Aktas (2011) and Kim (2005) that interactions between students of diverse roots is expected to yield a minimised feeling of isolation; and according to Cross and Johnson (2008, p. 311), most students who are South African are still very xenophobic. In this case, however, the lack of adequate communication may have led the participants into having misunderstandings and misconceptions about their local peers regarding certain issues. This, on the other hand, may be influenced by the socio-linguistic backgrounds of both parties (local and international students), in the sense of what their cultural stances are regarding human relationships. It is thus important that communication is encouraged at all times between local and international students.

Participant 5 also explained that the language barrier that existed between him and his local peers enhanced his level of loneliness and lack of social interactions:

*PARTICIPANT 5: ...I was more like on my own in the foreign land, and the language barrier was a big issue for me as well ...The environment was very different from where I was coming from. There is a huge language barrier compared to my home country where everyone uses English or pidgin as a language of inter-tribal usage....Before coming here, I thought I would be able to make a lot of local friends but the language issue just seems to be a huge blockade in making friends. Because I could not interact freely without feeling like a foreigner and you could see it in the classrooms too. People would sit with the other people with whom they share a common language and this prevented a lot of social interactions...*

One would have expected that both the international students and their local peers would excitedly share languages and cultures with one another while also seeing it as another opportunity of enlightenment. These reasons, as Glass, Buus and Braskamp (2013, p. 6) note, could lead international students into an astute academic backwardness and dislike for local students. This section of the findings thus contradicts Gunaratne's (2004) assertion that students (local and international) are fascinated about the acquisition of another language that is different from theirs. It also explains the feelings of loneliness that the participants expressed that they went through as they were far from home and were not able to feel at home. Similarly, it brings to mind the question: how do you feel welcome when not all parties seem interested in learning each other's ways?

This possibly is also another point where the term 'assertiveness' as used by Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson and Pisecco (2002), has a notable impact because none of the participants actually made mention of having ever moved close to the local peers, except Participant 3 who had a slightly different story to tell. Participant 3 explained that he had a more friendly relationship with his local peers, as he explained that they were friendly and that he communicated with them.

*PARTICIPANT 3: ...it was fine. My relationship with them was quite okay. I interact well with them, I get along with them, we talk, we chat together, at times we find ourselves in the same group...In the class, yes, where we talk together, we encourage them, at times I also lend a helping hand to some of them, you know encourage them in their academics.*

This participant happened to be the only one with a different view about his local peers; this could mean that he probably had an accommodating spirit and open mind when dealing with them. During the discussion Participant 3 explained that he made an attempt to encourage a local student when she felt like dropping out of the programme and she probably did not drop out as she had planned. These interactions took place during the class activities where they had to do some group tasks that required that the students interacted with one another on certain topics. Another possible reason for this participant's experience could be that he overlooked what barriers existed in order to cultivate good relationships with his local peers.

This finding indicates the importance or value of the group activities that were encouraged in the classroom, as without that, this slightly different view with regards to language barrier may not have been achievable. In addition, if only Participant 3 had this experience of proper interaction with his local peers, does it really mean that international students are not ready to accept or agree with new cultures and rather pick only the aspects that they feel would be useful to their academic progress (Kettle 2011)? Or is interaction meant to be a collective task by both the local and international students in order to make their experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation worthwhile?

#### **4.3.8. The English Language and Academic Writing**

Language is associated with students' success in their academics (Mahat & Hourigan, 2007) and the impact of this cannot be overemphasised because as postgraduate students, a lot of academic writing is required for success. This however may be shocking to the students because academic writing processes as well as other newly introduced methods of language use in the academia are usually major obstructions and frustrations to the learning processes of these international students. It is seen in Participant 7's frustration about the writing culture in the host university.

This may be due to the fact she comes from a country which uses very little of the English language as a medium of communication and instruction. This confirms Biggs and Tang's (2009) assertion that a lack of adequate mastery of language is highly challenging for students who come from different countries. Huang (2012) refers to this as 'learner shock'. This lack may definitely prevent quality education from being achieved by the students. The challenges of academic writing were also seen in the responses of most of the participants (Participants 2 and 4) who indicated that they were quite good in some areas but not so much in writing academically.

*PARTICIPANT 2: I know that people talk about academic writing but I might not be there... that might not be where they are so comfortable in...*

This participant indicated that academic writing posed a challenge for him in this period. Being a second or third language user of the English language must have been quite a challenge for these students, who talk more of engaging in academic writing. Another thing that could lead to this difficulty is their foundational knowledge of writing which perhaps should have been acquired in their previous degrees. This is in agreement with Andrade's (2006) assertion of international students' unfamiliarity with the process of academic writing due to the fact that they were more used to the more passive systems of writing which lacked arguments or critiquing. This was also voiced by Participant 4 when he expressed that:

*PARTICIPANT 4: I knew nothing about academic writing, all I knew was writing. I knew how to write but I couldn't write academically. So it was this module now that introduced me to academic writing...*

It is deducible that the participant just started learning academic writing in his Honours programme, while the host university's expectations may have been that he already had that knowledge in his undergraduate years. This confusion can both be worrisome and problematic. Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) explain that international students' lack of knowledge of the English language often causes uncertainties, anxieties and confusion while engaging with class tasks, presentations and other aspects of the content of the programme.

All the participants in this study happen to be second or third language users of the English language and so this theme was continuously discussed as a factor that affected them negatively. This finding tallies with Zhou, Frey and Bang's (2011) findings where their participants also had enormous issues with academic literacy and writing. In this study, Participant 7 in her narratives made known the impact that English as a third language had on her studies and the feeling of inferiority, as well as personal embarrassment that she had during the course of the programme as a result of an inadequate knowledge of the use of language.

*PARTICIPANT 7: ...moreover English language is not my first language and even is not my second language...but I was embarrassed because of my lack of language and I felt that people in the class were wondering if I am a postgraduate student and I can't speak English properly...*

This participant understood the grave importance of academic writing when she moved to South Africa to start the Honours programme. It must have been embarrassing indeed that a postgraduate student did not have much knowledge about academic writing. Unknowing to her however, the other international students in her class (based on this study's findings) were also battling with the same academic writing issues; maybe she would not have been so embarrassed if she was aware of this. These findings however contradict Andrade's (2006) statement that language aptitude has no negative impact on international students' experiences and that reasons behind experiences go beyond language competence. This is because this study's participants were hugely affected by their inadequacy to use the English language academically and as expected of them by their lecturers and host university.

On the other hand, some of the participants (like Participants 4, 5 and 8) noted that they were motivated to be better at learning and doing academic writing in the long run despite their prior academic writing challenges. This agrees with Mahat and Hourigan's (2007) assertion that language deficiency is overtly likely to make international students think of ways to improve and be better at removing obstructions to their growth. Evidence is seen as one of the participants (Participant 5) expressed his inefficiency at the use of language at the onset of the programme, but this, he said, improved gradually as he eventually acquired knowledge which he still utilises at the moment in his doctoral studies:

*PARTICIPANT 5: ...I was able to know more about academic writing and what is required of me as a student and a teacher. The teachings as time went on became clearer to me and I can't really say that I had regrets that much...*

It is thus easy to say that for this participant, the initial challenges enabled him to ensure that he had a better understanding of the module. This also applies to some of the other participants like Participant 8 who stated in her narratives that *love for the academia grew based on the knowledge derived from my Honours programme.*

*PARTICIPANT 8: This was undeniably a pleasant experience and it made me fall in love with research.*

These participants' attempts to improve academically must have influenced their eventual love for the same once problematic module. This confirms Dunstan's (2009) statement that there is a need for international students to work on personal linguistic developments in order to experience a lesser amount of stress in that area. Ultimately, it is important for international students to improve linguistically (Zhou, Frey & Bang, 2011) in order to excel academically. This improvement was experienced by the participants (Participants 4 and 8) as they explained that it was a good start into research for them.

Similarly, unfamiliar use of language and accent was raised by many of the participants, one of whom is Participant 2, who explained that he was asked many times by a lecturer to repeat his words during class sessions:

*PARTICIPANT 2: ...the teachers also ... they entrench it, in that they would ... sometimes maybe when you speak in class, they would want you to repeat and repeat and I mean, you might have a different accent but almost everybody does, so that shouldn't affect the...what you want to communicate.*

This could have led to the participant's self-esteem being affected if he was made to feel that his language usage was being continuously questioned, especially in a public space such as the

classroom. Another participant (Participant 4) explained that in one of his classes, he could virtually hear nothing the lecturer was teaching:

*PARTICIPANT 4: ...My first time, my first experience in the class ... is that when she was teaching, I could not hear what she was saying. But, when I heard other people laughing, I would also join them to laugh, but I didn't know the reason why they are laughing (laughs) so I couldn't ...The first problem was the problem of the accent, so I couldn't understand what she was saying...*

The participant explained that he usually would leave the class without learning anything and due to that, he had an academic setback in that module because it was not clear to him as he did not hear or understand what the lecturer explained in the classes. Such an issue could have been due to the student's unfamiliarity with their lecturers and their ways of speaking. It also could have been that the particular lecturer was not used to having students of diverse nationalities in one space and was unable to manage/utilise her/his speech production style to the advantage of the learning process. This confirms Nayak and Venkatraman's (2010) findings in their study of Saudi Arabian students studying abroad who indicated that the teachers' accents and use of language in the classroom are usually problematic for them. The issues of accents can thus be detrimental to international students' learning processes and the essence of learning if they are not addressed. This is because attending classes without acquiring knowledge is an absolute waste of time. Much sensitivity may thus be required by both lecturers and students in order to ensure that everyone in class is included in the lectures.

#### **4.3.9. Lecturers' Impacts**

Lecturers' impacts on students' academic achievements cannot be overemphasised. It is pertinent to mention the issue of failures and successes due to some of the lecturers that the participants met during the course of their Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation. Some of the participants (such as Participants 4 and 8) explained that as a result of some of their lecturers' ways of handling them and their modules, they either failed or passed those modules.

*PARTICIPANT 4: ...she couldn't encourage us and so that was why I said that it started from 50% here with my knowledge of writing and everything, and it dropped to around 40% to 30% ... that is my interest. I have no interest in the module at all, I have no interest in the module, I almost failed the module. In fact, the lecturer even went to some of the lecturers in the department and said I plagiarised...*

Having no interest in the module may have been because the participant did not feel affirmed in the learning environment. As he explained, no encouragement came from the lecturer that taught the module. Other participants (such as Participants 2 and 3) confirmed this finding. Participant 4 noted that the lecturer impacted on him negatively which affected his impression of the lecturer as well as the module, and this also prevented many of the students from taking up some of the issues in the particular module as postgraduate interests. This was recognised as a sad incidence for the students, as well as their experiences of taking up study at the university. This also indicates that lecturers have a significant influence on what happens to students' academic lives and the choices they make regarding continuing their studies.

Encouragement from lecturers was also mentioned, whereby one of the participants (Participant 3) acknowledged the impressions that were made on him by one of his lecturers who encouraged him in difficult times.

*PARTICIPANT 3: ...one of these lecturers was very kind ... I really have so much love for her ... just one act of kindness ... It was fantastic.*

An acknowledgement of this lecturer's actions indicates that the students encountered other lecturers whom they felt had a positive impact on their academics which made them improve. This is important as it shows the influence educators have on the teaching and learning processes. This finding however contradicts some of the other participants who complained of a lecturer-international student gap as having existed and influenced their performances as well as their experiences of the Honours programme. Another positive experience with a lecturer was mentioned by Participant 8 who explained that despite the initial shock that she experienced as an international student, she was able to cope because her lecturers were supportive and gentle in dealing with her and her academic issues:

*PARTICIPANT 8: ...I was encouraged by several factors like lecturers' readiness to actually encourage participation...*

Encouragement by lecturers thus keeps coming up as a major factor in students' satisfaction about their academics and pedagogy. Participant 2 also had a similar experience regarding this:

*PARTICIPANT 2: ... sometimes it depends on the particular educators to make things difficult or not ...*

It was also enlightening to observe that the international students in different years of study had diverse experiences; this was also noticeable with the type of lecturer interactions that the participants expressed. The researcher thus opines that it is indeed necessary that timely evaluations (both lecturers and students) are done so that some students are not disadvantaged while others feel cheated or unfairly treated during their studies in the same department.

#### **4.3.10. Geographic Closeness to the Academic Environment**

Being close to the campus made a difference to one of the participant's (Participant 8) experiences as she indicated that she stayed close to the campus where she had access to the library, books and internet:

*PARTICIPANT 8: Some other encouraging factors were the reading facilities (library, LAN) and one of the institution's residences where I resided at the period. All these made the whole study period more convenient and seeing other students taking their academics seriously encouraged me to also do the same...*

This indicates the importance of nearness to the learning environment and the utilisation of provided reading facilities on students' success. It was discovered that many of the participants (such as Participants 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6) also stayed on campus, while the others (such as Participants 2 and 7) who did not, stayed nearby. It may thus be highlighted that distractions can

easily be avoided when international students are resident in the institution's environment where they can use the provided study amenities conveniently. Participant 8 thereafter explained that her experience during the Honours programme made her decide to pursue further studies in the same department and she is currently doing her Masters programme. This was probably possible because of the unhindered access to internet and reading facilities that students who reside on campus had.

#### **4.3.11. Problematic Teaching Styles and Programme Structure**

Differences in teaching styles was noted among the gathered subthemes, whereby some of the participants (such as Participants 3 and 5) noted that the teaching styles that were used by their lecturers during their Honours programme were different from the ones to which they were exposed. They explained that some of these styles enabled them to interact in groups and share ideas via the use of PowerPoint and other forms of group and individual discussions.

*PARTICIPANT 3: Well, I can say at home, it's more of product learning. You read and you wanted to just see yourself progress to another stage if you passed. But here, it's more of research based learning where you are left alone to reason critically...*

This indicates that the participant was able to identify differences that existed between his past qualification and the Honours programme. However, some of the teaching styles (according to Participants 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) were problematic and made it difficult for the participants' learning processes at that time.

*PARTICIPANT 5: As I said before, I had difficulty in learning because of teaching styles.*

This indicates that teaching styles are important, in that the students who are usually at the receiving end lose out during the supposed learning process. This issue of programme structure was repeatedly mentioned by the participants, especially the married one (Participant 2), who had also done it as a part-time student:

*PARTICIPANT 2: So if you look at it, you have only the weekend and some of us at that time ... I had my family and you have to spend time with your family. So it was so difficult, that ... I know three or four dropped out due to the nature of the programme ... how they designed it to accommodate part-time students.*

He explained that the programme was rigidly structured in a way that does not adequately accommodate part-time students who also worked while doing their Honours. Thus, the researcher reasoned that Participant 2 might have had some of these experiences due to the fact that he was married and working at the time of the programme. There was also a mentioning of strict rules with which the participants operated and did not find much advantage from it.

*PARTICIPANT 2: So it should be more eclectic, more dynamic, where even students might be asked the appropriate way they want this to run. That way, probably you could get the perfect way where it could work for both lecturers and students....Than having one straight jacketed way that cannot be bent and when people get like 48%, they come back, register, and for international students, you have to pay international levy, pay medical, pay... I mean it's a lot of payment just to... and maybe it's only that module that you failed in your...so that I don't think it's the best way...*

This participant failed some of his modules and he felt unfairly assessed and this explains why he expected various measures to be put in place when international students' assessments are being marked. This also sheds some light on the financial responsibilities of international students and their level of disappointment when they do not pass their modules. Most of those frustrations are usually as a result of the financial implications of those failures. The constant review of modules may thus be a way of balancing these issues. This is seen in Hellsten and Prescott's (2004) statements about the effectiveness of a consistent reflection and modification of teaching practices in a way that suits the needs of the students. This is why university authorities should be aware of international students' needs (Nieto & Booth, 2010) in such a way that these students feel understood by their lecturers. Fleischman, Lawley and Raciti (2010, p. 16) explain that this will enable them to be given the kinds of services that provide good, affirming learning opportunities for them.

The participants (especially Participant 4) also made mention of the class time frames, assessment methods (assignments) and the topics that were chosen for reading and critiquing purposes, which he explained only spoke to or about South African issues.

*PARTICIPANT 4: Actually, some of us, were questioning the modules. The modules ... everything is just focused on South African education. ...The module should focus more on teaching... generally, I mean a kind of universal approach should be adopted in teaching the modules. Like Language in Media, ... Language in Education ... everything focused on South Africa, Language in multilingual society ... everything still focused on South Africa. It is only Academic Literacy that is open...so every other thing is still focused on the South African system which we thought was not appropriate for us because we know that we are still going back to the places where we came from...*

He expressed that this was devoid of the consciousness that the international students would have to use some of the knowledge derived during their study when they eventually return to their home countries after the completion of the programme. Participants' expectations of their host institution and the services they would be getting must have led to the disappointment they felt when they did not get what they had anticipated. This correlates with Trice's (2004) suggestion that universities' curriculum should be made beneficial and favourable for both local and international students in such a way that topics are made to accommodate all. In that way, they will see the relevance of each of the topics that are dealt with in their modules. They will also be able to share learnt knowledge with other people when they eventually return to their home countries as most countries have their categorisation of what is and is not tenable in their educational systems. This is an important aspect of international study.

#### **4.3.12. Lack of Time and or Inadequate Time Management/Balancing Abilities**

This study's participants (Participants 3 and 5) mentioned that time constraints led to stress during their Honours programme. Stress, according to Hellsten (2010), occurs when there are inconsistent objectives, routes, and time frames. This may arise during the process of

international students' familiarisation with their host institution and this may be burdensome for the students (Hellsten, 2010). Participant 3 tagged his study experience as 'fine'.

*PARTICIPANT 3: Well, in summary, I say that my experience, I can rate it as not bad. That's how I want to rate it. I don't want to rate it as good, I can rate it not bad. I don't want to rate it as excellent, I will just rate it as fine, overall it's quite acceptable.*

The researcher was able to perceive that this participant was trying to bottle up some emotions, which led to further probing. This participant mentioned lack of adequate time as a student, stating that even though he had some support from some of his lecturers (one of which he said made a good impression on him), his Honours period was fine generally and he had the ability to grow on his own. Some of the other participants reiterated this during the open-ended discussions where they explained that had they had more time to finish their assignments, they would have had better marks in those assignments than they eventually had. The issue of strict rules also came up where Participant 2 noted that the timetable prevented him as a part-time student from attaining his full potential as was required for the programme, stating that there was hardly time for him to meet with his lecturers or settle down to sort out his assignments.

*PARTICIPANT 2: Yea I wrote about the strict rules, I don't know whether I have given an... appropriate heading, but then it's just that the programme is so stereotyped in a way that it's not flexible. It has... you are told that attendance is supposed to be about 10% ..., you have this percentage for submission of work. Most of the work I did were all assignment based. We didn't write exams on it but now, if somebody finishes an assignment, time should be given to them. If the person has not done well in the assignment, the person should be allowed to re-do the assignment.*

Participant 2 seemed to be the only participant who had problems with time during the Honours programme. This was due to his family and job commitments. Is it then right to say that all study should be on full-time basis to alleviate such problems?

#### **4.3.13. Self-Motivation (home expectations and personal goals)**

Inquiry into participants' motivations to study further after their experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation extracted diverse responses from them. Some of the participants (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8) made mention of the fact that self-motivation was one of the major driving factors of the successful completion of their Honours programme.

*PARTICIPANT 1: Further study is a personal decision you make. To me, I don't know about others, for me nothing can stop me from... You see all these issues, ... it's the same everywhere, even outside South Africa. You see, it's a module that you have to do. It's compulsory, so it's a module that you have to do. So, even if you don't want to do it, you must do it to get to the next level. So, it's not about saying it's nice or it's bad. It's compulsory, so you have to face it.*

According to them, self-motivation pulled them through their studies regardless of the identified challenging experiences of being international students abroad. This finding contradicts Erichsen's (2011) finding that international students' failure was caused by the fear to fail as a result of what they saw and heard about the institution and the environment. The international students in this study explained that despite the difficulties encountered during the programme, they managed to overcome them as a result of their personal goals and thirst for success as well as the expectations from home. This is seen as Participant 1, when asked how he managed to succeed despite his stated challenges, expressed that:

*PARTICIPANT 1: Nothing can stop me.*

This was majorly observed in most of the other participants' responses and it was a pointer to some of their reasons for this motivation, which rested mainly on the financial obligations back home as well as their families' expectations of their success at the university. This confirms Curtin, Stewart and Ostrove's (2013) findings in their comparative study of the academic experiences of international and domestic students, where they realised that the international students took their research work more seriously than did their local peers. A reason for this is

that the international students received some push from their families at home who were also expecting their academic prowess on completion of their studies. Zhou, Frey and Bang (2011) explain that international students' main objective is to succeed in their host institution and in this study, similar expectations existed together with their self-motivation. Similarly, one of this study's participants (Participant 3) explained how, despite all financial odds, he ensured that he completed his studies, even if it meant that he had had to work as a tutor in the institution.

*PARTICIPANT 3: I experienced it a lot because it was hectic, but all I can just say is that I was able to scale through it. I am an international student without any funding per se. So I have to do a lot of saving with the little tutorials I do in the institution and yea, with some other help from some other people I was able to, you know, go through it. There were a lot of times I don't have things, I don't have food, I don't have money. Well, I just look at it as a type of vision that I have to pursue.*

The aspect of teaching or tutoring while studying may have also been helpful in international students' consistent self-development and assessment, as well as the enablement of healthy interactions with junior students and local and international peers. The development of all kinds of skills helps international students make friends and maintain relationships (Trice, 2004 and Nambiar et al., 2012).

This also reinforces Erichsen's (2011, p. 126) assertion that the learning progression of international students influences their adjustment to circumstances. Participant 5 also expressed his determination to succeed despite all odds:

*PARTICIPANT 5: So all I wanted was just to pass my modules so that I could raise my head when my peers were also graduating and then maybe proceed after resting a bit.*

Hence, self-motivation may have been made possible with regards to the determination of students and the resources that are made available to them by their host institution. This could have also been possible due to the fact that they came from distant countries and families who had high expectations of them.

#### **4.3.14. Influence of Library Facilities**

Some of the participants (Participants 3, 4 and 8) explained that the library and internet facilities as well as their newly acquired academic writing skills helped them through and made their experiences of the programme worth it.

*PARTICIPANT 3: Yea, at the onset, I didn't know how to get some of these things... Later, the librarian ... the man in the library ...there was a programme that was organised in the library and they taught us how to check materials on the internet and all that...The librarians there were very good, yea, they were ready to help and ... the resources really helped me. It really helped me...*

Hence, the impact of the library on these students' academics cannot be overemphasised. Participant 5 also expressed the efficacy of the library and LAN resources to which he gave the credit of the improvement of his academic writing skills as well as his reading abilities.

*PARTICIPANT 5: Thank God for the available resources like the library and LAN facilities. Maybe I would have dropped out like some of my colleagues. And that would have been shameful for me as an international student after all the expenses incurred before entering the country and before I had to use money to register as a student again. These available resources helped me to get some balance and space where I was able to read and get materials. As time went on this reading facility helped me to get committed to study and ...the mind ...to not want to fail ...made me get more committed.*

The facilities made available were highly praised by virtually all the participants during the discussions and in their visual illustrations (like Participant 8) as having helped to grow their thirst for studying.

#### **4.3.15. A Changed Environment**

Another item for discussion was the issue of the changed environment which forced self-development, as indicated by Participant 7.

*PARTICIPANT 7: The environment forced the development of me, my mind, my thoughts, my opinions, who I am.*

She explained that the changed environment made her realise some of the things that she lacked and that at a point, she had to re-develop herself. A different environment in this case thus could have been both negative and positive for the participants.

#### **4.3.16. Foreignness and the Feeling of Foreignness**

In this study, the term ‘anti-foreigner tendency’ was repeatedly mentioned by some of the participants who took the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation in 2012 to 2013.

*PARTICIPANT 4: ... the lecturer's approach ... because of her approach and the attitude... because of this idea of racism...I mean everybody felt she was a ... she was racist...so because of that, not only me, not only me, almost everybody. We did not like this module.*

This is in agreement with Beoku-Bett's (2006) assertion that international students are often seen as the minority group, tagged ‘the foreigners’ and are faced with the challenges of blending with the new culture and pedagogy of their environment. International students in Redden's (2012) study claimed to feel unsafe with being with people of different cultural backgrounds, portraying a likelihood of institutional discrimination towards a particular group of students.

Another foreigner issue was raised by one of the participants who had studied after 2013, where she explains that at the university:

*PARTICIPANT 7: I faced some difficulties as a foreigner ... that the system ... is different from my country's universities...*

The participants seemed sure that nothing else could explain the marking problems that they had and the interactional problems that they had with a few of the lecturers that took them through some modules during that given period. For such reasons as these, Glass and Westmont-Campbell (2003) assert that these kinds of experiences should be looked into, as a feeling of communal acceptance often influences students' educational performances. Similarly, Sicut (2011) explains that as soon as international students feel very relaxed in their host countries, they are likely to ignore formerly annoying issues and relate better with one another and the locals as well. This indicates that enhancing the familiarisation of international students with their host institution enables them to easily integrate into the university and feel welcome as students and bonafide members of that learning community.

#### **4.4. Overall Themes**

In answering the study's questions (What are international students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation at a South African university and what are the reasons for international students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation at a South African university), the following overall themes were gathered from the participants' responses. They are listed in Table 2:

**Table 2:** The category of the themes that were collected regarding the participants' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation and the reasons for participants' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation.

<b>International Students' Experiences Of The Language And Media Honours Specialisation</b>	<b>Reasons For The Experiences</b>
1. Initial confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A change in pedagogical approaches.</li> <li>• Perceived artificial orientation and</li> </ul>

	<p>inefficiency of the international relations office.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differences in context (between home and abroad institutions).</li> <li>• English being second/third language.</li> </ul>
2. Lecturer-international student gap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A perceived misunderstanding of the concept of internationalisation on both sides (lecturers and the participants).</li> </ul>
3. International student-international student gap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to communicate effectively with fellow international students.</li> </ul>
4. Local student-international student gap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language barrier.</li> </ul>
5. Failures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lecturer-international student gap.</li> <li>• Lecturer issues/stereotypes.</li> <li>• Problematic teaching styles and programme structure.</li> <li>• Differences in contexts (home and international university).</li> <li>• Lack of time and/or inadequate time management/balancing abilities.</li> <li>• Strict rules.</li> <li>• Inconvenient for part-time students (job and marriage influences).</li> <li>• Unfamiliar use of language and accent.</li> <li>• Monetary issues (lack of funding).</li> <li>• English being second or third language.</li> </ul>
6. Successes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on lecturers' impacts (teaching styles and lecturer encouragement).</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-motivation (home expectations and personal goals).</li> <li>• Influence of LAN and library facilities.</li> </ul>
7. Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A changed environment.</li> <li>• Foreignness and the feeling of foreignness.</li> <li>• Lack of proper international students' relationship.</li> <li>• Local-international student gap.</li> <li>• Inadequate help from the international students' office.</li> </ul>
8. Academic literacy improvement/increased knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on lecturers' impacts.</li> <li>• Self-motivation (home expectations and personal goals).</li> </ul>

Based on these discussed themes and subthemes, it was realised from the collected data that most of the stated experiences of the participants also explain the reasons for the experiences, which points to the fact that the experiences in some of the cases are interwoven with the reasons for the experiences.

#### 4.5. Participants' Recommendations

After each session with the participants, the researcher asked if they had any recommendations based on the concerns that they noted. Some of them desired a more accommodating orientation for international students on entering the institution, and an adequate information channel through which international students would be duly informed of institutional events and occurrences, rather than gaining important information as '*a rumour*' (as a participant put it). Based on the implementation of these concerns by the university's management, the participants

expressed that international students will feel engaged via proper and sufficient information dissemination processes and inclusion in institutions' governance. Figure 11 highlights participants' recommendation and ideas on how they could have approached their studies at the host university differently as well as what measures should be put in place by the management of the institution.

### Figure 11: Participants' Recommendations



These recommendations, according to the participants should be ensured in order to have a more fulfilling international study experience and a more representative international students' relations office. One of the participants advocated for a part-time friendly structure that allowed for flexibility for part-time students' class attendance and assessments. Some of the participants also mentioned the introduction of regular evaluation of lecturers in a bid to enhance and improve lecturers' teaching styles, their interaction with international students as well as correct any perceived wrong notions (as in the case of the international students who felt stereotyped in this study). This, they noted, could help in bridging the supposed gap that exists between lecturers and international students in such a way that the international students are made to feel freer to communicate with them and get help from them when necessary. Another

recommendation that was offered by the participants was the need for the management to look into providing a more helpful funding scheme for international students.

#### **4.6. Conclusion**

In this chapter, it was noted that the participants' experiences of the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation was linked to their reasons for having these experiences. It was on this basis that the researcher requested the participants give their recommendations for international study abroad. It was assumed that these recommendations might help to further probe the experiences regarding international study and the reasons for such experiences.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This study was conducted in order to explore international students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation at a South African university. Data was generated by eight participants who were all international students who took the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation from 2011 to 2014 at a South African School of Education. In this section of the dissertation, the main findings of the study will be highlighted and the theoretical and methodological implications, study limitations, areas for future research and recommendations that were derived from the study will be discussed.

#### **5.2. Main Findings**

Two research questions guided this study:

1. What are international students' experiences of taking a Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation at a South African university?
2. Why do international students have such experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation at a South African university?

The main findings are summarised in response to the two questions above.

##### **5.2.1. International Students' Experiences of taking a Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation at a South African University**

In this study, differences in the participants' years of study were found to have made a difference in their experiences of taking the specialisation. This could be related to a change of students and staff during the stated years, as it was noticed that some of the participants who had studied in

the same year had similar experiences, which in some cases contradicted those of participants who had studied in a different academic year.

Some of the participants who had studied in the same academic years (2011 to 2013) had similar experiences in terms of their responses concerning the negative experiences that they had with the teaching styles, international relations office and funding, academic writing, rigid programme structure, relationships with their lecturers and local peers, as well as fellow international students. They also had similar positive experiences.

Participants who did their studies after 2013 focused on initial confusion, loneliness and English as a second or third language. They explained that the availability of reading facilities enabled them to have some experiences which led to their success and thirst for more education in the same department. This could be important in noting the progress made thus far in the specialisation (with regards to international students), or it may be that the more recent Honours graduates did not experience some of the difficulties that the previous students had experienced during their own years of study, and this made it more important to ruminate on the reasons for their stated experiences.

### **5.2.2. The Reasons for International Students' Experiences of Taking the Language and Media Honours Specialisation at a South African University**

Participants pointed out the many reasons to explain their experiences. An overriding idea was that 'this is not home'. The majority of participants noted that they constantly had feelings of foreignness and being ill-treated (which may connote that for them, foreignness equals ill treatment). Some of them also noted the case of unfamiliarity with the environment and the differences in the context of learning (from their home universities). Participants believed that local students were comfortable and able in their environment while the international students felt foreign. Perceptions such as these indicated a lack of healthy relationships between the two groups of students, which may have been influenced by their historical and cultural differences.

Another point which was raised was the issue of the structure of the programme which the participants believed was different, rigid and newer than the previous approaches which they were more familiar with, before embarking on the journey of international study. One such noted difference is the writing culture that was experienced in their host university. There was also a struggle between part-time students' success and concentration rates as a result of the time constraints of their work and study. This, they explained, impacted on their experiences more negatively than positively.

There were also findings related to lecturers' impacts on the participants' failure and success rates. Issues of being criticised based on writing and speech production were raised, and the participants noted that they did not feel that some of their lecturers realised the possibility of different languages and their usage as they exist in the university. It was found that language differences were highlighted as participants struggled with speech production, and as diverse accents appeared unwelcome. Based on these findings, one may say that failure to acknowledge such immense diversity that exists in the classroom may readily give way to all kinds of presumptions and preconceptions, while it also breeds perceptions of being disliked or excluded from the learning community.

Likewise, this study's participants felt further excluded by being unable to express their concerns to the lecturers because they did not want to seem rude. This connotes that these international students saw expression of feelings to their lecturers as being confrontational. Some of the reasons for this could be linked to the students' diverse cultural differences, upbringing and their level of interactions with people in the learning environment. This thus enables discussions on the issue of assertiveness, which apparently these concerned participants did not seem to have exhibited. This study's researcher at this point thus presumes that due assertiveness on the part of international students could have worked out well for them rather than their outright avoidance of expression and communication with their lecturers, which they feared could be termed 'rudeness'. Therefore, it might be prudent to say that both cultural and historical factors could have influenced participants' experiences in this regard, as they possibly also did not have close interactions with their lecturers in their previous home universities. Some of the participants also noted that a lack of finances affected their studies negatively. In addition, the majority of the

participants did not have productive and healthy relationships with their local peers. This research also brought to light the language barrier that existed during the process of the participants' group work.

Nonetheless, working within the premises of the university was said to have helped the participants in getting familiar with their host institution. Besides making friends during this period, these international students were able to gain profitable work experiences that motivated them to study. Some other participants explained that they were given opportunities to work at the university which settled some of their financial worries. This thus serves as a pointer that when international students are given an opportunity to work on campus they are able to meet all kinds of people, build healthy relationships with them, learn new concepts, break barriers and get acclimatised to their new setting. Self-motivation and determination were repeated themes that speak volumes about the students' readiness to learn and their refusal to go back home as failures or worse still, empty handed. Overall, the participants expressed their satisfaction with the overall results of the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation as well as its relevance, stating that it was eye opening. Participants went further to note that the modules could prove useful to other specialisations as well.

### **5.3. Theoretical Implications**

Conducting a study such as this may not have been possible without the utilisation of phenomenology as a theoretical framework, which aided an understanding of the study of participants' experiences and their stated reasons for those experiences. It is noted from this study that for proper understanding of what the international students experienced during the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation, it was important to accommodate and understand in-depth, all the factors (such as time management, lecturer issues, newness to technology, lecturer/peer gaps, artificial orientation/international relations office, perceived stereotyping, among others) which impacted on the participants' experiences of the Honours programme. For this purpose, it was necessary to get comprehensive responses from the participants in their natural settings. Hence, phenomenology as the study's theoretical framework helped to understand rich and in-depth information from the study's participants.

Likewise, phenomenology when used in this study enabled data collection (spoken, written, drawn and hidden) from participants about their experiences of the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation in such a way that they were able to really reflect on their study periods and express what they went through as international students at that time. This reflection enabled some of the participants to see the nature of those experiences and probably for the first time, ponder upon the reasons why they had those experiences. Some of the participants at some point during the data collection phase did a re-evaluation of their thoughts about their experiences by acknowledging the fact that most of their perceptions at that time could have been as a result of assumptions rather than what was really happening. This then prompted some suggestions and recommendations from them at the end of their sessions.

Additionally, the utilisation of hermeneutic phenomenology as a theoretical framework in this study enabled the researcher to reflect herself, while also comparing and contrasting with the participants' responses, what she experienced during the Honours specialisation, as well as what may have been foregrounded during her initial thoughts on her experiences of taking the specialisation. Having been a part of the research process thus helped the researcher to describe and interpret some of the participants' experiences, which may have aided some understanding and ascription of meanings to the specified experiences.

Despite the advantages of having phenomenology as a theoretical framework, one theoretical limitation was the participants' constant repetition of the words 'I felt' and 'we felt', among others. Such words do create some difficulty in determining the differences between their thoughts and perceptions, and their experiences. It made the researcher cautious in her attempts to be clear about the kind of data that was being offered as being that of experiences rather than that of feelings and thoughts of the events that occurred during the participants' Honours study. Conversely, the fact being that the researcher singlehandedly conducted each of those data collection phases, made it easy to detect when the participants were expressing thoughts about the programme or when they were talking about their experiences. Sometimes it was necessary to steer the participants back to the research topic and in line with the study's theoretical underpinning.

#### **5.4. Methodological Implications**

The study's methodology enhanced the collection and analysis of data from the selected participants in different ways. The case study research design aided a well-situated data collection process as the researcher had to meet with the participants (except Participant 7) at the selected university, which was also where they all did their Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation. This probably also made it easier for the participants to remember and relate their experiences because of that environmental effect.

Using visual illustrations, open-ended discussions and narratives also enabled the researcher to get rich information that was scrutinised, compared and contrasted with each of the responses that were derived from each of the participants. This made it easy to detect if there existed inconsistencies or excluded information in the data and it also made it easy for the researcher to make the participants touch on any information that they probably attempted to hide or leave out of the discussions. Hence, the researcher is of the belief that each data collection method built on the previous one. Starting the data collection process with the visual illustration and then going on to discussing the visual illustration, and afterwards doing narratives, was probably helpful for the research. The chosen methodology helped in deriving information which, if not collected via diverse means, may not have yielded the results that were eventually derived in the study.

Likewise, the utilisation of the data collection methods which all explored participants' experiences and the meanings of those experiences revealed that the participants were able to deeply reflect on their own responses to the questions and also ponder on possible ways through which some of the challenges which they encountered during their Honours study could have been overridden at that time.

#### **5.5. Reflections on the Study as an International Student**

In this section, I write my reflections on the study in first person. As previously mentioned, I am an international student at the university that was selected for this study and I am a student of one of the mentioned academic sets. Based on the information that was given by the participants, I

was able to identify the differences between my experiences and theirs. During the data analysis stage, I realised that there were many differences between my experiences and that of my fellow international students. Some of these differences concerned issues of lecturers and assessments. During my Honours programme, I experienced really skilled and intelligent lecturers whose teaching approaches encouraged me to read, think and critique more than I ever did in my previous qualification. This aspect of the teaching process enabled me to attempt my assignments and to be assessed at the expected level. This, I believe, further explains the impact of the academic year, lecturer and change of teaching approaches on international students and their experiences.

More so, while going through and analysing the collected data, I reflected on the period of my first entry into the institution and some of the financial as well as initial concerns that I encountered, which, if not quickly averted, could have truncated my dreams of further education. I also struggled financially at some point, despite the fact that I was being sent some money from home monthly. When I got the opportunity to tutor some modules, I was encouraged mentally and financially to concentrate on my studies. Reflecting on that phase of my life makes me understand the importance of funding and scholarships being awarded to international students. While I was able to strive very hard to achieve my goals of pursuing an international degree, I understand how financial constraints affect concentration on academic pursuits.

I experienced the educational environment (system, teaching style, among others) as very different from back home. During my studies, regardless, I got all the needed help from my lecturers even though some of the issues that were stated by this study's participants (like not being so free with lecturers) may have been true about me as well. This could be traced back to my previous academic settings where lecturers were almost feared by students and one would think being too forward or irritating them could mean a failure in the module(s) the lecturers taught. However, I used to communicate with them via emails and my studies were not affected by this.

More importantly, having had an opportunity to work as a tutor at the university, utilise the library and LAN facilities, have a 'ready' set of lecturers, as well as a set determination to

succeed academically, despite all odds, made me fall in love with research. This experience actually encouraged me to proceed with my Masters study which I am currently doing in the same department and university where this research was conducted.

## **5.6. Area for Future Research**

As seen in this study, adjusting to the new environment for the participants took more time than they probably had expected because it was a significant change (psychological, pedagogical and social) for them. The methods of the dissertation focused on international students' experiences of taking a programme in a South African University which is based in one province; this may indicate that the study may not be generalised, neither can it be of much solid contribution to policy improvements. The findings nonetheless may broaden perspectives on international students' experiences and given recommendations which can enhance international education and pedagogy. The researcher is as a result, optimistic that the study sprouts and deepens more research on human experiences as well as an understanding and interpretation of these experiences. Therefore, more work may need to be done regarding researching international study and students abroad. Such studies could include:

### **5.6.1. A Larger Group of People or Departments**

It might be helpful to conduct more research on a larger number of universities and a more diverse group of nationalities. It is assumed that this may enable the determination of the range of experiences that international students encounter as well as the differences between their experiences. It is with this sort of research also that the term 'generalisability' of findings may be conveniently enhanced.

### **5.6.2. International Students' Challenges and Solutions**

Research may be carried out to determine what steps international students are taking to solve identified challenges. This is important as it could enable other international students to utilise some of these procedures because these are the procedures that worked for their counterparts. It

may also help the universities in which international students are studying to discover what interventions are needed to assist international students.

### **5.6.3. The Impact of Biography on International Study**

Another study may focus on the impact of biographical details on international students' studies abroad. In the present study, biographical details were not overtly focused on, and thus the impact of biographical details on international students' studies might prove important for research that focuses on internationalisation.

### **5.6.4. The Utilisation of a Different Set of Research Designs and Approaches**

This current study used qualitative methods for the purpose of data collection. It might be a good idea to use a mixed methods approach for a study on international students in order to focus on a larger group of international students than that which was dealt with in this study.

### **5.6.5. The South African Context**

Another research may look critically at and engage with the South African context with regards to international students especially with regards to South African contextual factors like race, class, prejudice, marginalization and exclusion. These are also critical angles of investigating international students' experiences.

## **5.7. Recommendations**

It is hoped that the findings of this study are considered when dealing with international students now and in the future, so that some of the identified challenges as explained by the participants are engaged with, with newer sets of international students, thus preventing the replication of the negative cycles.

### **5.7.1. Review of Study Materials**

There should be a continuous review of all study materials to ensure the acknowledgement and acceptance of diversity as well as an adequate inclusion of all students, regardless of their nationalities, cultures and prior qualifications.

### **5.7.2. Review of Teaching Styles**

Teaching styles should be constantly reflected on to ensure that learning styles with which students arrive are acknowledged and new ways of teaching are scaffolded to enable effective learning by all students.

### **5.7.3. Prioritisation of International Students' Academic Needs**

The needs and expectations of all students, including international students, should gain priority, and examples from beyond South Africa should be included. If possible, using examples from international students' home countries may enhance the educational experience for all in the classes.

### **5.7.4. Placement of Support Structures for International Students**

There needs to be an overt description and explanation of the support structures in place for international students at a university. Such support includes making explicit the access students have to lecturers.

### **5.7.5. Encouragement of International Students to Acclimatise**

International students need to be encouraged to assume agency by asking questions and creating a social platform for themselves.

### **5.7.6. Scholarships for International Students**

Scholarships for international students may assist to alleviate their financial, and thus academic, concerns.

### **5.7.7. International Students' Prior Planning before Travelling**

Prior preparation before embarking on international study is required. Host institutions may consider unpacking the country's culture, teaching and learning styles, languages used, climate, support structures and demographics, among others, for international students. Knowing where to go and what to do in instances of xenophobia might also assist international students to understand the context.

### **5.7.8. Recruitment of International Students in the International Relations Office**

International students should be recruited to provide their services in the International Relations Office. This will assist these students in acclimatising to the environment and will provide a safe space for them.

### **5.7.9. Acknowledgement of Internationalisation by the Host Universities and Staff**

Institutions need to make an effort to recognise and respect cultural and linguistic differences and to appreciate the beauty inherent in diversity. This could be deliberated on and worked on during conferences and departmental meetings in order to work out possible strategies of encouraging a healthy, yet productively diverse learning community.

### **5.7.10. Transition pedagogy**

Issues such as institutional literacy systems, integrated curriculum and transition pedagogy should be considered in higher institutions for the main purpose of supporting the needs and expectations of both the international students and university postgraduate programme. It is also

important that HEIs induct and support international students by all means so that their studies can run smoothly and they feel welcome/valuable in their host institutions.

## **5.8. Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the overall conclusions of the dissertation on international students' experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation and the reasons for these experiences. Based on the findings that were derived in this study, one can say that conducting a study such as this not only helps to explore and understand the experiences of international students, but more significantly, could help to gain vital developmental insights for the department, the university, the country and international students, including the researcher.

The findings that were derived from this study suggest that international students have both positive and negative experiences. Findings also indicate that various kinds of support are needed for improvement and growth in international study. These findings also demonstrate that research into peoples' experiences is essential in making studies better for future international students while also ensuring that the institution is marketable for diverse kinds of students from various nationalities. Adequate support should be made available in order to ensure successful acclimatisation that will help international students feel welcome, involved and comfortable in their host institution. Such an environment will have an impact, not only on their academic performance, but on their experiences of international study as well.

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## Appendix A (i): Gate-Keeper Letter of Approval (Registrar, UKZN)



8 December 2015

Miss Temitope O Adekunle (SN 213574029)  
School of Education  
College of Humanities  
Edgewood Campus  
UKZN  
Email: [tpadekunle@yahoo.com](mailto:tpadekunle@yahoo.com)

Dear Miss Adekunle

### RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

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

*"International students' experiences of taking a Language and Media Studies Honours specialization at a South African University".*

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting a visual illustration of experiences, a discussion segment as well as a segment for written narratives with students on the Edgewood campus.

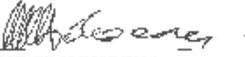
Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using 'Microsoft Outlook' address book.

Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely

  
MR SS MOKOENA  
REGISTRAR

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54011, Durban, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 8005/2208 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 7824/2204 Email: [registrar@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:registrar@ukzn.ac.za)

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

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## Appendix A (ii): Gate-Keeper Letters of Approval (The Head of the School of Education)



15 February 2016

Miss Temitope O Adekunle 213574029  
School of Education  
Edgewood Campus

Dear Miss Adekunle

Protocol reference number: HSS/D118/016M

Project Title: International students' experiences of taking a Language and Media Studies Honours Specialisation at a South African University

### Full Approval – Expedited Application

In response to your application received 8 February 2016, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

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

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

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

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

Yours faithfully

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

/pm

Cc Supervisor: Dr Ansurie Pillay  
Cc Academic Leader Research: Professor GH Kamwendo  
Cc School Administrator: Ms Tyser Khumalo

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

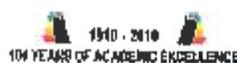
Dr Shenaka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X64001 Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 9527/9529/4657 Facsimile: +27 (0)31 260 4909 Email: [srkhan@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:srkhan@ukzn.ac.za) / [smthabisi@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:smthabisi@ukzn.ac.za) / [phuhisa@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:phuhisa@ukzn.ac.za)

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



Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Mkandawile Pietermaritzburg Westville

## **Appendix B: Letter to the Participants**

### **Information Letter**

To All Participants

My name is Temitope Adekunle, a Masters student of the Language and Media Studies specialisation at the School of Education of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I am conducting a study on international student's experiences, titled: International Students' Experiences of the Language and Media specialisation at a South African university and it is focused on international students. This study aims at exploring the experiences of selected international students who have undergone the Language and Media module. I write to invite you participate in the research.

The research will be conducted on Edgewood campus and the process entails making a visual illustration of experiences, a discussion segment as well as a segment for written narratives which will take approximately 60 minutes or less. The discussion segment will be recorded. However, all data will be disposed of according to the UKZN standards without any mishandling of information. Also, please be assured of your ethical rights and assured that utmost anonymity and confidentiality will be strictly maintained in this research and there will be no identification that might link participants to the results derived in this research.

Thank you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully

Temitope Adekunle

Language and Media Studies

Edgewood Campus

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Email address: [tpadekunle@yahoo.com](mailto:tpadekunle@yahoo.com)

My supervisor is Dr. Ansurie Pillay of the School of Education, Edgewood campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Contact details: email: [pillaya3@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:pillaya3@ukzn.ac.za); Phone number: 031-2603613

You may also contact the Research Office through: Ms. P. Ximba HSSREC Research Office,  
Email: [Ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Ximbap@ukzn.ac.za)

## Appendix C: Consent Form

### Informed Consent Letter

My name is Temitope Adekunle, a Masters student of the Language and Media Studies specialisation at the School of Education of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I am conducting a study on international student's experiences, titled: International Students' Experiences of the Language and Media specialisation at a South African university and it is focused on international students. This study aims at exploring the experiences of selected international students who have undergone the Language and Media module.

The research will be conducted on Edgewood campus and the process entails making a visual illustration of experiences, a discussion segment as well as a segment for written narratives which will take approximately 60 minutes or less. The discussion segment will be recorded. However, all data will be disposed of according to the UKZN standards without any mishandling of information. Also, please be assured of your ethical rights and assured that utmost anonymity and confidentiality will be strictly maintained in this research and there will be no identification that might link participants to the results derived in this research.

Once the research process is concluded you may benefit from it by knowing the outcome of the data analysis.

For further clarification or inquiries, you may contact the researcher on [tpadekunle@yahoo.com](mailto:tpadekunle@yahoo.com) or the supervisor on [pillaya3@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:pillaya3@ukzn.ac.za). You may also contact the Research Office through: Ms. P. Ximba HSSREC Research Office, Email: [Ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Ximbap@ukzn.ac.za) Thank you for your co-operation.

I..... (Full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

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

I hereby provide consent to:

Produce a visual image	YES NO
A critical open-ended discussion	YES NO
An Audio-recording of the discussion	YES NO
Writing a narrative	YES NO

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE

## **Appendix D: Visual Illustrations**

Question:

1. Please present in visual form your experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation.

You may present a picture, diagram, sketch, drawing or mind map or you may use words or anything else to depict your experiences. (I am looking for your EXPERIENCES, not artistic ability).

2. Please briefly explain your visual image.

## **Appendix E: Open ended discussions**

Schedule:

1. Please explain your visual image to me.
2. What does each aspect signify?
3. What prompted you to choose such images?
4. Do you believe you have omitted anything significant in your image? Why do you think you omitted that aspect?
5. What are your experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation?
6. Why do you think you had such experiences?
7. Could you please critically reflect on the entire experience of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation?

## **Appendix F: Narratives**

Instruction:

Please write openly and freely on your experiences of taking the Language and Media Studies Honours specialisation. Your writing is unrestricted and unlimited but should accurately and freely reflect your experiences.