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*Students excelling academically: Exploring academic staff members' and students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)*

By:

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Discipline of Psychology

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**DEDICATION**

**TO ALL THOSE WHO ARE EXCEPTIONAL IN THEIR OWN WAY**

**“OUR LIVES BECOME BEAUTIFUL NOT BECAUSE WE ARE PERFECT,  
BUT ONLY WHEN WE PUT OUR HEARTS INTO WHAT WE DO”**

## ABSTRACT

Student learning and academic achievement are understood to be interactively linked to teachers, teaching and university systems. Therefore, this study on exceptional academic achievement among undergraduate students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal aimed at understanding how exceptional academic achievement occurs from both academic staff members (teachers) and high achieving students' points of view. The study was theoretically grounded in social cognitive theory and used a qualitative method. Specifically, the researcher used purposive and convenient sampling methods to select 14 participants for the study (i.e., eight academic staff members and six high achieving undergraduate students). All participants either worked or studied in a Humanities field. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff members while a focus group discussion was held with the high achieving students. The data collected from the participants was transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings from the study suggest that exceptional academic achievement among students is highly influenced by the teaching and learning processes (including clear communication, availability and consultation with lecturers, mentoring and support) that takes place between academic staff members and students. The findings from the study also highlight multiple (intrinsic and extrinsic) enhancers and barriers which influence exceptional academic achievement outcomes amongst undergraduate students. Some central enhancers are peer support, implementation of technology, implementation of tutors, and internal motivation. Some key barriers are lack of space, noisy and over-crowded learning spaces, and lack of trained tutors and practical issues with the use of technology.

Nevertheless, being consistent, hard-working and taking responsibility for their learning enables high achieving students to overcome barriers that they experience at university. Improvements are being made by the university and lecturers, to help students excel in their academic outcomes by creating conducive learning environments, creating visible learning structures for students to follow and creating curriculums to suit students' needs. Lastly, in this study, it was found that it is important for students to excel in their academics as it creates good self-esteem, motivation, healthy competition, consistency and an attitude of commitment to hard work.

### **Key words:**

*Exceptional academic achievement, exceptionally, academic staff members, high achieving students.*

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Although undergraduate university students and lecturers typically busy themselves with multiple educational tasks and activities during the semester, the summative assessment of learning outcomes is still the central indicator of the level of academic achievement attained by the student. This study is concerned with exceptional academic achievement in the South African higher education context that prioritises explicitly the perspectives of academic staff members and academically outstanding students on the topic of exceptional academic achievement. Chapter One starts with the background to the research problem that this study sought to address, then goes on to outline the aims of this study, study objectives and research questions. This chapter continues to identify the significance of the research and definitions of essential terms that need to be made aware of in the study.

### **1.2 Background of the study**

South African higher education has witnessed considerable gains in student participation in the sector since 1994. However, these gains in participation have not matched corresponding increases in student achievement (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2014). DHET (2014) highlights explicitly low success, throughput and graduation rates as a significant problem for the South African higher education sector. Understandably then, a high proportion of research in the higher education field over the past two decades has focused on student underachievement and failure. Although not problematic in itself, this focus can reinforce a "deficit" mindset (or discourse) for conceptualising student learning and academic achievement in South African higher education. When conflated with race and socio-economic status, a deficit mindset can reinforce prejudice and discrimination, and begin to reinforce expectations around reduced student progression and success (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Such a deficit discourse becomes linked to the increase of "non-traditional" students in higher education, and specifically students from diverse backgrounds (Council of Higher Education [CHE], 2010). In an attempt to counter the problems associated with a deficit discourse in student learning and achievement research, it would be useful to explore the phenomenon of learning and academic achievement from the exceptional end of the achievement spectrum. This is because the implications of deficit thinking facilitates "generalisations about student ability to be made and supports a laziness to grapple with the complex issues around student difficulties" (McKay & Devlin, 2016 p. 349). A study on exceptional academic achievement

may function to counter lazy generalisations about students' abilities and potentials in contemporary South African higher education.

This study explored academic staff members' and students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement, specifically at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in South Africa. The sample consisted of academic staff members (Academic Leaders of Teaching and Learning [ALoT&L] and lecturers) and high achieving students at the undergraduate level. For this study, exceptional academic achievement is understood to refer to an individual student's comparatively high academic performance (Lubinski, 2009; Buchanan, 2015). In this study, exceptional academic achievement was assumed to involve educational achievement outcomes that are higher than usual and above average. In addition, exceptional academic achievement has previously been operationalised in the South African higher education environment as leading to the attainment of various merit awards [,] distinctions in modules, certificates of merit for individual modules, Dean's commendation for a semester performance, high credit weighted averages across modules in a semester, and degrees conferred cum laude or summa cum laude (Munro & Samuel, 2015, p. 170). For academic staff members and students, the achievements as mentioned above are most likely to be commonly associated with exceptional academic achievement. This dissertation uses the phrase 'high achieving students' to refer to those students who demonstrate exceptional academic achievement, as per the above definitions.

There are also other processes that are involved in attaining exceptional academic achievement (Buchanan, 2015). These processes are identified as students having positive attitudes towards their learning, taking the initiative for their learning, being independent learners, taking responsibility for their education and knowledge, persevering and displaying effort in their academic work (Schunk & Zimmerman 2012; Buchanan, 2015). Hence, academic achievement may not always be related to high marks and highly weighted averages, but it can also be recognised through the success of goal attainment, satisfaction and the application of new skills (Burger & Naude, 2019).

It is also essential to consider that exceptional academic achievement can be theorised from a social cognitive perspective as it involves processes from an individual student's mindset and behaviour, which can influence achievement. According to Bandura (2011) 'behaviour, cognition and other personal factors, and environmental influences all operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bidirectionally' (p. 2). These factors influence a

student's academic achievement trajectory. Also, exceptional academic achievement can be adequately understood from a socio-cultural perspective because these systems involve a broader contextual understanding of factors that may influence exceptional academic achievement.

Hence going forward, it is essential to understand the definition of exceptional academic achievement as well as other processes and factors that can influence exceptional academic achievement. Furthermore, exceptional academic achievement is necessary to explore because most research in South African, global, and higher education studies has focused on student failure and underachievement (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Therefore, there is a lack of research on exceptional academic achievement. In the following section a historical background on education is presented as it is understood to influence exceptional academic achievement outcomes.

#### 1.2.1 Historical context influencing the background to the study

In the apartheid era, higher education separated institutions for white South Africans and institutions with limited educational offerings for people who were classified as non-white (i.e., Black, Indian and Coloured South Africans) (CHE, 2010). At that time, there were constraints for Black South Africans to attend white universities, and this was controlled by the Universities Amendment Act of 1959 (Mabokela, 1997). During the 1980s, the concern of increasing physical access to universities in South Africa became an urgent economic, political and social justice imperative (Mabokela, 1997; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). This imperative was done to raise awareness of equal access to higher education for Black South Africans (CHE, 2010; Munro, 2014). During the 1990s South Africa was transforming into a democratic country and became fully democratic in 1994. Hence, changes in the higher education sector began to take place, such as the increasing access of Black South Africans entering universities in South Africa (CHE, 2010; Munro, 2014; Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

In the 21st Century, South African universities are made up of diverse populations of students who have different racial and socio-economic backgrounds enrolled in various degrees or programmes (CHE 2013; Schreiber & Yu, 2016). According to Schreiber and Yu (2016), there is a high influx of students, and this is because more students are gaining access to higher education due to revisions of degree reforms, changes in administration and increased funding in student fees and residence (CHE 2013; Schreiber & Yu, 2016).

However, on the other hand, there is a non-equivalent increase in academic staff (CHE, 2016). This non-equivalent increase in academic staff can complement the increase in failure rates and poor academic performance. Hence, this leads to low success and throughput rates (CHE 2013; Schreiber & Yu, 2016), high dropout rates and inefficient costs to the higher education sector. Therefore, it becomes crucial for South African higher education to improve academic performance, to find ways to enhance and further exceptional academic achievement. When the higher education sector can focus on exceptional academic achievement, changes can be made at universities and other learning institutions. Therefore, Schreiber and Yu (2016) argue that the area of academic excellence, specifically exceptional academic achievement is under-researched and there is a need to understand the areas in which students are achieving, rather than mainly focusing on failure among students.

Since the topic of exceptional academic achievement is under-researched, there is a gap that exists with regards to focusing on exceptional academic achievement. There is also a need to understand the terms of exceptional academic achievement, and the meaning that it conveys to students, academic staff members and university institutions. Furthermore, the overall outcome of the study reported in this dissertation will assist in identifying and seeking to close the gap on the lack of research based on student's exceptional academic achievement and how outstanding academic achievement can be enhanced at an individual and institutional level.

### **1.3 Study aims, objectives, and research questions**

#### **1.3.1 Aims:**

This study explored the phenomenon of exceptional academic achievement at UKZN. Furthermore, student learning and academic achievement are understood to be intricately linked to teachers, teaching and university systems intended to facilitate learning. The study also aimed to understand exceptional academic achievement from both academic staff members and high achieving students' points of view. Also, the study aimed to contribute to research that did not perpetuate a deficit discourse in conceptions of learning but instead added to the growing body of work on exceptional academic achievement.

#### **1.3.2 The objectives:**

- To explore academic staff members' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement among university students, and
- To explore high achieving students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement at university.

### 1.3.3 Research questions:

The research questions which guided the research study were formulated as:

1. What are academic staff members' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement amongst university students?
  - a) How do academic staff members explain exceptional academic achievement at university?
  - b) What roles do academic staff members play in student exceptional academic achievement at university?
  - c) What individual, institutional, systematic enhancers and barriers towards student exceptional academic achievement do academic staff members feel are relevant and why?
  
2. What are high achieving students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement at university?
  - a) How do high achieving students explain exceptional academic achievement at university?
  - b) What individual, institutional, systematic enhancers and barriers to exceptional academic achievement do high achieving students feel are relevant and why?

## **1.4 Significance of the Study**

The significance or importance of the study explores exceptional academic achievement among undergraduate students with the ultimate aim of understanding how exceptional academic achievement occurs from both academic staff and high achieving students' perspectives. The study, therefore, offers a more comprehensive approach to academic achievement and learning research by understanding viewpoints from both academic staff and students, and not only from one aspect (e.g., students only). The study is significant in that it also aims to foreground instances of exceptional academic achievement in South African higher education, so that these instances can co-exist with those of underachievement and failure.

## **1.5 Operational Definition of Terms**

### 1.5.1 Perspectives

"Perspectives" refers to people's understanding and points of view on a specific topic of interest (Huo et al., 2019).

### 1.5.2 Exceptional Academic Achievement/exceptional:

Exceptional academic achievement is understood to lead to the attainment of "various merit awards [,] distinctions in modules, certificates of merit for individual modules, Dean's commendation for a semester performance, high credit weighted averages across modules in a semester, and degrees conferred cum laude or summa cum laude" (Munro & Samuel, 2015, p. 170). For academic staff members and students, the achievements as mentioned above are likely to be achievements that are most commonly associated with exceptional academic achievement. The definition of 'exceptional academic achievement' can be further understood as the top performing three to five percent of undergraduate students at UKZN and ranked by their credit weighted average for marks obtained in modules passed.

### 1.5.3 High achieving students

'High achieving students' refer to those students who demonstrate exceptional academic achievement, as per the above definition in 1.5.2

### 1.5.4 Academic staff members

'Academic staff members' refer to all those who are involved in the teaching and learning process of students (specifically for this study ALs of T&L and lecturers fall under the definition of academic staff members).

## **1.6 Structure of Dissertation**

The structure of the dissertation will briefly explain each chapter and what it entails. Chapter One is an introduction of the research study. It entails the background of the study, study aims, objectives and research questions. It also identifies the significance of the study, important terms and definitions used in the study and ends with a conclusion. Chapter Two highlights the literature that was reviewed in the study. It consists of literature reviewed internationally and locally. There is also clear reference that is made to education policies. The theoretical framework used in this study was the social cognitive theory that was also discussed in the literature review chapter. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology. It included the research design and study procedures, the population of the of the study, sampling techniques and sample size, research instruments and data collection methods, data analysis, data management, ethical considerations and limitations of the study. Chapter Four entails the research findings of the study. It is a report of the qualitative analyses of the data generated. Thematic analysis offered a coherent means of summarising the main issues identified into themes and categories that emerged from the data. Chapter Five is the discussion chapter,

which presented a discussion of the findings that was discussed using the literature that was found. In Chapter Five both converging and diverging views from the literature and the data was discussed. Lastly, Chapter Six is a conclusion of each chapter in this dissertation. It entails salient points from preceding chapters and includes future recommendations.

### **1.7 Conclusion**

Chapter One introduces, presents and highlights the concern of this study that explores the phenomenon of exceptional academic achievement in the context of South African higher education. The perspectives of academic staff members and academically exceptional students were considered. This chapter also highlighted the need for research on exceptional academic achievement as there is mainly a focus on students' underachievement and failure. This sense of focusing on underachievement and failure in the education sector has been evident since post-1994 and persists in the 21st century. This knowledge sets a backdrop of the study to provide an understanding of how teaching and learning, and exceptional academic achievement has been understood to transpire over the years. The next section is Chapter Two. In Chapter Two, literature discussed draws on theory and research on (exceptional) academic achievement in higher education. The literature review is aimed at highlighting gaps and limitations in the existing research.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The literature discussed in Chapter Two draws on theory and research on (exceptional) academic achievement in higher education. Specifically, the literature reviews gaps and limitations in existing research, and suggests how this study seeks to contribute to the relevant academic debate. The following themes are discussed throughout the literature review. Firstly, understanding teaching and learning, focusing on the role and influences that academic staff members play in the trajectory of students' learning and exceptional academic achievements. Furthermore, ways in which universities in South Africa could be conceptualised as enabling institutions are presented. Secondly, intrinsic and extrinsic enhancers and barriers that students face when attempting to achieve exceptionally are also explored. Thirdly, Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory is presented as a suitable theoretical framework to explain how students can achieve exceptionally. Key psychological processes of agency, self-regulation and self-efficacy are specifically highlighted in the discussion of the social cognitive theory.

### **2.2 Understanding teaching and learning**

During the apartheid era in South Africa, Black South African students studied in primary and secondary education institutions that were regulated by the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (Griesel, 2004; Maile, 2004; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). The education that was delivered in response to the Bantu Education Act was characterised as highly authoritarian and inferior. Moreover, unsystematic knowledge practices were used to develop forms of learning, literacy and knowledge depth (Griesel, 2004; Maile, 2004; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). In contrast to the types of authoritarian, uncritical, unsystematic knowledge practices, and the type of thinking and learning that was typically enforced in Bantu Education, critical and independent thinking is required for success and exceptional academic achievement in university studies (Griesel, 2004; Maile, 2004; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). More specifically, Griesel (2004) asserted that Bantu education offered at school level did not adequately prepare students to meet requirements for success at the university level.

Due to the authoritarian teaching style, students in Bantu education were typically exposed to rigid and uncritical learning (Griesel, 2004; Maile, 2004; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Although, the Bantu Education Act technically ended with apartheid, residual teaching and learning practices from Bantu education still exist in ex-Bantu education schools (CHE, 2010; CHE, 2013). Moreover, prevailing under-preparedness from secondary education and feelings of

alienation and isolation in higher education learning environments are still experienced by undergraduate students at universities (Loots, 2009; CHE, 2010; CHE, 2013). Hence, it is vital for academic staff members to build on the current knowledge and experience that students have, to enhance their learning. In the next paragraph to follow, it is essential to understand some of the critical roles that academic staff members play in teaching and facilitating learning amongst students.

Academic staff members play a crucial role in facilitating efficient channels of communication between themselves and students. Regular communication made by lecturers encourages students and builds a good student/lecturer relationship. According to Dahesihsari (2009) and Witt, Wheelless, and Allen (2004), the status difference between lecturers and students can make it difficult for effective communication between them. This effective communication is influenced by the positions which lecturers may hold, their level of education and sense of (un)friendliness (Witt et al., 2004). However, when accommodative communication behaviour is employed by lecturers, such as emailing students, one-on-one consultations and constant interaction with students, a relationship is built (Dahesihsari, 2009; Wood, 2015). Once there is clear communication, and a relationship is established, students will be encouraged to be proactive in class. Therefore, students do not have to shy away from lecturers, or from taking part in classroom activities, as they are recognised by lecturers (Dahesihsari, 2009). Furthermore, Wood (2015) said communication between people encourages personal and professional growth. Through communication, people are provided with advice and feedback that can assist with an increase in the effectiveness of a person's learning. Moreover, people communicate to develop identities, establish and build relationships, coordinate efforts with others, have an impact on issues that matter to each other, and work out problems and possibilities (Wood, 2015).

In addition to the other roles of academic staff members, they have a responsibility to nurture students' achievements and also to be effective in their teaching. Being able to nurture students' achievements is being able to recognise their abilities and to reward them either intrinsically or extrinsically (Al-Shabatat, Abbas, & Ismail, 2010). Nevertheless, there are many other responsibilities which academic staff need to take care of, such as involvement in continuous research, publishing and daily administration (Houston, Meyer, & Paewai, 2006). These responsibilities often constrain academic staff from focusing on, and nurturing student achievement and effective teaching (Houston et al., 2006; Al-Shabatat et al., 2010). However,

management of their roles and responsibilities can bring about effective teaching and learning (Houston et al., 2006; Burgess, 1996; Billot, 2010).

Institutions are developing ways to deal with such issues so that lecturers can have a balance between their multiple responsibilities (Burgess, 1996; Billot, 2010). Enabling institutions refer to effective and ineffective dimensions of an (educational) institution, and whether the university can improve or fail to facilitate an enabling (educational) environment (Peterson, 2006). This may refer to the support that the university provides to lecturers and students. Improvements aimed at student achievements are already progressing at university institutions. This improvement can create a space for exceptional academic achievement to be recognised and encouraged (CHE, 2010; Smit, 2012; Case, 2013). Improvements can be on teaching and learning (Peterson, 2006) and places within the university in which students can thrive and enhance their achievements. For example, lecturers assisting students with difficult sections/modules of coursework in classrooms, the university improving the availability of resources (i.e., learning spaces and Local Area Networks [LAN's]), lecturers and universities as learning institutions recognising students' abilities and achievements as well as creating structured curriculums suited for students to improve on their exceptional academic achievement outcomes.

According to Fomunyam and Teferra (2017) in South African higher education, there is an enormous amount of interest in the decolonisation of the curriculum, to transform the curriculum into an Afrocentric perspective. Furthermore, Fomunyam and Teferra (2017) explain that decolonising and reforming the curriculum would create foregrounding for local and indigenous knowledge which will make the curriculum content more relevant to the context of South Africans/Africa. Scholars creating an Afrocentric curriculum provide a different perspective to the Eurocentric and global north experiences that have mainly dominated curriculum content for centuries (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). However, on the other hand, according to Jackson (2017), the Afrocentric curriculum and courses vary in terms of depth, scope and function. Jackson (2017) suggested that although an Afrocentric curriculum supports the goal towards African-centeredness, the offerings are not widespread enough to cover the African experience. Hence, for an Afrocentric curriculum to grow, higher education institutions need to consider curriculum recommendations to design and enhance the effectiveness of an Afrocentric curriculum (Jackson, 2017; Fataar, 2018). Therefore, an Afrocentric educational reframing should include careful selection of content for a de-colonial curriculum approach to occur, as well as the basis on which the curriculum in universities are constituted (Fataar, 2018).

Another important role that academic staff members have is engaging in the classroom environment to improve students' achievements. The engagement of academic staff members in the classroom environment can restructure how students learn (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995; Tinto, 2012). According to Tinto (1997) for many students especially those who have multiple obligations outside the university institution, the classroom may be the only place where students and academics meet, and where education in the formal sense is experienced. However, for academic and social involvement or integration to take place, it must also occur in the classroom. The classroom experience helps with the process of both student learning and persistence (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Lukkarinen, Koivukangas & Seppälä, 2016). Even though learning and persistence in the classroom contributes to student achievement, it is also essential to consider involvement or integration in the life of the university, as this increases the likelihood that students will persist (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Lukkarinen et al., 2016).

Hence, student engagement, both inside and outside the classroom, appears to be especially crucial for student success (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Lukkarinen et al., 2016). According to Montenegro (2017), it is essential to have teacher intervention and feedback to ensure that there is both interaction and engagement between lecturers and students. One way in which lecturers assist students to engage in the classroom is by creating online questionnaires made up of questions regarding a current section being covered in class. This engagement involves students going over notes and reading their textbooks to find answers to complete the questionnaires (Montenegro, 2017). This preparation beforehand further facilitates engagement between the lecturer and student, because they have read the required material and completed the questionnaire that enables them to discuss and have conversations in class regarding the section being taught.

It is also essential to get students to be co-creators of their learning as this creates more of an interest and responsibility towards an individual's learning process. However, according to Bovill, Cook Sather and Felten (2011 p. 133) "[w]ithin higher education, students' voices are frequently overlooked in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula". Hence, academic staff need to explore ways in which students can become fully involved in these designs (Bovill et al., 2011). Engaging students in this area positions them as active agents in analyses and revisions of education. Furthermore, this allows students to voice and share their ideas. Students have a unique perspective on teaching and learning and they should be invited to share their insights, which warrant not only the attention, but also the response of educators (Bovill et al., 2011). Thus, it is important to consider the role that academic staff members (as

teachers) play in the student exceptional academic achievement trajectory. Their role is essential because they facilitate learning and assist students in progressing in their educational development.

Furthermore, it is also important to be made aware of the enhancers and barriers that students face in order to achieve exceptionally in their academic journey. Hence, the next section of Chapter Two discusses the enhancers and barriers that influence exceptional student academic achievements as well as ways in which students can assist themselves to achieve exceptionally in the face of adversities.

## **2.3 Enhancers and barriers that students face when attempting to achieve exceptionally**

### **2.3.1 Extrinsic enhancers and barriers**

There are physical factors that exist outside of the individual (extrinsic) (McKay & Devlin, 2016) which may enhance or create barriers toward students in the process of their academic achievements. Extrinsic barriers relate to social, cultural, political and economic factors that happen "outside" of the individual (McKay & Devlin, 2016). These extrinsic factors could be a disadvantaged background, protest action and disruptions from institutions that may hinder lecture or tutorial attendance and slow down the rhythm and pace of the academic semester (Ngidi, 2005; CHE, 2010). The latter may result in the delayed submission of assignments, compromised assessment processes and difficulty in completing curricula.

However, there are also potential enhancers in the extrinsic domain. For example, support from other students and being able to work together to enhance and improve each other's learning could increase academic achievement (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2014). However, it is also essential to choose the right peers to work with, and to learn with, as negative peer pressure such as poor attitudes, values and behaviour could also serve as a significant barrier to student achievement (Sacerdote, 2011; Terrion, 2012). According to Loots (2009) and Terrion (2012), peer support plays a positive role in studying successfully. The study conducted by Loots (2009) highlighted support for first-year students through a peer monitoring programme with academic and psychosocial support. The purpose of the study was to implement support structures in higher education to enhance success rates (Loots, 2009). In the study, it was found that there are at least three factors that affect academic success. These three factors include feelings of being academically prepared/unprepared, feelings of inclusion/isolation, and enjoying support/lack of support from significant others (Loots, 2009). Hence, student

performance is enhanced through preparedness, inclusion and peer support that fosters both academic and social integration (Loots, 2009; Terrion, 2012; Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2014).

Another positive extrinsic aspect that would assist with enhancing students' achievements is using tutorial systems and technology. Tutorial systems provide one on one discussions, advice and guidance, and more detail into modules and courses (Wisker, Antoniou & Ridley, 2013; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). There are also practical examples used in tutorials which give students a hands-on experience, rather than only receiving information through formal lectures and textbooks (Bloom, 1984; Wisker et al., 2013). Tutors stimulate an interactive and academic experience to assist students in their studies (Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011).

Tutoring establishes a learning environment that is socially constructed and where tutors and students can interact on an informal basis as well as where learning materials are clarified and understood with contributions made by both tutor and students (Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011). This interaction allows students to develop relationships and a sense of belonging within higher education institutions. Furthermore, tutors can assist students with a smooth transition as they integrate themselves in their academic careers (Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011).

However, inexperienced tutors may serve as barriers to academic achievement, especially where those tutors have not received adequate training to assist students effectively in tutorial sessions (Bloom, 1984; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). For tutors to provide students with mentorship, guidance, and to help students improve their academic achievements, tutors themselves need to be trained and developed with skills to assist students (Bloom, 1984; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). Tutorial systems/tutors are also costly for learning institutions to implement and a lot of the time students do not take advantage of the system put in place, by either not being committed or by not contributing significantly when they attend tutorials (Bloom, 1984; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). Moreover, many students show little interest in the written or oral advice offered to them by tutors and a substantial number do not even bother to collect their work once it has been assessed, preferring to receive their grades by notification from examination boards (Duncan, 2007; Wisker et al., 2013). This means that tutors provide important written and oral advice to students who show evidence that they have not read, understood, or learned from the points raised by tutors (Duncan, 2007).

However, feedback is inseparable to the learning process, and successful students show how judicious use of tutors' feedback can enhance and develop learning in highly effective ways (Duncan, 2007; Wisker et al., 2013). Moreover, tutoring helps with students' success and the

increase in throughput rates among students (Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Reinheimer, & McKenzie, 2011). Research has shown that tutoring impacts positively on students. Hence, improving examination results decreases stress, and offers a more satisfying academic experience for students (Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Reinheimer, & McKenzie, 2011). Therefore, it is important to implement tutoring systems as well as to train and develop tutors as their assistance aids in students improving in their academic achievement outcomes (Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Reinheimer, & McKenzie, 2011).

Technology is also a great enhancer to student achievement as it can offer an efficient and contemporary way for students to engage with learning material (Laurillard, 2002; Muller, 2015). In addition to the use of technology in classrooms, it has been found to create opportunities for social growth, problem-solving, peer teaching, independent work, and exploration (Al-Zaidiyeen, Mei & Fook, 2010). It is also important to consider the implementation of online learning systems to meet students' needs in the learning environment. This system is being rolled out at learning institutions on a global level, due to an ever-increasing development in new knowledge raising at the demand of each level of the education ladder (Muller, 2015). Implementing technology, such as the use of online learning systems can support teaching and learning activities, that consists of features that enable the sharing of learning material and providing interaction between lecturers and students (Muller, 2015). In Sub-Saharan Africa the majority of higher education institutions are integrating technological systems, such as online learning to supplement traditional face-to-face teaching, develop and share learning materials via internet and to assist with distance education because online learning can reach more learners across various geographical boundaries as opposed to traditional learning (i.e. attending class) (Mtebe, 2015).

Despite such advancements in learning institutions, class attendance and physical engagement adds value to student learning. Students can have a better understanding of the material being taught to them. Even though technology has improved teaching and learning outcomes in the education sector, having the traditional lecturer delivering course material to students allows for communicating conceptual knowledge (Nyatanga & Mukorera, 2019). However, due to the underestimation of the importance of lecturers as teachers in the classroom, technology systems may advocate improving learning and achievement outcomes among students (Nyatanga & Mukorera, 2019). Nevertheless, attending class is useful because teachers/lecturers exploit the natural human aptitude for spoken communication and allow real-time, human presence and

social interaction takes place, whereas online learning systems/technology systems does not offer this experience (Bai, Ola & Akkaladevi, 2018).

Furthermore, there are also potential barriers associated with the availability of technology. These are potential problems that students and academic staff experience when using technology, such as poor internet accessibility, computer facilities and printer equipment not being maintained as well as the lack of willingness of lecturers to incorporate technology in their teaching (Al-Zaidiyeen et al., 2010; Hammonds et al., 2013).

The lack of availability of other university resources also creates barriers to achievement. These resources are, lack of availability of academic staff due to teaching and working overload (Houston et al., 2006; Burgess, 1996; Billot, 2010), as well as unorganised timetables and structures that lead to students not being aware of, or clear about course requirements and flow of modules (Houston et al., 2006; Burgess, 1996; Billot, 2010). Furthermore, noisy spaces and crowded learning areas such as libraries and LAN's are barriers to achievement, because students are unable to learn and be productive in disruptive environments (Leibowitz, 2014). This learning environment pushes students to find other learning spaces, such as their residential apartments on campus or their homes. Finding other learning spaces is a problem because students move away from the actual learning institution and as a result, students may not even attend lectures and tutorials, which would, in turn, affect their learning. Therefore, according to Lukkarinen et al., (2016) and Bai et al., (2018) students that do not attend lectures and tutorials are most likely to have meagre achievements whereas students that attend their lectures and tutorials consistently more likely to have better academic outcomes.

Lukkarinen et al., (2016) conducted a study on class attendance on three distinct groups of university students: those that drop out before final exams, those who attend classes as well as the exam, and those who study independently and attend the exam. Lukkarinen et al., (2016) found that students who do not attend class regularly are most likely to drop out before the final exam, due to lack of preparation and not coming to class to engage and learn. Furthermore, the lack of class attendance is also influenced by several factors (Lukkarinen et al., 2016). For example, the university culture, workload, teaching methods and the teacher. Despite these factors, students who attended class regularly, as well as the exam, display significant improvements in their tests, assignments and final exams compared to those who drop out or study independently (Lukkarinen et al., 2016). However, even studying independently, without attending classes due to various reasons, such as the timing of classes and overlap of courses



with work, these students are still able to have high-performance levels due to being diligent and putting effort into their learning (Lukkarinen et al., 2016). They do this by using a variety of sources other than their course work materials, by continuously searching and studying information from external sources.

It is also important to look at the ability within the individual, such as intrinsic (natural) enhancers and barriers that affects students' exceptional academic achievements.

### 2.3.2 Intrinsic enhancers and barriers

Intrinsic factors exist within the individual (McKay & Devlin, 2016) and refer to an individual's abilities that able or disable the person to achieve. Examples of intrinsic factors include intelligence, learning style, retention and memory capacities (Illeris, 2018). However, there are some external barriers (e.g., poverty) that can become internal enhancers and motivate students to achieve academically (Illeris, 2018; Ngidi, 2005). For example, an individual from an impoverished background could be driven to work as hard as he or she can to remove themselves from the situation of poverty and to create a better life for themselves (Illeris, 2018; Ngidi, 2005). This example could be regarded as self-motivation to improve their current situation (Sampson, 2011). Students also intrinsically monitor their performance. This intrinsic monitoring is influenced by bursaries and scholarships as well as family support, which they receive as recognition for their high achievements. Intrinsically they know they must be consistent with their performances to maintain their bursaries and scholarships or continue to receive financial support from their family for their education (Sampson, 2011).

However, on the other hand, according to Maslow (1943) in (McLeod, 2013 p.2), "individuals possess a set of motivational systems unrelated to rewards or unconscious desires" which he referred to as basic needs. People are motivated to achieve their basic needs that are associated intrinsically, and when one need is fulfilled, people seek to accomplish the next one, and so on (McLeod, 2013). When students are unable to meet their basic needs, they are unable to maximise their achievements. This barrier is great to many students who suffer from their basic needs, not being met. For example, not having food, proper shelter, love and support, self-esteem and self-actualisation (Sampson, 2011). These basic needs affect them intrinsically and cause them to lose concentration on learning and focusing on their achievements. Even though students are faced with many enhancers and barriers, there are ways in which they can assist themselves to achieve exceptionally.

### 2.3.3 Ways in which students can assist themselves to achieve

Students can assist themselves in achieving by firstly working hard as individuals, through consistency and keeping abreast with general information in all areas (by only being aware of what is required in your field does not expand on learning and one is unable to think critically) (Towle & Cottrell, 1996). Secondly, students can use their self-motivation to drive their achievements (Ngidi, 2005; Sampson, 2011) by reflecting on their involvements and commitments that they have made (e.g., obtaining a degree) (Towle & Cottrell, 1996; Ngidi, 2005; Sampson, 2011). Furthermore, internal motivation helps students build resistance towards difficulties they face (Ngidi, 2005; Sampson, 2011) because they have a plan put in place when they come to university, which makes them goal driven to achieve their plans (Ngidi, 2005; McLeod, 2013). For example, their plans would be to complete a degree and graduate.

Lastly, students need to be responsible for their own learning. Due to many constraints within the university, such as the lack of availability of academic staff and resources, students need to be actively engaged in their learning. According to Towle and Cottrell (1996) and Abraham, Upadhyya, and Ramnarayan (2005) students also need to take the initiative in their learning "i diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes, that is, they take responsibility for, and control of, their own learning" (p. 357). When students can do this, they become active agents in their learning process. However, there is still the need for direction and guidance from academic staff (Brown, 2002; Al-Shabat et al., 2010). Even though academic staff may not always be available due to commitments and time constraints, students can make further efforts by using facilities and resources offered to them (Brown, 2002; Al-Shabat et al., 2010). These facilities and resources include libraries and online resources to assist in their learning as well as planning well in advance for examinations and assignments. Students being able to take charge of their learning creates more interest and motivation for students, which contributes to them achieving exceptionally (Towle & Cottrell, 1996; Brown, 2002). In the next part of Chapter Two, the social cognitive theory presents as a framework to conceptualise, understand and explain how exceptional academic achievement can arise.

## **2.4 The Social Cognitive Theory**

According to the social cognitive theory, there are four factors that can affect a student's exceptional academic achievement. These factors refer to a student's behaviour, cognition,

personal factors and environmental factors. The "social cognitive theory favours a model of causation involving a triadic reciprocal determinism. In this model of reciprocal causation, behaviour, cognition and other personal factors, and environmental influences all operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bidirectionally" (Bandura, 2011, p. 2). This triadic reciprocal determinism means that behaviour can affect cognition, and vice versa and the individual's cognitive abilities can affect the environment, and vice versa and the environment can affect the individual's behaviour, and vice versa (Harinie et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the social cognitive theory does not see people driven by internal forces, or automatically shaped or controlled by external stimuli. Instead, human functioning can be explained by the process whereby behaviour, cognition, personal factors and environmental factors interact together as determinants of each other (Bandura, 1986). Figure 2.1 shows the triadic reciprocal determinism of the social cognitive theory and how behaviour, cognition, and the environment, of an individual, interact together (Harinie et al., 2017). Therefore, the individual can be defined in terms of several basic capabilities. Some of these capabilities refer to agency, self-regulation capability and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 2011). Furthermore, these capabilities also inform ways in which students can go about learning and attaining exceptional academic achievement outcomes.

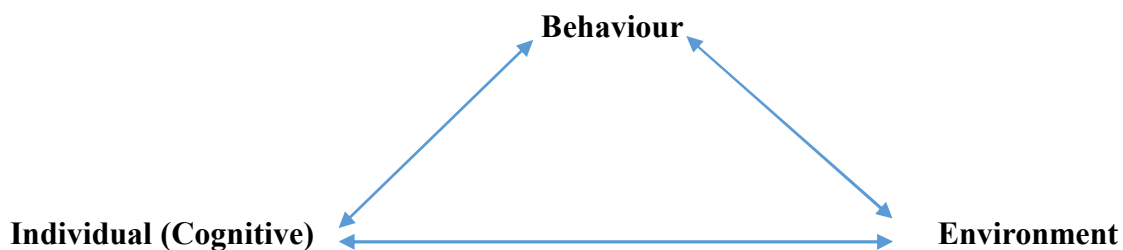


Figure 2.1: Bandura's social cognitive theory (Adapted from Bandura, 1986; Harinie, et al., 2017).

#### 2. 4.1 Agency

According to Bandura (1986), people do not merely react to their immediate environment; neither are they influenced by their past. Most human behaviour is purposive and regulated by forethought and symbolic ability, which is the perspective of the future. This forethought is also known as agency whereby people can foresee the likely consequences of their possible actions, they set goals for themselves, and they plan their actions for the future (Bandura, 2000). In this case, many students take action by getting access to university. They then design and set goals to achieve at university to meet future outcomes (Montenegro, 2017). These future

outcomes can be: the opportunity to study further in a desired field, the fulfilment of being educated, completing a degree and graduating that will ensure suitable employment in the future. (Montenegro, 2017). Furthermore, agency "is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (Bandura, p.164, 2006).

When people are involved in the process of forethought, they can motivate and guide their actions to their desired outcomes. Students can drive their actions and meet their desired outcomes through hard work and consistency (Montenegro, 2017). However, when people are faced with issues such as failure, impoverished backgrounds and lack of motivation, foreseeing one's future outcomes may be difficult (Bandura, 2000, Bandura, 2006). However, agency through forethought and symbolising capability can reduce the impact of these issues by an individual working harder and continually planning for future outcomes (Bandura, 2006).

Agency develops the process of forethought, which can support foresight-full behaviours, even when there are present conditions in the environment that are not especially conducive to it (Bandura, 2000; Sampson, 2011). Even though students may be faced with challenges, such as lack of finances, impoverished environments or lack of support from significant others, they still can persist academically despite such adversities (Ngidi, 2005; Sampson, 2011). Human beings have the capability of being proactive, self-organising, self-reflective and self-regulating, and this enables them to make their own choices and to be able to adapt and manage changes in their environment (Bandura, 2001).

Symbolising is defined as a process whereby people transform experiences into internal models that can serve as an ultimate guide for future action (Bandura, 2006). Hence, symbolising provides people with a powerful way of altering, adapting and giving meaning to their environment (Bandura, 2006). By using one's knowledge and symbolising powers one can generate innovative courses of action. Furthermore, the capability of purposive action such as agency lays on symbolic activity, because future events are not the only aspect that determines behaviour, but rather there are also images of desirable future outcomes that develop action which is most likely to bring about realisation (Bandura, 2006). The symbolising process allows people to transfer their future outcomes into current motivators that regulate foresight-full behaviours (Bandura, 2006). Agency is thus the product of generative and reflective ideation. From a social cognitive theory perspective; then, student achievement is driven by the agency of the individual to achieve in the best way possible to meet their future outcomes (Montenegro, 2017). This drive also includes students working towards goals that are planned

to meet outcomes. Students can meet their plans through self-regulation, which deals with constant reflection and evaluation of themselves (Bandura, 2001).

#### 2.4.2 Self-regulation

Self-regulation is another essential feature of the social cognitive theory. It is central to the belief that people do not only behave to suit the preferences of others, but they are somewhat motivated and regulated by internal principles and self-evaluative reactions to their actions (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 2011). People set personal standards for themselves, which they can reflect on, to evaluate their behaviours (Zimmerman, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). Hence, an act can be due to self-produced influences from the external environment as well as self-regulatory functions (Zimmerman, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012).

According to Schunk (2001) in Zimmerman (2002), research has shown that the nature, origins, and development of students being able to regulate their learning processes play a vital role in their attainment of exceptional academic achievement. According to Zimmerman (p. 64, 2002) "goal setting, time management, learning strategies, self-evaluation, self-attributions, seeking help or information, and important self-motivational beliefs, such as self-efficacy are all part of the self-regulatory process". Even though research has revealed how successful self-regulatory processes lead to achievement in learning institutions, few teachers prepare students to learn independently, or it may be the environment in which learning takes place that may cause students to depend on most of their education and collection of information from teachers (Zimmerman, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). Teachers need to know the strengths and weaknesses of their students and part of their role should be to empower students' self-awareness of their abilities (Zimmerman, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012).

Thus, when a person arranges facilitative environmental conditions, develops cognitive guides, and creates incentives for his or her efforts, this could result in that person contributing to their motivation and action (Zimmerman, 2002; Bandura, 2006; Harinie et al., 2017). On the other hand, self-regulatory functions are mainly internal origins of support, and it does not necessarily mean that it determines self-influence on the cause of one's behaviour (Zimmerman, 2002; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012) because people have the capability of reflecting. They have the capability of reflecting on their self-consciousness, which enables them to think about their thought process, and by reflecting on their experiences, they can derive general knowledge about themselves and the world around them. Thus, people can

understand through reflection as well as evaluate and alter their thinking through motivation such as self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2002; Bandura, 2006; Harinie et al., 2017).

### 2.4.3 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the internal motivation of a person to perform well (Bandura, 1986). It can be further defined as the judgment of one's capability to organise and execute courses of action to attain designated performances (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy also refers to a person's ability to accomplish a certain level of performance to produce outcomes from the consequence of motivation (Bandura, 1986; Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2005). According to Zimmerman (2002), self-efficacy is different conceptually and psychometrically from other motivational constructs, such as outcome expectations, self-concept and locus of control.

As mentioned earlier in the literature, according to Maslow (1943) and McLeod (2013) there are basic needs that need to be met to enable people to have high motivational levels and to achieve desired outcomes. These basic needs can be seen in Figure 2.2, which explains Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It is often that a lot of necessities required by students to achieve academically are not met. Examples of basic needs that might not be met by students include food, shelter, financial support, and support from academic staff, institutional barriers and non-conducive learning environments. Hence, in this case, it is important that students' basic needs are met (lower level basic needs) to be motivated to reach exceptional academic achievement (McLeod, 2013; Maslow, 1943). "One must satisfy lower level basic needs before progressing on to meet higher level growth needs. Once these needs have been reasonably satisfied, one may be able to reach the highest level called self-actualisation" (McLeod, 2013 p. 2).

Self-actualisation is the realisation and fulfilment of an individual's goals. Self-actualisation affects the motivation and behaviour of individuals that leads to self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2005; Maddux, 2016). Thus, when student needs are met, they are motivated to achieve. Through motivation, they can foresee their future and plan accordingly. Furthermore, they can reflect, self-assess themselves as well as be persistent and consistent with their academic achievement by mastering their experiences for further enhancement (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2005; Maddux, 2016). In other words, the more a person works at a task that they perceive to be motivating, the more efficacious they will feel regarding that specific task as they build increased proficiency or "mastery" towards a task that creates self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2005; Maddux, 2016).

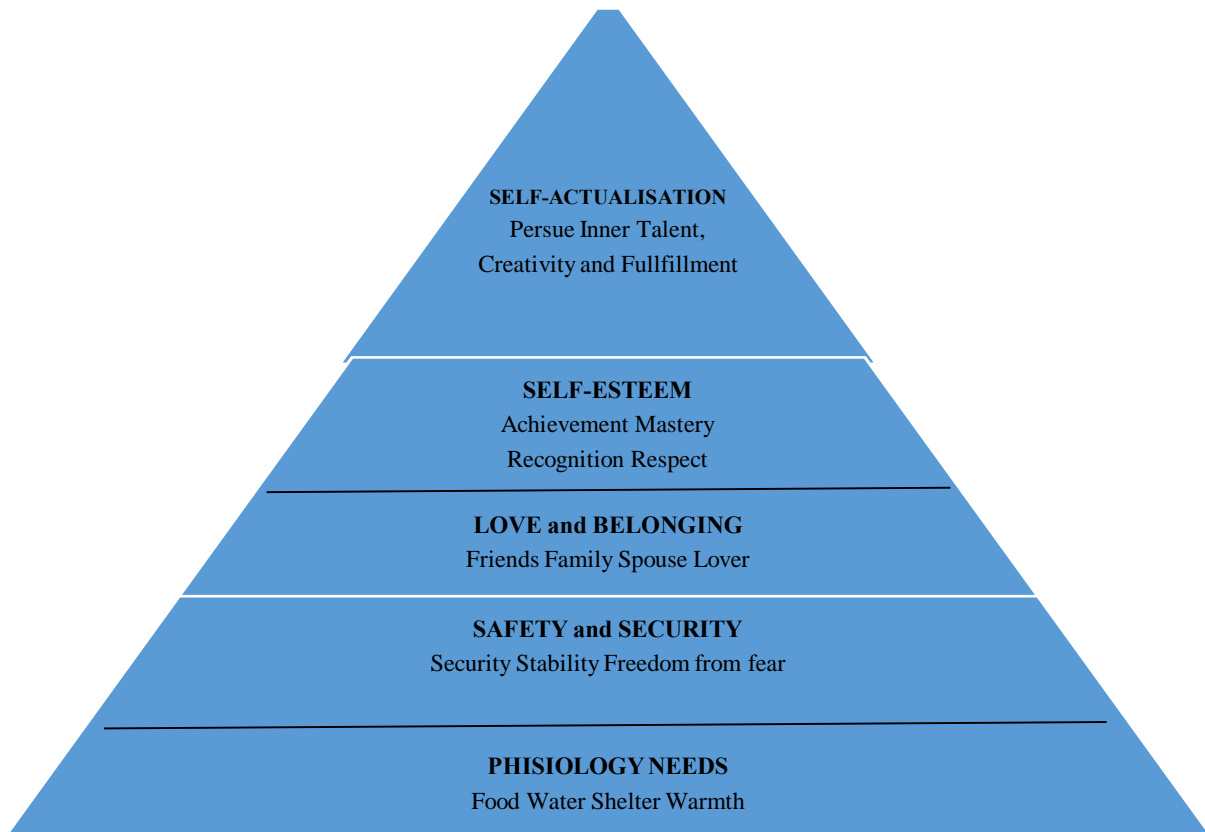


Figure 2.2: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Adapted from Maslow & Lewis, 1987; McLeod, 2013).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion to the academic debate, the above themes show where there are gaps and limitations in research on exceptional academic achievement. Firstly, excelling academically can be enhanced by being assisted by academic staff members through the roles that they play in teaching, communicating with students and being involved in students' academic trajectory. This enhancement creates an integration between academic staff and students on which relationships are built to strengthen the teaching and learning process among academic staff members and students. It is also the university's responsibility to improve educational achievement outcomes among students as well as evolve universities into enabling institutions.

Chapter Two also highlighted enhancers and barriers that affect exceptional academic achievement as well as ways in which students can assist themselves to achieve. When students can help themselves to achieve it allows them to adjust and adapt to university settings as well as use the best of provisions by the university to focus on their achievements.

The literature reviewed has given evidence that exceptional academic achievement among students can be understood to be part of a triadic reciprocal determinism. This triadic reciprocal

determinism is according to Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2011). It explains the process of an individual's behaviour, cognition, personal factors and environmental factors that interact all together (Harinie et al., 2017), which defines an individual with capabilities (agency, self-regulation and self-efficacy). These capabilities can inform ways in which students go about learning and attaining exceptional academic achievement outcomes.

Based on the literature reviewed, it seems that there has not been enough research done in South Africa that explores exceptional academic achievement. However, there seems to be support from university institutions as they recognise academic achievement and gaps between students and lecturers. Furthermore, the teaching and learning process, resources and student involvement needs to be bridged to enhance exceptional academic achievement. The next section to follow is Chapter Three. In Chapter Three, the research methodology discusses various procedures that were carried out in the research process.



## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The research methodology refers to a range of methods that can be used in research, such as the design of a study, sampling and sampling techniques, data collection methods and data analysis methods (Babbie, 2013). These methods are then used to inform, interpret, explain and make predictions about the study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Chapter Three aims to describe the paradigm of the research, and the methods and procedures used to carry out the research.

### **3.2 Study objectives and questions**

The objectives of the study were:

- To explore academic staff members' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement among university students, and
- To explore high achieving students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement at university.

### **3.3 Research questions**

Research questions which guided the research study were formulated as:

1. What are academic staff members' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement among university students?
  - a) How do academic staff members explain exceptional academic achievement at university?
  - b) What roles do academic staff members play in student exceptional academic achievement at university?
  - c) What individual, institutional, systematic enhancers and barriers to student exceptional academic achievement do academic staff members feel are relevant and why?
2. What are high achieving students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement at university?
  - a) How do high achieving students explain exceptional academic achievement at university?

- b) What individual, institutional, systematic enhancers and barriers to exceptional academic achievement do high achieving students feel are relevant and why?

### **3.4 The study**

#### **3.4.1 Research paradigm**

The research paradigm of this study fits into the interpretive paradigm, which seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning that individuals attach to their everyday lives and actions (Neuman, 2006; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). An interpretive paradigm is a useful approach for exploring the subjective experiences of individuals, which is essential in the context of this study (Neuman, 2006; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006).

Firstly, the ontology of the interpretive paradigm is relativism (Scotland, 2012), which is the view that reality is subjective and differs from person to person. According to Scotland (2012), our realities are mediated by our senses and reality emerges when our consciousness interacts with objects that already have meaning. For example, language does not passively label objects, but rather shapes and moulds reality. This reality can be constructed through the interaction between language and aspects of an independent world (Scotland, 2012).

Secondly, "[t]he interpretive epistemology is one of subjectivism which is based on real-world phenomena. The world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it" (Scotland, 2012, p. 11). Hence meaning is not discovered, but rather it is constructed through the interaction between consciousness and the world. For example, knowledge and meaningful reality are constructed in and out of the interaction between humans and their world and are developed and transmitted in a social context (Scotland, 2012). Therefore, the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of individuals who are participating in it (Scotland, 2012).

Lastly, the interpretive methodology is directed at understanding the phenomenon from an individual's perspective, investigating the interaction among individuals as well as the historical and cultural contexts which people inhabit (Scotland, 2012).

Examples of interpretive methodology include: case studies (in-depth study of events or processes over a prolonged period), phenomenology (the study of direct experience without allowing the interference of existing preconceptions), hermeneutics (deriving hidden meaning from language), and ethnography (the study of cultural groups over a prolonged period) (Scotland, 2012). In this study, a phenomenological approach was taken. The next part of

Chapter Three discusses a qualitative research design that extends from an interpretive paradigm.

### 3.4.2 Research design

The research design describes a plan whereby research participants are invited to participate in a process to generate data about specific research objectives and questions (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005).

In this study, a qualitative research design was used. According to Terre Blanche, Kelly and Durrheim (2006), a qualitative research design can be defined as taking peoples subjective experiences as the essence of what is real to them. This subjective experience happens by making sense of people's experiences by interacting with them and listening carefully to what they have to say (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Hence, a qualitative research design allows the researcher to connect and give power to the language and expressions of the people involved in the research and may help the researcher understand the social world (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Additionally, qualitative designs and methods attempt to study and develop an understanding of human action (Babbie, & Mouton, 2005).

According to Silverman (2013), there is diversity in qualitative research designs. A researcher commonly selects a qualitative research design because of it being a practical matter of deciding what works best for the research problem and questions. The features that attract researchers to this design are many, and so are the ways in which the design is practised. For example, in a study conducted by Moloï (2010) and Moloï et al. (2010) on a similar topic to this study, a qualitative research design was used to gain in-depth descriptions and understandings of teachers' perceptions regarding factors contributing to academic success.

A qualitative design fits well with the nature of this study because the study or researcher wants to understand academic staff members' and high achieving students' perspectives of exceptional academic achievement. Hence, the study required a qualitative design for the researcher to interact on a one-on-one basis with the participants to get a full understanding of the meanings that the participants make and attach to exceptional academic achievement. A qualitative design is more flexible and seeks to explore the participants' daily routines or things that affect their daily lives (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005). A qualitative design was also identified as being useful for this study as it enabled the researcher to contrast and compare the differences and similarities between academic staff members and students views on the phenomenon. Moreover, natural methods, such as observations or interviews, are employed

when conducting a qualitative research study (Silverman, 2013). In this study, the method used to obtain data was through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. During a qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument. The next part explains the procedures that were followed in the research.

### 3.4.3 Study Procedures

This study was embedded within a larger study at UKZN "The student academic exceptional project: Equity and exceptional academic achievement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal". Hence, Gatekeepers permission and ethical clearance were granted for the overarching study (See Appendix 3 A and B- Gatekeepers approval; Appendix 4- ethical clearance for overarching study). Full ethical permission required for the study reported in this dissertation was also granted in fulfilment of the research process (See Appendix 5). The study is based on academic staff members and high achieving students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement at UKZN. Academic staff members were made up of AL's of T&L and lecturers (across UKZN campuses), and the students were at the undergraduate level. The students were all sourced from the Pietermaritzburg campus at UKZN. Delimitations of the study include all participants because they all came from the UKZN College of Humanities. Academic staff members in the study were employed within respective Schools within the UKZN College of Humanities. Although a limitation, focusing the study on participants from one field of study made it easier for the researcher to access participants.

The study assumed that by exploring AL's of T&L, lecturers and high achieving students, more rigour and triangulation would be given to the phenomena of exceptional academic achievement. In this study rigour and triangulation was achieved in the sense that perspectives of the topic on exceptional academic achievement was not only being explained from academic staff members or students but instead explained by both groups that are interconnected within the teaching and learning processes. The study also expected differences and similarities amongst AL's of T&L, lecturers and high achieving students about their understanding of exceptional academic achievement. The study also set out to uncover the participant's perceptions of exceptional academic achievement at university, the roles of academic staff members and their contributions to student's achievements, as well as individual, institutional and systematic enhancers and barriers to exceptional academic achievement.

The first step dealt with conducting a pilot interview with an academic staff member who was known to the researcher and her supervisor. The staff member was emailed an invitation (See

Appendix 1 B) to take part in the study, and an information sheet and consent form were provided to the participant (See Appendix 2 A). The academic staff member was interested in the topic of research, thus having an interest in taking part in the pilot interview. The information obtained from the pilot study was used to test the interview schedule (See Appendix 1 A), and to identify whether any modification to the interview schedule was needed. There were no changes made to the interview schedule and data collected from the pilot interview was included in the study.

After that, academic staff members were contacted accordingly to take part in the study (See Appendix 1 C). While collecting data from academic staff members, the second step was implemented which was sourcing high achieving students from UKZN's scholarship list. The researcher used this list to collect a sample of high achieving students from the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg campus (See Appendix 6 A and B). Once the high achieving students were identified from UKZN's scholarship list they were sent an email invitation, information sheet and consent forms to take part in the study (See Appendix 1 E; Appendix 2 B and C). The data collection process ran for approximately three months, from April 2017 to June 2017.

### **3.5 Location of the study**

The study was located at UKZN on three of the five campuses. This university exemplifies "[a] truly South African University of Choice that is academically excellent, innovative in research, entrepreneurial, and critically engaged with society [that] aims to establish a value-driven organisational culture that empowers the institution and its people to achieve institutional goals" (<https://www.ukzn.ac.za>). The study was conducted with both academic staff members (AL's of T&L and lecturers) and high achieving students (all of whom were adult participants). Academic staff members working on Howard College, Edgewood, and Pietermaritzburg campuses responded to the invitations to participate in the study. The high achieving students were selected from UKZN Pietermaritzburg Campus.

### **3.6 Study population**

The population refers to an entire collection of individuals, and a sample refers to a subset of the population (Tredoux & Durrheim, 2014). Hence, the study population was made up of academic staff members and students from UKZN, while the sample for this study consisted of AL's of T&L and lecturers and high achieving students. The AL's of T&L also assisted the researcher to recruit lecturers as part of the sample from the various Schools within UKZN

College of Humanities (i.e., Schools of Applied Human Sciences, Arts, Built Environment and Development Studies, Education, Religion, Philosophy and Classics, and Social Sciences). The reason to include lecturers as part of the study was due to the concern that AL's of T&L would have time constraints and limited availability. Hence, the collective term for both AL's of T&L and lecturers will be referred to as academic staff members.

The sample of students consisted of those who are high academic achievers within the UKZN College of Humanities. According to CHE (2016), the headcount enrolment for students in Humanities fields in 2011 was 220,326 students, and in 2016, the headcount enrolment was 238, 535 students. The course success rate in the Humanities field for 2011 was 76%, and in 2016, the success rate was 79% (CHE, 2016). The subsequent interest in focusing on the students registered in (and academic staff working in) a humanities field is due to the increase of students and the growth of success rates in the Humanities field. In addition, the researcher is a humanities student and has personal experience and an interest in (exceptional) academic achievement in the humanities field of study.

### **3.7 Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

Academic staff members from each School within the UKZN College of Humanities were eligible to participate in the study. With regards to the students, only high academic achieving students from the College of Humanities were eligible for inclusion in this study. The 2017 UKZN's scholarship list was used to recruit high achieving students (Access to use 2017 UKZN's scholarship ó see Appendix 6 A and B). The UKZN Humanities scholarship list had a population of seventeen students from which the researcher only required six to ten participants, specifically from the Pietermaritzburg campus. Lastly, permission was granted for the overarching project within which this study is located (i.e., HSS/0060/015CA- see Appendix 4).

### **3.8 Sampling techniques and sample size**

Sampling arises directly out of defining the population on which the research will focus on (Cohen et al., 2007). Non-probability sampling techniques (such as purposive and convenient sampling) were used in this study. Non-probability sampling was used because the researcher had purposively selected particular target groups and because the research is on a small-scale (Cohen et al., 2007). Purposive sampling involves 'handpicked' samples. Here, the sample is chosen deliberately for a specific purpose (Henry, 1998; Cohen et al., 2007; Babbie, 2013). Convenient sampling deals with selecting the nearest respondents that are available for the

required sample size. Convenient sampling is choosing a sample that is easy to access (Henry, 1998; Cohen et al., 2007; Babbie, 2013) for the researcher. Both the sampling techniques that were used in the study do not represent any other group of samples apart from the chosen sample. Hence, this contributes to the lack of generalisability in the study (Henry, 1998; Cohen et al., 2007; Babbie, 2013). However, purposive and convenient sampling techniques suited the research because the focus of the research was specific to the sample of academic staff members and high achieving students at UKZN.

The sample size refers to the number of participants that were in the study. This study was made up of eight academic staff members and six high academic achieving students. At least one academic staff member from each of the six Schools from the College of Humanities was interviewed. A focus group discussion took place with the six high academic achieving students from UKZN. There was a change in the initial sample size. The initial target was six academic staff members. However, there were eight that were interviewed. This was due to the response and interest of academic staff taking part in the research. The researcher intended to recruit between six to ten high achieving students for the focus group discussion. However, only six students responded to the email invitation and took part in the focus group discussion. The high achieving students were only sampled from UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus. The total number of participants that took part in the research was 14.

### **3.9 Participants**

The target population for the study was academic staff members and high achieving students. The academic staff members were made up of AL's of T&L, and lecturers. Eight academic staff members were interviewed. The high achieving students were made up of undergraduate level students. The undergraduate level included students from 1st year to 3rd year. Six high achieving students took part in a focus group discussion. The total number of research participants in the study were 14.

### **3.10 Research instruments**

The research instruments that were used in the study were interviews and a focus group discussion. Semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were used in this study to allow for a degree of open-ended responses from the participants (Silverman, 2013). Interviews allow for face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the participant (and can typically be used to facilitate the researcher's understanding of participants' views of their lives and the meaning of their experiences) (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Terre Blanche et al., 2006; Silverman,

2013). Individual interviews were conducted with the eight academic staff members to obtain an in-depth understanding of their views on the topic as well as the researcher learning and gaining the experience of designing and conducting interviews (See Appendix 1 A -for a copy of the semi-structured interview schedule). The interview schedule was used as it allowed the researcher to answer the research questions of the study. Furthermore, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Focus group discussions can be used to gather qualitative similarities and differences among participants in a study (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). It is a quick method to use for determining collective information since focus group discussions are collective conversations among groups of people (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Furthermore, a focus group discussion "involves collective engagement designed to promote dialogue and to achieve higher levels of understanding of issues critical to the development of a group's interests and or the transformation of conditions of its existence" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p 2). Hence, a focus group discussion was used to gather collective information from high achieving students who discussed, engaged in conversation and reflected on the topic of exceptional academic achievement at UKZN (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). The researcher also wanted to learn and gain experience in designing and conducting a focus group discussion, as interviews were already held with academic staff members. In addition, the researcher also used a focus group discussion schedule to carry out the focus group discussion with students (See Appendix 1 D - for a copy of the focus group discussion schedule). The focus group discussion was also recorded, transcribed and analysed.

The interviews ran for approximately 60 to 90 minutes with each of the academic staff members from respective schools within the College of Humanities and the focus group discussion conducted with high academic achieving students ran for approximately 150 minutes.

### **3.11 Data collection**

Data collection took place at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Data that was collected for this study included the various UKZN campuses (Howard College campus, Edgewood campus and the Pietermaritzburg campus). The data was collected from academic staff members involved in the process of teaching and learning at UKZN and high academic achieving students, from the College of Humanities. The students were sourced from UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus. The researcher was based in Pietermaritzburg, and there was the availability of students in the Humanities field on the Pietermaritzburg campus. Hence, a focus group was run with six



students who responded to the email invitation to participate in the study (See Appendix 1 E). The academic staff members were sourced from the respective Schools that fall within the College of Humanities. Hence, eight academic staff members from the six schools within the College of Humanities were interviewed. Each academic staff member was sourced by sending out an email invitation, information about the research and consent forms for their participation (See Appendices 1 B and C; and Appendix 2 A).

Gatekeeper's permission (See Appendix 3 A and B) had been granted to contact academic staff members from the different UKZN schools. The data that was collected from academic staff members and the high achieving students was recorded with an audio recording device with the permission of the participants. The data for the focus group discussion was also collected from a colleague of the researcher (Monique Schoeman) as her study also required information from high achieving students. The researcher then systematically transcribed the recorded interviews and focus group discussion verbatim, drawing on Jefferson's simplified version of traditional transcribing conventions, adapted from Silverman (2005, p. 376) (See Appendix 7). Once the data had been transcribed, the researcher began analysing the data, using thematic analysis.

### **3.12 Data analysis**

The researcher used thematic analysis to analyse the data that was collected from the interviews and focus group discussion. Thematic analysis identifies, analyses and reports on patterns, such as themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lyons & Coyle, 2016). This method of analysis was used because the researcher aimed to find underlying themes or patterns that come from the perspectives of both academic staff members and students on the topic of exceptional academic achievement. Themes that emerged from the analysis were able to supply rich descriptions and meaning from the data that contributed significantly to the findings and the topic of research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lyons & Coyle, 2016).

There are many advantages to doing a thematic analysis. The advantages of doing a thematic analysis are as follows: it is flexible, easy to learn and accessible to researchers with little experience of qualitative research because it has few prescriptions and procedures to follow that makes it easy for researchers to grasp (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is also helpful for those researchers who are in the early stages of their research career. Thematic analysis does not require detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of other qualitative approaches, and offers a more accessible form of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic

analysis is also useful as it summarises important features from large data and provides thick descriptions of the data set, and it can also highlight similarities and differences across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process helps the researcher take a well-structured approach in handling the data to produce a clear and organised final report of the findings from the data collected (Nowell et al., 2017).

Although there are many advantages of using thematic analysis, it is also important to be aware of the disadvantages of using it. Firstly, there is a lack of substantial literature on thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). This lack of literature may cause novice researchers to feel unsure of how to conduct rigorous thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Secondly, since it is very flexible and broad, it can make it difficult for the researcher to decide on what aspect to focus on in the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, this could lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence when developing themes derived from the research data (Nowell et al., 2017). Lastly, inappropriate research questions and poor conduct of analysis cause the method to fail (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

It is vital for qualitative research to be valid and reliable throughout the research process. Validity and reliability in qualitative research refer to the credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability of the research.

### **3.13 Credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability**

The terms reliability and validity are typically more suited to research grounded in a positivist paradigm that uses quantitative methods. Psychometric and statistical measures can be easily assessed in terms of their reliability and validity, however, in constructivist research, the terms reliability and validity are not as meaningful (Maxwell, 2012; Tracy, 2010). Hence, there is a need for a different set of criteria to determine the quality of qualitative research that does not rely on positivist notions such as validity and reliability (Maxwell, 2012). These terms are rather referred to as credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability of a study (Maxwell, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). These features provide a better representation of the standards required in evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2012). Hence, these features of a study lie in the researcher using appropriate methods to bring about rigour in the study (Franklin & Ballan, 2010).

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of a study (Tracy, 2010). In quantitative studies, this is earned through reliability, replicability, consistency and accuracy (Tracy, 2010). However,

because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research, reliability, replicability, consistency and accuracy are not possible. In qualitative research, researchers can establish credibility through thick descriptions of a study (Tracy, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, transcription conventions were used in the transcripts. These transcription conventions were used to provide meaning for the descriptions from participants' perspectives on the topic of exceptional academic achievement at UKZN (See Appendix 7.6 Transcription Conventions).

Furthermore, the participants' in depth responses to the researcher's questions also provided "thick" descriptions on the topic. Moreover, line numbers from the interviews and focus group discussion were referenced in extracts (in Chapter Four) taken from the transcriptions in order for the reader to have direct guidance on where to find specific extracts in the transcripts. Credibility can also be earned by the researcher's ongoing reflexivity during the research process (Maxwell, 2012).

Transferability refers to the generalisability of the study (Nowell et al., 2017). Generalisability is usually the aim of quantitative research, and this happens by implementing appropriate statistical sampling procedures, which allows the researcher to generalise findings of the selected sample (Silverman, 2013). However, generalisability of qualitative research findings is not possible in qualitative research because findings are derived from small samples which may not be representative of a population (Silverman, 2013). However, transferability can be dealt with in qualitative research by the researcher selecting a sample suitable for the study (Silverman, 2013). In this study, the researcher used collective and purposive sampling methods to collect a specific sample for the study. Furthermore, thick descriptions of the findings were provided to strengthen the transferability of the study. Specifically, thick descriptions could enable those reading the study to self-assess whether the study findings are transferable to their settings (Nowell et al., 2017).

Dependability refers to the researcher ensuring that the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Maxwell, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, the researcher followed a logical process by first obtaining ethical clearance. Once this was obtained, the researcher was able to conduct data collection and data analysis. The data collected was recorded and transcribed. The recordings provided accurate records of interviews with academic staff members and the focus group discussion with high achieving students. Line numbers were also used in the transcriptions to show rigour and to act as a reference to find the exact sources of information in the transcriptions. Moreover, thematic analysis was used to

develop findings and organise major themes that guided the study findings. Lastly, "[w]hen readers are able to examine the research process, they are able to judge the dependability of the research" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3).

Conformability is concerned with the researcher establishing interpretations and findings that are clearly related to the data, by demonstrating how conclusions and interpretations of the study were reached (Nowell et al., 2017). Researchers include markers such as theory, methodology, and analytical choices that are acknowledged throughout the study (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, the use of research methods ensure that the data recordings are accurate, interpretations of data are empirical, logical and replicable. This also increases the credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability in a qualitative study (Franklin & Ballan, 2010). The methodology process is important so that others can understand how and why decisions were made in this research (Nowell et al., 2017). Conformability is also said to be achieved when credibility, transferability and dependability are embedded in the study (Nowell et al., 2017).

Once the data had been collected, transcribed and analysed, the researcher had to store and ensure the safekeeping of the research data.

### **3.14 Data management**

The raw data collected through interviews and a focus group discussion was audio recorded. The audio recordings were then transferred to the researcher's laptop where it was saved in a folder. This process was done so that the researcher could analyse and transcribe the recordings, using Microsoft Word and Windows Media Player. Each transcription was saved on a Word document. A copy of the recordings and transcriptions were sent to the researcher's supervisor for storage and examination purposes. The researcher's laptop was secured by password, so confidentiality of participant information could not be affected. Lastly, once the study was complete, the raw data was deleted from the researcher's laptop. However, audio recordings and transcriptions will still be kept with the researcher's supervisor for a maximum of five years. In addition to this, there are further ethical considerations to be aware of in the Social Science field.

### **3.15 Ethical Considerations**

According to Wassenaar and Mamotte (2012), it is important to consider ethical issues appropriate in the field of Social Science. Ethical issues to consider are informed consent and respect for participants, collaborative partnership and social value, scientific validity, a fair

selection of participants, favourable risk-benefit ratio and independent ethical review of the research (Wassenaar & Mamotte 2012). These ethical considerations highlight the importance of professional ethics and refer to employing professional conduct and behaviour at all stages of the research process, which will, in turn, improve the integrity (and validity) of the research findings (Wassenaar & Mamotte 2012).

#### 3.15.1 Informed consent and respect for participants

All of the participants in this study were asked to give their informed consent to take part in the study (Appendix 2 A and B) (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Wassenaar & Mamotte 2012). In the consent forms the aim of the study was explained, the extent of participation, and the collection and storage of data was clarified. The academic staff members were asked to participate in interviews, and the high achieving students were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. As far as possible, the participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Only the researcher and research supervisor have access to the data, and the participants' names do not appear in the study. Instead, the researcher used pseudonyms to anonymise the participant's names. The research is also written in such a way that if a non-participant were to read it, they would not be able to identify the participants. Since the method of data collection from the high achieving students was a focus group discussion, an additional consent was required to maintain anonymity as each participant was aware of who participated in the focus group discussion (Appendix 2 C). Further to this, participants were reminded that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any point (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Wassenaar & Mamotte 2012). The participants were told that once the study was completed, the findings can be shared with them if they wish so.

#### 3.15.2 Collaborative partnership and social value

The researcher seeks to promote the interests of the participants by exploring academic staff members' and high achieving students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement with the identified target population. There are no obvious or guaranteed benefits to participating in this research. However, it could be argued that having interviews and a focus group discussion in the form of a conversation around the topic of exceptional academic achievement, could provide an opportunity for the participants to explore their views and opinions in a non-threatening and honest manner (Wassenaar & Mamotte 2012). The high achieving students that took part in the focus group discussion were provided with refreshments

and a light snack after the gathering. These refreshments were purely to thank them for their time and were not meant as an incentive for their participation. Furthermore, the findings could be used to inform further interventions and research seeking to understand exceptional academic achievement amongst the identified target.

#### 3.15.3 Scientific validity

The researcher ensured that the methodology of the research produced reliable findings. In qualitative research, this requires justifiable and appropriate research methodology from stages that includes sampling through to final analysis (Wassenaar & Mamotte 2012). These stages were discussed and followed throughout the methodology section.

#### 3.15.4 Fair selection of participants

The research question applies to academic staff members and high achieving undergraduate students. Participants were selected by convenient and purposive sampling methods based on meeting this criterion. This selection was felt to be fair, as they are from the population most likely to benefit from the research (Wassenaar & Mamotte 2012).

#### 3. 15.5 Favourable risk benefit ratio

There was a limited possibility of distress or discord to the participants in the study, as the research was not sensitive. However, if participants felt uncomfortable at any point in the research or if they had any questions regarding the research, they could contact the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. These details were provided to participants in the informed consent forms (Appendix 2 A and B).

#### 3.15.6 Independent ethical review

This study was embedded within a larger study HSSREC protocol reference HSS/0060/015CA. However, the research was subject to independent ethical review. The ethical clearance number is HSS/1038/017M and was provided by the HSSREC.

### **3.16 Limitations of the study**

The first limitation of this study was the lack of access which the researcher had to high achieving students because there are not many high achieving students. The researcher

specifically looked for high achieving students from UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus. In addition, there was a lack of email responses from student participants willing to take part in the study. The initial amount for recruiting high achieving students was ten, but only six students responded to the email invitation and participated in the focus group discussion. Furthermore, academic staff members, specifically AL's of T&L, had time constraints due to their working commitments and other responsibilities. However, the researcher had included lecturers as academic staff members to be in the study. Therefore, in the case of unavailability of AL's of T&L, lecturers were also considered in the study. A limitation was also noted of the terms 'exceptional academic achievement and success'. There was a lack of clear differentiation between the two terms when interviewing the lecturers and students. Hence, participants described their achievements interchangeably with regard to those two terms. This is a weakness of the study/methodology and future research on this topic will have to make the differentiation much clearer in interviews/focus group discussion schedules.

Secondly, participants could also drop out of the study or may not want to take part, due to confidentiality issues. The researcher ensured that there was no problem around confidentiality with participants as each participant had been given consent forms explaining their confidentiality in taking part in this study. These forms were handed to the participants at the interviews and focus group discussion. There was also a confidentiality pledge for the participants who took part in the focus group discussion.

Thirdly, a further limitation of the study was the time constraints of this study itself. There was a specific time frame of two to three years in which data collection had to be collected, and the study had to be complete within a particular time. This constraint may cause certain aspects of the study being left out or not thoroughly researched due to time constraints. However, this was dealt with by the researcher working consistently and meeting deadlines for each section of the project that needed to be completed, in order to put the overall study together timeously.

Fourthly, there was a lack of the availability of literature based on the topic of exceptional academic achievement among students. This shortfall in literature is mainly because students' achievements are less focused on, and there is more focus on students' failure and underachievement in higher education. However, the researcher used both national and international sources to obtain, and read, as much literature as possible to write up on the topic of exceptional academic achievement among students.

Lastly, researchers need to be aware of the limitations of generalisability in a qualitative study. Generalisability is normally the aim of quantitative research, and this happens by implementing appropriate statistical sampling procedures, which allows the researcher to generalise findings of the selected sample. However, in qualitative research, although the methodology has been recognised, there are concerns about the generalisability of qualitative research findings. This concern is because findings in qualitative research are derived from small samples. Quantitative research accounts for larger samples to provide more accurate results and therefore produce higher generalisability, due to the larger number of samples. However in this study, it was dealt with by the researcher using appropriate sampling methods, such as purposive and convenient sampling methods. These sampling methods allowed the researcher to choose a specific sample, hence selecting a sample suitable for the study and generalising within that specific sample.

### **3.17 Conclusion**

In conclusion, Chapter Three highlighted step by step procedures that were carried out in the research process to produce research findings on the topic at hand. This chapter aims to guide the reader, and other researchers, on the processes that were undertaken by the researcher while conducting this research. In addition, the methods and procedures used to carry out the research can be used as a guideline for other researchers researching similar topics. It can provide information on ways in which other researchers can go about conducting their research, or even conduct the very same research, to test its credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability and findings of the research. Hence, this chapter is to ensure procedures carried throughout the research project are sound and valid to provide reliable research findings. The next chapter will thus focus on the research findings of this study.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS:**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This study aimed to explore academic staff members' and high achieving students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement at UKZN. The findings from the study will be presented within five themes which the researcher developed through thematic analysis of the transcripts from the interviews held with academic staff members and a focus group discussion held with high achieving students. The five themes presented are; 1) The meaning of exceptional academic achievement, 2) The roles and influence of academic staff members in helping students excel, 3) Academic staff members and students perspectives on enhancers and barriers to exceptional academic achievement, 4) Improving exceptional academic outcomes, and 5) The importance for students to excel academically. Extracts from the transcripts are used in this chapter to illustrate and provide support for the five themes that were developed. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identities, line numbers and transcription conventions (Jeffersonian Notation adapted from Silverman, 2005 Appendix 7- transcription convention key) are part of the extracts to provide detail and rigour. In addition, sometimes non-essential details reported by the participants have been omitted or modified to not inadvertently reveal a participant's identity.

### **4.2 Participant description**

The participants of the study were from UKZN that consisted of academic staff members and high achieving students. The academic staff members were sourced from various UKZN campus, and the high achieving students were sourced from UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus. All the participants were from the College of Humanities. The sample consisted of eight academic staff members that comprised of AL's of T&L and lecturers, and six high achieving students. At the beginning of the interviews and focus group discussion, the first few questions asked by the researcher was focused around the profile of the participants and getting to know the participants a little bit more as an individual. Tables 1 and 2 (see below) summarise relevant participant information as well as their central views on exceptional academic achievement.

**Table 1: Participant profile: Academic staff members (AL's of T&L and lecturers)**

<b>Participant pseudonyms</b>	<b>Current role at UKZN</b>	<b>Number of years served in current role</b>	<b>Where did they start their career</b>	<b>Participants views on the main things that a student/lecturer/ university needs to do to help a student excel</b>
1. Dr. Govender	Academic Leader of Teaching and learning.	Two years in AL of T&L role, and six years of teaching at UKZN.	Teaching at a school.	Students can excel by being well rounded and having requisite skills, knowledge, attitudes and values. The design of curriculum to aid students' achievements as well as planning, preparation and organisation from the lecturer helps students to excel.
2. Dr. Mohan	Academic Leader of Teaching and learning.	Two years in AL of T&L role at UKZN.	Former lecturer of UKZN Westville campus and Mathematics teacher.	Students being able to engage, be critical and a hard working helps them to excel. Established communication between lecturers and students as well as universities recognising students' achievements help them to excel.
3. Dr. Singh	Former AL of T&L, currently a lecturer.	One year in AL of T&L role and eight to ten years of teaching experience at UKZN.	Lecturer at UKZN.	It is when students have cultivated the love for learning that aids them to excel. Universities allocating substantial resources to lecturers to manage work overload can help students excel as more focus can be on students.

4. Dr. Mike	Senior Lecturer	+ - 20-23 years of teaching.	Lecturer at UKZN.	When students learning is nurtured they are able to excel as well as being motivated, passionate and a hard working aids in their achievements. Curriculums need to be less mechanistic and lecturers needs to have structure and visible pedagogy to help students excel.
5. Dr. Mandy	Lecturer.	+ -13 years of teaching at UKZN.	Lecturer at UKZN.	Students having skills, critical thinking (think widely) and the joy for learning helps them to excel. Lecturers mentoring, nurturing and recognising students achievements helps them excel.
6. Dr. Reshma	Lecturer.	Seven years of teaching at UKZN.	Worked at different research institutes, thereafter came into lecturing.	Students basic needs being fulfilled such as food and shelter can help students excel. As well as choosing the right friends to be with at university. Lecturers networking with each other across disciplines keeps them abreast with regards to managing students teaching and learning.
7. Dr. Jones	AL of T&L, Cluster leader and Senior lecturer.	Two years as Cluster leader and teaching for eight years at UKZN.	Teaching at a school.	Students being motivated, understanding themselves and being responsible for their learning helps them to excel. Having structured programmes and tutorial systems at university helps students to excel.

8.Dr. Khumalo	Academic Leader of Higher degrees and lecturer.	Two years in AL of T&L role and teaching for +- 25 years.	Studied engineering, worked for an engineering organisation and thereafter worked for the Department of Education.	Students being able to know their identity (role) according to their needs help them to excel. Lecturers helping students to establish their roles, motivate them and universities having tutorial systems in place helps students to excel.
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**Table 2: Participant profile: Undergraduate high achieving students**

<b>Participant pseudonyms</b>	<b>Year of study</b>	<b>Participants views on the main thing that a student/lecturer/university needs to do to help a student excel</b>
1.Nandi	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student, BA degree.	Resources available to students by the university such as internet access, working computers, availability of space in LANSØS and libraries help students to excel.
2.Sindi	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student, B.S.S degree.	Being motivated as a student and obtaining bursaries/scholarships from UKZN helps students to excel.
3.Peter	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student, Bachelor of Theology degree.	Students making good use of their time at campus, by taking out as much as putting into the year helps them to excel.
4.Tyla	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student, Psychology and HR degree.	Having an established relationship with lecturers, students avoiding peer pressure and students being aware of facilities that are available at the university helps them to excel.
5.Kerisha	3 <sup>rd</sup> year student, BA degree.	Students being able to engage, perform personally, understand and take away valuable information to apply in the future helps students to excel.
6.Lebo	4 <sup>th</sup> year student, Honours (was an undergraduate student at the time of scholarship award).	Students being motivated by lecturers and significant others such as family, helps students to excel.

### **4.3 The meaning of exceptional academic achievement**

#### **4.3.1 Exceptional academic achievement measured by marks**

The majority of the staff and student participants initially explained that they thought exceptional academic achievement referred to students obtaining high marks or percentages for tests and assignments, distinctions for modules, and graduating cum laude or summa cum laude. This explanation was mentioned by many of the academic staff members who participated in the study. For example, Dr. Singh said, "I think that we measure it as "cum laude and summa cum laude" (Interview 3, line 222). Dr. Mike also explained that his understanding of exceptional academic achievement was, "they definitely sort of summa cum laude students (. uh::mm:: (. now you see I think with (. that sort of summa cum laude sort of level" (Interview 4, lines 164-165).

Furthermore, Dr. Jones commented, "for me:: uhm people are looking at probably the 90 and the 95% and the 80% for students" (Interview 7, line 71). In addition to exceptional academic achievement being measured by marks, Dr. Khumalo said,

There are those (. those of us who will measure it through marks, examination marks  
Eh:: so in other words those will simply say to us uhm (. you are only good if you can  
reproduce the content that was given to you by your lecturers. So they will then  
obviously achieve something like distinctions (Interview 8, lines 69-71).

The students who participated in the focus group discussion held similar views to that of academic staff members about what exceptional academic achievement was.

õTyla: Like distinctions and stuff.

Participants: (laugh).

Lebo: Distinctions.

Nandi: To me I have never really evaluated it, it is like ya okay, is it percentage wise?

Asthu (Researcher): However you view it,

Monique (Researcher): Ya.

Asthu: Now that you are hearing õwhat is exceptional academic achievementö what,

Monique: How do you define it if you had to write it down?

Sindi: I guess it's getting your A's, your distinctions I would say that.

Monique: Ya:: getting your A's (. more thoughts?

Lebo: Ah:: I agree with everyone, I think to get your distinctions. Anyone who performs well academically gets distinctions (.) (laughs)ö (Focus group discussion [FGD], lines 19-30)

#### 4.3.2. Exceptional academic achievement beyond marks

In contrast to the mark centred definition of exceptional academic achievement presented above, some of the participants offered a non-mark centred perspective of exceptional academic achievement. For example, academic staff members identified that displaying certain academic skills, behaviours, or attitudes towards learning could be regarded as exceptional academic achievement. Dr. Govender said, "í a student who is well rounded in terms of having the requisite (.) skills, knowledge, attitudes and values" (can achieve exceptionally) (Interview 1, lines 78-79). Furthermore, Dr. Mandy explains,

Ya well I mean in our discipline I think it is a student who demonstrates (.) particular skills and critical thinking. So, uh I think itø someone who has the joy of learning, who thinks widely:: (.) who it doesn't necessarily needs to be someone who is a (Sociologist) or who is keen on (Sociology). But somebody who takes information from all::: their area of learning and understand the academic theoretical (.) sort of backgrounds and there real world, and puts it together in interesting ways. Uhm, also somebody who is ready to grab hold of academic ideas and, and examine them and criticise them and uhm see their worth::, because what often happens now days for me:: in classes is that students just want to pass the course (Interview 5, lines 58-73).

Furthermore, Dr. Jones explained that exceptional academic achievement comes with hard work and being able to improve upon past performance levels. She highlighted that there is more than one way in which exceptional academic achievement can be perceived, as well as many factors that influence a student's achievement, such as student levels of understanding, specialisations and student's experiences.

For me exceptional achievement is also for those students that have come in just with a five and they have managed. So they have come in with a 50% and they've managed within one semester to get into a 60%. Uhm so, so for me exceptional achievement is not one answer. It really does depend on who the students are, depends on the levels, depends on specialisation and:: one is also looking at uhm the various factors that different students actually experience (Interview 7, lines 72-81).

Discussing the concept of exceptional academic achievement makes academic staff members and students more aware of what it means to achieve exceptionally. Conceptualising exceptional academic achievement can assist students in their learning process and can assist academic staff members to clarify their roles in teaching and learning. The next theme looks at the roles that academic staff members play, and the influence they have, in helping students excel.

#### **4.4 The roles and influence of academic staff members in helping students excel**

The second theme to arise from the analysis of the data was the role of academic staff members in helping students excel academically. One of the significant roles that academic staff members were perceived to have was in helping students excel through regular communication and encouragement, thus building a good lecturer/student relationship. In discussing his role as a lecturer, Dr. Mohan mentioned that it is key to communicate with students daily. This includes communicating with all students, both with those that are achieving, and with those who may not be doing very well at their academics. Furthermore, it is important to convey information to all students as this shows interest from lecturers as well as establishing a good relationship between students and lecturers. Dr. Mohan explained that he communicates to students by emailing them from the UKZN online platform (Moodle).

So I then send emails to those students, so I have access to every student from first year to fourth year on this campus, and so through the Moodle site we send out information to these students. Right, about general issues, so anything that we want to tell them which we think will help them to improve (in) their (profession) , their, their, abilities, their achievements, we use that site to do that for them (Interview 2, lines 151-156).

In the focus group discussion, many of the students did agree on clear communication and building a relationship with lecturers to inform their learning. The information provided from academic staff members has great influence on the decisions that students make. Tyla explained,

Sometimes you need to just go up and actually ask the lecturers, and when you ask them, you actually realise, ðh okay, you know this, I didn't know that, and then it helps you to even work harder towards getting into honours or masters or whatever (FGD, lines 626-629).



The findings from the data also suggested that many academic staff members nurture students that are already achieving highly. Specifically, Dr. Mohan said that in their school (cluster/structures/ disciplines within UKZN),

300 students (.) potential *cum laude* students. These are (final) year students that are in their (final) year and when we looked at their academic record of a thousand students in fourth year we ended up with 300 students, who (.) we think if they are given the right kind of advice now stand a chance of getting their degrees *cum laude* at the end of the year (Interview 2, lines 164-168).

Hence, students who have the potential to be exceptional academic achievers are identified in Dr. Mohan's school and they are given support in terms of guidance from academic staff to help them improve on their academic standing. Dr. Mandy also mentioned that it is important to nurture and mentor students.

Well I suppose you are there to mentor that (exceptional academic achievement). It's very, very difficult at an undergrad level if you have a big class. Uhm I think my role would be to nurture exceptional academic achievement (.) and uhm with some people you can nurture it (Interview 5, line 98-102).

Many other academic staff members, like Dr. Khumalo and Dr. Jones explained that their role as lecturers is to motivate students and to encourage students to understand their own potential to achieve because a lot of their potential comes from understanding themselves and their capabilities. Dr. Jones said, "But it's really about getting students to understand who they are, motivating them uhm:: showing them that there are possibilities and, and the possibility is dependent on you," (Interview 7, lines 246-248). The next theme to follow looks at academic staff members' and high achieving students' views on enhancers and barriers that impact on exceptional academic achievement.

#### **4.5 Academic staff members and high achieving students' perspectives on enhancers and barriers to exceptional academic achievement**

This theme explores the participants' understanding of enhancers and barriers which they perceive have an effect on exceptional academic achievement. The researcher also found that there are ways in which students can manage and assist themselves to achieve exceptionally in the face of any adversities that they may experience.

#### 4.5.1 Enhancers

Findings show that academic staff members have mentioned that student performance is enhanced by the support of fellow students working together to help each other improve themselves. According to Dr. Mohan, in their school they get students to evaluate each other's essays over the Moodle system.

í And then for you to get your 5% you have to go and peer read two other peoples essays and you got to put comments on it. All right, so that we feel also helps to build, so, so, if I am reading your essay, I can then say to you Asthu (researcher conducting interview) you missed out this point here and that point there, and so that, and so we don't want it to be just something that you do so, you get 5% if you do this, but you must, we will go and look at your comments, are you giving critical comments. So you see how we enhancing you also by getting you to critically analyse somebody else. So you now not reading passively, you reading because you want to find out how can you help this person to improve (Interview 2, 349-369).

Student achievement is also enhanced by students working in groups and studying together for tests. "Students tell me that they, what they really do talk about, some students support each other in terms of learning for a test" (Dr. Mandy, Interview 5, 169-170). Furthermore, academic staff members also encourage students to choose the right kind of company to be with at university. Academic staff members encourage students to be with other students who will provide support and who are serious about university. According to Dr. Reshma choosing the right kind of company (peers) at university enhances student achievement.

I say to them (.) make friends with people who care about why they here. And afterwards they start to realise and I say go and hang around with people who are committed to why they're here, that will say to you have you done this week's assignment. I have completed what you think about this. You don't have to be the smartest of the group but you've got to be part of a group that cares about why they here (Interview 6, lines 236-245).

There are also practical ways in which student achievement can be enhanced. According to the research findings of this study, lecturers can teach by making use of practical examples in the classroom to enhance students' understanding of a concept that is being discussed. Furthermore, lecturers being aware of technology and incorporating new ways of displaying and providing information by using these technologies can also enhance academic

achievement. Dr. Reshma said, "one of the ways in which one would enhance that were people are using technology, students are responding a little bit better" (Interview 6, lines 496-497). Additionally, this creates a dynamic and innovative classroom environment to stimulate other ways of learning, which can increase achievement.

There are also other enhancers to students' academic achievements. For example, tutorial systems put in place to assist students in smaller, more manageable groups. They are provided with exercises that relate to the module or work content that is covered in class. These tutorials are run with experienced students, who have obtained their degrees and are continuing onto Honours or Masters Degrees. Furthermore, academic staff members explained that their classes are very large, and not all students may be on the same track at the same time. Dr. Khumalo said "we have the tutorial system. Where we take our (...) our Postgraduate student to help them eh:: in small groups" (Interview 8, lines 623-634). Thus the significance of tutorials to improve exceptional academic achievement.

In the focus group discussion many of the students also mentioned that there are other practical examples, such as bursaries and scholarships that also enhance their achievements and such enhancers motivates them to work harder. Thus attaining bursaries/scholarships have a positive outcome in students maintaining their high performance. In addition, students that took part in this study also mentioned that lecturers being accessible for them to gather extra information outside of the classroom environment was important for their academic achievement. Moreover, the students in this study reported that having access to resources, such as libraries, LANs and internet connection at the university enables them to collect information, do research and communicate with other students and lecturers effectively.

#### 4.5.2 Barriers

In the research findings there were many barriers that participants expressed that have an impact on exceptional academic achievement. Some of these barriers are very basic, such as needs not being met. These needs include food, sufficient nutrition and shelter. The high cost of resources such as textbooks are also a barrier. Dr. Reshma explained, "I mean I do think that students do face huge, huge problems. You know practically students are, have all sorts of pressures, some of them are physically hungry" (Interview 5, lines 135-137). Dr. Reshma also said "Uh:: I think finances and I've had students say to me I don't have a place to stay (...)ö (Interview 6, line 393.)

The lack of basic needs affects students' learning and becomes part of personal factors that can have an effect on student motivation and learning. This becomes a barrier towards exceptional academic achievement.

The research findings also pointed to lecturers being overloaded with administration, teaching, supervising and being under pressure with few resources. This creates a barrier for students as there is less availability and minimal consultation time for students to meet with lecturers on a one-to-one basis. Unorganised time tables and structures create a lack of focus and guidance for students to follow. Furthermore, the participants also expressed that inexperienced tutors are also seen as a barrier, as there is lack of sufficient guidance and mentorship during tutorials.

The participants had also mentioned that joining the wrong company (peers), where there is bad influence and peer pressure also hinders student achievement. 'I think friends and the whole peer pressure thing will always contribute towards your academic, you know, career' (Tyla, FGD, lines 915-916).

Many of the students from the focus group discussion expressed that there is a lack of availability of resources at the university. It was found that the LAN and libraries are overcrowded and noisy, protest action disrupts learning and lack of access to internet connection at the university disables them to collect information, do research and communicate with other students and lecturers effectively. These resources, also mentioned in 4.5.1 are meant to enhance and assist students in their exceptional academic achievements. Furthermore, the lack of equipment such as lost keys, broken projectors, lack of computers and printers are barriers that students identify as slowing them down in the process towards exceptional achievement. The findings of this study show that even though there are barriers affecting exceptional academic achievement, there are ways in which students can assist themselves to achieve.

#### 4.5.3 Ways in which students can assist themselves to achieve

This sub-theme explored ways in which students can assist themselves in their own way to achieve highly at university, by taking advantage of what is available to them at the university to overcome barriers which they may be facing.

Many of the academic staff members from the interviews and high achieving students from the focus group discussion agreed that working hard and being consistent as an individual leads to achievement. 'You've got to work consistently alright that's one thing' (Dr. Mohan, Interview

2, line 263). Being a consistent student and keeping abreast with general information around you as a person allows you to achieve. This is because you are not only aware of what is in your field, but you are also aware of things happening around you. "So, students also need to keep abreast with what is going on around them" (Dr. Mohan, Interview 2, line 287). Academic staff members in this study said that it is also very important for students to be self-motivated and to use their motivation to drive their achievements. Students can do this by reflecting on their involvements and commitments they have made. For example, their involvement and commitment towards completing their degree.

Many of the students said that they have built resilience towards the barriers they face personally and at university. For example, the lack of resources which include food, finances, internet access, lack of space in libraries, LANs and classrooms. This resilience which they have built helps them to persevere and it enables them to use whatever is available to them to achieve, "It's about that . . . resilience and coming here because of a plan" (Dr. Reshma, Interview 6, line 229). "I am here, what is my goal and how do I go about achieving that" (Dr. Reshma, Interview 6, line 232). Academic staff members in this study mentioned that motivation is what leads to most achievements in life, and they shared many sources of motivation for a student to achieve academically. According to Dr. Mike,

Students that work hard and have an interest in what they do motivates them to be passionate, to enjoy what they are doing. "I think there is very hard work (.) uhm::: You know I think they, they I mean part of their aptitude is part of their like uhm real interest and passion (Interview 4, lines 178-179).

In the interview with Dr. Khumalo, he spoke strongly about students finding out who they are and being aware of their identities. Students being aware of who they are and knowing their identities motivates them to work towards a goal. Furthermore, students knowing who they are and their identities also guides them and allows them to fit into what suits them and their needs as a student. "Finding identity has to do with your own (.) eh, eh motivation, it will motivate you" (Interview 8, line 185-185).

In the focus group discussion students reflected on the pressure that they put on themselves to obtain high percentages. They claimed that obtaining high percentages in turn motivates them to continue doing well. On the other hand, when students are motivated they engage with their learning and develop a better understanding of their modules. For some students being able to

engage with, and understand, their course work is much more fulfilling and motivates them to achieve exceptionally. Kerisha said,

Hm:: ya, I think uhm I put quite a lot of pressure on myself to do well academically which is you know is being high percentage or reflecting well, but exceptional academic achievement is like when I feel like personally just when I feel like I was able to actually understand and engage, and take away from that module and be able to apply that in future and not just you know the distinctions, because (.) sometimes I've done well in that sense where I have achieved a high percentage, but I felt like I gained nothing from the content (FGD, lines 32-38).

Some students explained that their distinctions reflect their passion for what they are learning. Tyla said,

For me as well, for (Psychology) when I, when I get my distinctions for that I feel like, I feel well because that is my passion, (Psychology) is my passion that is what I want to do. When I get it for (HR) it's just like you know I got a distinction for (HR) it's fine, but for (Psychology) that means more to me because that is actually what I want to do and ya (FGD, lines 44-50).

For other students, their motivation lies in making good use of their time at university and learning as much as they can in that time. Peter explained,

Ya, it's my first time encountering such a crazy term 'exceptional academic achievement' ya, so for me it is just fulfilling to have put my time into good use through the year hmmm and then if I can take out as much as I can then I would have achieved for myself. The marks really they generate on their own (FGD, lines 56-60).

#### **4.6 Improving exceptional academic outcomes**

The previous theme showed findings that displayed a range of enhancers and barriers that students face when it comes to their academic achievement. This theme, improving exceptional academic outcomes provide findings on, improving standards within University schools, improvement on teaching and learning spaces (classrooms) and curriculum programmes. Thus improving on exceptional academic achievement amongst students.

##### **4.6.1 University schools improving academic achievement**

Many academic staff members said that schools (structure/clusters/disciplines within UKZN) can improve academic achievement by creating networks across other schools. This allows for

academic staff to build relationships amongst each other to enhance teaching strategies, learn how to deal with practical issues, and to share ideas on how to strengthen learning in the academic environment. Dr. Reshma explains that building a relationship among each other as academic staff members creates a network.

I will go are you having this or what have you done and they'll say well have you tried this, have you spoken to this person. So informally I think there are individuals across different schools and disciplines that (takes a breath) we just network with each other (Interview 6, lines 588-591).

By academic staff members being in a network they are able to update each other and keep abreast with trends. Hence, most academic staff members will provide the same information to guide students that will allow them to achieve highly.

In the findings another important aspect was raised by the participants of the study. They referred to having more and improved facilities. For example, the participants referred to counselling facilities, as these facilities help students make choices and help guide their academic development. Improved library facilities (as this where most learning takes place) and access to other resources such as books and internet access are among improvements which the university needs to consider. Students from the focus group discussion also mentioned that improved orientation around the university will familiarise them with regard to other facilities available by the university. Orientation can assist students with a better understanding of university rules, regulations and processes, such as online registration. Important departments for example, the finance department and student academic records are important facilities that students need to know about. Early knowledge of facilities offered by the university allow students to settle in more easily and they are able to concentrate more on their achievement without any delay when those facilities are clear and available to them. Tyla explained,

I feel like a lot of the stuff have, has to be made known more, the information has to be made available easily. You know there isn't, you just hear people talking about it, or it'll be at some place where you don't even walk past to look at this information. I think that the university has to really just find a nice way of making stuff available for all students to know. í Support services, financial aid stuff, everything. Sometimes, most of the time, you have to go ask this person and that person and that person - three, four people to get the right story (FGD, lines 1306-1316).

According to academic staff members in this study there are also other ways in which schools can improve students' exceptional academic achievement. Improving students' exceptional academic achievement can be done by making the learning structure more visible instead of skipping to different topics. Academic staff members of this study asserted that it was important to rather build on what has already been taught and pay attention to building knowledge by creating assessments, tests and courses on previous background knowledge. Dr. Mike said, "It's paying attention to in a sense (.) properly building (.) a knowledge structure within a course" (Interview 4, lines, 718-719). Furthermore, Dr. Mike goes onto explaining, "where you have to start with a base thing. Uhm I mean with mathematics you start with number theory and you build addition and then subtraction and then you, you accumulate each thing builds on a different foundation" (Interview 4, lines 725-727).

Lastly, there are some schools within UKZN that provide students with bursaries/scholarships and laptops to motivate them and get them involved and interested in what they do.

These bursaries are good because they give them laptops and then they keep, so it's easy for them. When they go to tutorials after the lecture and then they just use their laptops eh::: you can even find them around the corner, he is sitting there and then working on their stuff (Dr. Khumalo, Interview 8, lines 648-651) .

In addition there are also schools at UKZN that recognise those students who do exceptionally well and a private function is held to honour their achievements. This shows that students are being recognised for their hard work and efforts they put into their achievements.

#### 4.6.2 Improving exceptional academic achievement in the classroom

This sub-theme explores, improving exceptional academic achievement in the classroom (teaching and learning space). The findings provide ways in which academic staff members can assist in the classroom to help students achieve.

The findings show that academic staff members regard having structure in the way they teach and creating a visible pedagogy guides students. Dr. Mike explained "but I mean the structure would be one thing because you, you students would begin to understand that there is (.) there's structure (.) that there's something they can get access to" (Interview 4, lines 879-881). This assist with student achievement as lectures are clear and understandable for them to follow.



Academic staff members also say that having exercises in class where students can engage in a critical way (thinking and writing) supports their achievement. For example this is done by lecturers preparing and designing online questionnaires that are attempted by students before coming to class. This helps them to engage with the content and prepares students for conversations with lecturers in class. Dr. Khumalo mentioned,

What (stutters) what, what seems to be good here in motivating the students in the classroom situation is that eh::: (.) is when lecturers (.) eh::: um eh::: design quizzes, that will be (.) at, that will be addressed by the students before they come to the classes (Interview 8, lines 827-831).

Henceforth, by more and more lecturers implementing activates and an integrated classroom environment, engagement in teaching and learning between lecturers and students is established. Moreover, it allows for lecturers to pay more attention to needs of their students and to tailor make their teaching style suitable for students to do well academically. Lastly, lecturers encourage the use of *Turnitin* to create good quality work, Dr. Khumalo explained,

í And another way, and the other part that is also motivating them is that eh we are using eh, eh::: their classroom situation when they submit any::: assignment, They have to send it in to, to turnitin. So turnitin is helping lecturers again, to help them to, to, to so the system is training these students to understand how academic writing is suitable (Interview 8, lines 934-943).

The turnitin process makes students aware of their academic reading and writing, and trains students to develop good reading and writing skills.

#### 4.6.3 Improvements of the curriculum to cultivate exceptional academic achievement

In this sub-theme, improvements of the curriculum to improve exceptional academic achievement is explored. In the findings, lecturers suggested ways in which the curriculum that they follow to teach students may be changed or improved to suit students' learning needs.

Academic staff members identified that there are major shortfalls in the design of curriculums. Typical shortfalls identified by academic staff members included having structure, being specific about content and including aims, objectives and goals of the content to be taught to students. Dr. Khumalo said, "You can see::: that ehm::: (.) curriculum, major curriculum concepts are not positioned in such a way that eh::: there are supporting students (.) so::: curriculum concept are important in, in designing any, any lesson" (Interview 8, lines 991-

993). Hence, improvements can be made by making necessary adjustments in the curriculum to assist academic staff in their teaching. Moreover, the content becomes more transparent for students to understand, aiding in their learning process. Secondly, the curriculum can improve by implementing time management. This deals with the completion of tasks and moving on to building a new section. Thirdly academic staff need to make it clear as to how students will be assessed. This allows for students to organise themselves and to be well prepared in terms of understanding the assessments criteria.

Other ways in which the curriculum can be improved is by having someone established in the school to develop, set and manage the curriculum effectively. The curriculums should also integrate more of an Afrocentric framework. Dr. Mandy said, õuhmm (.) I think you know in terms of the Africanisation of the syllabus that might make it more relevant for students and enable students both to be more interested and for it to be meaningfulö (Interview 5, lines 427-429). According to academic staff members taking on an Afrocentric approach in teaching, is developing and taking shape within UKZN. Lastly, academic staff members also mentioned that curriculums can improve by being less constrained and suit what students want to learn about.

#### **4.7 The importance for students to excel academically**

The last theme explores the importance of students to excel academically. Mostly, why it is important for students to be achieving and doing well in their academic life.

Many of the participants in this study, academic staff members and high achieving students agreed that it is important to excel academically. When students excel their self-esteem grows and they become more interested and involved in their academic life (students understand their course work, they attend lectures, they engage in the learning process and they can mentor and provide support to their peers). Dr. Mandy said,

Yes, I do, oh definitely. I mean how fabulous for their self-esteem or for us, just sort of for (.) in terms of academic life. So for the person themselves and for academic life generally and also to become mentors for other people (Interview 5, lines 522-524).

Furthermore, this motivation creates healthy competition for students. It is also important for students to excel academically and to be consistent to maintain or receive bursaries and scholarships to further their studies. Additionally, students aim to do well as they feel the pressure from financial support which their parents provide for them during their study period.

Hence, they do not want to disappoint themselves and their parents. This is also another way in which students are motivated to excel in their academic life. Kerisha said,

“Uhm, well, I, I do put a lot of pressure on myself just because, err, parents is paying for my studies, so, getting a scholarship and that sort of thing has always been motivation for me to, to be consistent” (FGD, lines 576-578).

Being a high achiever it’s self is motivating. Although, it is also important to be aware that achievement is personal and a lot of the students try and do very well even though they do not fall within *cum laude* and *summa cum laude status* at university. However, lecturers have noticed that students who have come in with a 50% have managed to pick themselves up to 60%. This improvement is seen as exceptional by these lecturers. It is important for academic staff to acknowledge improvements that students make and to further motivate students in their academic ability. As mentioned previously in 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, Dr. Jones explained,

So, so for me:: uhm people are looking at probably the 90 and the 95% and the 80% for students (Asthu: hmm) for me exceptional achievement is also for those students that have come in just with a 5 and they have managed. So they have come in with a 50%. And they’ve managed within one semester to get into a 60% (Interview 7, lines 71-75).

Hence, many academic staff members commented that when students achieve beyond their expectations and are able to improve they become exceptional academic achievers. Thus, the importance for students to excel academically.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

There seem to be similarities between academic staff members and high achieving students on the perspective of exceptional academic achievement. Even though different factors have been mentioned, exceptional academic achievement seems to be mainly centred on student-lecturer relationships, and the university environment seems to take precedence. Therefore, the findings indicate that the roles which lecturers and the university play have a pivotal impact on exceptional academic achievement among students. Academic staff members reported the need to have more hours and consultation times with students, and high achieving students also said that having one-to-one interaction with academics provides more insight into their interests. However, it is challenging for academic staff members to do this consistently due to other constraints, such as overloaded administration and being involved in their writing and publishing, required by the university.

Other issues experienced by participants was the lack of resources available by the university and some basic needs of students not being fulfilled. On the other hand, however, some improvements are taking place. For example, high achievers are being identified and given more focus and guidance by academic staff, and special functions are held to award their exceptional academic achievements. There are also improvements that academic staff are implementing in classrooms to make learning more accessible and getting students to be involved at the classroom level. Lastly, curriculum adjustments are being included to make learning more relevant to students, such as engaging with students' interest, taking an Afrocentric perspective and creating clear concepts to improve curriculums to better facilitate teaching and learning. All these factors aim to improve exceptional academic achievement outcomes amongst students. The next section is Chapter Five. This chapter entails the discussion of this research.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The sections discussed in Chapter Five have been informed by the literature review and research findings chapters in this study. These sections are as follows: the meaning of exceptional academic achievement; academic staff aiding students in their learning process; enhancers and barriers to achieving exceptional academic outcomes; improving academic achievement outcomes; and the importance for students to excel academically.

### **5.2 The meaning of exceptional academic achievement**

The DHET (2014) has highlighted low success rates, throughput and graduation rates as a major problem for the South African higher education sector. Focusing on students' underachievement and failure reinforces a deficit mindset for conceptualising student learning and academic achievement in South African higher education. Hence, exploring the phenomenon of learning and academic achievement from the exceptional end of the achievement spectrum allows for a different perspective of understanding academic achievement.

An essential aspect of this study was to understand what exceptional academic achievement might mean to different role players in the higher education sector. The majority of participants in this study explained or understood exceptional academic achievement as being associated with high marks/percentages/distinctions. These marks were awarded in relation to tests, assignments and examinations that students would participate in as part of their university modules. Furthermore, students that graduated with their degrees cum laude or summa cum laude was also considered as exceptional academic achievement by participants in this study.

However, on the other hand, participants reported that exceptional academic achievement could go beyond marks. In contrast to a mark centred definition of exceptional academic achievement participants in this study also presented a non-mark centred perspective of exceptional academic achievement. Participants reported that having certain academic skills, behaviours and attitudes towards learning such as working hard and improving on past performance levels can also be regarded as exceptional academic achievement. According to Buchanan (2015), there are also other processes that can consider students to progress into exceptional academic achievers. This process includes students having positive attitudes towards their learning, taking the initiative, being passionate, independent and responsible, and placing effort into their academic work. These qualities are likely to foster exceptional academic achievement (Schunk

& Zimmerman, 2012; Buchanan, 2015). Therefore, although exceptional academic achievement is technically about academic outcomes, it also evokes reference to the academic and psychological processes that students might engage in or demonstrate in their exceptional academic achievement journey.

### **5.3 Academic staff members' roles and aiding students in their learning process**

In this study, participants reported that one of the significant roles that academic staff members were perceived to have in helping students excel was through regular communication and building a good lecturer/student relationship. The participants also said that having information provided to them (e.g., the structure of tests/assignments/examinations, course layout and expectations, information on honours and masters courses and information on university adjustments and university facilities available for students) from academic staff members informs their learning and influence decisions that students make. This process reflects the influence of interaction between the environment and the individual (Bandura, 2011; Harinie et al., 2017). When such information is conveyed to students, it enables their behaviour to be purposive (Bandura, 2000; Montenegro, 2017). Purposive behaviour regulates their forethought process (Bandura, 2000; Montenegro, 2017) that allow students to foresee their future actions. Hence, purposive behaviour enables students to plan for their actions (Bandura, 2000; Montenegro, 2017).

Through communication, important information is conveyed to students and they are able to prepare ahead for tests and examinations as well as work towards building their skills and knowledge for future degrees (e.g., Honours/Masters degrees) that they might be interested in, and in the future of their academic or professional careers (Wood, 2015). Hence, students become active agents in their learning environment, when information is provided to them (Bandura, 2006). Thus, in their learning environment, the information provided to them influences their cognition (forethought, symbolising future outcomes and planning) that then informs their behaviour (agency) which influences their exceptional academic achievement outcomes (Bandura, 2011; Harinie et al., 2017).

According to Dahesihsari (2009) and Witt et al., (2004), the status difference between lecturers and students can make it challenging for effective communication between them. This difference is influenced by the positions which lecturers may hold, such as their level of education and sense of (un)friendliness (Witt et al., 2004). However, when accommodative communication behaviour is employed by lecturers, such as emailing students, one-on-one

consultations and constant interaction with students, a relationship is built (Dahesihsari, 2009; Wood, 2015). Hence, there is interaction in the learning environment, and the social distance between students and lecturers become minimised when there is communication. Through an established relationship, students have more encouragement, they are proactive in class, and they do not shy away easily as they can communicate effectively with lecturers (Dahesihsari, 2009).

Furthermore, Wood (2015) said communication between people encourages personal and professional growth. Through communication, people are provided with advice and feedback that can assist with an increase in the effectiveness of a person's learning. Moreover, people communicate to develop identities, establish and build relationships, coordinate efforts with others, have an impact on issues that matter to each other, and work out problems and possibilities (Wood, 2015).

When there is interactive engagement between lecturers and students, lecturers become more approachable. Students from the focus group discussion in this study mentioned that lecturers need to be more student centred. Many academic staff engage in the classroom environment through interaction with students (providing feedback in class, getting students involved in group work activities and effective communication) to improve students achievement as it aims in restructuring how students learn (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995; Lukkarinen, Koivukangas & Seppälä, 2016). According to Tinto (1997) for many students, especially those who have multiple obligations outside the university institution, the classroom may be the only place where students and academics meet, and where education in the formal sense is experienced.

The classroom experience helps with the process of both student learning and persistence. Even though learning and being persistent in the classroom supports students' exceptional academic achievement, it is also important to consider involvement or integration in the life of the university, as this increases the likelihood that students will persist (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Lukkarinen, Koivukangas & Seppälä, 2016). Students' involvement in the life of the university also increases student knowledge and development of their skills (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Lukkarinen, Koivukangas & Seppälä, 2016). Hence, student engagement, both inside and outside the classroom, appears to be especially important for students' exceptional academic achievement (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 2012; Lukkarinen, Koivukangas & Seppälä, 2016). In the findings of this study it found that student engagement was important by interacting in class

activities such as questionnaires and attending tutorials. Whilst outside activities involved interaction with university facilities, resources and peers.

According to Montenegro (2017), when students are involved and fully engaged in their learning process, they can enhance their academic outcomes. Furthermore, students' involvement in the classroom orientates students towards improvements of their performance, positive expectations about abilities, long-term academic achievement, and the quality of socialisation and preference (Montenegro, 2017). However, students' involvement in their learning process should not only consider their engagement, but also consider the involvement and engagement with academic staff members as well the learning institution.

According to Montenegro (2017), it is important to have teacher intervention and feedback to ensure that interaction, involvement and engagement occurs between lecturers and students in the classroom. In the findings of this study, one way in which lecturers incorporate student engagement in the classroom environment is by creating online questionnaires made up of questions regarding a current section being covered in class. Developing online questionnaires allow students to go over notes and read their textbooks to find answers to the questionnaires (Montenegro, 2017). Furthermore, in the findings of this study academic staff members mentioned that students going through their learning material and reading their textbooks creates further engagement, that aids students to discuss and have critical conversations in class regarding the section being taught.

Academic staff members in this study also suggested that it is important to nurture students that are already achieving highly. According to Al-Shabat et al., (2010), nurturing student achievements is being able to recognise their abilities and to reward them either intrinsically or extrinsically. Dr. Mohan (Interview 2) mentioned that in his school (cluster/structure/discipline within UKZN), they reward their students by having an internal awards ceremony that recognises their high achieving students. This ceremony of recognising their exceptional academic achievers is apart from the traditional university graduation ceremony. Dr. Mohan (Interview 2) explained that at this ceremony, the school honours its students that have achieved exceptionally in their modules. The students are presented with a certificate of acknowledgement for their achievements. Hence, students that are exceptional academic achievers are identified, and they are given increased support and guidance to improve on their academic standing. This identification is a way in which students are recognised, rewarded and motivated in Dr. Mohan's school. Furthermore, academic staff members also assist students by



mentoring and motivating them to understand their potential which can assist them in achieving exceptionally in their academics. This assistance enables students with their agency that will allow them to use their standards of achievements and guidance from lecturers to foresee their future developments in their academic trajectory.

## **5.4 Enhancers and barriers to achieve exceptional academic outcomes**

### **5.4.1 Extrinsic enhancer and barriers**

Extrinsic enhancers and barriers are physical factors that exist outside of the individual (McKay & Devlin, 2016), which may enhance or create barriers for students in the process of their academic achievement. Extrinsic barriers relate to social, cultural, political and economic factors that happen "outside" of the individual (McKay & Devlin, 2016). Hence, extrinsic enhancers and barriers will be discussed in relation to students' exceptional academic achievements.

According to academic staff members in this study, student performance is extrinsically enhanced by the support of fellow students, working together to help each other improve themselves. Furthermore, academic staff members also encourage students to choose supportive peers to be with at university. According to Boud et al. (2014), support from other students, and being able to work together to enhance and improve on each other's learning could increase academic achievement. Good peer relationships established in the learning environment assists with students' agency that allows them to be motivated by other students to foresee their future outcomes (Bandura, 2011; Harinie et al., 2017).

However, it is also important to choose appropriate peers to be with and to learn with, as negative peer pressure such as, poor attitudes and values towards learning could also serve as a great disadvantage to student achievement. In this study, students from the focus group discussion mentioned that negative peer pressure is something that could always effect a person's performance and career. (Sacerdote, 2011; Terrion, 2012). On the other hand, in the findings of this study, it was found that peer support plays a positive role in studying successfully. In the literature that was reviewed, a study was conducted by Loots (2009). The study highlighted the support that first-year students would receive through a peer monitoring programme with academic and psychosocial support. The study aimed to implement support structures in higher education to enhance students' success rates (Loots, 2009). The findings from the study revealed that students enjoyed the support from significant others (peers) in their learning environment (Loots, 2009; CHE, 2010; CHE, 2013). Hence, student performance

is enhanced through peer support, which fosters both academic and social integration in the learning environment (Loots, 2009; Terrion, 2012; Boud et al., 2014).

In the research findings of this study, it was also found that there are other ways in which student achievement can be enhanced. It was found that academic staff can teach by making use of practical examples in the classroom to enhance students' understanding of a concept that is being discussed. For instance, Dr. Mohan (Interview 2) mentioned that he uses practical examples in his teaching. He starts by using a house as an example, he then explains to students how to understand a certain concept of a topic by relating concepts of the topic to the structure of a house (Interview 2).

A further enhancement is for lecturers to be aware of technology and incorporating new ways of displaying and providing information, by using new and improved technologies available in the environment. Incorporating the use of technology in the classroom enhances both students' learning and lecturers' teaching (Muller, 2015). In the findings, Dr. Reshma (Interview 6) mentioned that using technology in the classroom enhances students' learning. She claimed that students seemed to respond better in the classroom when technology is utilised. Furthermore, the use of technology in classrooms creates a dynamic and innovative classroom environment to stimulate other ways of learning, which can increase exceptional academic achievement (Al-Zaidiyeen, Mei & Fook, 2010; Muller, 2015). According Muller (2015), the use of technology is also a great advantage to students. Technology can offer an efficient and contemporary way for students to engage with their learning material (Laurillard, 2002; Muller, 2015). In addition to the use of technology in classrooms, it has been found to create opportunities for social growth, problem solving, peer teaching, independent work, and exploration (Al-Zaidiyeen, Mei & Fook, 2010).

However, there are potential barriers associated with the incorporation of technology in classrooms. For example, lectures become replaced with online learning systems to meet global/international changes in education (Muller, 2015). Due to advanced technological systems in the learning environment, the traditional face-to-face teaching and interaction between students and lecturers are lost (Mtebe, 2015). Despite the enhancers that technology offers, class attendance and physical engagement adds value to students' learning and there is a deeper understanding of the material. (Nyatanga & Mukorera, 2019). Even though technology has changed education, having the traditional lecturer delivering course material to students

enables communication and conceptual knowledge in classrooms (Nyatanga & Mukorera, 2019).

Furthermore, teaching/lecturers exploit the spontaneous human aptitude for spoken communication and allow real-time, human presence and social interaction to enhance exceptional academic achievement, whereas online learning systems do not offer this experience (Bai, Ola & Akkaladevi, 2018). In this study, it was found that there are also potential problems that students and academic staff experience when using technology. For example, poor internet accessibility, computer facilities and printer equipment not being maintained at university, and the lack of willingness of lecturers to incorporate technology in their teaching (Al-Zaidiyeen et al., 2010; Hammonds et al., 2013).

There are further external enhancers to students' exceptional academic achievements at university (in this study, exceptional academic achievement and learning are conceptualised along a continuum). A further enhancer is tutorial systems put in place to assist students in their academic achievements. In the findings of this study, Dr. Khumalo (Interview 8) mentioned that postgraduate students assist undergraduate students in tutorial sessions. The implementation of tutorial systems provide one-on-one discussions, advice and guidance, and more detail into modules and courses to enhance students' learning and understanding of the modules/courses they are being taught (Wisker et al., 2013). Students undertaking practical examples in tutorials sessions provide them with a hands-on experience, rather than only receiving information through formal lectures and textbooks (Bloom, 1984; Wisker et al., 2013).

Even so, there are some barriers regarding tutorial systems put in place to enhance students' academic achievements. These barriers range from the lack of experienced tutors because they have not received adequate training (Reinheimer, & McKenzie, 2011). It is also costly to implement by the university, and many students create a barrier for themselves by not attending or contributing wholeheartedly when they attend tutorials (Bloom, 1984; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). Moreover, many students show little interest in the guidance and advice that tutors may offer to them during the tutorial session or on the marked exercises that tutors complete and hand back to students to review their marks and tutor comments (Duncan, 2007; Wisker et al., 2013). However, tutoring helps with students' success and the increase in throughput rates among students, and tutoring impacts positively on students. Hence, improving examination results decreases stress, and it offers a more satisfying academic

experience for students. Therefore, it is important to implement tutorial systems and to train and develop tutors, as this system supports student academic outcomes. (Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Reinheimer, & McKenzie, 2011).

Lastly, the students in this study from the focus group discussion mentioned that other external enhancers assist them with their exceptional academic achievement outcomes. For example, bursaries and scholarships motivate them to achieve exceptionally and to continue working hard to maintain their bursaries and scholarships which they receive from the university. Students are motivated to maintain these external enhancers (bursaries/scholarships) that can be related to self-regulation as students can self-regulate their actions (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 2011). They self-regulate by setting standards for themselves, such as obtaining bursaries/scholarships. They are then able to reflect on goals which has an influence on their behaviour. However, it is important to understand that self-regulation is not only an influence of external factors, but the support from internal origins are also considered to influence students' behaviour (Zimmerman, 2002; Bandura, 2006; Harinie et al., 2017). Students self-regulate by consciously reflecting on their achievements (because of their high marks they get bursaries/scholarships, and learning materials are paid for) that motivates them to do better and to maintain their academic standards (Zimmerman, 2002; Bandura, 2006; Harinie et al., 2017).

The students that took part in this study also mentioned that academic staff should be accessible for students to gather extra information (i.e., course material that students may not have understood in class, further guidance on upcoming assignments and tests, and detailed information provided to students who are interested in taking up higher degrees, i.e., Honours/Masters degrees) outside of the classroom environment. This is important as students feel recognised by academic staff members and they feel that academic staff have an interest in their learning.

Students in this study, reported that having access to internet connection at the university enables them to collect information, do research and communicate with other students and lecturers. This access enhances their academic achievements and these resources allow them to operate efficiently and effectively in their learning environment.

The lack of availability of these resources and other university resources also creates barriers to achievement. These barriers refer to the lack of availability of academic staff due to teaching and working overload (Houston et al, 2006; Burgess, 1996; Billot, 2010), as well as unorganised timetables and structures that lead to students not being aware and clear of course

requirements and flow of modules (Houston et al, 2006; Burgess, 1996; Billot, 2010). Furthermore, noisy spaces and crowded learning areas such as libraries and LAN's hinder achievement, because students are unable to learn and be productive in disruptive environments (Leibowitz, 2014).

In the findings of this study, students mentioned that these extrinsic barriers (noisy spaces, crowded learning areas such as libraries and LAN's are disruptive environments) push them to find other learning spaces, such as their residential apartments on campus or their homes. This barrier could pose as a problem to students who stay away from the actual learning institution (Lukkarinen et al., 2016; Bai et al., 2018). In light of this students miss out on their learning opportunities in the classrooms as well as they become unaware of important university notices and information that may affect their learning (Lukkarinen et al., 2016; Bai et al., 2018). For example, postponed dates for tests and assignments or new information learnt in modules/courses. This affects students and has a negative impact on their academic achievements.

However, many students persist in not attending lectures and tutorials, because of barriers such as the lack of availability of resources (academic staff, unorganised timetables and structures, noisy spaces and crowded learning areas) (Lukkarinen et al., 2016; Bai et al., 2018). In this study, the students from the focus group discussion mentioned that these barriers affect their learning towards exceptional academic achievement, and hence, they feel there is no need to attend university lectures and tutorials. However, when students do not attend class/lectures it becomes detrimental for their learning outcomes (Lukkarinen et al., 2016; Bai et al., 2018). Students attending their lectures and tutorials improve their academic outcomes, and they are most likely to produce higher marks in their final assessments by attending classes consistently (Lukkarinen et al., 2016; Bai et al., 2018).

It is also important to consider enhancers and barriers that are experienced from within the individual, such as intrinsic enhancers and barriers that affect students' exceptional academic achievements.

#### 5.4.2 Intrinsic enhancers and barriers

Intrinsic factors exist within the individual (McKay & Devlin, 2016) and refer to abilities that enable or disable the individual to achieve, such as intelligence, learning style, retention and memory capacities (Illeris, 2018).

In the research findings of this study, it was found that intrinsic enhancers and barriers are somewhat related to students' needs being fulfilled. The participants of this study reported that when students' needs are not met, it creates barriers for them in their academic achievement process. For example, the lack of food and inadequate nutrition, lack of shelter and the lack of tuition fees are needs that students are struggling to meet. These conditions are mainly a reflection of the type of environment that a student comes from. A background where needs are not addressed may intrinsically affect a student's thinking, learning and motivation. Therefore these barriers can slow down a student's learning process.

However, students that are faced with such barriers can use intrinsic enhancers to better their situation and to meet their needs. For example, an individual from an impoverished background could be driven to work as hard as he or she can to remove themselves from the situation of poverty and to create a better life for themselves (Illeris, 2018; Ngidi, 2005). Being driven to remove oneself from a particular situation (e.g., poverty) could also be regarded as self-motivation to improve and change their current situation (Sampson, 2011).

Self-motivation can be through agency, self-regulation and self-efficacy (Sampson, 2011). Agency motivates students from within and allows them to reflect internally (Montenegro, 2017). In this instance, students would reflect on the best ways possible in which they can achieve their future outcomes (Bandura, 2000; Sampson, 2011). When students have positively reflected on their future outcomes, they are internally motivated to meet their desired needs. This positivity reflects students' self-efficacy to accomplish desired needs and to perform at the desired level to fulfil their future outcomes, such as exceptional achievement in their academic programme (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2005; Maddux, 2016).

According to Abraham Maslow (1943) people are motivated to achieve needs that are intrinsically associated, and when one need is fulfilled people seek to fulfil the next one (McLeod, 2013; Maslow, 1943). Hence, when students are unable to meet their needs, they are unable to maximise their academic achievements (Sampson, 2011). This barrier affects them from within, and causes them to lose concentration on learning and focusing on their achievements. For instance, when students are unable to realise their self-esteem, they are unable to self-actualise because their basic needs have not been fulfilled. When students lack confidence and self-esteem, they are unable to reflect on their learning and become active agents in their learning process in order to foresee their future outcomes, including exceptional achievement (Sampson, 2011). This lack of self-esteem means that there is no motivation, and

when there is a lack of motivation, they are unable to self-actualise. Thus, due to not having intrinsic motivation and extrinsic support, students are unable to drive their learning capability to achieve highly in their academics.

Nevertheless, students are able to adapt to the adversities which they face in their learning environment. They are able to adapt by taking responsibility for their learning, being consistent and hard working. These requisites act as internal motivation for students, that helps build resistance towards the difficulties that they may experience (Nigidi, 2005; Sampson, 2011). This internal motivation enhances students' ability to reflect on the involvements and commitments they have made (e.g. obtaining a degree). This process of reflection drives students to meet their desired goals and plans that they have set out to achieve (Ngidi, 2005; McLrod, 2013).

It is also important to note that there are ways in which exceptional academic achievement is being improved by learning institutions.

### **5.5 Improving exceptional academic outcomes**

Improvements can be made by academic staff members and the university to increase exceptional academic achievement outcomes amongst students.

According to academic staff members in this study, networking across schools allow academic staff to build relationships amongst each other. Building relationships will enable them to learn teaching strategies from each other, deal with practical issues experienced in teaching, and to share ideas on how to strengthen learning in the academic environment. This connection keeps academic staff members up to date with trends, and by keeping communication open, it can be assured that academic staff members will provide the same information to guide students towards improving their exceptional academic achievement.

There are also other ways in which schools (structure/clusters/disciplines within UKZN) can improve students' academic achievements. According to Dr. Mike (Interview 4), an academic staff member in this study, said that it is important to make learning structures more visible for students. Developing structure in the way they teach and creating a visible pedagogy guides students. This assists students as lectures become clear, and it is easier for them to follow through modules/courses being taught by lecturers. Dr. Mike (Interview 4) further explained, that rather than moving abruptly on to unrelated topics, it is more suitable to build on what students have already been taught. When lecturers provide students with a visible learning

structure, students can organise themselves and prepare themselves in terms of what they expect from lectures (Houston et al., 2006; Burgess, 1996; Billot, 2010). Paying attention to building knowledge by creating assessments, tests and course work on previous background knowledge can improve students' academic outcomes (Houston et al., 2006; Burgess, 1996; Billot, 2010) because they already have an understanding of previous learning. Hence, when students reflect on what they have learnt in the past, and they have clear knowledge structure about a current topic, they can easily assimilate new information with understanding (Billot, 2010).

It is also crucial to focus on students' reading and writing. Academic staff members in this study mentioned that at UKZN, this is further improved by students making use of a system called Turnitin. Academic staff members said that this guides students with regards to how they can improve their academic reading and writing by avoiding plagiarism. When students' academic skills (reading and writing) are nurtured, they are motivated to take up further degrees, such as Honours and Masters Degrees, as well as having the confidence to publish their research. Thus, students having well-developed reading and writing skills can improve their exceptional academic achievements.

Academic staff members in the study also say that having exercises (classroom tasks) in a class where students can engage in a critical way (thinking and writing) supports their achievement. Students being exposed to tasks/activities in class that require them to be critical allow them to engage with the content as well as be prepared for discussions on the topic being taught to them before coming to class (Towle & Cottrell, 1996). In addition, students need to think and be critical beyond what they are studying, as getting different perspectives from around them in their world enables them to have general knowledge (Towle & Cottrell, 1996). This general knowledge helps students to achieve because they can think widely, and they are not confined to critical thinking only in their field of study (Towle & Cottrell, 1996). Thinking widely can improve exceptional academic achievement amongst students because they can draw on different aspects from the world around them.

Academic staff members in this study, also suggested ways in which the curriculum that lecturers follow to teach students could be changed to help satisfy students learning needs and to help them improve their academic achievements. According to the findings in this study, major concepts in the presentation of curriculums are missing. Concepts that are being missed are the lack of structure, content not being sufficiently specified, and poorly detailed aims,



objectives and goals of the material being taught to students. Implementing a curriculum that considers these concepts allow for lectures and the content to be more understandable for students. Other ways in which the curriculum can be improved is by having someone established in the School to develop, set and manage the curriculum effectively. When there is responsibility taken for the development of curriculums, there is dedication to manage it effectively to bring about improvements in student learning.

Curriculums should also incorporate more of an Afrocentric content and framework. This framework is slowly taking shape within UKZN. Integrating an Afrocentric framework in the curriculum can make learning more relevant to students (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). This framework allows for learning to be relevant in the context of Africa/South Africa (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). When students can understand how things are developing around them in their own familiar context, they can relate to what is being taught to them (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). Hence, implementing an Afrocentric framework into the curriculum can improve students' academic achievements (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). However, according to Jackson (2017), an Afrocentric curriculum is not as global as Eurocentric curriculums. Therefore, an Afrocentric curriculum may not account for all experiences as it more African centred (Jackson, 2017).

Lastly, curriculums can improve by being more relevant to what students want to learn about. This opportunity involves students in being co-creators of their learning as this creates more of an interest and responsibility towards an individual's learning process. However, according to Bovill et al., (2011 p. 133) "[w]ithin higher education, students' voices are frequently overlooked in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula". Hence, academic staff need to explore ways in which students can become fully involved in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curriculums (Bovill et al., 2011).

When students are involved as co-creators in the design of teaching, courses and curriculums, they become active agents in analysis and revisions of education. This involvement allows students to share their voices and ideas which affirm that they have a unique perspective on teaching and learning that can improve their academic achievements. Hence, students' sharing their insights warrant not only the attention, but also the response, of educators. By responding to students' ideas educators demonstrate willingness to work together with students and to improve academic achievements. (Bovill et al., 2011).

## **5.6 Importance of students excelling**

In this study, many of the participants, both academic staff members and high achieving students, agreed that it is important to excel academically. It is important because when students succeed healthy self-esteem is created, academic life is happy and fulfilling and they can mentor others. Furthermore, it is important for students to excel as it creates motivation to continue working hard, and it encourages healthy competition amongst students. It is also important for students to excel academically as this encourages them to be consistent and maintain commitment towards their studies. Students can maintain their consistency and hard work through agency. Agency includes a student's motivation, self-regulation (which is the constant reflection on their performance and achievements), and self-actualisation. When students understand the importance for them to achieve highly, they work harder to reach their goals and fulfil their desires (such as completing their degrees and graduating).

Students in this study said that it is important for them to excel academically because they feel the pressure from financial support which their parents provide for them during their study period. Hence, they do not want to disappoint themselves or their parents. Moreover, it is important for students to maintain their levels of achievement to continue receiving the support that assists them in their academics from a significant other (parent/s) and the university (bursaries/scholarships). This support helps students feel that they are not studying all on their own, and further motivates them to be consistent in their high achievements.

According to academic staff members in this study, it was found that high achievement itself is motivating because students have worked hard and set goals for themselves to achieve in their academics. It is also important to consider that achievements are personal and a lot of students try to do well even though they do not have very high marks or fall within cum laude and summa cum laude status at university. This personal achievement is also significant for lecturers and universities to recognise, as students are excelling by improving on their academic achievements. Dr. Jones (Interview 7) mentioned that it is important for academic staff to identify students who come into university with a 50% and have managed to achieve 60% within one semester. She said that this should be seen as exceptional academic achievement. This identification is important because it helps students to realise and be aware of their abilities to achieve exceptionally. When students further display positive attitudes towards their learning they develop skills, knowledge and values, and they are able to cultivate the love for learning, be consistent, hardworking and responsible. Therefore, academic staff members

in this study commented that when students achieve beyond their expectations, they can improve, and they become exceptional academic achievers.

In the next section, Chapter Six concludes on the research of this dissertation and presents recommendations for future research in exceptional academic achievement.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This study was aimed at exploring exceptional academic achievement among undergraduate students with the aim of understanding how exceptional academic achievement occurs from both academic staff members and high achieving students' perspectives. Chapter Six thus brings the dissertation to a close by highlighting salient points from each of the preceding chapters, summarising main findings of the study and future recommendations for researchers.

### **6.2 Salient Points from Preceding Chapters**

Chapter One introduced and set the backdrop to the study. This backdrop included an exploration of the higher education context from 1994, and considered entrance into university, the entrance of diverse populations into university, and restrictive teaching styles and education acts (i.e., Universities Amendment Act of 1959) that influenced (exceptional) academic achievement in South Africa. Despite positive changes implemented by the higher education sector, only limited gains have been made in terms of improving students' success rates (CHE, 2010). The DHET (2014) has highlighted how low success rates, low graduation rates and throughput rates amongst students threaten the sector and the South African labour market and economy. As a consequence of the problem of low success and throughput rates, much research has necessarily focused on academic underachievement and failure. However, one of the problems of focusing on academic underachievement and failure can create and reinforce a "deficit" mindset for conceptualising students' academic achievement. Hence, the study reported in this dissertation was concerned with exploring the phenomenon of exceptional academic achievement in the South African higher education context in an attempt to add and offer an anti-deficit perspective of student learning. The study did this by considering the perspectives of academic staff members and academically exceptional students.

Chapter Two of the dissertation reviewed literature and theory about (exceptional) academic achievement in higher education. The literature review was aimed at highlighting gaps and limitations in the existing research on the topic of exceptional academic achievement. The literature reviewed the importance and influence that academic staff members have on students' exceptional academic achievement outcomes.

Academic staff member's roles are to facilitate effective teaching and communication amongst students. Students need to play their role by taking responsibility for their learning. Both

academic staff members and students need to be involved in, and committed to, the teaching and learning process to enhance exceptional academic achievement outcomes. When academic staff members and students are involved and committed to the teaching and learning process, an integrated relationship is created that strengthens the teaching and learning process. Moreover, it is the university's responsibility to improve academic achievement outcomes among students as well as evolve universities into enabling institutions to assist students with their exceptional academic achievement outcomes.

The literature also highlighted enhancers and barriers (intrinsic- within the individual and extrinsic- outside of the individual) that affect students' exceptional academic achievement. Enhancers such as technology, tutorials and conducive learning environments improve exceptional academic achievement outcomes. Whereas barriers prevent students from achieving such as the lack of basic needs not being fulfilled, lack of one-to-one interaction with academic staff and the lack of resources to support learning. Even though students are faced with barriers that prevent them from excelling, they have the capability to assist themselves to achieve and to adjust so that they can adapt to settings of the university.

Chapter Two also explored how social cognitive theory can be used to explain exceptional academic achievement among students. The social cognitive theory highlights that individuals are not merely influenced by themselves, but rather influenced by their behaviour, cognition and environment. Further to that, it can be understood to be part of a triadic reciprocal determinism. A triadic reciprocal determinism can be explained by the process of an individual's behaviour, cognition, and environmental factors interacting together as shown in Figure 2.1 (Harinie et al., 2017). This process defines an individual's capabilities (i.e., agency, self-regulation and self-efficacy). These capabilities can inform ways in which students go about learning and attaining exceptional academic achievement outcomes.

Based on the literature reviewed, there has not been enough research done in the South African context that emphasises exceptional academic achievement among students. However, there seems to be support from university institutions as they are recognising exceptional academic achievements, gaps between students and lecturers, the teaching and learning process, resources and student involvement that need to be bridged to enhance exceptional academic achievement.

Thirdly, chapter Three highlighted the research methodology. The study objectives and research questions guided the methodology chapter, as well as the research paradigm was

explained (interpretivist research paradigm). The research paradigm informs and leads to the research design that was chosen for this study. In this study, a qualitative research design was chosen as it suited the nature of research. After that, the procedures of how the study was carried out was explained, as well as the location in which the study was done. The research methodology chapter also clarified sampling methods, data collection and data analysis methods used to derive findings of this study.

Furthermore, ethical procedures were highlighted to ensure the safety of participants as well as a sound and rigorous study. Also, the methods and procedures used to carry out this research can be used as a guideline for other researchers researching similar topics. It can provide information on ways in which other researchers can go about conducting their research or even conduct the very same research to test its credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability and findings of the research. Hence, the research methodology chapter of this study ensures procedures carried throughout the research project were sound and valid to provide reliable research findings.

Fourthly, Chapter Four highlighted the findings of this research study. At the beginning of the findings chapter, the researcher presented two tables (Table 1 and Table 2). These tables provide essential information on each participant in terms of a brief background on their current roles, degrees obtained, year of study as well as their views on the main things that a student/lecturer/ university needs to do to help a student excel academically.

In the findings chapter, there seem to be similarities between academic staff members and high achieving students on the perspective of exceptional academic achievement. Even though different factors have been mentioned, exceptional academic achievement is centred mainly on student-lecturer relationships and the university environment seems to take precedence. Therefore, the findings indicate that the roles which lecturers and the university play have a vital impact on exceptional academic achievement among students. Academic staff members reported the need to have more hours and consultation times with students, and high achieving students also reported that having one-to-one interaction with academics provides more insight into their interests. However, it is challenging for academic staff members to do this consistently due to other constraints, such as overloaded administration and being involved in their writing and publishing. Other issues experienced by participants was the lack of resources made available by the university and some basic needs of students not being fulfilled.

On the other hand, however, there are improvements in exceptional academic achievement that are taking place. For example, high achievers are being identified and given more focus and guidance by academic staff, and special functions are held to award their exceptional academic achievements.

There are also improvements that academic staff are implementing in classrooms to make teaching and learning more accessible and getting students involved at the classroom level. There are also curriculum adjustments that are taking shape to make learning more relevant to students, such as engaging with students' interest, taking an Afrocentric perspective and creating clear concepts (curriculum structure, aims and goals) to improve curriculums to better facilitate teaching and learning.

All these factors aim to improve exceptional academic achievement outcomes among students. Lastly, the discussion of this study is highlighted in Chapter Five. The discussion chapter is a part of the research that reiterates the findings of this study by discussing the findings and substantiating it with literature that was mentioned in Chapter Two of this study.

It is also important to highlight recommendations of this study so that these recommendations can improve the future of exceptional academic achievement in learning institutions.

### **6.3 Recommendations for future research**

- Future studies with a similar topic should focus on exceptional achievement other than high academic achievement. In this study, it was found that academic staff members and high achieving students do not only consider exceptional academic achievement to be measured with high marks (distinctions), cum laude and summa cum laude students but also recognises students that achieve in different areas of life which allow them to excel exceptionally. For example, at UKZN, the Distinguished Students' Award (DSA) does not only recognise academic excellence amongst students, but also considers outstanding community engagement or university service. Academic staff are also recognised through a Distinguished Teachers' Award (DTS). This award does not only consider academic staff to be outstanding teachers who demonstrate successful and effective learning outcomes. They are also recognised for their sustained contribution to teaching and learning through innovation and improvement of teaching and learning practices, their role in community engagement, and their contributions to curriculum development.

([http://utlo.ukzn.ac.za/Excellence\\_Awards/Overview\\_of\\_Excellence\\_Awards.aspx](http://utlo.ukzn.ac.za/Excellence_Awards/Overview_of_Excellence_Awards.aspx))

- Another recommendation would be to have individual interviews with high achieving students before the focus group discussion to get their perspective on the topic of exceptional academic achievement. In a focus group discussion, there could be dominance, and if participants are shy or not outspoken, they find it easy to agree with the group and their personal views on the topic are lost. Furthermore, interviews generate in-depth knowledge and more specific questions can be concentrated on. Such as the demographics of the student participants to get a sense of their context and to make sense of what they are say.
- A clear distinction between the terms 'exceptional academic achievement and success needs to be made when interviewing the lecturers and students. This was a weakness of the study/methodology and future research on this topic will have to make the differentiation much clearer in interviews/focus group discussion schedules.
- University structures (schools/clusters/disciplines) need to develop ways that will assist in improving student academics and in highlight student success just as much as student failure.
- The university also needs to develop ways in which they can provide, and maintain relevant resources effectively to students, to assist them with meeting their learning needs.
- Lastly, an increased academic and administrative workload does not give lecturers adequate time to meet and consult with students. Hence, universities need to implement effective strategies to deal with this issue as students rely on one-to-one meetings with lecturers to enhance their exceptional academic achievement outcomes.



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## APPENDICIES

### Appendix 1

#### A) Interview schedule: UKZN Academic staff members

##### Interviewer question guide:

1. Introduction, overview of research, and consent.
2. Tell me about your current role at UKZN:
  - a. How long have you been in the role?
  - b. Where did you start your career?
3. What does exceptional academic achievement at undergraduate level at UKZN mean to you?
4. Why do you think some students excel academically at undergraduate level and others don't?
5. How does your role as AL T&L (or academic staff member) influence academic achievement outcomes in undergraduate education at UKZN?
6. As an AL T&L (or academic staff member) what do you think are some of the enhancers and barriers that the students might be facing in order to excel academically?
7. What could your School do to improve academic achievement outcomes at UKZN?
8. What could lecturers do in the classroom to assist students to excel academically?
9. What could students do to assist themselves excel academically?
10. In what ways could the undergraduate curriculum be changed to help improve academic achievement outcomes at UKZN?
11. Lastly, is it important for students to excel academically? Say why or why not?

B) Email invitation to participate in an interview: Academic Leaders for Teaching and Learning (AL T&L)

Dear Prof/Dr \_\_\_\_\_,

**Invitation to participate in a research project on exceptional academic achievement by UKZN students**

I will be conducting an institutional research study on undergraduate students who excel academically at UKZN. As an Academic Leader for Teaching and Learning at UKZN, your input on undergraduate academic achievement outcome would be greatly appreciated. You are therefore being emailed and invited to participate in a research interview on the topic of exceptional academic achievement at UKZN (see attachment to this email for more information on the interview and the study).

It would be greatly appreciated if you would consider participating in this research interview. Please reply to this email if you are available to participate in this study, and I will then follow up with you about a suitable date, time, and venue for the interview.

Sincerely,

Asthu Mahabeer

Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Tel: 033 260 5371

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

C) Email invitation to participate in an interview: Academic staff members

Dear Prof/Dr/Mr/Ms \_\_\_\_\_,

**Invitation to participate in a research project on exceptional academic achievement by UKZN students**

I will be conducting an institutional research study on undergraduate students who excel academically at UKZN. You have been identified by your Academic Leader of Teaching and Learning as a key role player in the attainment of academic achievement outcomes at undergraduate levels. You are therefore being emailed and invited to participate in a research interview on the topic of exceptional academic achievement at UKZN (see attachment to this email for more information on the interview and the study).

It would be greatly appreciated if you would consider participating in this research interview. Please reply to this email if you are available to participate in this study, and I will then follow up with you about a suitable date, time, and venue for the interview.

Sincerely,

Asthu Mahabeer

Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Tel: 033 260 5371

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

D) Focus group discussion schedule: Facilitators guide:

Time	Activities and facilitator prompts/questions
20min	<p><b>Part 1: Introductions and consent:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants arrive</li> <li>• Introductions</li> <li>• Overview of study</li> <li>• Information sheet</li> <li>• Informed consent</li> </ul>
35min	<p><b>Part 2: Stimulus activity:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitator asks participants to separate the piece of paper provided into two; on the one half, draw a UKZN space that you think enables students to excel academically; on the other half, draw a UKZN space that you think prevents UKZN students from excelling academically</li> <li>• Students complete the drawing independently</li> <li>• Each student then takes a turn to show and explain their drawing to the group</li> </ul>
35min	<p><b>Part 3: Open discussion:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is exceptional academic achievement at university?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1. How have your perceptions of exceptional academic achievement changed as a result of the strikes on campus last year?</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. What helps you to excel academically in normal circumstances?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1. Does this change during protest action? If so, How?</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. What role does your family play in your academic achievement?</li> <li>4. What role do your lecturers play in your academic achievement?</li> <li>5. What role do resources play in your academic achievement?</li> <li>6. Which groups of students seem to excel more than others? Why might this be so?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6.1. Do you think there is a relationship between race and high academic achievement? In what ways?</li> </ol> </li> <li>7. What prevents you from excelling academically in normal learning conditions?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7.1. What factors constrain your academic achievement during protest action?</li> </ol> </li> <li>8. In which degrees/modules is it harder to excel academically in?</li> <li>9. Which systems at UKZN frustrate your attempts to excel academically?</li> <li>10. What could UKZN do to help you excel academically?             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10.1 What could UKZN do to help you excel academically, especially during times of campus unrest?</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

E) Email invitation to prospective focus group discussion participants:

Dear student,

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

We are conducting an institutional research study on undergraduate students who excel academically at UKZN. As an undergraduate student who has excelled so far at UKZN, you are being emailed and invited to participate in a focus group discussion on the topic of exceptional academic achievement at UKZN (see attachment to this email for more information on the focus group discussion and the study). If you are interested in participating in a focus group discussion on the campus you are studying, please reply to this email and we will get back to you with further details about the date, time, and venue of the focus group discussion.

Sincerely,

Monique Schoeman

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

## Appendix 2

### A) Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research (ALØs of T&L and Lecturers)

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> April 2017

Hello Academic Staff Member,

My name is Asthu Mahabeer, and I am a student from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Pietermaritzburg campus. I am currently a Masters student in Research Psychology and I am registered in the Discipline of Psychology at UKZN. You can contact me via email: mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that is part of my masterØs degree (thesis). It involves a research study on exceptional academic achievement at UKZN. The aim of the project is to explore exceptional academic achievement from the perspectives of academic staff members and high achieving students. The results from the study could assist UKZN to understand what facilitates exceptional academic achievement at UKZN, and how this could be encouraged and supported. You have been invited to take part in an interview with the researcher on exceptional academic achievement at UKZN. The study is expected to enrol at least six academic staff members from the different Schools within the UKZN College of Humanities. The study will involve the following procedures

- An introduction informing you about myself as the researcher and my contact details.
- Informing you about the study and informed consent from you as the participant.
- Facilitation of the interview which involves an interaction between the researcher and the participant
- The duration of your participation if you choose to enrol and remain in the study is expected to be 60-90 minutes.
- The study is funded by the UKZN University Teaching and Learning Office.

There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in the interview. Your participation and the content of what you discuss will be kept confidential. In addition, your identity will not be revealed when the findings from the study are reported. For example pseudonyms will be used

in the reporting of the research, and any potentially identifying information about you will be anonymised. I hope that the study will enable the following benefits:

- To understand what facilitates exceptional academic achievement at UKZN.
- How this could be encouraged and supported.
- Make students and academic staff members (e.g., Deans, Academic Leaders and Lecturers) more aware of exceptional academic achievement.

The study will not provide direct benefits to the participants and there are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this study.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number **HSSREC protocol reference HSS/1038/017M**). My research project is embedded within a larger institutional study with the HSSREC. Please view approval number of the overarching study **HSSREC protocol reference HSS/0060/015CA**

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

### **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

**KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA**

**Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609**

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

Participation in this research is voluntary. The participants may withdraw participation at any point. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation the participants will not incur penalty

or loss of treatment or other benefit to which they are normally entitled. The researcher is unlikely to terminate participation from participants in the study.

The only cost incurred by participants as a result of participation in the study will be their time. There will be no incentives provided for the participants, and the researcher will meet the academic staff members at the location and venue of their choice.

---

## CONSENT

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have been informed about the study on the perspectives of academic staff members and students on exceptional academic achievement at UKZN, and the barriers to academic achievement by Asthu Mahabeer

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

## **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

**Research Office, Westville Campus Govan Mbeki Building**

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000



KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

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

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record interviews      YES / NO

---

**Signature of Participant**

---

**Date**

B) Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research (High achieving students)

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> April 2017

Hello student,

My name is Asthu Mahabeer, and I am a student from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Pietermaritzburg campus. I am currently a Masters student in Research Psychology and I am registered in the Discipline of Psychology at UKZN. You can contact me via email: mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that is part of my master's degree (thesis). It involves a research study on exceptional academic achievement at UKZN. The aim of the project is to explore exceptional academic achievement from the perspectives of academic staff members and high achieving students. The results from the study could assist UKZN to understand what facilitates exceptional academic achievement at UKZN, and how this could be encouraged and supported. You have been invited to take part in a focus group discussion on exceptional academic achievement among undergraduate students. The study is expected to enrol at least 10 high achieving students from UKZN, Pietermaritzburg campus. The study will involve the following procedures:

- An introduction informing you about myself as the researcher and my contact details.
- Informing you about the study and informed consent from you as the participant.
- Facilitation of the interview which involves an interaction between the researcher and the participant
- The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be 60-90 minutes.
- The study is funded by the UKZN University Teaching and Learning Office.

There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in the focus group discussion. Your participation and the content of what you discuss will be kept confidential. In addition, your identity will not be revealed when the findings from the study are reported. For example pseudonyms will be used in the reporting of the research, and any potentially identifying information about you will be anonymised. I hope that the study will enable the following benefits:

- To understand what facilitates exceptional academic achievement at UKZN.
- How this could be encouraged and supported.
- Make students and academic staff members (e.g., Deans, Academic Leaders and Lecturers) more aware of exceptional academic achievement.

The study will not provide direct benefits to the participants and there are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this study.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number **HSSREC protocol reference HSS/1038/017M**). My research project is embedded within a larger institutional study with the HSSREC. Please view approval number of the overarching study **HSSREC protocol reference HSS/0060/015CA**

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

### **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus

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4000

**KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA**

**Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609**

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

Participation in this research is voluntary. The participants may withdraw participation at any point. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation the participants will not incur penalty or loss of treatment or other benefit to which they are normally entitled. The researcher is unlikely to terminate participation from participants in the study.

Costs that might be incurred by participants as a result of participation in the study may be transport to the venue, as the focus group will be held at UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus. Although, the students will be recruited from the UKZN PMB area and will be attending university at the time of the research. The incentive for participation in the study will be refreshments (juice/cool-drink and a light snack to eat, such as pizza) after the focus group discussion is completed. The incentive will be given to the participants for taking part and contributing to the study, as well as for their time which they may have incurred before, during and after the focus group discussion.

---

## CONSENT

I í í í í í í í í í í í í . have been informed about the study on the perspectives of academic staff members and students on exceptional academic achievement at UKZN, and the barriers to academic achievement by Asthu Mahabeer

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at mahabeerasthu79@gmail.com

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

## **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

**KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA**

**Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609**

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

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record focus group discussion	YES / NO
-------------------------------------	----------

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

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

C) Confidentiality pledge for focus group participants

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

Signed:

Date:

## Appendix 3

### A) Gatekeepers approval



6 January 2015

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

Dear Dr Munro

#### **RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

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


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

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

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

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

Yours sincerely

  
MR BAATILE POO  
REGISTRAR (ACTING)

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 6005/2206 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 7024/2204 Email: [registrar@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:registrar@ukzn.ac.za)

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



Founding Campuses:  Durban  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

B) Gatekeeper approval



17 May 2017

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

Dear Dr Munro

**RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Simon Mokoena".

**MR SIMON MOKOENA  
REGISTRAR**

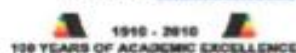
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**Office of the Registrar**

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 8005/2206 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)



Founding Campuses   ■ Edgewood   ■ Howard College   ■ Medical School   ■ Pietermaritzburg   ■ Westville



## Appendix 4: Ethical approval of overarching study



12 February 2015

Dr Nicholas Munro 316183  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Dr Munro

Protocol reference number: HSS/0060/015CA

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

### Full Approval – Expedited Application

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

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

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

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

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

Yours faithfully

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

/pm

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

---

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






Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

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

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

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## Appendix 5: Full ethical approval for study



2 August 2017

Ms Asthu Mahabeer 213517070  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Ms Mahabeer

Protocol reference number: HSS/1038/017M

Project title: Students excelling academically: Exploring academic staff members' and students' perspectives on exceptional academic achievement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)

### Full Approval – Expedited Application

In response to your application received 23 June 2017, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

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

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

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

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

Yours faithfully

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

/pm

cc Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Munro  
cc. Academic Leader Research: Professor D Wassenaar  
cc. School Administrator: Ms Nondumiso Khanyile

---

### Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

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

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



Faculty Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

## **Appendix 6:**

### **A) Amendments to research protocol (HSS/0060/015CA)**

21 February 2017

Dr Shenuka Singh

Chair: Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Dear Singh,

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

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

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

##### 1) Change in project leaders/collaborators:

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

##### 2) Access to 2016/2017 UKZN Scholarships List

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

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

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

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Munro', with a stylized, cursive script.

Nicholas Munro, PhD

Lecturer: Discipline of Psychology, School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus

B) Full approval notification-Amendment application (HSS/0060/015CA)



22 March 2017

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

Dear Dr Munro

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

**Full approval notification- Amendment application**

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


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

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

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

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully

  
.....  
Dr Shamila Naidoo (Deputy Chair)

/px

---

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

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

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



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## **Appendix 7: Transcription Conventions (Jeffersonian Notation)**

### **Transcription Conventions (Jeffersonian Notation adapted from Silverman 2005, p. 376)**

- [ Left brackets indicate the point at which a current speaker's talk is overlapped by another's talk.
- = Equal signs, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning, indicate no gap between the two lines.
- (.) A dot in parentheses within a line indicates a tiny gap, probably no more than one-tenth of a second.  
A dot in parentheses on its own line indicates a relatively 'pregnant pause'
- \_\_\_ Underscoring indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude.
- :: Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound.
- ( ) Parentheses contain the author's descriptions rather than transcriptions.

## Appendix 8: Turnitin report

### Final masters dissertation

#### ORIGINALITY REPORT

<b>11</b> %	<b>8</b> %	<b>3</b> %	<b>9</b> %
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<b>2</b>	<b>www.tandfonline.com</b> Internet Source	<1 %
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<b>4</b>	<b>scholar.ufs.ac.za:8080</b> Internet Source	<1 %
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<b>9</b>	<b>Grewal, Simran Kaur(Harris, L and Lewis, P). "A case study investigation into the diffusion of e-</b>	<1 %



mediated learning technology in UK higher education", Brunel University Brunel Business School PhD Theses, 2011.

Publication

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<b>10</b>	<b>Submitted to EDMC</b> Student Paper	<1%
<b>11</b>	<b>Submitted to Universiti Malaysia Sabah</b> Student Paper	<1%
<b>12</b>	<b>Submitted to AUT University</b> Student Paper	<1%
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