



**EXPERIENCES OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF STUDENTS
WITH DISABILITIES AT UNIVERSITIES OF TECHNOLOGY
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**by
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this Doctorate to my late mother, Doris Cele. I wish she were still around to witness this great achievement. I love you, Mom.

DECLARATION

I, Princess Thulile Duma, declare that

- (i) The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
- (ii) This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
- (iii) This thesis does not contain other persons' data, graphs or other information unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from them. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
 - a) their words have been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been referenced;
 - b) where their exact words have been used, their writing has been placed inside quotation marks, and referenced.
- (v) This thesis does not contain text or tables copied and pasted from the Internet unless specifically acknowledged and the source being detailed in the References section.

Signed: _____

PT DUMA

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ABSTRACT

As a minority group, people with disabilities experience discrimination and stigmatisation in our communities. According to some disability models, the general public often perpetuates the negative treatment of people with disabilities, and this is exemplified particularly in the medical and the social models. In South Africa, the issue of disability has rightly received concerted attention, which is evident in the number of legislations the country has promulgated since the advent of a democratic government. South Africa is one of the signatories of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and it ratified it and the Optional Protocol on 30 November 2007. Transformation and the democratisation of the education sector have resulted in a steep incline in the number of students with disabilities in higher education. These students are not often included in statistics but there is evidence that many have gained confidence in the system and have proved themselves to be competent students in the academic sphere. Moreover, many are succeeding despite the under-preparedness of some higher education institutions to accommodate these students both physically and academically.

The following questions guided the study:

1. Which experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?
2. How do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?
3. Why do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in the way they do?

The purpose of the study was to explore and thus understand the experiences of academic success of students with disabilities in two universities of technology in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, namely the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). Disabilities are mostly associated with limitations and dependency, but this study took a positive approach by placing the investigation under the lenses of the resilience and self-efficacy theories. The study was underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm which allowed the researcher to view the academic environment through the perceptions and experiences of the participants. The theoretical framework that I employed comprised a combination of phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy and I used these theories as a springboard to understand the phenomenon of academic success achieved by students with disabilities. Thirteen participants were involved in this qualitative research. I

used both purposive and snowball sampling to obtain saturated data. A qualitative research design was employed in this inquiry. Semi-structured interviews and photo-voice images were used as the primary data collection methods. The data that were obtained through these methods were augmented by observation notes and document analysis.

The study found that, irrespective of the different backgrounds of the two institutions, the participants shared common academic experiences. The findings could be divided into three distinct categories, namely: main focus, stressors, and enablers. In the category of main focus it was found that students with disabilities desired independence, leeway to build their own future, and they wanted to be developed and empowered so that they could emancipate themselves from the bondage of discrimination. The second category revealed conflicting forces that I refer to as stressors. These stressors were engendered by a lack of inclusivity and were driven by a number of issues including an ‘unfriendly’ infrastructure, limited curricula, inappropriate teaching and learning methodologies, residential issues, and limited funding. The third category enlightened the enablers, which were support, self-efficacy, self-regulated learning, spirituality, and resilience. Although a combination of the three theories that were employed was a novel approach in this field of study, it should be noted that the findings were not unique and did not digress from those of earlier studies. In order to enhance the academic success of students with disabilities, I strongly recommend that universities prioritise inclusivity and encourage disability awareness among all staff members.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
DECLARATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v

CHAPTER ONE

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	The Research Problem	4
1.3	The Researcher's View and Positionality	5
1.4	Research Objectives and Research Questions	8
1.5	Significance of the Study	9
1.6	Location of the Study	11
1.6.1	Background to Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT)	12
1.6.2	Background to the Durban University of Technology (DUT)	13
	1.6.2.1 <i>Establishment of ML Sultan Technikon</i>	13
	1.6.2.2 <i>Brief history of Natal Technikon</i>	14
1.7	Scope of the study	14
1.8	Structure of the Thesis	15
1.9	Conclusion	18

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUALISING DISABILITY AND POSITIONING THE STUDY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1	Introduction	19
2.2	Conceptualising Disability	19
2.3	Legislation Pertaining to People with Disabilities in South Africa	22
2.4	Models of Disability	30
2.4.1	The medical model	30
2.4.2	The social model	31
2.4.3	Other models of disability	35
2.5	Disability as a phenomenon in South African Higher Education Institutions	38
2.5.1	Massification of higher education and challenges for people with disabilities	41
2.5.2	Inclusivity in higher education	46
	2.5.2.1 <i>Student support</i>	52
	2.5.2.2 <i>The achievement of academic success in HEIs</i>	55
2.6	Dropout Rates	60
2.7	Conclusion	63

CHAPTER THREE

PARADIGMATIC AND THEORETICAL FRAMING OF THE STUDY

3.1	Introduction	64
3.2	Understanding Research Paradigms	64
3.2.1	The positivist paradigm	66
3.2.2	The critical theory paradigm	66

3.2.3	The interpretivist approach	67
3.3	Theoretical Framework	69
3.3.1	Phenomenology	70
3.3.2	Resilience	72
3.3.3	Self-efficacy	79
	3.2.3.1 <i>Cognition as a driver of academic success</i>	81
	3.2.3.2 <i>Motivational processes</i>	81
	3.2.3.3 <i>Affective processes</i>	81
	3.2.3.4 <i>Selection processes</i>	82
	3.2.3.5 <i>Self-regulated learning</i>	83
3.2.4	Tenets of combination of the selected theories	86
3.3	Conclusion	90

CHAPTER FOUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA PRODUCTION

4.1	Introduction	91
4.2	Qualitative Phenomenological Research Design	91
4.3	Methods of Data Production	94
4.3.1	Semi-structured interviews	95
4.3.2	Document analysis	96
4.3.3	Photo-voice recordings	97
4.4	Sampling and Recruitment	99
4.4.1	Determining the type of universe/population	100
4.4.2	Sampling unit	100
4.4.3	Snowball sampling	101
4.5	Ethical Considerations	101
4.6	The Interviewing Process	103
4.7	Data Analysis	104
4.7.1	The process of data analysis	108
	4.7.1.1 <i>First phase: Familiarising myself with the data</i>	109
	4.7.1.2 <i>Second phase: Generating initial codes/determining the natural meaning of units</i>	110
	4.7.1.3 <i>Third Phase: Transformation of the meaning units/revelatory structure</i>	113
	4.7.1.4 <i>Fourth and fifth phases: Reviewing and naming themes and determining structure</i>	113
4.7.2	Strengthening the quality of the research: Trustworthiness	115
4.8	Conclusions	117

CHAPTER FIVE PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

5.1	Introduction	118
5.2	Theme One: Understanding Academic Success	119
5.2.1	Perceived reality of academic success	119
	5.2.1.1 <i>Academic success as a new beginning or foundation</i>	119
	5.2.1.2 <i>Academic success is hard work for self-determination</i>	120
5.2.2	Spirituality	122
5.2.3	Self-efficacy	122
	5.2.3.1 <i>Being content</i>	122
	5.2.3.2 <i>New self-concept and new leadership roles</i>	124

5.2.3.3	<i>Self-regulated learning</i>	126
5.2.4	Time management	128
5.3	Theme Two: Protective Factors as a Form of Support	129
5.3.1	Support	130
5.3.1.1	<i>Family support</i>	130
5.3.1.2	<i>Becoming the main supporters of the family</i>	131
5.3.1.3	<i>Support from friends and others</i>	132
5.3.2	Self-motivation	133
5.4	Theme Three: The Academic Environment	134
5.4.1	Rejection and experiences of humiliation	134
5.4.1.1	<i>Admission constraints</i>	134
5.4.1.2	<i>Positive academic staff support</i>	136
5.4.1.3	<i>Library services</i>	138
5.4.1.4	<i>Attending classes comes with challenges</i>	140
5.4.2	Life in a residence	145
5.4.2.1	<i>Meals and subsistence</i>	145
5.4.2.2	<i>Safety and security in the residences</i>	147
5.5	Theme Four: The funding system	149
5.5.1	Financial challenges for students with disabilities	149
5.5.2	Positive experiences of NSFAS	151
5.5.3	Lack of information from NSFAS	151
5.5.4	The Disability Unit	152
5.5.4.1	<i>Positive support</i>	152
5.5.4.2	<i>Ineffective service</i>	154
5.6	Understanding their Rights	155
5.6.1	Human rights	155
5.6.2	Disability and employment	156
5.7	Conclusion	157

CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC SUCCESS

6.1	Introduction	158
6.2	Perceived Realities of Academic Success	159
6.2.1	Understanding and defining academic success	159
6.2.1.1	<i>Achieving academic success requires hard work and self-determination</i>	160
6.2.1.2	<i>Spirituality</i>	162
6.2.2	Self-efficacy	163
6.2.2.1	<i>Being content with disability</i>	163
6.2.2.2	<i>New self-concept and new leadership roles</i>	165
6.2.2.3	<i>Self-regulated learning</i>	167
6.3	Time Management	168
6.4	Conclusion	169

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

7.1	Introduction	171
7.2.1	Family Support	171
7.2.2	The changing role of family support	172
7.2.3.	Support from peers and others	173

7.3	Self-Motivation	174
7.4	The Academic Environment	176
7.4.1	Experiences of rejection and humiliation	176
7.4.2	Positive support by academic staff	178
7.4.3	Access to the library and books	179
7.4.4	Access to lecture rooms	180
7.4.5	Life in residences	183
7.5	Impact of the Funding System	185
7.6	The role of the Disability Unit	186
7.7	Students with Disabilities and their Rights	188
7.8	Conclusion	189

CHAPTER EIGHT

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: EDUCATION CHANGE LIVES

8.1	Introduction	190
8.2	Life-Changing Experiences	190
8.2.1	Independence and future prospects	190
8.2.2	Overcoming disability and poverty	192
8.2.3	Development, empowerment and emancipation	194
8.3	Leadership Roles	198
8.4	The Spirit of Resilience	199
8.4.1	Communication	201
	8.4.1.1 <i>Self-awareness and intrapersonal skills</i>	201
	8.4.1.2 <i>Intelligences and decisiveness</i>	202
	8.4.1.3 <i>Problem solving</i>	202
8.4.2	Resilience as a beacon of hope	203
8.5	Conclusion	204

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

9.1	Introduction	205
9.2	Shared Lived Experiences	206
9.3	Main Findings	209
9.3.1	Lack of inclusivity	209
9.3.2	Academic success and resilience	210
9.4	Implications of the Findings for Future Studies	211
9.5	Conclusion	212

REFERENCES	214
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APPENDIXES

Appendix A:	Research approval	238
Appendix B:	Application for ethics approval	240
Appendix C:	Research approval from Mangosuthu University of Technology	244
Appendix D:	Research approval from Durban University of Technology	245
Appendix E:	Consent for taking and using my photograph	246
Appendix F:	Turn-it-in report	247

LIST OF FIGURES, PHOTOGRAPHS AND TABLES

FIGURES

Figure 3.1:	The resilience framework.....	79
Figure 3.2:	Combined theoretical framework: phemenology, resilience and self-efficiency	87
Figure 6.1:	Components of academic success.....	161
Figure 8.1:	Skills associated with resilience.....	201
Figure 9.1:	Graphic illustration of shared lived experiences of students with disabilities	209

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photograph 5.1:	Themba’s team.....	126
Photograph 5.2:	Glory’s strategy for studying.....	127
Photograph 5.3:	Thulani and his friend studying as a pair’’’.....	128
Photograph 5.4:	Inaccessibility of books in libraries.....	139
Photograph 5.5:	Dysfunctional computer laboratory.....	139
Photograph 5.6:	Dysfunctional lift.....	142
Photograph 5.7:	Rainy days – no classes.....	143
Photograph 5.8:	The risk of attending classes.....	145
Photograph 5.9:	Struggles in the residence.....	146
Photograph 5.10:	Survival of the fittest.....	148

TABLES

Table 2.1:	DHET registration statistics (2011-2013).....	45
Table 2.2:	Comparison between mainstreaming and inclusive education.....	49
Table 2.3:	Process and procedures associated with a disability uit at HEIs.....	54
Table 3.1:	Pintrich’s phases of areas of self-regulated learning.....	84
Table 4.1:	Comparison of the thematic and phenomenological data analyses	

	models.....	107
Table 4.2:	Developing meaning	111
Table 4.3:	Revolution of meaning and codes.....	113
Table 4.4:	List of themes and subthemes.....	114
Table 4.5:	Quality assurance.....	116
Table 5.1:	List of participants.....	118
Table 9.1:	Summary of challenges commonly experienced by students with disabilities.....	207
Table 9.2:	Summary of results.....	209

ACRONYMS

CHE	Council on Higher Education
CHETL	Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
FET	Further Education and Training
FOTIM	Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis
HEDSA	Higher and Further Education Disability Services Association
HEIs	Higher education institutions
HDCP	Human Development, Capability and Poverty International Research Centre
ICIDH	International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps
INDS	Integrated National Disability Strategy
NCHE	National Commission on Higher Education
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
ODP	Office of the Deputy President

SAHE	South African higher education
SRC	Student Representative Council
UDL	Universal Design of Learning
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UPIAS	Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation
WHO	World Health Organisation

CHAPTER ONE

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

1.1 Introduction

While various studies have highlighted the challenges that people with disabilities encounter in our communities, the current study explored the experiences of academic success of students with disabilities who were enrolled at two universities of technology in South Africa. Given the fact that people with disabilities have been relegated to a peripheral position in society for a very long time, they have been marginalised in education on a global scale (UNESCO, 2015). The 8th consultation meeting of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on monitoring of the implementation of the Convention and Recommendations against Discrimination in Education confirmed that people with disabilities face different and difficult challenges in pursuit of their careers. According to UNESCO (2015, p. 5):

People with disabilities face specific challenges in the pursuit of their right to education resulting in a reduced access to mainstream education. Specific provisions guarantee their right to education and encourage countries to adopt an approach that is inclusive to all, including those with disabilities.

In recognition of the plight of people with disabilities, various activists, forums for people with disabilities and UNESCO took the lead in addressing the issues of inclusive education. Consequently, issues of the marginalised position of students with disabilities in higher education institutions remain current and push universities worldwide to consider diversity and transformation as expounded by various policy documents and authors (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013; Higher Education, 1997; Jameel, 2011; Kassim, Dass, & Best, 2015; Kochung, 2011; Oliver Mutanga, 2017; Tilak, 2015). In South Africa, the Higher Education Act of 1997 (DHET, 1997) emphasises the need to render universities accessible to wider communities than before to ensure that universities become centres for the development of competencies and knowledge for all students by placing them on an equal footing with their counterparts who do not have any disabilities. Currently, tertiary education

is regarded as the peak of education and is viewed as the education system that actively contributes to the economic development of individuals and the country (Andrew, Rop, Ogola, & Wesonga, 2015; CHE, 2014; Kirillova, 2017; Ohajunwa, Mckenzie, Hardy, & Lorenzo, 2014). It is for this reason that many young people, and even older citizens, aspire to attain tertiary qualifications. Education is believed to be a social change influencer. According to Spiel et al. (2018, p.1):

Education is expected to foster social progress through four different but interrelated purposes: humanistic, through the development of individual and collective human virtues to their full extent; civic, by the enhancement of public life and active participation in a democratic society; economic, by providing individuals with intellectual and practical skills that make them productive and enhance their and society's living conditions; and through fostering social equity and justice.

Education is thus considered as a human right that every person must enjoy in order to lead a fulfilling life and attain sustainable livelihood conditions. This is important for any student who has a disability as it might provide him/her with a weapon to fight stigma and being marginalised in society.

The South African political shift in 1994 impacted transformation in universities nationwide as apartheid education laws such as The Bantu Education Act of 1953, The Coloured Education Act of 1963 and The Indian Education Act of 1965 were repealed. These Acts had intended to segregate people in many ways and to enforce inferiority onto designated groups. The new democratic government promulgated advanced, human rights-based legislation that endorses equity and quality education for all, social inclusion, the promotion of social justice and inclusive education, thereby repealing all discriminatory laws and practices (Luger, Prudhomme, Bullen, Pitt, & Geiger, 2012). It is notable that South Africa views the issue of people with disabilities with solemnity and that it has proven itself to be at the cutting edge in terms of progressive and accommodative policies relating to persons with disabilities. South Africa seems to have made far more positive strides towards accommodating people with disabilities compared to other countries in the Southern African Development Community (Koszela, 2013) .

Conversely, Mutanga (2017) and Ohajunwa et al. (2014) are concerned about the challenges that students with disabilities still experience and the slow pace of implementing inclusive education in South African universities. In this context, Morrison, Brand, and Cilliers (2008)

emphasise the barriers to inclusive education, and they argue that capturing accurate statistics of students with disabilities is a common challenge. Various studies have consistently highlighted that there might be a good number of students with disabilities in South African universities who are not officially captured in university records (CHE, 2001; FOTIM, 2011; Kendall, 2016).

It has been noticed with concern that disability as an issue that impacts students does not feature in the CHE 2018 report or in previous years' reports. In fact, these reports focus mainly on gender issues and totally disregard disability as a prevalent phenomenon. Such an omission may be viewed as a dire oversight. It is envisaged that, should such information be included in CHE reports, it could have a positive impact on the standing of universities in general, and this may encourage people with disabilities to pursue their studies in view of how other people in the same position perform and even excel. Thus understanding the challenges people with disabilities experience in their endeavours to gain academic success at universities of technology was deemed vital as they are a minority and vulnerable group, yet they should be encouraged to advance their studies and careers through attaining higher education qualifications.

The overarching aim of this study was to enhance understanding of the academic experiences of students with disabilities at universities of technology and to determine in what manner their experiences impacted their achievement of academic success. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, the term 'academic success' will relate to a student who progressed academically and was in the final year of study at the time when the study was conducted.

Academic success is a concept that is influenced by global educational dynamics, the educational environment, technologies, and individuals' perception of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). In this context, academic success means meeting the university's requirements and expectations of academic success and making satisfactory progress towards attaining a qualification. Success demands resilience, competency and persistence if any student wishes to be acknowledged for academic achievement (Zimmerman, 1999; Bandura, 1990). Resilience and success go hand in hand as students have to counteract a number of challenges and strive to remain in the system without dropping out. A recent CHE report (2016) showed that most students completed their qualifications in five years instead of the three-year period that is generally required, and some ended up never completing their

studies at all. However, for students with disabilities the throughput (or success) rate has been lower compared to that of students without reported disabilities (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002; Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2018). Available (yet limited) data on the low throughput rate and large dropout rate of students with disabilities may suggest that universities' top management are callous and that they follow a 'survival of the fittest' approach that discriminates against students with disabilities. It was against this backdrop that the experiences of academic success by students with disabilities at universities of technology were deemed important, as it had become an imperative to explore and, where appropriate, critique policy development in these institutions of higher learning.

Given the foregoing, it seems that to be successful requires resilience, particularly if the candidate has a disability. According to Sandoval-Hernández and Białowolski (2016, p. 2), resilient students are "those who are academically successful but come from disadvantaged or vulnerable groups". It was thus important for this study to unearth the experiences of resilience and self-efficacy of students with disabilities, as they are a minority group and are differently abled. For Pisano (2012, p. 6), the term 'resilience' means "the ability to absorb change and disturbances" while it also suggests "the capacity to adapt and perform". Both the resilience and self-efficacy concepts are thus theoretical lenses that helped me to understand the academic success of students with disabilities. The study was also underpinned by phenomenology, which is the study of lived experiences – in the context of this study, the academic experiences of students with disabilities.

1.2 The Research Problem

South African education was driven by discriminatory laws for a long time. For example, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 and the Universities Amendment Act of 1959 enforced the segregation of people according to their skin colour and race, not their abilities. Based on the apartheid system, many Black communities were prevented from furthering their education as there were only a few universities for Black people. These universities were often left with insufficient funding to extend their facilities (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Odhav, 2009). One issue that mitigated against the growth and development of these institutions was the political and liberation struggle agenda. In the post-apartheid era, when physical access to all universities was gained by large numbers of students of colour, a new challenge emerged,

which is an epistemological access challenge. The term ‘epistemological access’ was coined by Wally Morrow to describe ways in which students in higher education acquire knowledge (Plooy & Zilindile, 2014). Students from previously disadvantaged communities were found to be wanting and academically unprepared to participate in meaningful higher education learning (du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014a; Munro, 2014). In essence, if students are not fully supported, they are likely to be burdened by negative consequences of epistemological access which may result in early dropout and poor throughput rates (du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014).

When shifting the focus to students with disabilities and drawing a parallel with previously disadvantaged students, it would seem that the former group’s physical and epistemological access to tertiary institutions is not high on the agenda, which means that they are excluded or marginalised from obtaining qualifications at tertiary institutions of their choice. Many students with disabilities persistently face issues associated with physical and epistemological access, unlike the experiences of students who have no disabilities (Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, Chataika, & Bell, 2014; Matshedisho, 2010).

Satisfactory coverage of issues of inclusive education and various reports were traced that highlighted barriers to enrolment, lack of support of students with disabilities, as well as high dropout and failure rates among this group (Howell, 2001; Matshedisho, 2010; Mutanga, 2017; Swart & Greyling, 2011). However, it was clear that limited research had been done on the academic success or achievement of students with disabilities (Morrison et al., 2009), and in my view this is a glaring oversight. Whilst students with disabilities are graduating every year from South African universities, little is known about how they manage to persist in order to succeed in their studies. This study thus attempted to provide a clear understanding of such students’ experiences in terms of their challenges, but particularly in terms of the drivers of their academic success.

1.3 The Researcher’s View and Positionality

It is important to mention at an early stage in this report that the study’s foundation was the qualitative design and that it adopted the interpretivist paradigm (see Chapter Three). Understanding the researcher’s positionality in qualitative research is significant as it

underscores trustworthiness, self-disclosure and ethical principles as yardsticks that guide a study (Moore, 2015; Flores, 2018). According to Flores (2018), Milligan, (2016) and Moore, (2015), avoiding the impact of ‘insider-ness’ and ‘outsider-ness’ in research becomes impossible if one conducts qualitative research using interviews as a data collecting method. I took heed of this warning and, when I approached the research design, I took cognisance of the advice that the conflicting status of insider-ness and outsider-ness was likely to occur when I conducted my research on a minority group (Crean, 2018).

I was aware of my conflicting role as an academic in one of the institutions that participated in the study and that this might impact my insider-ness and outsider-ness at the same time. However, Kersen (2016) argues that the simultaneous position of an insider/outsider could be an advantage in research as it could facilitate insights that would not have been possible outside this dual role. In higher education, academic identity represents authority, power and privilege which may be attached to class, education level and race (Flores, 2018), and this is likely to have an adverse impact on participants if they feel intimidated. It is thus important to explain my position as the researcher and how I positioned myself to avoid any threats that the participants could have experienced. Before embarking on my study, I had often attended meetings of students with disabilities that had been organised by the Student Counselling Department at Mangosothu University of Technology (MUT), and in this process I familiarised myself with the plight of students with disabilities and the many triumphs and issues they experienced.

I grew up in a deep rural area in KwaZulu-Natal where various meanings and perceptions were attached to disabilities and the causes thereof. These perceptions were, in most instances, negative and unpleasant and filled young people with fear. However, I came to accept that such attitudes were a reflection of the ignorance of the community simply because they did not understand that disability is a biological impairment and not a supernatural visitation that aims to punish. There were a few learners with physical disabilities in the primary school that I attended as there was a lack of special schools for children with disabilities in the area where I grew up. Unfortunately, if my memory serves me right, none completed Standard 10 (currently Grade 12). They had dropped out earlier for many reasons which, in light of newly acquired insight, included lack of inclusivity, the travesty of corporal punishment, and the inaccessibility of schools that were too far for them to reach on foot.

When I considered the study design, I understood that my understanding of disability had primarily been influenced by the afflictions impacting my immediate relatives and some of my disabled students at the university where I was based. Having close contact with people with disabilities changed my attitude towards them positively and opened opportunities to engage with them. As a lecturer I am expected to embrace diversity and practise inclusive education in my classroom where I should engage with all students in an equitable manner. I am of the opinion that if one has never engaged with people with disabilities, the urge to marginalise them consciously or unconsciously is difficult to avoid, and I thus circumvented the lure of using the medical model approach in this study. (Note that the latter approach is explained in more detail in Chapter Two).

The perception that most people harbour that people with disabilities are unable to do most of the things that ‘normal’ people can do is a myth and dangerous stereotyping. In my experience, this negative attitude changes when one comes into contact with people with disabilities, and eventually one’s perceptions of a disabled person are infused with new meaning and new thinking. When I was challenged by the reality of my new perceptions, the question that plagued my mind was: *What makes us think that people with disabilities are helpless?* I was inspired by my understanding that one does not need to have any physical disability or impairment to feel disabled. For instance, if one is surrounded by people who are speaking an unknown language, one feels left out and uninvolved, and one can neither understand nor respond to the conversation.

In the quest to find ways of understanding people with disabilities, many approaches are followed, some of which are accommodative while others are derogatory. The philosophy that underpins the models of disability have assisted my conceptualisation of the disability phenomenon, and those that most effectively contributed to my view and illuminated my understanding were the social and the human rights models. These models illuminate and promote social justice and social inclusion and will be discussed in more detail in the models of disability section.

The notion that disability is a sensitive issue sometimes makes it difficult to fully engage with this phenomenon (Lourens, 2015). People with disabilities are often referred to as a vulnerable group and this perpetuates the notion of isolation, dependence and low self-esteem. Lourens (2015) raises a number of very interesting points of this debate in her thesis, particularly where

she cites Kittay (2008) on the epistemic responsibility and the epistemic modesty principles. These principles emphasise ethical responsibility, such as when a researcher needs to be aware of his/her shortcomings in terms of understanding the subject. This suggests that the researcher has to get sufficient information before reaching any conclusions.

As I am a person without any physical disabilities, writing about students with disabilities at a university of technology required that I approach this topic responsibly and compassionately. I thus took cognisance of the central issue that is highlighted by epistemological principles, which is the debate whether people without disabilities should conduct research on the topic of disability or not (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2014; Shakespeare, 2014; Shildrick, 2012). People without disabilities are often seen as ‘oppressors’ as they perpetuate the stigmatisation of people with disabilities when they are not objective enough. Conversely, some argue that it is not guaranteed that people who do research in the field of the disabled do so because they are biased. Thus, understanding the dichotomy in such debates was important when I approached the study and I felt compelled to declare my position on the subject before commencing this report.

1.4 Research Objectives and Research Questions

The objectives of the study were to:

1. To explore the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities that contribute to their academic success in universities of technology;
2. To examine how the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success; and
3. To critically examine why the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in the way they do.

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. Which experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?
2. How do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?

3. Why do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in the way they do?

1.5 Significance of the Study

It is envisaged that this study will add new knowledge to our understanding of the academic success that students with disabilities achieve in South African higher education institutions, which is a phenomenon that had been glaringly under-researched before this study commenced. Most literature on people with disabilities in higher education in South Africa tends to reflect on negative connotations such as barriers to learning and the challenges faced by students with disabilities without giving much attention to their successes. The rationale for this study emerged from the notion that the findings would elicit a better understanding of the current status of students with disabilities at higher education institutions. Resilience, self-efficacy and phenomenology were used to enhance understanding of academic success, with particular focus on students with disabilities who studied at universities of technology.

People with disabilities are a sub-group of various minority groups globally and are often referred to as a vulnerable group. When referring to people with disabilities, their vulnerability is often verbalised as ‘desperation’, ‘different’, or ‘unable to fit well into society due to impairment’. I thus argue that this scholarly study on disabled students’ academic success will contribute to engendering a paradigm shift in society, to the extent that the negative attitude society harbours about people with disabilities may be shifted and adjusted. The intention was to learn from their experiences and to share their narratives in an attempt to influence higher education institutions to embrace diversity in their student enrolment and support programmes. Understanding the experiences of students with disabilities who attained academic success was important as it would shed light on how they overcame the many challenges in the higher education system and how this led to success. Achieving success is not only important for such students as individuals, but it extends to other students who might feel that higher education is for the elite and for able bodied individuals only. Thus understanding and supporting the journey of people with disabilities towards academic success is a mandate that higher education institutions should embrace, and the study’s findings could inform these institutions and encourage them to establish an agenda to support and increase the throughput rate of students with disabilities.

The findings of the study have implications for the entire higher education system, starting with the CHE and spiralling downwards from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to executive management teams at universities as well as their administrative and academic staff. Singly and collectively, these stakeholders have an obligation to ensure that all students who meet the minimum requirements for entry into universities have access to all the facilities – physical and academic – in order to achieve success in their studies.

The significance of this study for universities is thus multifaceted. For instance, universities are communities that accommodate diverse students and they ought to understand the need to ensure adequate accommodation for students with disabilities at all levels. Students with disabilities, like all other students, need to be supported so that they may achieve success. As integrated systems, universities encourage students to engage with various departments for optimum support. Therefore, although academic departments are at the forefront of students' academic experiences, students are also in touch with other departments such as finance, transport, residences, examinations, student affairs, and the disability unit – if such a unit exists at the institution. The study thus attempted, *inter alia*, to learn how the aforementioned departments impacted students with disabilities and how these students felt about their respective contributions towards their academic success.

The intention of the study was thus to allow disabled participants the space to share their experiences of success and to give recognition to their voices in narratives of how they excelled in a challenging environment. In this context, the study followed a phenomenological approach. The knowledge that would be generated was intended to assist not only the students concerned, but also academia, policy-makers, decision-makers and strategic planners at higher education institutions. It was also envisaged that the study could be used as a foundation for future studies in a similar field. Should the intention of dissemination of the findings to communities via articles, flyers and community programmes be realised, various members of the general public will also benefit as they will gain a better understanding of people with disabilities. Finally, as a researcher and a lecturer at a university, it was envisaged that the study would play a critical role in my own understanding of people with disabilities and the challenges they experience in the academic environment and how I could best apply this understanding to support and encourage any students with disabilities I and my colleagues might encounter in the future.

In light of the aforementioned, the main objective of the study was to explore the academic experiences of students with disabilities in a higher education context, with specific reference to universities of technology. This goal was ignited by my personal observations of how people with disabilities often did not get the recognition they deserved. According to Gorman (1999), they often need to put in double the effort that is required of other students to succeed (Gorman, 1999).

The South African Census report of 2011 revealed that approximately 2 870 130 people had a disability of some kind in South Africa at the time. Interestingly, only about 5.3% of disabled people had managed to succeed in higher education institutions (HEI), 23.8% had no formal education, and 24.6% had some primary education (Lehohla, 2011). The success rate of people with disabilities in higher education may seem to affect only a small proportion of this minority group, but their access needs to be adequately encouraged and improved. It is thus argued that useful lessons could be learnt from the scholarly nature of this study. Moreover, if information about workable strategies for academic success is subsequently disseminated and deployed, it could assist all students, regardless of their disability status.

1.6 Location of the Study

In the era prior to the advent of democracy in 1994, South African policies allocated schools and universities to each race, and these institutions were funded differently (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). As a result, there were universities for White, Coloured, Indian and Black students. These policies impacted not only the curricula that were offered, but the infrastructure was impacted by the funds that were available. Post-1994, however, these erstwhile divisions were addressed and most universities were transformed to reflect the multi-racial tapestry of the South African society.

The study was conducted at two universities of technology in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of South Africa, namely Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) and Durban University of Technology (DUT). MUT is a historically Black university and, even today, is predominantly attended by Black students as it is situated in a township area. DUT came into existence as a result of a merger of two historically White and Indian institutions. These universities of technology are currently the only two such universities in the KZN province. However, covering all the universities of technology in the country would have been an

enormous challenge in terms of time and accessibility. According to DUT and MUT websites, these two universities of technology accommodate high numbers of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds (MUT, 2018 & DUT, 2017).

It is an acknowledged fact that universities of technology, which were previously structured and managed as ‘Technikons’, are not on an equal footing with fully-fledged, traditional universities in terms of resources, departmental diversity and research output (FOTIM, 2011; Matshediso, 2007; CHE, 2010). Therefore, learning about students’ academic experiences and successes in this kind of environment will contribute to scholarly knowledge and insight in many ways, and provide a sound foundation on which further studies in the field with a wider ranging scope could be based.

1.6.1 Background to Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT)

Mangosuthu University of Technology, formerly known as Mangosuthu Technikon, is situated in Umlazi Township which is the second biggest township in South Africa. Records of the university (MUT, 2018) reveal that it enrolls predominantly Black students from townships and surrounding areas as well as from poor, disadvantaged and deep rural communities. It is the smallest tertiary institution in the province of KwaZulu-Natal and has an enrolment of about eleven thousand students. It has only three faculties, namely Engineering, Management Sciences and Natural Sciences. It has two campuses close to each other: the main campus and the Natural Sciences campus. The latter was previously known as uNgoye as it was a University of Zululand satellite campus.

The idea of establishing Mangosuthu University of Technology came about in 1974 at a meeting attended by representatives of Anglo American and De Beers, Harry F. Oppenheimer, and Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi. The main purpose was to increase the number of Black technicians as there was a high demand for such qualified people. In fact, the industry required 3 000 technicians at the time. In 1979 it opened its doors as Mangosuthu Technikon and was offering engineering programmes in Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering and Construction, Electrical Engineering, and Chemical Engineering. The university has since grown and has now two additional faculties, namely the Faculty of Management Sciences and the Faculty of Natural Sciences. It started with fifty students and now records twelve thousand plus students. At the time of the study, the records that could be traced reflected that 86 students had a disability of some kind. Compared to other universities, MUT remains relatively small

and was the only institution that did not merge with another in 2002 when all the other universities did so. Records of student enrolment do not concentrate on disabilities, therefore it was difficult to establish when the first student with a disability was registered at the university.

1.6.2 Background to the Durban University of Technology (DUT)

This brief history of DUT was extracted from a report generated by the Division of Corporate Affairs (2008) that narrates the establishment and the development of DUT. Durban University of Technology exists as a result of a merger of M L Sultan Technikon and the Natal Technikon in 2002. It was known as the Durban Institute of Technology immediately after the merger, but in 2006 the name changed to Durban University of Technology. It has three campuses: one in the Durban central area that is easily accessible, and two others that are situated in the KZN Midlands and in Pietermaritzburg. It serves diverse communities in KZN and accommodates foreign students as well. Similar to MUT, DUT has no historical records on students with disabilities as the disability unit that was recently formed is in its infancy. A brief history is provided below.

1.6.2.1 Establishment of ML Sultan Technikon

The idea of establishing a technical college for Indian working communities in the evening started as early as 1929. The institution was situated in the centre of Durban city and allowed easy access for working students. ML Sultan offered commerce and hospitality courses. It developed into a Technikon through generous funding by Indian communities. The most important donation was made by Hajee Malukmahomed Lappa Sultan in 1941, and other individuals and sponsors like the Natal Indian Cane Growers Association also contributed large sums of money. Prior to securing an appropriate building, the classes were conducted at St. Aiden's Mission School in Durban. The college grew due to the contribution of passionate volunteers who offered their time to teach in the evenings for the benefit of the Indian community. The ML Sultan Technical College officially opened its doors to 240 full time students and 4 760 part time students in 1956. The name of the college changed to ML Sultan Technikon in 1984. Due to transformation policies that were initiated by the democratic government post-1994, ML Sultan Technikon merged with Natal Technikon in 2002.

1.6.2.2 Brief history of Natal Technikon

The Natal Technikon was situated in the Durban city centre (CBD) where access to all amenities was easy. It was founded in 1907 by Dr Samuel George Campbell. Back in those years it was known as the Durban Technical Institute and specifically catered for the white community. In 1923, the name changed to the Natal Technical College. It was for white students and was funded by the government of the time and other sponsors like T B Davies, Arthur, and many others. The institute was transformed and given the status of Technikon Natal in 1979. It continued to grow and offered a variety of programmes ranging from Arts and Engineering to Commerce, and many more. At the emergence of the democratic dispensation in South Africa, the institution had 12 000 students of which about 40% was white. Negotiations for a merger started and eventually this institution merged with ML Sultan Technikon in 2002.

Any merger comes with challenges as it requires change in many areas of the organisation, which might come with resistance. This was the case with this institution as both students and staff had to face numerous challenges. The background of both institutions was fraught with challenges caused by the political dispensation prior to the advent of democracy in South Africa. In fact, the impact of racist policies negatively affected non-white people. However, this racial divide was not a focus of the study and will not be explored further.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The brief background provided above was intended to highlight the rationale for establishing these institutions and the particular groups that they were meant to serve. Students with disabilities have been accommodated by default as they were not specifically noted in enrolment policies. This fact is evident in the architectural and infrastructural design of these higher education institutions.

People with disabilities have historically demonstrated their capabilities in many fields such as the arts (e.g., Christy Brown had cerebral palsy but is renowned as a poet, painter and an author) and science and economics (Stephan Hawking had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis but was a globally acknowledged scientists and academic). Another example is Helen Keller who

was blind and deaf but who became a seasoned lecturer in her field. There are living legends with disabilities who have been through the system of higher education and have succeeded. However, doubt about the capabilities of people with disabilities still exists and many are burdened by stigma and prejudice. Understanding their journey to attain academic success became my passion, and I wanted to give these people a voice by exploring their experiences and allowing them to narrate their stories.

The study thus did not focus on a particular disability, but embraced all manner of disabled students at the two universities of technology in their final year of study. The rationale for this inclusion criterion was that the study required data from students with disabilities who had already been in the system for some time and who would thus understand all the upheavals and challenges associated with the higher education system. The study did not compare the two institutions per se, but the reader will be given sufficient scope to do so in the findings at his or her own discretion.

In terms of the scope of the study, it is acknowledged that the relatively small sample size and the fact that only two universities of technology in a single geographical area were targeted limited the scope. However, the study design allowed the researcher to explore at some depth the challenges and opportunities for students with disabilities at universities of technology in KwaZulu-Natal province. Others may view the small sample as a limitation, yet it is a strength of qualitative research that supplies sufficient data to serve as a departure point for future studies in the field.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One sets the scene for the study and presents a broad background on the position of students with disabilities who enroll at universities of technology. The transformation of South African institutions in the Durban area in KZN is discussed, with particular reference to the main study sites. The research aims and objectives are clearly expounded in this chapter. The scope and limitations of the study are discussed to avoid unnecessary confusion and to address any expectations that might be harboured concerning the study participants. The structure of the thesis is outlined to guide the reader through the thesis and a brief conclusion to this chapter is provided to afford a link to the following chapter.

Chapter Two conceptualises the notion of disabilities using existing knowledge regarding people with disabilities, with particular focus on their position in the higher education context. The discourse takes a journey through historical times and highlights the co-operation between different organizations to effectively fight discrimination against people with disabilities. The discourse further elucidates contradictory and supporting views on people with disabilities that were explored with the intention of reaching conclusions that would add to the existing body of information pertaining to the achievement potential of students with disabilities at tertiary institutions. Chapter two thus presents a wide scope of the literature, starting with the milestones of legislation pertaining to disability that South Africa has reached. Models of disability are explored by referring to different lenses.

Framing the study by positioning it within the paradigm of relevant theories was important. The interpretivist paradigm was selected as the most appropriate for this project. Chapter Three thus covers a comprehensive narrative of the theoretical framework that underpinned the study. Three theoretical frameworks, namely phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy were explored to understand the academic experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. By exploring the linkages and inherent coherence among the chosen theories, a new trail in scholarly exploration was opened in terms of this particular topic. The study will thus contribute significantly to the pool of knowledge as no study used this combination before. By exploring the experiences (phenomenology), resilience and self-efficacy of students with disabilities, I was assisted in understanding the ability of students with disabilities to persevere, work hard, and show determination in their endeavours to obtain academic success. The research lens was phenomenology as the authentic experiences of the participants were core to the success of the study. In this context, the study resonates with Kumpfer's (1995) model of resilience. This model is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The research methodology that was adopted connected every phase of the study and set the scene for the study by posing research questions (Chapter One). Connecting existing knowledge (see the literature review Chapter Two) with new knowledge was important. This was achieved through processes that are discussed in Chapter Four. In brief, the research design, the research tools and the data analysis processes that were utilised are discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

This study was anchored in an interpretive approach as it allowed the voices of the participants to be heard and the milieu of their experiences to be integrated with the findings. Chapter Five presents the data according to themes as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2005). A phenomenological analysis approach was followed as the study was premised on phenomenology. In Chapter Five, an attempt is thus made to clearly illustrate how the two methods of data analysis were employed successfully. The primary data that are presented in Chapter Five were elicited by means of interviews, photo-voice images and documentary analyses. The thematic approach was utilised for data analysis and the data are also triangulated in the presentation and discussion sections.

Due to the massive body of data that was received, the discussion of the findings is divided into a further three chapters according to the research questions. The data are presented and the findings are discussed and simultaneously linked with the literature for verification and the elucidation of new knowledge.

Chapter Six focuses on understanding academic success and is based on the first research question: *Which experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?*

Chapter Seven attempts to answer the second research question: *How do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?*

Finally, the third research question is addressed in Chapter Eight: *Why do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in the way they do?* The rationale for achieving academic success is determined in this chapter and the drivers of the motivation to succeed are revealed. In all these data discussion chapters the unique experiences of students with disabilities emerge as critically important for decision-making practices by university communities.

Chapter Nine is the final chapter and summarises the main study findings. Conclusions are drawn and recommendations, also for future research, are offered.

1.9 Conclusion

When conducting research, the scholar has to find a gap in existing knowledge and examine as many variables as possible with the intention of finding a solution to a societal phenomenon. The scholar may also develop a new model and should provide new knowledge that might facilitate policy development and the adoption of best practices. The experiences of academic success of students with disabilities was identified as an area that had not been tapped extensively before. Providing the background and history of the sites where the research was conducted was important for a better understanding of the academic context in which the study participants were submerged. The serious nature of this study was underscored to highlight the importance of giving recognition to students with disabilities in society and, more specifically, in the higher education context. By understanding the experiences of academic success of students with disabilities, their position in societal contexts will be viewed with more compassion and respect. In many instances, people with disabilities suffer because of discrimination and prejudice and because of the interpretations elicited by the disability models. For instance, the medical model explores why and how persons with disabilities are judged and argues that they are unable to engage in certain activities in the same way that 'normal' people do. This study refuted this model.

In Chapter One I presented an initial road map of the study by focusing attention on the phenomenon of people with disabilities in South African higher education institutions. The background to and purpose of the study were discussed. I then presented the research objectives and questions, the conceptual framework, and a brief exposition of the methodological approach that had been adopted. Various tools and methods were employed in my efforts to contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge pertaining to people with disabilities and their academic endeavours. The next chapter will concentrate on conceptualising disability and the theoretical models that underpin this phenomenon and it will look closely at the legislation that pertains to people with disabilities in South Africa. The chapter is concluded with a discussion that focuses on the position of people with disabilities in higher education institutions.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUALISING DISABILITY AND POSITIONING THE STUDY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter conceptualises the disability phenomenon and locates disability discourses in the South African legislative context. The concepts of disability and inclusivity in higher education are discussed and the experiences of disabled students in higher education are explored by referring to the views and findings of various scholars in the field. A major argument that is derived from this chapter is that, while there is extensive literature on the challenges students with disabilities face (challenges that are related to their failure and drop-out rates), the successful academic experiences of students with disabilities are rarely highlighted. This literature review thus exposes this gap and highlights the need for an understanding of the academic experiences and personal qualities that contribute to the success of students with disabilities.

2.2 Conceptualising Disability

Disability is a phenomenon that is as old as mankind, yet many misunderstandings still surround it as it is undeniably complex, dynamic, multidimensional and varied in nature (Graham et al., 2014). It respects no boundaries, class, gender, age, race and socio-economic status and is a phenomenon that is associated with various limitations in the existence of people of all walks of life (Chan & Zoellick, 2011; Kisanji, 1993; Syed et al., 2011). The following definition of the World Health Organisation (2012, p. 3) is the most commonly agreed upon by many countries:

[It is] an umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.

Disability is a universal human phenomenon as some individuals are born with an impairment or are afflicted as a result of an ailment or an accident. A person may also be afflicted during the commission of a crime, during wars, as victims of acts of violence, and when deprived of basic social needs. For many individuals it occurs as a result of the aging process. A disability could be visible, invisible, temporary, episodic or permanent (Graham et al., 2014; Kamenopoulou, 2016) and is mostly experienced as debilitating when the person fails to access opportunities due to environmental barriers. Interaction with the environment is often restricted and thus Kamenopoulou (2016) and Mantsha (2016) refer to the ecological systems theory to understand the link between disability and the environment. This theory explores the individual's interaction with the environment in terms of a micro-system (interpersonal level), a meso-system (interaction with immediate society such as school and family), an exo-system (understanding of and interaction with external bodies such as legislation and governance), a macro-system (understanding of and participation in cultural activities such as in the social and economic spheres), and lastly a chrono-system (understanding changes in all systems). Loewen and Pollard (2010) share a similar sentiment, arguing that the environment or society may have an enabling or disabling effect on individuals which may make some people feel disabled. Disability is thus a personal issue (Loewen & Pollard, 2010; Ohajunwa et al., 2014), yet it concerns all people around that particular individual and draws everybody's attention either positively or negatively. Various authors agree that defining disability is difficult, and an appropriate definition depends on the lens and the context in which it occurs in an individual in time and place. For instance, it could be defined from a sociological, biomedical or economic perspective, and thus the meaning that is attached or constructed will impact the individual either positively or negatively. Several researchers (Kisanji, 1993; Loewen & Pollard, 2010; Soudien & Baxen, 2006) argue that the way disability is contextualised shows the paradigm or philosophy entangled in the beliefs and policies of a particular society.

Disability is often seen in a harsh light as the interaction between a person with an impairment and attitudinal and environmental barriers hinder their full participation in society on an equal basis with others (Naami, 2014; WHO, 2012). By defining a person with a disability, such a person may experience a feeling of inferiority as he/she may feel abnormal and not on the same level as his/her peers or siblings, and this may result in a low self-esteem. It may also be due to such categorisation and grading that people with invisible disabilities seldom reveal their condition.

As human beings, we are often labelled by language that defines our roles, situations and associations. Sometimes our conditions give us an identity based on how we interact with the environment, and this may lead to discrimination and prejudice as is the case with people with disabilities. Mutanga (2013) is of the opinion that negative identity is perpetuated by the environment and the policies that define it. For instance, at university students with disabilities need to disclose their status so that they may be identified and assisted accordingly. This means that assistance may not be available should a student not disclose his/her disability status. This speaks to Stryker's identity theory which argues that identity is multifaceted and created by multiple identities (Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010). As far as Stryker (1968, in Owens et al., 2010) is concerned, identity is accumulative and defines who we are and what our expected behaviours should be. However, identity becomes salient as it needs to be affirmed by our actions. In the late 1950s and 1960s, Tajfel posited the social identity theory, which is a theory of group membership and behaviour (Korte, 2001). The theory was further refined by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s and focuses on the social factors that influence perceptions of group identity. People are categorised or self-categorised and gain membership of a group based on social contexts. However, this has a bearing on psychosocial and emotional factors. Korte (2012, p. 169) explains the transition process of membership as follows: "In adopting the identity of the group, the individual identity of the person recedes to the background and the identity as a member of the group comes to the foreground". Such grouping comes with perceptions of seeing others as belonging to an out-group, and this can shift to perceptual discrimination as well as either high or low self-esteem, depending on the group setting. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979, in Bogart, 2015), social identity creates effective influence on the group which may result in group creativity, thus changing the values and out-group perceptions to create a conducive environment. Students with disabilities are likely to face similar prejudice when their self-identity as individuals is overshadowed by perceptions of the group or their conditions.

Conversely, Bergen (2013) advocates for self-concept, which occurs when an individual is able to define him-/herself as a person who is not defined by others' perceptions, but by his/her own proficiencies and self-worth. Furthermore, Whannell and Whannell (2015) and Zimmerman (1989) also emphasise the development of self-concept as a crucial component of academic success. Positive academic performance may have an impact on how one perceives oneself, and ultimately identity is likely to change (Jameel, 2011). Hence self-concept means understanding one's own skills, competencies, deficiencies, attitudes and beliefs. Such thinking

creates strong self-confidence, self-esteem and independence that may contribute positively towards achieving academic success. In this context, the ability to understand one's own capabilities is a positive, and students with disabilities in higher education contexts may need this attribute to manoeuvre successfully through their study process.

On the 9th of December 1975, the Declaration on the Rights of People with Disabilities was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This Declaration encourages national and international protection of the rights of the disabled. In March 2006, about 131 countries signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). South Africa is one of these signatories, thus it undertakes to promote the rights of people with disabilities to ensure their fundamental freedom (Koszela, 2013). People with disabilities are addressed by the rights-based model of disability and the human rights-based model which both consider an individual as a human being before considering their disability condition. The thinking behind these models is that everyone has the full right to access all available services (Koszela, 2013). Both stand against any form of discrimination and promote equality and a quality lifestyle. Worldwide, these models underpin the agenda of activists in disability organisations and are supported by a progressive rights campaign that is actively encouraged by the Department of Social Development (2015, p. 12) that refers to “economic, social and cultural rights of human rights relating, amongst others, to the workplace, social security, family life, participation in cultural life, and access to housing, food, water, health care and education”. Emphasis on these models is clear in the South African Constitution and they are further supported by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

2.3 Legislation Pertaining to People with Disabilities in South Africa

South Africa has made a special effort to protect and respect the rights of people with disabilities through the promulgation of different pieces of legislation that fight against any kind of discrimination. According to Nhlapo, Watermeyer and Schneider (2006), an organisation known as the Disability People of South Africa (DPSA) has fought against discrimination and for the equal rights of people with disabilities. Through the DPSA, a Disability Rights Charter of South Africa was launched in 1992, and hence the rights of people with disabilities are enshrined in the Bill of Rights which is part of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996. Through successful negotiations with the ruling party (the African National Congress

[ANC]), people with disabilities are represented in all organs of state such as Parliament, the National Council of Provinces, provincial legislatures, the Commission on Gender Equality, the National Development Agency, the Public Service Commission, and the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nhlapo et al., 2006). Furthermore, the rights of people with disabilities, together with the rights of all other people in the country, are managed under the ambit of the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC). Equal education for all is recognised as a basic human right, as declared in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education of 1960, and in the South African Constitution of 1996. Denying people access to education amounts to a discriminatory act and is illegal.

Understanding South African legislation pertaining to disability is important as it has a profound impact on individuals with disabilities, and by implication on students with disabilities in higher education settings. In this section the focus is on how the South Africa government perceives disability and the efforts or strategies that have been utilised to embrace, acknowledge and address diversity.

South Africa as a developing country experiences various challenges due to the prevalence of chronic diseases as well as crime and poverty, which are all factors that may exacerbate the affliction of being disabled (Graham et. al 2014). Globally, the early 1990s and the advent of the 21st Century marked a breakthrough in developed and developing countries for legislation to accommodate people with disabilities (Syed 2011). The Twenty Year Review (Van der Byl, 2014) document spells out an important milestone that South Africa has reached in as far as disability is concerned. For example, an organisation called The Disabled People of South Africa (DPSA) was formed in 1984 with the purpose of fighting for the recognition of people with disabilities. Their persistence led to the development of the Disability Rights Charter in 1992. The Charter demanded the inclusion of people with disabilities as worthy and rightful citizens of the country and informed references to disabled people in the Constitution of South Africa in terms of equal rights, access to basic services and non-discrimination (South Africa, 1996). Furthermore, persistent advocacy by the DPSA propelled the South African government to create the Office on the Status of Disabled People (OSDP) in the Presidency to represent people with disabilities in all sectors. One of the main achievements of the OSDP was the promulgation of the White Paper on Integrated National Disability Strategy in 1997 (this paper was updated in 2015 to the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). This White

Paper aims to ensure the full integration of people with disabilities by emphasising their full participation in a society that is for all people without discrimination against anyone. There are many organisations in South Africa that fight for the rights of disabled people, but in the interest of brevity they are not mentioned or discussed. Suffice it to say that demands by organisations for justice and equality for all have engendered shifts in attitudes towards gender, race, sexual orientation and disability and many have bodies have fought against exclusion, social injustice, and the marginalisation of minorities (WPRPD, 2015).

Many organisations such as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS, 1976) in Britain, the Disabled People of South Africa (DPSA), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and others have fought successfully against the stigma of disability. They influenced a shift from the medical to the social model which regards people with disabilities as members of society who need not to be hidden from the public eye. The social model advocates that it is society that imposes the label of disability on people by creating social and attitudinal barriers that make their lives difficult (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). In the 21st Century, the South African agenda has focused on people with disabilities as people who have the same rights as other citizens, and this has consequently led to the enactment of legislation to protect their rights in the last two decades.

People with disabilities have been denied access to partake in various activities in the past, and this is being addressed by the government through human rights-based legislation (Morrison et al., 2009). Changes in legislation to remove barriers in institutions of higher learning have resulted in an increasing number of students with disabilities enrolling at both international and local universities (Howell, 2005; UNESCO, 2005; Crous, 2010; Hadley, 2011; Swart & Greyling, 2011; Lyner-Cleophasetal, 2014). The South African government has progressively passed different pieces of legislation and endorsed strategies to ensure inclusivity and equal rights to education for all. The following are examples of such legislation:

- Section 29 of Chapter 2 of the supreme law of the country, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South Africa, 1996) promotes the right to basic education as well as further education for all. The state thus commits itself to making education available and accessible to all citizens without discrimination or favour.

- Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997) advocates the transformation of the higher education system to ensure that unfair discrimination has no place. It encourages the implementation of strategies and practices that promote equality and quality education.
- The National Plan for Higher Education 2030 (South Africa, 2015a) acknowledges the sins of apartheid that caused discrimination even in the higher education sector where universities separated people of colour and whites. Part of the objectives of the Plan is to facilitate and increase the skills development of people with disabilities by at least 2%, which will assist in alleviating poverty within this group. Eradicating discrimination is at the forefront of the agenda, and all forms of discrimination are being targeted. The country has a mission to promote equality in all sectors, especially education. Recently, free education has been introduced in some schools and at all universities for poor people to allow every child in South Africa access to education. This initiative does not exclude students with disabilities. The National Plan for Higher Education also attends to unfair discrimination, developing skills, and promoting the economy in light of the so-called ‘fourth industrial revolution’ that is intended to enhance social stability. Changes and transformation are inevitable as South Africa is part of the global village. To achieve equity in higher education, the National Plan for Higher Education seeks to increase the number of students with disabilities at tertiary level.
- Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education ((Department of Education, 2001) advocates not only the integration of learners with special needs into the main stream, but encourages inclusivity in education at all levels. The policy promotes fair and equal opportunities for all students to access education from primary to secondary school level and includes access to higher education. Progress in this regard is under way, and some workshops and pilot studies are being conducted. For example, Antoinette D’Amant’s (2009) study is evidence of the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa. However, the Human Rights Watch (2015) suggests that inclusive education should not happen in selected schools only, and that it must be made binding for the benefits of all students to cater even for those who have decided not to disclose their disability status.

- A Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2007) report proposes that a primary mandate is “...to admit learners with disabilities/special needs who have historically been marginalized at this level [and] providing them with opportunities to receive the education and training required to enter a variety of job markets. Alongside this is the challenge to develop the institutions [sic] capacity to address diverse needs and barriers to learning and development”.
- The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building an Expanded Effective and Integrated Post-School System (DHET, 2013; 2014) provides a plan for higher education transformation which includes and encourages inclusivity/universal learning in higher education.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Strategic Plan 2010-2014 encourages expanded access, improved quality and increased diversity of provision. The needs of staff and students with disabilities should be catered for (South Africa. Department of Higher Education and Treaining, 2015).
- The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD) as promoted by the Department of Social Development (2015) acknowledges the different types of disabilities and their causes as well as the socio-economic background of people with disabilities that might be a barrier to their development. It aims for universal design that will allow equal access for and full participation of all in all activities.
- The Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-school Education and Training System (DHET, 2018) that focuses on the post-school education and training of people with disabilities is a recent policy document that ensures inclusivity and equal rights for all.

In a nutshell, the overall purpose of South African legislation is to promote equity, equal access to education and to discourage and remove any form of discrimination against people with disabilities in order to finally maintain and protect the human rights of all people living in South Africa. The above mentioned prescripts advocate the right to education for people with disabilities. However, laws and legislations geared towards improving access to higher education for people living with disabilities may not be realized if there are no vigorous implementation strategies (Loewen & Pollard, 2010; Matshedisho, 2010; Matshediso, 2007).

Additionally, Matshediso (2010) argues that governmental departments seem to be working in isolation or in competition with one another. What may be seen as a vigorous strategy of

promoting equality could in fact result in limited results due to a lack of focused strategies and collaboration. Matshediso opines that when all government departments are doing something to address disability at the same time, their efforts may be successful. However, as it stands, these prescripts on disability are scattered among all government departments, which makes it difficult to monitor and evaluate their implementation (Ibid.).

In many instances, students with disabilities continue to face challenges at universities and this affects their participation, progress and success in higher learning settings (Kochung, 2011). Laws to protect their rights seem to be inadequate in light of the many challenging real-life situations they face in the university environment. In my opinion, the positive intention of all these pieces of legislation can only come to fruition when university communities are actively engaged in seeking understanding of the importance of students' academic success.

A critical review of applicable legislation and strategies was helpful in this study as it illuminated the paradigm shift that this country, as an independent member of the United Nations, has embarked on. The thinking behind these legislations shows that the country is against discrimination, and particularly discrimination against people with disabilities. It is heartening to know that South African law allows people with disabilities to fully enjoy their rights, just like any other citizen in the country. South Africa has thus focused on developing policies and strategies that are encompassing, progressive, rights-based towards people with disabilities, and that repudiate any form of discrimination in all spheres of life (South Africa, 2015b).

South African legislation has taken the lead in many fields on the continent of Africa, but especially in terms of the emancipation of people with disabilities. It has advocated for positive change, inclusion, and accommodation of people with disabilities. For this reason the period between 1999 and 2009 is known as the African Decade of Disabled Persons. This was subsequently extended by the African Union from 2010 to 2019 (Van der Byl, 2014). The Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School Education and Training System (South Africa. Department of Higher Education, 2018) allowed the state to fill the gaps in the higher education system for the adequate accommodation of students with disabilities. At the same time, the state created partnerships with different stakeholders for the betterment of students with disabilities in higher education. However, one criticism of this effort is that,

while the effort made by the government is commendable, there are no clear sanctions for those who transgress against these prescripts (Mutanga, 2015) .

Through legislation, the strategies and efforts by activists for human rights resulted in a paradigm shift to the extent that disabilities are no longer viewed as a curse, a burden, or an individual's problem, but as an opportunity to embrace all people in our society. The social model uses the term 'Ubuntu' (which is an African concept of respect, humanity, caring, compassion for others, and embracing diversity) as a conceptual lens through which all human beings are treated with respect, regardless of their background, disability, race, gender and creed (Govender, 2014). Similarly, Mosia and Phasha (2017) and Walton (2018) look at disability through the African ethical and moral perspective of Ubuntu, arguing that people should be considerate of others' needs. The Ubuntu concept has elements of social justice, equality and fairness. It fits all models of disability, most especially the medical, social and (human) rights models. For example, using the medical model of disability will mean protecting the weak and taking care of their health, while the social model deals with fairness and equal access to all facilities. The rights-based model has to do with laws that enforce equity and discourage discrimination in any form.

Input from many stakeholders such as the government, the private sector, medical professionals, researchers and non-government organisations (NGOs) has made it difficult to find an all-encompassing definition for disability, as each understands and defines disability from its own perspective. The definition of disability has progressively evolved (United Nations, 2006) over the past decades and there is as yet no consensus on the disability definition both locally and globally. However, regardless of a lack of such a definition, progressive legislation in South Africa as a means of discouraging discrimination of people with disabilities, private organisations, the public sector, and NGOs are working together to address/offer services to people with disabilities. Some companies in the private sector are contributing through their social responsibility activities. For instance, Barloworld Equipment in the Western Cape works collaboratively with the Sawubona disability initiative to uplift people with disabilities in the region.

South Africa is trying to create an enabling environment for people with disabilities, hence many organisations deal with specific disabilities that affect children and adults. Different

aspects such as life skills as a means of self-empowerment and self-development are the foci of these programmes. To make it easier to access information on disabilities, in 2009 Lisa Langenhoven compiled a 473-page guideline document entitled *Directory of organisations and resources of people with disabilities in South Africa*. This document was published by the University of South Africa (UNISA). However, all the many commendable efforts are watered down by inequalities that prevail in the country, particularly in secluded rural areas. People with disabilities living in deep rural areas continue to suffer the real brunt of their disabilities due to a lack of resources, services and infrastructure.

In light of the guidelines presented by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), the public sector in South Africa has made reasonable efforts to embrace the needs of people with disabilities. The public sector, supported by the Department of Labour, has taken a stance against the marginalisation of people with disabilities and has encouraged the employment of such people. These efforts are enforced through the Employment Equity Act of 1997 (South Africa, 1997) and the policy of affirmative action. The Department has recently increased the percentage of people that organisations need to employ from 4% to 7%. Such attempts assist in eradicating poverty among people with disabilities.

However, this enabling environment is not without challenges, as in some instances organisations' infrastructure is not ready to accommodate people with disabilities. In most cases, companies find it costly to accommodate them and especially small organisations may not have sufficient resources to do so. They also lack policy decisions pertaining to the employment of people with disabilities, and this is exacerbated by the attitude of fellow workers and management and a lack of knowledge (Naami, 2014; Ndlovu & Walton, 2017). Conversely, some organisations struggle to find suitable qualified candidates with disabilities (Moja, Mann, Sing, Steyn, & Naidoo, 2011; Majola & Dhunpath, 2016). On a positive note, this means that there are opportunities for students with disabilities to attain their qualification and grab the employment opportunities that are available. For example, Mutanga (2017) found that students with disabilities mostly enrolled for qualifications in the social sciences due to limitations that impede people with disabilities in other faculties. This automatically paints a gloomy picture in as far as employment of people with disabilities in the areas of hard core science like engineering is concerned.

So far, disability has been defined as a multi-faceted phenomenon that is open to different understandings – some empowering and some limiting. The following brief discussion on models of disability shows how others perceive people with disabilities and how they perceive themselves. It is in this context that Shakespeare (1996) believes that disability is socially constructed.

2.4 Models of Disability

The disability phenomenon has captured the attention of governments, organisations and societies on a global scale. As a result, disability is understood in various ways as it is a socially constructed phenomenon. Various researchers maintain that disability is constructed through interaction between the external environment and internal personal factors that determine how it is perceived (Soudien & Baxen, 2006; Swart & Greyling, 2011). Different conceptual frameworks have been attached to disability, which has given birth to different models of this phenomenon. An exploration of models of disability was important in this study in that they provide an understanding of the perspectives of disability and how these perspectives have evolved over time. Each model that was explored contributed to my holistic view of disability and exposed the views, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of disability that either influenced change or inhibited progressive thinking about this phenomenon among communities. Policies, strategies and practices are based on and are justified by these different models (Kamenopoulou, 2016) as they establish a basis for understanding and engagements within the disability arena in higher education as a public entity. Like any other phenomenon, disability has engaged researchers' interest with the purpose of bringing awareness, policy development, enactment of legislation, and gaining better understanding of disability as a part of social life. To understand disability, researchers have used a critical approach, liberalism, or an interpretative, feminist, or post-modernism paradigm. In this section a few models of disability that relate to the study are discussed.

2.4.1 The medical model

Disability is generally defined as a physical handicap or impairment, which is a perception that packages people with disabilities as helpless, sickly, in need of charity and in a dependent state. This position is endorsed by the medical model of disability that is infused with the notion that

disability is a problem and that people with disabilities are defective, incomplete and dependent on medical experts. Moreover, they need to use drugs or undergo surgery to fix what is not normal (Mji, Chappell, Statham, Mlenzana, Goliath & DeWet, 2013; Ojo, Chibuzor, Ugochukwu, & Chukwukelue, 2015; Sullivan, 2011). Such a view has a detrimental effect on people with disabilities. For example, many children globally are absent from school because they cannot be accommodated on account of their disabilities (WHO, 2011). According to the medical perspective, disability is mostly viewed as afflicting an isolated individual, and less that it has little to do with society (Ohajunwa et al., 2014). The literature shows people with disabilities are associated with lower expectations, lower achievement in education, poor health, high unemployment rates, high poverty rates, and low class labels in societies. One perception is that such people are good candidates for government grants, special institutions and charitable support. However, such perceptions are always biased (Sullivan, 2011; Naami, 2014; Sedibe & Buthelezi, 2014; Majola & Dhunpath, 2016). According to Owen, (2015, p. 389), the medical model “views disabled people as flawed and unable to perform in social roles in the same way as non-disabled people”. Moreover, experiences of stigma, a derogatory attitude, discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities could break and disable society, and such an attitude and negative statements may leave concerned individuals, friends, and close family distraught and traumatised.

Activists and researchers consider the medical model as a traditional welfare approach to disability and many critics have been outspoken against this model. Kaufmann (2016) highlights the shortcoming of the medical model and argues, first, that the side effects of medication may be more disastrous than intended. Secondly, medication may make people more dependent on it and they may become too reliant on medication. Thirdly, their emotions, agony and experiences remain intact and cannot be cured by any medication (Ibid). However, these comments do not suggest that the medical model is doomed and irrelevant, as there are cases where disability is associated with chronic pain that needs to be alleviated.

2.4.2 The social model

Currently, the social model is the most preferred model to address disability as it moves the burden of disability from the individual to the community and allows people with disabilities to be independent. It also facilitates access to equal opportunities and rehabilitation (Koszela,

2013; Ohajunwa et al., 2015). This model came into effect through efforts of many organisations as well as people with disabilities themselves who critically analysed their predicament and suggested ways of dealing with it. The focus of this model is to make the community and environment barrier-free for people with disabilities to access facilities or material and to allow inclusivity in all aspects of their lives (Mantsha, 2016; Naami, 2014; Sedibe, 2014; Lourens, 2016; Matshediso, 2007). Their efforts have given relief and shifted shared responsibility to society to change, to embrace diversity, to create disability friendly environments, and to be more accommodative to the needs of people with disabilities. The social model has been strengthened by the initiative of the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Person with Disabilities which reiterates and again endorses the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that was adopted in 2006 with the purpose of fighting against any discrimination. It aims to discourage attitudinal and environmental discrimination against people with disabilities whilst highlighting social inclusion as a main mandate (United Nations, 2006).

The Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) (1976) engaged in a political campaign to demand that environmental, attitudinal, institutional and economic barriers be identified and addressed. These are the kinds of discrimination that the social model seeks to attend to. Graham et al. (2014) highlight that there is institutional discrimination, environmental discrimination, as well as attitudinal and technological discrimination. Institutional discrimination occurs when the government does not have policies that regulate equal access to opportunities like education and employment, or when it fails to encourage social inclusion. Environmental discrimination occurs when the environment is not made conducive for people with disabilities; for instance, no ramps for wheelchair users and dim lights for visually impaired people. The failure of society to adjust environments exacerbates disability effects (Loewen & Pollard, 2010). Attitudinal discrimination is expressed in negative attitudes, stereotyping and the stigmatisation of people with disabilities, which may all lead to intentional or unintentional exclusion. Both environmental and attitudinal acts of discrimination are foregrounded in the UN definition of disability (United Nations, 2006, p. 1) where it slams “attitudinal and environmental barriers that inhibit full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. The effects of globalisation are immense and inevitable and the development of information and technology has made life without technology impossible (Meric, Er, & Gorun, 2015). Nonetheless, in many instances people with disabilities are technologically disadvantaged, as facilities for them are non-existent or

training is not provided on how to use the available facilities (Lourens, 2015). In an article by Brian Watermeyer (2014) entitled *Freedom to read: A personal account of the 'book famine'*, he shares the painful experience of being unable to access print material and he bemoans the neglect by institutions and communities of sight impaired people.

The overarching intention of the social model of disability is to integrate people with disabilities socially, have social networks, ensure community participation, and encourage social capital which, in a nutshell, is social inclusion. Simplican, Clifford, Leader, Kosciulek, and Leahy (2015, p. 19) define social inclusion as “the broad conceptions of social inclusion [that] can involve being accepted as an individual beyond disability, significant and reciprocal relationships, appropriate living accommodations, employment, informal and formal supports, and community involvement”. Social inclusion is further succinctly explained by Allaman (2013) as a way of betterment of human life that is characterised by a shift towards greater social justice, equality, and collectivism. Hosking (2008) uses the disability theory (CDT) to understand disability as a social construct. The CDT is based on critical theory principles that promote human emancipation from any kind of oppression such as political or racial or any kind of power. He argues that disability is socially constructed as means of oppressing others. His points of departure are the following:

- Disability is a social construct, not the inevitable consequence of impairment.
- Disability is best characterised as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and the social environment.
- The social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional and attitudinal environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of ‘normalcy’ (Ibid, p. 7).

This thinking is consistent with the social model on disability which is commended by many organisations and individuals who are fighting for the rights of people with disabilities worldwide.

Amongst the few international initiatives that have actively contributed towards promoting the rights of people with disabilities are the following: Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS); the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); the

United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006); UNESCO, and WHO. The work done by these organisations has impacted legislation on disability in many countries, including South Africa. Legislation combats negative attitudes that stigmatise people with disabilities and refutes the assumption that they are incomplete and in need of special medical attention (Mji et al., 2013). It is such attitudes that have encouraged people with disabilities to become vocal and fight for their rights (Ibid.).

The literature reveals that there is a strong belief that societies disable people with disabilities in many ways by placing unnecessary barriers in their way (Loewen & Pollard, 2010; Mji et al., 2013; Simplican et al., 2015). Some policies, particularly in developed countries such as the UK (DFID, 2000 in Bines, 2011), view disability as putting people in an underprivileged state. In the latter document disability is associated with deprivation of socio-economic rights. This may literally lead to poor economic status, thereby leading to restricted opportunities for full participation in community activities. The main goal of UPIAS is to see a society where people with disabilities are fully engaged and where their differences are being embraced by society rather than being discriminated against. UPIAS (1976, pp. 3-4) strongly expresses the following view:

In our view, it is society which disabled physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society.

Wendel (1996) refers to a case in a California restaurant in 1993 involving Burger King. This incident revealed the narrowly reductionist view against people with disabilities when a deaf lady could not place an order using an intercom, and instead handed over a written order at the counter. She was denied service. In defence of the organisation, Stan Kyker, executive vice-president, said: "People [with disabilities] are going to have to accept that they are not 100 percent whole and they can't be made 100 percent whole in everything they do in life (p. 15)". It is such scenarios that reflect pejorative, constricted thinking and that relegate people with disabilities to second class citizens. They indirectly and directly have to negotiate for their spaces and acknowledgement on a daily basis due to physical and attitudinal barriers in society (Kaufmann, 2016; WHO, 2011).

Some researchers (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; Graham et al., 2014) are critical of the social model of disability even though it has gained strength internationally as an acceptable model.

Their concern emanates from the overly simplification of the model by activists and academics who have no experiences of living with disability. They argue that there is a strong misperception that the model is considered as a solution to disability challenges and that the meaning and application of the social model are taken for granted, thus disregarding the underlying factors that impact living with a disability and its accompanying emotions (Lourens, 2015). It is indisputable that barriers in society could be very limiting to people with disabilities; however, societal changes or barrier removal may not completely make their lives manageable or change their physical being. A limitation of the social model is thus that it views disability as homogeneous, but such an attitude may be self-destructive as some people with disabilities have impairments that require constant medical intervention.

Furthermore, Kaufmann (2016) states his reservation about the social model by drawing on the feminist view that this model does not take away the experience of impediment and disability in the long term. It is important to be mindful of dynamic societal behaviours that might be very unpredictable at times and to know that, irrespective of the political, economic and religious character of the society in which they live, disabled people are subjected to oppression and negative social attitudes that inevitably undermine their personhood and their status as full and worthy citizens. Additionally, Graham et al. (2014, p. 15) argue that the model "...also does not allow for an interrogation of the ways in which a wide range of impairments interface [sic] with the environment to result in very different experiences of disability". They further contest that fixing the external environment and materials may not be a permanent solution, as other factors need to be considered as well. Changing community thinking may be impractical, and thus ample legislation is required to protect people with disabilities. However, changing the attitudes and behaviours displayed by individuals will take time, and therefore constant awareness of disability as a human phenomenon is necessary. It is against this backdrop that Albert (2004) appeals that people with disabilities be in the forefront of the struggle as they need to be actively involved in the development of policies and strategies pertaining to disability. Their positive views and experiences are indispensable and will assist in the process of breaking down barriers. This view is supported by the popular slogan of people with disabilities: "Nothing about us without us" (Scotch, 2009).

2.4.3 Other models of disability

Besides the two models of disability that have been discussed above, there are other perceptive understandings of disability that are discussed by Shanimon and Nair (2014) in their paper entitled: *Theorising the models of disability philosophical social and medical concepts: An empirical research based on existing literature*. Not all of these models are entertained in detail in this study, although some might have relevancy. According to Shanimon and Nair (2014), the development of models of disability addresses disability as a scientific model, and this allows scientists to research and learn new ways of eliminating problems like ‘abnormality’ as a term for disability forever. The scientific view is geared towards ‘normality’; thus anything that is different is ‘abnormal’ and a solution must be found to make it ‘normal’. This view is related to the medical model of fixing a disability. It sounds quite inhuman, as it treats people as guinea-pigs or research objects.

The diversity model of disability is different as this model views ‘abnormality’ as acceptable and argues that people need to learn to embrace the diversity we live in or with. The diversity model is neither a medical nor a social model as it is based on appreciating the person as a human being with whatever differences that a person may have (Simmeborn et al., 2013). Jones, (2013,p.7) refers to a speech by Anthony Lake, a UNICEF executive director, who made a profound statement at a conference in Cape Town when he explained the importance of embracing disability: “When you see the disability before [you see] the child, it is not only wrong for the child, but it deprives society of all that the child has to offer... Their loss is society’s loss, their gain is society’s gain”.

The charity model of disability is based on the line of thought that people with disabilities are dependent and need care and that they are unemployable and helpless victims incapable of helping themselves (Koszela, 2013). Graham et al. (2014) refer to the charity model as a ‘welfarist model’ as people are pitied and perceived as deserving hand-outs or placed in special institutions. Such people thus become dependent on social grants and charity and rely on goodwill and benevolent acts (Majola & Dhunpath, 2016; Matshediso, 2007). This is contrary to the social model of disability. In many instances, poverty and disabilities are interlinked for the obvious reason of low education levels that have a direct impact on low rates of employment (Naami, 2014; Graham et al., 2014). This kind of model undermines the dignity of a person

with a disability and encourages self-pity, thus affecting the self-esteem and confidence of such individuals. Some families even encourage people with disabilities to beg at street corners, which is appalling and derogatory. Also, in many instances people with disabilities in South Africa are beneficiaries of a social grant which discourages them from engaging in activities that will ensure their independence.

The human capacity model is closely related to the rights-based and human rights-based models. This model is concerned with the person first and then with disability. For instance, instead of referring to the term ‘disabled person’ in which the word ‘disabled’ seems to be defining the characteristics of the person, the term ‘person with a disability’ is used. It is for this reason that the discourse in this thesis refers to the participants as ‘students with disabilities’ as this puts emphasis on the person and not on his or her disability (Fleischer, Adolfsson, & Granlund, 2013). Having a disability does not disqualify a person from being a human being who has a personality and deserves to be treated with profound dignity and respect. However, Pollard and Loewen (2010, p. 11) argue that the language in ‘person with a disability’ indicates an abnormality that requires a cure. Seemingly, they prefer the term ‘disabled person’, which means that such people are part of diversity in society and can be proud of their difference.

The educational model of disability encompasses most of the models discussed above, for instance the social model, the rights-based model, the human capacity model, the human rights-based model, and the diversity model. In the educational model the emphasis is that everyone has a right to education as all human beings are educable and anyone can learn. According to UNESCO (2015, p. 3), the right to education “...has been internationally recognised as an overarching right: it is a human right in itself and indispensable for the exercise of other human rights”. This view is supported by many pieces of legislation, agreements and policies globally. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD, 2006) is committed to enforcing, among other rights, the right to education of people with disabilities. This is further elaborated on in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, where all forms of inclusive, quality, free, compulsory, and basic education are encouraged. Shanimon and Nair (2014) believe that students with disabilities should have access to the general curriculum where, it is assumed, they will learn certain skills that will lead to an economically independent, self-sufficient, productive and fully participating person. Many people with disabilities live in poverty (WHO, 2011) and rely on social grants. Accessing

education is thus an attempt to break the chain of poverty and to widen skills development which will enhance the employability of people with disabilities. It is undeniable that the full emancipation of human kind is reliant on education as it enlightens and brings positive change. This is emphasised in Chapter 9 of the National Plan for 2030 which views education as a tool that “empowers people to define their identity, take control of their lives, raise healthy families, take part confidently in developing a just society, and play an effective role in the politics and governance of their communities” (Ibid., p. 304). Jameel (2011) holds a similar view on the role of education, arguing that it contributes to human capital formation and that is a key determinant of personal well-being and welfare. Many countries that fight the scourge of discrimination are making inclusive education one of their priorities.

Through discourses such as those that were discussed above, the 21st Century has experienced an increase in the number of students with disabilities who have enrolled at institutions of higher education (Swart & Greyling, 2011; Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, Chataika, & Bell, 2014). According to WHO (2011), higher education is considered as the hub of knowledge that may change individuals’ lives, the economy of the state, and that may bring social change. It plays three distinctively roles. First, it is considered as a beacon that prepares students for advanced skills that will enhance their employability, thereby increasing their prospects for a better future and a better life (Dalai, 2011; Mutanga, 2013). Secondly, it is a fountain of knowledge that not only creates knowledge, but critiques information to find new meaning which could be applied globally. It thus critically develops human capital for social change. Thirdly, it provides opportunities for social mobility and simultaneously strengthens equity, social justice and democracy Chapter 9 of the National Development Plan (South Africa, 2015a). Therefore, improving education, training and innovation in higher education is instrumental in economic development, which is a tenet that is supported by the South African Skills Development Act 97 of 1998 (South Africa, 1998). Education should be looked at as an important tool for good citizenship that will ensure an enriching and diversified life. However, the challenges that many students experience in higher education have made it impossible for many students with disabilities to realise their dreams through education (Kochung, 2011; Lombardi, Murray, & Dallas, 2006; Mutanga, 2017). Having considered these facts, this study intended to explore the experiences of students with disabilities to determine the factors that assisted them in achieving academic success at two universities of technology.

2.5 Disability as a Phenomenon in South African Higher Education Institutions

Recently, there has been overwhelming interest in the topic of students with disabilities at higher education institutions internationally and locally. A fair number of studies have been conducted on students with disabilities in attempts to gain a clear picture of the issues in the higher education context that impact them (Mosia & Phasha, 2017; Khoaeane & Noang, 2015; Walton, 2018; Crous, 2004; Donohue & Bornman, 2014; FOTIM, 2011; Lourens, 2015; Mantsha, 2016; Mutanga, 2015, 2017, 2018; Riddel & Weedon, 2013; Matshediso, 2007, 2010; Howell, 2005; Ohajwa, 2013). In as much as these studies were conducted in different contexts using different samples and methods, they seem to have reached consensus that students with disabilities face challenges in higher education settings, particularly in terms of access and physical accommodation.

Students with disabilities normally find it harder to adapt to the physical infrastructure of higher education institutions (HEIs) than their counterparts as most do not have facilities that cater for the disabled. This is acknowledged by the Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School Education and Training System (2018). (For the purpose of this study, the latter will be referred to as the Strategic Policy on Disability). In developed countries, students with disabilities are likely to face various difficulties due to the fact that most of them come from high schools that cater specifically for students with disabilities (Kelepouris, 2014; Kochung, 2011). These schools are staffed with educators who have been trained to deal with learners with special needs and they have an infrastructure that accommodates people with disabilities. However, most universities and colleges in South Africa lack the expertise to deal with students with disabilities (Kochung, 2011). This could hamper these students' academic success and result in frustration for both the students and their lecturers. In South Africa, the lack of special facilities for students with disabilities poses a challenge and is in contravention of the policies of HEIs. In this regard, academics play a crucial role in meeting the needs of all their students (Kochung, 2011; Konur, 2006; Soudien & Baxen, 2006; Swart & Greyling, 2011). The challenges that people with disabilities experience may also contribute to the limited number that pursue further studies at institutions of higher learning globally (Crous, 2004; FOTIM, 2011).

It is acknowledged that learners with disabilities face many challenges in South African schools, but this study's quest was to better understand the experiences of students with disabilities in their endeavours to attain academic success in the higher education environment. The discourse will thus unpack this topic under the following points: the massification of education, the government's view of dealing with disability as presented in the National Plan for 2010-2030, and the policies of the Department of Social Development.

South Africa has a long history of oppression that was introduced by colonialism and sustained by apartheid policies, but some of these policies have been under review since before the advent of democracy in 1994. During the apartheid era, gatekeeping in the higher education sector was a norm and entrance was reserved for the elite. The school and higher education systems were powerful tools in enforcing gender, racial, ethnic, disability and other forms of discrimination as well as the authoritarian policies of apartheid. Students with disabilities had a very limited place in education and higher education was indirectly made inaccessible to many Blacks and minority groups. However, since 1994 the South African higher education system has been in a process of transformation and this has enforced the removal of barriers that previously made it difficult to accommodate all qualifying students (Higher Education Summit Annexure 5, 2015). PSET (2016, p. 9) exposes the fact that only a fifth of people with disabilities attended tertiary education institutions during the apartheid era, with the majority being whites. White special schools were better resourced and funded compared to those for other races, and these schools were the worst for Black children in rural areas, if they existed at all (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Mutanga, 2016). Another point is that the medical model was used as a gatekeeper for screening the admission of students with disabilities to universities.

Higher education is considered as the apex of the education system and reaching this level is therefore associated with success, prosperity, development, employability and enlightenment (Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, Chataika, & Bell, 2014; Morley & Croft, 2011; Festa-Dreher, 2012; Ohajunwa et al., 2015). Universities as engineers of knowledge contribute immensely to socio-economic development, justice, global networking and transformation across a wide spectrum of fields (Ntombela & Soobrayen, 2013). However, the literature is adamant that access to such prestigious institutions was always a challenge. With the absence of special universities for students with disabilities, students have no choice but to attend public (or mainstream) universities; unfortunately, many are not yet geared towards inclusive education. Both students with disabilities and universities find themselves challenged in this regard. The CHE (2016)

acknowledges that the South African higher education has its foundation on segregationist philosophies and discriminatory practices. Universities as agencies of change have always contradicted this position by acknowledging that institutions of higher learning should influence and drive social justice and transformation; however, discrimination persists in this context (Emong & Eron, 2016; Morgado, Cortes-Vega, Lopez-Gavira, Alvarez, & Morina, 2016; Mutanga, 2013). The literature thus paints a fairly clouded picture of disability in South African higher education, regardless of the fact that the government has encouraged an enabling environment for all students.

2.5.1 Massification of higher education and challenges for people with disabilities

The 21st Century has experienced a rapid increase of numbers of students, especially in African developing countries. The attainment of a higher education degree or diploma is associated with progressive thinking and knowledge which might be instrumental in the development of states (Mok & Jiang, 2016). In 1996, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) resolved to massify the higher education system by extending participation to the wider community, which rapidly increased enrolment numbers (Agbesi, Banda, & Wang, 2018; CHE, 2016; Mok & Jiang, 2016; Ntombela & Soobrayen, 2013; Songkaeo & Yeong, 2016). This transformation initiative has been a worldwide phenomenon as a means of improving competition, social mobility, and partnerships with private institutions. Thus, according to UNESCO Bangkok and SEAMEO (2006, p. 3):

The massification of higher education reflects the global trend of improving higher education opportunities for all, and transforming higher education systems from being elitist to ensuring mass participation across different social, income and geographical groups. These massification programs seek to serve student/professional groups who may not have the educational opportunities to undertake initial or further study and professional development at higher levels.

The demands of globalisation, coupled with the demands of the fourth industrial revolution, have underscored the need to provide education for everybody. This is further confirmed by Mok and Jiang (2016, p. 3) who state that "...increasing higher education enrolment would improve quality of population and enhance national competitiveness in the globalising world".

The legislation that was discussed above has painted a picture of the South African context as developing and progressive in its aim to protect and promote the human rights of all citizens. Education is forefronted as the core developmental vehicle that has the potential to emancipate the masses from all sorts of oppressive conditions such as poverty, disease, and discrimination. Central to non-discrimination is the promotion of transformation in higher education settings where equal access and development should be fostered. This places a statutory obligation on higher education institutions to admit all qualifying students to the system. The role of higher education is gaining strength as it is understood to have a great impact on economic and social progress (Pouris & Inglesi-Lotz, 2014; Spiel et al., 2018; Valerio et al., 2016). It is in these institutions where human capital, through skilled and professional workers, is produced, which is critical for poverty alleviation. Opening access to higher education becomes equivalent to generating knowledge, which is what the world needs.

The principles of massification are politically, economically and socially driven (Mwirichia, Jagero, & Barchok, 2017). In essence, massification is the democratisation of the education system and aims to redress the education inequalities of the past when some groups had limited access to institutions of higher learning. This limitation had a negative impact on various ethnic groups in terms of lifestyle and professional development and barred them from full participation in the developing world.

Massification is an instrument to ensure equity and knowledge expansion (Mwirichia et al., 2017; Olakulehin & Singh, 2013). However, there has been some resistance as universities want to retain their elite status. The higher education system in developed countries such as the UK and the USA has been universalised, while developing countries are struggling with massification (New Delhi Report, 2014; Songkaeo & Yeong, 2016). Olakulehin and Singh (2013) argue that developing countries such as Nigeria, India and South Africa have not as yet embraced massification as they have not relaxed their entry requirements.

Questioning massification may not sound politically or socially correct; however, its economical standing should be opened to questioning. A critical observation has been that, despite the massification of the education sector, equal access and equal opportunities are not guaranteed (New Delhi Report, 2014; Mok & Jiang, 2016). Moreover, students with disabilities have been the victims of discrimination worldwide, yet it is noted with concern that the issue of disability has not been explored in detail in terms of the massification of the higher education

system. Wilson-Strydom (2011, in Mutanga, 2013) also critically comments that open access to higher education is not equivalent to success opportunities and may create social exclusion within the higher education system. A controversial question is whether the quality and standards of higher education will become strong through massification if the number of challenges that are experienced are not addressed (Matovu, 2018; Mwirichia et al., 2017; Ntim, 2016; Odundo, Origa, Nyandega, & Ngaruiya, 2015). For example, Morley and Croft (2011) state: “Enrolling more disabled students in HE does not automatically lead to full participation in university life or equality”. Therefore, while massification has achieved wider participation, it seems to have a number of ripple effects. It is for instance plagued by a new set of challenges such as an imbalance among high numbers of students and funding, academic staff ratios, over-stretched resources, a high workload on academics and assessment issues, to name only a few (Ntim, 2016; Songkiao & Yeong, 2016). Moreover, the low throughput rate has remained constantly under 5% (Macgregor, 2016), with only 27% of these students graduating in the allocated time and another 40% dropping out early (du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014). The CHE (2016) has expressed grave concern regarding the throughput and graduation rates across the system that are consistently not improving. Research has shown that students are finding it difficult to adapt to the higher education curriculum due to challenges in transitioning from high school to university. Under-preparedness and an articulation gap affect undergraduates, and these have been identified as dominant factors in low throughput rates (CHE, 2013). These challenges are said to be emanating from the misalignment between basic education and higher education curricula.

Students with disabilities may experience more than under-preparedness and an articulation gap because there is the persisting perception that the services in special schools are not equivalent to those in mainstream schools. According to Howell (2005), the attitude in the schooling system does not prepare and encourage learners, especially those with disabilities, for university studies. Mutang (2017) also confirms that the schooling experiences of learners with disabilities are different from those of others, more especially for those coming from special schools. The support and cushioning that they are used to may be hard to replicate in higher education. Ntombela and Soobrayen (2013) note that the transition from high school to tertiary institutions is a difficult process for most students and could be worse for students with disabilities (Barnard-Brak, Schmidt, Wei, Hodges, & Robinson, 2008). As has been noted above, the massification process is silent on the issue of disabilities, and this suggests that the higher education environment may be harsher for students with disabilities than for others. In

this context, Jameel (2011) argues that students with disabilities have to double their efforts if they want to succeed, and states that they "...have to overcome the dual obstacles of academic demands combined with their disability" (p. 8). These students are predisposed to encountering challenges in higher education, irrespective of the specific disability each has (Wasielewski, 2016; Ntombela & Soobrayen, 2013), and this could result in poor performance, low self-esteem and high dropout rates (Ndlovu & Walton, 2016; Sedibe & Buthelezi, 2014). Challenges may not be limited or be specific to academia, but may range from minor issues like access to information to choosing a career, socialisation and others. Available resources, infrastructure, funding, policies, administrative capacity as well as academic support in higher education institutions are a mismatch to massification and open access (CHE, 2016). Moreover, massification becomes a contentious and political issue and is fraught with contradictions when it is considered a mere increase in numbers without thinking of policies and how students and higher education institutions will cope with and benefit in the process (Moriña, 2017). Additionally, Tinto (2014) highlights the importance of support for students at tertiary institutions. This may be academic, financial, social or in any other form that will ensure that students settle comfortably and eventually succeed as expected.

PSET (2016) refers with concern to the lack of proper inclusion of and support for students with disabilities in public higher education, and further mentions the low numbers of such students in the system. Their low graduation rate is a reason for these concerns. However, notwithstanding the many challenges, research has shown that the number of students continues to increase in higher education institutions worldwide (Redpath, 2013; Ntombela & Soobrayen, 2013; Lourens, 2015; Rosario, Alvarez, Morgado, & Dolores, 2016; Lombardi 2016; Wasielewski, 2016). In light of the new political dispensation in South Africa, the DHET has prioritised education for all, and this has seen the number of students with disabilities gradually increasing in higher education. The table below depicts the registration patterns of twenty three South African public universities over a period of three years.

Table 2.1: DHET registration statistics (2011–2013)

Year	Non-disabled	Students with disabilities
2011	938 201	5 856 (0.6%)
2012	953 378	6 277 (0.7%)
2013	983 698	7 118 (0.6%)

Source: Public Sector Education and Training (PSET), 2016

It is acknowledged that more updated data over a five-year period would have elucidated the pattern even better, but efforts to obtain throughput graduation data were unsuccessful, hence the outcry against negligent capturing of correct data on students with disabilities in higher education is supported.

It has been noted with concern by many researchers that data on students with disabilities are either questionable or not available (Howell, 2005; FOTIM, 2011). This raises grave concern regarding the administration and management of higher education information systems. For instance, basic statistical information provided by PSET in 2016 should have reflected data up to 2015 at least, but this was not the case. This negligence on the part of higher education institutions, or the possibility that they withhold this information deliberately, should be addressed by means of amended policies and regulations. The question that arises is: *How is it possible for universities to support and accommodate students with disabilities if their statistics are inaccurate or unavailable?*

The government has promulgated policies advocating the equal treatment of people with disabilities and it has enforced policies on both basic and higher education. However, these policies do not fully articulate how students with disabilities need to be managed, and therefore and implementation plan is lacking (Bines & Lei, 2011; Matshedisho, 2007; Mutanga, 2017; Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Ndlovu & Walton, 2016). Inequality in the higher education sector seems to still be a reality; for instance, some universities have a fully-fledged disability unit but at some such a unit does not exist. The main excuse for non-compliance is a lack of funding to refurbish infrastructure and facilities, yet the DHET has allocated budgets for infrastructural development at universities annually. According to Bines and Lei (2011), dwindling university budgets has become an international challenge, especially in underdeveloped and developing countries. The National Plan of South Africa 2010–2030

wants higher education institutions to transform and become centres of knowledge that assist in transformation, poverty alleviation, and curbing unemployment through vocational skills and professional knowledge development. This involves planning for inclusivity in all spheres.

However, the department of Higher Education acknowledges the challenges that students with disabilities endure in the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) report (Matshedisho, 2010). “Institutional practices have failed to consider the learning needs of persons with disabilities and their support needs, [therefore they] continue to be a barrier to the sector” (DHET, 2015). The Department of Social Development conducted a pilot study in 2015 entitled *Experiences of persons with disabilities in learnership in higher education institutions and public entities*. This study confirmed that students with disabilities in higher education experienced various challenges. The study aimed to gain a better understanding of disability challenges and to attend to equality issues and measures required to address systemic weaknesses in universities in particular. The report revealed that there were persistent challenges in higher education, ranging from access to information when applying at universities for admission to problems in the classroom environment. A conclusion was that universities seemed to be silently resistant to transformation.

In the sub-Saharan African region, higher education in countries such as South Africa, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Tanzania and Uganda have made remarkable strides in embracing disability using the social and social justice models and human rights-based approaches. However, teething problems exist and are common. Pertinent challenges with regards to disability as highlighted by many researchers in Africa include, but are not limited to, infrastructure, access to information, inequality, lack of funding, policy issues and teaching and learning practices (Emong & Eron, 2016; Lyner-Cleophas et al., 2014; Matshedisho, 2007; Morley & Croft, 2011; Mutanga, 2013; Ntombela & Soobrayen, 2013; Chaputula & Mapulanga, 2017; Sedibe & Buthelezi, 2014; Ndlovu & Walton, 2016). Policies and strategies have been marked as a clear issue because, in most instances, they are neither existing nor clear and many are misaligned. According to Emong and Eron (2016), in Uganda for instance disability is strictly monitored by the National Council on Higher Education. Should a university be found not compliant, its operating licence (or accreditation) may be revoked. Ironically, in most countries – including South Africa – funding has been dramatically reduced, making it difficult to implement inclusive education and meeting the demands of the massification of higher education, which should include students with disabilities as well (Cloete, 2016; Okalany & Adipala, n.d.). The

current state of affairs in higher education may make students with disabilities feel that they are insufficiently accommodated.

2.5.2 Inclusivity in higher education

The urgency of introducing inclusive education to make universities accessible to wider communities has been on the table since the country became a democracy. The doors of the higher education system were thus forced opened for all those who had previously been disadvantaged. However, there is still a strong feeling that people with disabilities are being excluded. It is common knowledge that people living with disabilities have suffered the brunt of discrimination and stigmatisation across the universe (EWP 6, 2001; UNESCO, 2005; Kochung, 2011). This is acknowledged by UNESCO (2015, p. 5):

People with disabilities face specific challenges in pursuit of their right to education... [This has resulted] in reduced access to mainstream education.... Specific provisions guarantee their right to education and encourage countries to adopt an approach that is inclusive of all, including those with disabilities.

In the past, learners with disabilities were excluded from mainstream schools and placed in special schools. This affected mainly those communities that could afford such facilities. However, in deep rural areas they were neglected and the community had no plan to help such children; hence many were seen as a ‘burden’ to their families. The lack of resources, knowledge and facilities was a predominant reason for such negligence. It is against this background that the inclusivity concept has surfaced as a corrective measure for the ills of the past and hence the subject of inclusivity is receiving a lot of attention. Almost all countries worldwide are planning and designing policies or implementing measures to fight discrimination against people with disabilities. The United Nations drives this agenda through UNESCO, which encourages and conducts research on this topic, thus making inclusive education a universal issue (UNESCO, 1994). UNESCO (2005, p. 13) defines inclusivity as follows:

[It is] a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common

vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children (p. 3).

A common theme in the various definitions of inclusivity (Cologon, 2013; Kochung, 2011; Lyner-Cleophas et al., 2014; Ntombela & Soobrayen, 2013; Swart & Greyling, 2011) is the need for continuous and persistent efforts by all parties to make this work. It is a process of finding effective ways of removing barriers in the education system to ensure that learners who are differently abled are enjoying their learning without being excluded and shunned. Inclusivity is a societal journey of embracing diversity in communities (Hockings, 2010). However, Phasha, Mahlo and Dei (2017) are concerned about the 'narrow' focus of inclusivity on the African context. Their view of inclusivity goes beyond sameness and embracing diversity, as they argue that it should encourage wholeness in terms of considering the body, soul, mind and the spirit of the learner, and that all these aspects need to be accommodated in education. They also have a philosophical view of inclusive education. It is supposed to be thought provoking as they raise many interesting questions on the nature of education, its content and context.

At the basic education level there are progressive proposals for the provisioning of resources and facilities to promote inclusive education; however, these proposals are not actively followed up at university level. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has taken remarkable steps towards inclusive education in schools. The existence of various documents and policies such as the one entitled *Implementing inclusive education in South Africa* (South Africa. Department of Education, 2002) as well as Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001) bear testimony to the commitment that has been made towards inclusive education. Teachers are being trained, collaboration between parents and school governing bodies has started, and issues of curriculum are gradually attended to. However, many of these issues are at the teething stage and one may expect hitches in the process. But the DBE is showing commitment to EWP 6 and is building understanding of inclusive education and distinguishing mainstreaming from the inclusion system, which universities need to address urgently as well.

Table 2.2: Comparison between mainstreaming and inclusive education

Mainstreaming	Inclusion
Mainstreaming is about getting learners to ‘fit into’ a particular kind of system or integrating them into this existing system.	Inclusion is about recognising and respecting the differences among learners and building on similarities.
Mainstreaming is about giving some learners extra support so that they can ‘fit in’ or be integrated into the ‘normal’ classroom routine. Learners are assessed by specialists who diagnose and prescribe technical interventions, such as the placement of learners in programmes.	Inclusion is about supporting all learners, educators and the system as a whole so that the full range of learning needs can be met. The focus is on teaching and learning actors, with the emphasis on the development of good teaching strategies that will be of benefit to all learners.
Mainstreaming and integration focus on changes that need to take place in learners so that they can ‘fit in’. Here the focus is on the learner.	Inclusion focuses on overcoming barriers in the system that prevent it from meeting the full range of learning needs. The focus is on the adoption of support systems and making them available in the classroom.

Source: Adapted from EWP 6 (South Africa. DoE, 2001)

Inclusivity should be regarded as a process of engagement, collaboration, change and transformation which HEIs need to be part of it. Change and transformation are embraced as concepts at universities, yet applying these precepts is seldom realised. This is a contradiction as universities propagate inclusivity, yet they lag behind in implementation. This is acknowledged in the draft strategic disability policy framework of PSET (2016), which states that the South African higher education system has not yet achieved the international standards of inclusive education. However, existing resources include directives from the government that should be utilised effectively and, if this occurs, universal standards may be achieved. This is encouraged in studies by notable institutions and scholars such as the CHE (2005), FOTIM (2011), Kochung (2011), Morgado et al. (2016) and Redpath et al. (2013), who all agree on the following points:

- Poor architectural accessibility;
- Low numbers of lecturers with training in special needs education;
- Lack of awareness about education for students with disabilities;
- Rigid curricula and examination systems;
- Lack of appropriate teaching methodologies; and

- Numbers of students with disabilities are inaccurately captured.

These widely held concerns demonstrate that inclusive education in higher education is at the foundation stage, which suggests that it has not yet advanced from the ‘mainstream’ level (Table 2.2). Central to these concerns is low student success throughput levels which have adverse impacts on students. Letchtenberger et al. (2004) observe that students with disabilities “...fail to successfully complete their education by earning a degree, and instead choose to leave early”. The unintended consequences of this are likely to be suffered by these students, thereby negatively impacting their future prospects in their chosen careers. It is indirectly denying them the right to education and equality, which is tantamount to unfair practices. Universities need to realise that transformation does not mean comprising standards, but keeping the integrity of the system intact while allowing access to all who qualify.

The achievement of inclusivity is challenged if there are discrepancies in the manner in which some students, especially students with disabilities, are accommodated in the classroom and university environment. Controlling or managing inclusive education in the classroom is difficult, hence the execution of it remains entirely in the hands of individual academic staff members (Matshediso, 2007). How lecturers conduct their lessons could not be dictated as they have full autonomy. However, attitude, willingness and skills play a major role and may not be ignored when inclusive education is implemented. Additionally, Larocco and Wilken (2013, p. 1) note that “...there are also pedagogical challenges and opportunities that go beyond accommodation and support [for] the goal of learning for all”. Epistemological access is one of the challenges that surfaces, as it emphasises how students gain and access knowledge (Munro, 2014; du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014). It requires the full involvement and engagement of the student and a conducive environment to achieve the envisaged successes.

However, inclusive education does not start and end in the classroom environment, but encompasses a student’s life at university and within the community. Donohue and Bornman (2014) raise concerns regarding the ambiguity in policies that have contributed to ineffectiveness in implementing inclusive education, more especially in basic education. Matshedisho (2007) makes a similar observation with regard to policies about disability in higher education that are not accompanied by a clear implementation plan. It is argued that the top-down approach has led to a slow pace in the implementation of the inclusive approach. The consequences of the challenges experienced in basic education also impact inclusive education

in higher education settings, given the fact that higher education is dependent on basic education to produce students of a high calibre. Problems such as a gap in articulation skills, under-preparedness and epistemological access are likely to remain constant if inclusive education is not introduced at an early stage. The good intentions of inclusive education could only be realised if the pedagogical needs of students are made a priority.

Through the Draft Strategic Disability Policy Framework for the Post-School Education and Training System (DHET, 2018) the government acknowledges that there are shortcomings in the implementation of transformation and disability policies and strategies. Inclusive education has received minimal attention, which is evident in the throughput rates of students with disabilities. Some other reasons for a lack of transformation are the following (Ibid., p. 7):

- The absence of effective monitoring for compliance with national and international standards and obligations;
- The lack of effective coordination mechanisms;
- The lack of funding;
- The absence of enforcement mechanisms; and
- The lack of accountability and consequences for non-compliance.

In the absence of consequences associated with non-compliance, students with disabilities continue to endure the agony of discrimination in higher education. Their right to education and the fulfilment of their needs are thus not respected in all circumstances. Emong and Eron (2016, p. 3) make the following comment in this regard:

Failure by an institution to provide universal design, accessible facilities, reasonable accommodation, appropriate instruction or teaching methods and qualified staff for special needs students is a path to the exclusion of students with disabilities in the institution's programmes.

Institutional commitment to student support is thus necessary for student access and success.

Walton (2018) presents a new perspective on inclusive education when he argues that it could be used as a new way of decolonising the education system. According to Walton (2018), inclusive education "...can be described as a rights-based approach to education that seeks social justice by resisting exclusion within and from school communities and promoting the

access, participation, and achievement of all learners”. According to this view, human rights-based policies acknowledge equal access to education and treatment and promote fairness. Legislation pertaining to inclusive education demands that universities adopt a culture or a system that encourages accepted values and enforces relationships amongst administration, teaching staff, students, their parents, and university communities. It further argues that a university’s mission is easily accomplished when this culture is adopted. Lines of communication and roles and responsibilities become clear, which will make each participant understand what values and behaviours are required. Inclusive education in higher education institutions is expected to start with access to equal education and subsequently to lead to students’ academic success (Howell, 2005). These students should ultimately end in the labour market which will change their status in life (Gilson & Dymond, 2010; Ndlovu & Walton, 2016).

Shifting in the right direction was achieved by the DHET; this resulted in the Strategic Framework Policy for Disabilities in Higher Education (DHET, 2018). This policy is seen as a way forward in accommodating students with disabilities in higher education. However, this may not be sufficient as the responsibility lies with university officials to implement the policy effectively. The philosophy of HEIs in terms of the disability issue could become evident in the progress they make towards the implementation of disability initiatives. However, currently inclusive education seems to be peripheral on the HEI agenda and has not received the attention it deserves. This should be treated as a serious offence as higher education institutions are transgressing the right of a marginalised group to education. Ohajuwa et al. (2013) argue that inclusive education should be treated as part of social justice and as a driver of transformation in the higher education sector.

The fact that academic barriers are encountered by students with disabilities suggests that they need to double their efforts if they want to succeed. Being resilient is to stand strong against adversity, and this is a requirement for *all* students in higher education institutions. If they do not show resilience, they are automatically put at risk of dropping out and failure, as the lowering of standards to accommodate those who struggle is not an option.

2.5.2.1 Student support

The quality of the life that is enjoyed by students at HEIs has a great influence on their academic success, more especially so for students with disabilities. However, in many instances their expectations are not met. Part of the mandate of the Higher Education Disability Services Association (HEDSA) is to fight for the rights of people with disabilities. Each university should thus establish a disability unit and adopt and implement policies that will address the needs of students with disabilities. These units should provide essential services to students with disabilities such as Braille services for blind students, tape-recorded readings, sign language interpreters, alternative assessments, and assistive technologies such as text-to-voice converters. Faculties may often not assist in this regard as these are special requirements that demand the services of professional people.

Currently, less than 50% of South African universities have heeded this call or have been able to afford effective disability units (FOTIM, 2011). Student disability units are meant to provide critical external support to students with disabilities that may be social, academic and emotional. Such a unit also needs to be a centre of information and should sustain the quality of life of students with disabilities while they are at university. However, in some instances the rigid bureaucratisation of these units clothe them in mystery and many first year student are not aware where to locate them (Rosario et al., 2016). Studies on support services for students with disabilities unanimously reported various similar challenges that students face when they try to seek assistance (Fossey, Chaffey, Venville, Ennals, Douglas, & Bigby, 2017; Mantsha, 2016; Morgado et al., 2016; Tugli, Zungu, Ramakuela, Goon, & Anyanwu, 2013; Naidoo, 2010).

According to Mantsha (2016), the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) seems to be doing very well in supporting students with disabilities. There are numerous programmes for these students, starting from welcoming them to channelling them through to various departments where they will find support and assistance. This includes exceptional technological assistive services, making material available, and continuously updating and improving these services as required. Staff awareness programmes are conducted in the form of workshops for academic and non-academic staff. Such services are scantily provided by most other institutions and may range from notices on bulletin boards where notices are written in normal fonts and pinned at the top, to limited support from staff members who also have other responsibilities. A major

issue is the inaccessibility of venues for students who are visually impaired or who are in wheelchairs. These findings naturally suggest that ensuring clear communication of information is critically important and should be addressed.

Recently, Fossey et al. (2017) conducted a study in two Australian universities on the challenges that student with disabilities experienced. They looked at the students’ prior experiences of support, likely fluctuations in their support needs, the negotiation of needs between disability service staff and students, the students’ perceptions of available resources, and the students’ preferences about the disclosure of their learning support plans to teaching staff (see Table 2.3 below). The study revealed that it appeared to be the students’ responsibility to negotiate attention to their needs, starting with their willingness to disclose their disability status (Lechtenberger, Barnard-Brak, Sokolosky, & McCrary, 2012). In many instances, the students preferred not to disclose their status due to the fear of stigmatisation and discrimination. Only some made use of the available services when they faced challenges, It was concluded that this might have had an adverse impact on their epistemological access (Govender, 2014) and ultimately on their academic achievement.

According to a FOTIM report (2011), the CHE (2005) acknowledged that historically advantaged HEIs could not be compared to historically disadvantaged HEIs in terms of DU services and resources. It was found that the these services at historically disadvantaged institutions were fragmented and difficult to manage.

Table 2.3: Processes and procedures associated with a disability unit at HEIs

Responsibility	Action to be undertaken
Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance of disability status and self-identity • Disclosure of disability status • Experiences of using support in the past • Timing when accessing support (e.g., at enrolment or when difficulties arise) • Access to supporting evidence of disability • Knowledge or rights related to disability support • Use of alternative support (such as generic student services) • Relationships with teaching staff • Negotiation ability • Knowledge of available support structures • Evaluating of needs in a potentially changing situation • Understanding the usefulness of reasonable adjustments
Disability service staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service framework/philosophy

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal beliefs about disability support • Knowledge and experience of available support • Good relationship with student • Collaborative relationship with various departments • Relationship with teaching staff • Understanding and managing workload demands • Resource availability
Teaching staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive attitude towards students with disabilities • Knowledge of reasonable adjustments • Flexibility in teaching approach • Addressing workload demands • Ease of implementation of reasonable adjustments • Full-time and part-time access to disability awareness training
Tertiary institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adherence to legislation about disability support • Resource availability • Policy and procedures about disability support in place

Source: Adapted from Fossey et al., 2017

Chaputula and Mapulanga (2017) highlight the lack of library and information services for disabled people and acknowledge that possible barriers exist to their academic achievement at tertiary level. Lack of access to technology and equipment to support disabled students remains a challenge. The contents of the table above explicitly displays the challenges students with disabilities face in getting the necessary support that will facilitate their academic success. Pollard and Loewen (2010) are very critical of the current services provided to students with disabilities and believe that, as long as higher education institutions treat this mandate as a compliance issue, providing services to students with disabilities will remain ineffective and will not fulfil the needs of these students. Guzman's survey (2009, in Pollard & Loewen, 2010) reveal that about 75% of disability unit staff provide the required services based on compliance rather on being committed and passionate about their jobs. Generally, people with disabilities ought to be supported and empowered to develop their life skills which could lead to social change and a positive lifestyle (Ryynänen & Nivala, 2017).

The discourse above has clearly indicated that HEIs experience challenges that might be overwhelming for some students, and thus the support and involvement of parents are essential. Student support as a promotive and protective factor is not limited to the academic environment (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Bourdieu (1986) argues that the forms of capital that may be defined as support play an important role in sustaining students who are enrolled at universities. University students require any form of support possible, and this may

be financial, emotional, value- or belief-based, or social. Such support should also be provided by their families when they are in their transition to adulthood. Family support and involvement are instrumental in the academic success of students in general, and in that of students with disabilities in particular (InfoBrief, 2015; Kiyama et al., 2015; Martinez, 2015). Even though families may not be close when students reside at universities, they are able to play a monitoring role through social media and by constantly staying in touch with their children to encourage them to work hard (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015). In an academic context, such support may often be absent and this may leave affected students on their own to find supplementary support from friends or extended families (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015). Irrespective of their status, the academic success of students at tertiary institutions should be viewed as the concern and priority of multiple stakeholders given the economic and social value of the knowledge all students represent.

2.5.2.2 The achievement of academic success in HEIs

This section conceptualises academic success as an aspired attribute of students. It is undeniable that the degree to which students are integrated into and oriented regarding social life at HEIs is determined by their commitment to achieving academic success (Jayanthi, Balakrishnan, Ching, Latiff, & Nasirudeen, 2014; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Vanthournout, Gijbels, Coertjens, Donche, & Van Petegem, 2012; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Khurshid (2014, p. 40) defines success as “an attractive condition for human beings that every human starts struggling to achieve... No doubt success has always been a prime goal for learners [who wish] to accomplish their educational voyage”.

Academic success is underpinned by various factors. It is described as having great impact on a student’s self-esteem, motivation and resilience in higher education settings (Jayanthi et al., 2014). Various approaches have been employed by different researchers to understand and conceptualise academic success, or student success, in the higher education context.

Success is generally understood as both a process and a desirable outcome that may be dependent on many constructs such as the environment one is exposed to, support, resources, infrastructure, character, skills or traits, and one’s levels of self-determination, self-advocacy and self-awareness (Wasielowski, 2016a; Yailagh, Abbasi, Behrozi, Alipour, & Yakhehali, 2014). Khurshid (2014) perceives academic success as the aspired attribute of any student in

the pursuance of a career. In this study, the focus was on the achievement of academic success by students with disabilities and the factors that contributed to my study participants' successful academic experiences. The investigation was extended to dropout and failure rates and elements of resilience were explored as a general phenomenon that is a driver of success in any university student. Regardless whether a student has a disability or not, any student is exposed to and experiences challenges. I was therefore curious to see how and for what reasons academic success was achieved by students with disabilities.

Academic success as a dependent variable may be attributed to various complex factors (CHE, 2013) and cannot be restricted to natural aptitude or intelligence (Ali et al., 2013; Parker, 2016). There are many factors that are associated with academic success. Some are considered to be determined by prior experiences before entry into HE. These may be, but are not limited to, family background, socio-economic status, academic intensity in high school, the educational aspirations of the family, health, self-regulated learning, levels of self-determination, self-advocacy and self-awareness, academic resilience, self-identity, and personal aspirations (CHE, 2014; Jayanthi et al., 2014; Khurshid, 2014; Kuh et al., 2006; Sandoval-Hernández & Białowolski, 2016; Scheider & Lee, 1990; Wasielewski, 2016b; Yailagh et al., 2014). Kuh et al. (2006) argue that, while success at university may be attributed to teaching and learning, it also extends to student support, HE governance, technology, campus residence, financial aid, curriculum, socialisation, and student engagement. In addition, they declare that the degree to which students are integrated and oriented towards social life when enrolled at a higher education institution and the degree to which they are committed to academic life are determinants of their academic success. Similarly, Tinto (2005) argues that student integration, academic integration, social integration, and the quality of students' efforts and learning also determine their goal and commitment, all of which have a direct impact on their academic success. Parker (2016) describes academic success as an attribute that is consistent with multiple intelligences such as emotional intelligence (EQ) and spiritual intelligence. The literature thus exposes academic success as a multifaceted concept that is not purely reliant on intelligences, but that is dependent on the psychological, emotional and socio-economic status of the student. It also depends on infrastructure, family background, educational background and personal abilities. In this study, academic success was perceived as both an outcome and a process of concerted commitment by all stakeholders; that is, the state, the university council, faculties, non-academic support departments, academic staff, the community, family, friends and the student himself/herself. The student is on a continuum where s/he is the recipient of

the services of other stakeholders, and the student is thus duty bound to transact these relationships in order to achieve academic success. In this context, Wasielewski (2016) argues that an integrated approach is important in understanding this complex concept.

Clearly, student engagement is important and is empirically connected to academic success (Strydom & Mentz, 2010). Academic success is not only an outcome but is also a multidimensional concept and process that is based on various indicators such as student retention, academic achievement, student progression, and general development. Many researchers agree that an integrated approach to understanding academic success is ideal, hence the holistic development of any student is reliant on intellectual, emotional, social, ethical, physical and spiritual development. In this process, Ali et al. (2013) highlight the critical role that the family plays in students' achievement of academic success and argues that this role may have a positive or negative impact. Wilkins et al. (2014) claim that family support and parental involvement increase students' success rates as well as their engagement, attendance, academic performance and behaviour. Wasielewski (2016) argues that, irrespective of whether students have a disability or not, all students need support. This view is consistent with that of (Tinto, 2005) who argues that student engagement relies on their external background as it is a factor that contributes to success.

Well-developed internal and personal abilities contribute to student success (Kuh et al., 2006). The latter scholar describes successful students as those who possess some of the following characteristics: personal validation, self-efficacy, a sense of purpose, active involvement, reflective thinking, social integration, self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy. The perspective that Kuh et al. (2006) hold of students' success incorporates the elements of psychological, social and emotional intelligence as well as positive university involvement. Both psychological and emotional involvement are driven at individual level and are associated with multiple intelligences such as emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and intra-personal intelligences. Such aspects inform and contribute to student behaviour and ultimately to a student's academic success.

Further to Kuh's argument of internal personality is John Holland's theory of career choice, which he suggests is complemented by six types of personality: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional. Personality traits could be seen as drivers of academic success, hence their congruence with the critical cross-field outcomes (CCFOs) of any learning

programme in South Africa. Various critical cross-field outcomes need to be incorporated in all curricula, irrespective of the National Qualifications Framework levels (Nkomo, 2000, p. 18). This requires that students should be able to:

- Identify and solve problems and their responses should demonstrate that responsible decisions have been made using critical and creative thinking;
- Work effectively with others as a member of a team, group, organisation, or community;
- Organise and manage their activities responsibly and effectively;
- Collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information;
- Communicate effectively using visual, mathematical and/or language skills in oral and/or written presentations;
- Use science and technology effectively and critically and show responsibility towards the environment and the health of others;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

The CCFOs endorse lifetime learning and put the learner at the forefront of learning where s/he is required to interact with others, apply information, and act responsibly as a member of society. The CCFOs encompass self-regulated learning and self-efficacy characteristics that allow students to strive for competence in their own right.

According to Parker (2016), academic success is a dependent variable whilst intrapersonal intelligences are independent constructs. Intrapersonal intelligence refers to intrinsic resilience and the individual's accurate evaluation and understanding of his or her internal self and the ability to use this information to further his or her goals. Kuh et al. (2006) and Parker (2016) agree that academic success is achievable if one understands oneself and is comfortable with oneself; i.e., when the individual possesses self-identity, internal proficiency and self-knowledge (Gustavsson, Nyberg, & Westin, 2016; Kuh et al., 2006). Self-identity is composed of self-awareness, self-knowledge and the ability of self-reflection, all of which play an important role in student success. In the quantitative study that Parker (2016) conducted, he used a multiple intelligence development assessment scale (MIDAS) and the Connor-Davidson resilience scale (CD-Ris) to measure resilience. Finally three further scales were used to measure academic success, namely the scale of implicit theory of intelligence (SITI), the grade point average (GPA), and grade level. The results showed a strong correlation between

intrapersonal intelligence and academic success (Ibid). The latter study demonstrated that, through intrapersonal intelligence, students gain academic resilience and sustainability, both of which are critical for progression at university level.

However, literature has recently emerged that offers contradictory findings, stating that traditional and non-traditional measurements (such as IRT analysis) lack comprehensive instrumentation to predict academic success (Festa-Dreher, 2012). Instead, the academic success inventory for college students (ASICS) has strong psychometric properties and has been proven to be a useful measurement of academic success. The subscales of the ASICS include general academic skills, career decidedness, internal motivation/confidence, lack of anxiety, external motivation, concentration, socializing skills, personal adjustment, efficacy of the instructor, and external motivation. In her review of academic success theories (the self-determination theory, the cognitive theory, the achievement theory, the self-regulated theory, the environmental input theory, the student integration model, and Kuh's engagement model) the scholar concludes that all theories have some factors in common: motivation, skills, environment, locus of control, and social foundation. Ultimately, Festa-Dreher (2012) strongly recommends ASICS as a tool that universities could utilise to increase academic performance and high graduation rates. In the same vein, Kappe and Van der Flier (2012) and O'Connor and Paunonen (2007), who also engaged in quantitative studies, found that three aspects of the 'big five' personality traits (namely conscientiousness, personality and motivational traits) have a strong impact on student success. Together, these studies provide important insights into different tools for measuring academic success.

To conclude this section, it must be mentioned that it has become apparent that academic success is multi-faceted and that it comprises various constructs of intellectual, emotional, spiritual and behavioural aspects. Clearly, support seems to be at the centre of student success (Ali, Haider, Munir, Khan, & Ahmed, 2013; Khurshid, 2014). Academic success is perceived as an outcome and a process at the same time, and thus success depends on the nature of the experiences students have at all levels. It was in this context that one of the research questions of the study was drafted: *What experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?*

2.6 Dropout Rates

All the studies cited above underscore the fact that intelligence or cognitive skills alone may not ensure academic success, as success may be dependent on students' attitude, attributes, behaviour, and levels of family and university support (Dent & Koenka, 2016; Fraser & Killen, 2003; Kappe & Van Der Flier, 2012). Currently, all universities are facing the challenge of declining success rates and increasingly high dropout and failure rates, or a delay in the time that degrees are completed (Graham et al., 2014; Gutman, 2017; Moodley & Singh, 2015; Vanthournout et al., 2012; Wilkins et al., 2014). These realities are in direct conflict with increasing access rates. Studies on dropout rates point at various causes of this phenomenon which many include, amongst others, a poor relationship with lecturers, high levels of absenteeism, poor academic performance, low grades, behavioural problems, poor teaching, social isolation, lack of academic preparation, lack of support, lack of career guidance, poor self-discipline and commitment, over-burdened curricula, poor instruction, poor governance, low socio-economic status, poor health care, insufficient transition planning, and being a first generation student (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015). The latter means that a student is the first one in the family to have reached this level of education and to graduate. Furthermore, Govender (2014, p. 80) emphasises poor background as the main contributing factor to high dropout rates. He states: "If the home background is so different from that of the university, it is almost impossible for the student to integrate into the institution, [and] she will simply not persist with HE". This view was opposed by the current study as it included first generation students who had disabilities, but who were successful in their HE studies.

Dropout and declining student completion rates concern not only the academic fraternity, but society at large different levels. This phenomenon has become a persistent and common yet complex global challenge (De Kadt, 2015) and has a direct impact on the economy of a country (Husain & Hossain, 2016). Public universities are mostly surviving through government subsidies, and in South Africa many students from poor backgrounds are now funded by the government through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Most underprivileged students receive funds from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and have access to free HE education. However, according to a CHE (2016) report approximately 28% of the fund is used for students who will never graduate. Dropout rates in higher education are persistent and an international challenge, and in South Africa it seems to

be escalating (CHE, 2016). South Africa has a shortage of people with high-level skills and competencies and, if throughput rates are high, the economy of the country will benefit from such a high subsidy rate (De Kadt, 2015, CHE, 2016). However, should the dropout and failure rates increase, dire financial consequences will be the result. On a positive note, due to globalisation and its membership of BRICS, South Africa is required to equip itself with a workforce that has relevant skills (Cloete, 2016; Dirco, 2014; Guimarães, 2013), and the country is dealing with this requirement by offering free HE to a large numbers of students. Only time will tell if this initiative will have the desired outcomes or not.

The literature is replete with studies that highlight the challenges faced by students with disabilities and concerns about high dropout rates (Engelbrecht & De Beer; Lyner-Cleophas, Swart, Chataika, & Bell, 2014). Dropout and failure are complex multidimensional outcomes of long-term disengagement that are difficult to track as dropout victims are, in most cases, out of the system and inaccessible (CHE, 2016). Many students with disabilities have also fallen through the cracks (Kirkpatrick, 2013), and it is difficult to quantify their dropout rates due to inaccuracies in available data bases.

It has been noted with concern that graduation rates remain low although large sums of money have been invested in post-secondary education (CHE, 2016; Festa-Dreher, 2016). However, dropout and failure rates are by no means an isolated phenomenon and a South Africa problem alone. According to Festa-Dreher (2016), approximately two million students drop out of college each year in America, and nearly 30% of first year students do not enrol for a second year. Maslen (2017) reported on the University World News that Australia had an alarming dropout rate which allegedly emanated from the ill-preparedness of students entering higher education. Cambiano, Denny and De Vore (2000, in Festa-Dreher, 2016) found that, at Mid-Western University, only 41% of the freshman class graduated from their institution within six years, while only 5% was still enrolled after six years. According to a CHE (2013) report, approximately 55% of the total intake in South African HEIs will never graduate as many students will drop out, transfer to other universities, or be dismissed after having exhausted their academic stay. Moreover, while 48% of contact students will graduate in five years, only 35% will graduate at the regulated time in South Africa.

Various researchers (Festa-Dreher, 2012; Graham et al., 2014; Murray, 2014; Sandoval-Hernández, Andres', & Białowolski, 2016) have explored university dropout rates and

unanimously blame it on inequality. Their studies revealed that students from minority groups were primarily the victims of such an ordeal. There seems to be a disregard in the DHET and CHE reports for dropout rates and the reasons for dropping out, while stop-out is not clearly defined. The paucity of literature on the dropout rates of students with disabilities is a huge concern as there are no clear statistics on either the dropout or success rates of students with disabilities. However, Wessel and Jones (2009) note that graduation rates are relatively low amongst students with disabilities. The reasons why students with disabilities drop out appear to be the same as those of non-disabled students, but it must be considered that the former students are additionally burdened by living with disabilities.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter explored disability as a disabling factor for students, particularly in the higher education environment which is infested with many challenges that pose a threat to the academic success rate of students with disabilities. These students have to exert more effort when they deal with their respective challenges before tackling their academic work. Support efforts by the government through legislation were noted, but the literature revealed some deficiencies in the implementation thereof. Higher education seems to have conflicting agendas where students with disabilities are concerned, particularly as they are admitted but lack support mechanisms. Despite the frustrations and challenges in the higher education system, there are students with disabilities who persevere, negotiate all the hurdles in their way, and succeed. In the following chapter, the concept of resilience and its effects on academic success will be explored. The theoretical framework within which this research study was located will also be presented.

CHAPTER THREE

PARADIGMATIC AND THEORETICAL FRAMING OF THE STUDY

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present the paradigmatic and theoretical framing of the study. I commence the discourse by discussing the research paradigm before I discuss the theoretical lens (a combination of relevant theories) that was employed. A general understanding of a paradigm is provided before I justify the appropriateness of the interpretive paradigm that was adopted for this study. I subsequently elucidate the three theories that are focused on in this chapter and the interconnected elements of these theories are combined to constitute the theoretical framework of the study. These theories, namely phenomenology, the resilience theory and the self-efficacy theory, were all pertinent when I explored the achievement of academic success by students with disabilities.

3.2 Understanding Research Paradigms

In 1962 an American philosopher, Thomas Kuhn, introduced an abstract concept that he referred to as ‘a paradigm’ to describe the philosophical way of thinking about a research endeavour. This concept is mainly used in research to refer to the researcher’s world view and the conceptual lens that is used to view the world that is being researched (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Many researchers consider a paradigm an essential worldview that is framed by a constellation of beliefs, values and methods from which the research evolves (Creswell, 2009b; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja, Ahmed, & Kuyini, 2017; Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

A paradigm comprises the following four constructs: ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology (Creswell, 2009). Ontology refers to social reality, while epistemology is concerned with knowledge and the truth about what we know, the source of our knowledge, forms of knowledge, and ways of attaining new knowledge (Jackson, 2013). Axiology, which is concerned with values or ethical considerations, has to do with whether researchers are part of knowledge production or not, while methodology is concerned with how data are collected and analysed in a study (Jackson, 2013; Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

My understanding and appreciation of various paradigms enhanced the quality of this research in many respects. It was important to seek understanding of paradigms in general so as to make an informed decision about which one would be the most appropriate for my study. I thus explored the advice of various authors such as Lincoln and Guba (1994), Creswell (2013) and a more recent paper by Kivunja et al. (2017) to assist me in making a rational choice, and this choice fell on the interpretivist paradigm. It was envisaged that this paradigm would be best suited to explore the experiences of academic success of students with disabilities at tertiary institutions as it would guide me to understand their reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology), to devise the theoretical framework, to conduct a logical and meaningful literature review, to make a choice regarding the research methodology, to determine the value (axiology) of the study, to adhere to ethical principles, and to engage in data collection and analysis procedures (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja et al., 2017).

In essence, communities are abstractly held together by certain beliefs, values and techniques that are collectively referred to as a paradigm. This became evident through the literature review that revealed various perceptions about disability. Disability as a phenomenon is presented in various models, for example the medical model and the social model. Thinking about and perceptions of disability are evolving, which are concepts that are in line with the dynamic nature of paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For example, we are evolving from an era when students with disabilities were not considered suitable for higher education studies to one where their presence is as important as that of any other student. Currently, the numbers of students with disabilities who are enrolled at tertiary institutions are gradually increasing even though their enrolment is not yet at a desirable level. This is basically reflective of a paradigm shift as scientific understanding of communities is dynamic and enhanced through scientific endeavours (Orman, 2016).

Three paradigms of many that guide scholarly investigations are the positivist paradigm (Auguste Comte, 1798–1857), the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, and the critical paradigm (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, & Martin, 2014). After having read extensively in this field, I decided that the one that would be best suited to my study would be the interpretivist paradigm. I first provide reasons why some paradigms were not a good match for this study, starting with the positivist paradigm. I discuss each briefly under the precincts of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology by following the tenets of paradigm in general.

3.2.1 The positivist paradigm

The positivist paradigm was developed by Auguste Comte in the 19th century (Kivunja et al., 2017). He based this paradigm on the principle that there is a single, objective truth. According to Aliyu et al. (2014), Comte believed that reality could only be revealed through scientific knowledge and that it used logical, empirical explanations for its analysis. For this reason a positivist research paradigm was not suitable for my study because, in the main, it is materialistic, hard, objective science and uses hypotheses to explore the research problem (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). The positivist paradigm assumes a single truth (ontology) as an objective truth or naive realism (Aliyu et al., 2014; Kivunja et al., 2017). This truth is out there waiting to be discovered, and the positivist truth is measured through reliability and validity. In my research study reality was socially constructed and was subjective as it explored the experiences of the participants through their authentic narratives. Because, according to the positivist paradigm, the nature of truth is objective, the knowledge that is gained is also independent and objective and thus knowledge (epistemology) is based on facts and should be observed through experiments. My study was deeply embedded in understanding the experiences of my participants, but the positivist methodology is quantitative and generally deals with mathematical solutions. Thus surveys and laboratory experiments could not be conducted to elicit data and therefore the research paradigm was selected as it would support the qualitative research design.

3.2.2 The critical theory paradigm

Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse are regarded as the pioneers of the critical paradigm, while it is also believed that their thinking was influenced by Karl Marx (Asghar, 2013). The critical paradigm advocates fairness and justice and guards against exploitation and domination. It thus touches on issues of politics, power, religion, gender, economy and other societal constructs (Asghar, 2013). According to Fuchs (2015, p. 3), "...the goal of critical theory is the transformation of society as a whole so that a just society with peace, wealth, freedom, and self-fulfilment for all can be achieved". The dialectical nature of this paradigm allows society not only to be critical about issues in society, but to come with solutions that enable them to create their own ontology and epistemology. The nature of this paradigm was thus not relevant to my study, as the focus of this study was of an interpretive nature to explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities.

3.2.3 The interpretivist approach

It is important to note that no paradigm is superior or more correct than any other paradigm. It is thus the researcher's responsibility to determine the most appropriate paradigm for a given study. According to Groenewald (2004), adopting a paradigm helps to guide the researcher's thinking throughout the journey of the study. This ranges from constructing the research questions to determining the methods of data collection and analysis. Through a process of reading and critically analysing the literature on research methodology, I realised that the interpretivist paradigm would be the best choice for my study.

Interpretivism assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and that reality is subjective, that it is limited to context, space and time, and that the findings based on such a paradigm cannot be generalised (Andrade, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Rowlands, 2005). From an interpretive perspective, human beings are treated as social actors and thus the meanings and interpretations of their realities are constructed by them through their experiences, interactions and actions. By using this approach I was able to enter the natural social world view of the participants with the intention of understanding these worlds from their perspectives. Kaplan (2015) provides a very explicit explanation of how ontology and epistemology are embedded in the interpretivist paradigm as he postulates that this paradigm is based on the ontological assumption that human experience and action are governed by the subjective and comprehensive meanings that people construct within the unique social-cultural contexts of their lives. It involves the epistemological assumption that research should focus on data that capture these meanings and that provide insights into their content, structure, processes of formation, and consequences. As I entered the social world of my participants, I was aware that conducting this research should not be for the purpose of invading and authoritatively changing people's social world, but that it would be important to seek permission before conducting the study (Andrade, 2009). This process is explained in detail in the section on ethical considerations.

The principles of the interpretivist paradigm and my understanding of it were adequately interwoven in my study by acknowledging that epistemology is mainly relativist. During the data collection process, I allowed and encouraged my participants to create data that entrenched their social views as informed by their unique experiences of academic success. To achieve this, I used interviews and photo-voice recordings (Kivunja et al., 2017). By means of the in-depth interviews, the participants were able to think and reflect on their experiences of

academic success, thereby refining the epistemological perspective of the phenomenon that I was studying.

The interaction I had with the participants during the process of data production allowed newly constructed realities to emerge. However, that interaction did not undermine the existing realities of their experiences of disability and academic success as the concept was not a new or alien one for them. Moreover, the ontological view of my participants contributed significantly to the existing body of knowledge of disability, and this will be discussed extensively in the chapter where I discuss the research findings. In brief, my participants shared their different experiences with me narratively, which was in line with the multi-reality principle of the interpretivist paradigm (Aliyu et al., 2014; Kivunja et al., 2017). A practical example of subjective epistemology and ontology emerged as I progressed with the data collection process. All my participants had some disability, but their experiences were as diverse as their backgrounds in terms of gender, age, kind of disability and socio-economic standing. Some had grown up in poverty-stricken communities while others had not, and thus their experiences of the reality of disability differed. What became important as I began to understand each 'reality' was its fluidity and dynamic nature and that it had evolved over time and environment. By utilizing the interpretive paradigm, I was able to capture the special essence of reality and my knowledge construction was enhanced through understanding the settings of the young people who participated in the study.

In the interpretivist paradigm the research methodology is referred to as a naturalist methodology that allows the researcher to study participants in their natural settings (Kivunja et al., 2017). Thus the data collection process was conducted in spaces and at times that suited the participants, and this allowed them to feel comfortable and safe. I also used a qualitative research design as it elicited rich descriptions and socially constructed ontology and epistemology by means of appropriate data collection and analysis processes (Wahyuni, 2012).

A more in-depth discussion on the qualitative design and ethical considerations is provided later. In brief, in an attempt to ascertain the values of the study I drew from the following of Wahyuni's (2012, p. 71) arguments: "In terms of axiology, interpretivist researchers take the stance of the emic or insider perspective, which means to study the social reality from the perspective of the people themselves". In this process the participants' rights were not violated

in any way as I adhered rigidly to all ethical standards and sought ethical clearance from both institutions of higher education concerned. I also and obtained the participants' consent.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

Embedding a study within a theoretical framework is important as this, amongst others, determines the structure of the study in terms of research design and methodology (Adom, Hussein, & Agyem, 2018). According to Adom et al. (2018, p. 438), "a theoretical framework serves as a foundation upon which a research is constructed... It guides the researcher so that he/she would not deviate from the confines of the accepted theories to make his/her final contributions scholarly and academic...[In this manner the researcher] will philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically approach the dissertation as a whole". In light of the selected paradigm of the study, a combination of the phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy theories was chosen as this would constitute the most suitable theoretical framework that would address the topic under investigation. Ngulube, Mathipa and Gumbo (2015) emphasise the crucial role played by a theoretical framework in shaping an inquiry. The latter authors consolidated the benefits of a theoretical framework using different references and suggest that the following important points guide the selection of a theoretical framework:

- It serves as the basis of a research plan;
- It situates the researcher within scholarly discourse and links the study to the broader body of literature;
- It provides a frame within which a problem under investigation can be understood;
- It shapes the research questions and helps to focus the study;
- It allows the researcher to narrow the project down to a manageable size;
- It offers a plan for data collection;
- It operates as a tool to interpret research findings; and
- It provides a vehicle for generalisations to other contexts.

My selection of an appropriate theoretical framework for the study was thus guided by the points explicated above. What follows is a discussion on the theoretical framework selected for this study. Three distinct theoretical lenses were utilised in combination to interpret and evaluate the data that were generated by means of the various data generation tools.

Providing a brief background of each of the theoretical lenses that was used before depicting them as a combined theory is critical, as singly and in combination they assisted in providing a holistic picture of the outcomes of this study. I utilised a combination of three theories. First, I used phenomenology as advocated by Giorgi, Giorgi and Morley (2012) and Van Manen (2007). I also used the resilience theory as promoted by psychologists such as Kumpfer (1995) and Wright, Masten and Narayan (2013). I also used the self-efficacy theory (a theory of self-motivation) as postulated by Bandura (1993). These theories constituted the theoretical framework and allowed me to gain in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students with disabilities who achieved academic success (phenomenology), how they engendered resilience to succeed regardless of a plethora of challenges (resilience), and how they managed to be resilient and motivated to achieve success in their tertiary studies (self-efficacy). Each lens will be separately and briefly elucidated with the understanding that, in the interpretation of the data, they were utilised collaboratively as well.

3.3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology has been in existence for decades and is dominant in qualitative research as it guides the researcher to understand how people make meaning of their reality or world view and interpret it based on their experiences that ultimately shape their behaviour (Heinonem, 2015; Whiting, 1999). According to phenomenology, experiences may be even unnoticed activities that may carry rich information (ontology and epistemology) (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar, & Dowling, 2016). Phenomenology is an established and well researched field that was postulated by pioneers who contributed extensively to its development and recognition as a philosophy. Amongst those is Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who is regarded as the father of phenomenology. He first used this lens to understand religion and truth as they shape people's daily experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Martin Heidegger further developed the philosophy as he was interested in the phenomenon of meaning as 'being of being' (ontology) and believed that truth has double meaning. Various other philosophers and scholars have contributed positively to the extension of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (1962), in her book entitled *Phenomenology of Perception*, categorises the four qualities of phenomenology as description, reduction, essence and intentionality.

As was noted earlier, interpretive or qualitative research may take the form of narratives in which participants share their world view. Groenewald (2004) notes that through

phenomenology the researcher is able to understand social and psychological phenomena from the participants' point of view, and this enables the scholar to report on the essence of meaning in an interpretative and reflective manner (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2013). I used phenomenology not only to look at and focus on individual participants as social beings, but I also took into account their lived experiences. In this manner I created new knowledge and could attach new meaning to the academic success of students with disabilities in higher education. I thus employed phenomenology to understand the “meaning of being...the everydayness or ordinary existence” of academically successful students with disabilities in two higher education institutions (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). As human beings students with disabilities have a special relationship with their environment, and in this instance it was the higher education context in which they continuously created and attached different meanings to their experiences.

The success of the study heavily relied on my participants and I had a responsibility to treat them with respect and dignity. This is emphasised by Koopman, (2015, p. 3) who attests that research participants should be treated “as subjective epistemological beings in order to report their experiences without contaminating the data with extraneous worldview presuppositions, preconceived ideas and notions, or strongly held beliefs”. I thus played three different roles in this phenomenological study. First, I was a researcher making enquiry. In the second role I was a research tool because the research would not have happened without my interpretations of the experiences of the participants. Thirdly, I assumed the role of a learner. According to Van Manen (2007), phenomenology is a very interesting and fascinating research method which puts the researcher in a moment of wonder and meaning making, and in this context I was awed by what I learnt about the topic under investigation.

During the study, and particularly when I interpreted and evaluated the results, I attempted to understand what made students with disabilities succeed in institutions of higher education. In this process I utilised a combination of three theoretical lenses, namely phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy. As was mentioned above, phenomenology is the study of experiences and I used it to understand the experiences of academic success of students with disabilities.

The tenets of phenomenology revolve around experiences. When the researcher understands these experiences, it translates into meaning that can be understood and shared.

The following tenets of phenomenology were useful in this study:

- The meaning of being: People make meaning of their reality or world view and interpret it based on their own experiences. People also make meaning of their own identity which may inform their behaviour or reflect on their being (Whannell & Whannell, 2015). In the context of the study, I acknowledged that people with disabilities have unique experiences of living with their disabilities. Some authors refer to these experiences as negative as these people are constantly exposed to stigmatisation and discrimination. Moreover, students with disabilities have different experiences at higher education institutions as they may have limited access to facilities or be excluded due a lack of inclusivity in these settings.
- Lived experiences: Individuals have to make sense of their ‘everydayness’ or ordinary existence on a daily basis, and thus reality is subjective (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). As human beings we all have unique lived experiences and make sense of our daily existence in unique ways. Students with disabilities are no exception as they have to create daily understanding of what academic success is and how they will achieve it.
- Shared experiences: Experiences are both unique and shared (Van Manen, 2007). As human beings we share identity and the environment which means we may also share reality (ontology) and the meaning (epistemology) we make of it. Thus students with disabilities will have unique but also similar experiences of academic success.

I shall discuss how these tenets were applied in the interpretation of the data in the data analysis chapters.

3.3.2 Resilience

It is important to note that, at the conceptualisation of this study, there was a dearth of literature on the resilience of students with disabilities in higher education and mostly unpublished theses were available on this subject. Determining the reasons for the academic success of students with disabilities was crucial, as the dropout and failure rates of students in general had been a matter of grave concern for a long time, and to determine what could be viewed as an antithesis for this phenomenon as exemplified by students with disabilities was an important

consideration. In this section, the origin, definition and framework of resilience will be discussed and aligned to the study, where applicable.

Resilience is commonly defined as a process of adapting well in the face of adversity (Garmezy, 1993; Kumpfer, 1995; Portnoi & Kwong, 2015; Rutter, 2012; Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014). According to Richardson, Neiger, Jensen and Kumpfer (1999, p. 34), resilience is “the process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills.” It has two basic constructs: (i) risk factors or adversities that create a state of vulnerability; and (ii) protective factors that buffer hardships and have positive outcomes. Cassidy (2015) emphasises the psychological element of resilience and explains that a person perceives him-/herself (through self-identity) in his/her situation or through his/her own environment, and thus recognises adversity in this environment. Thus resilience is not possible or effective if there is no adversity. Similar to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1996), resilience has personal and positive characteristics that are reflected as self-esteem, self-consciousness and self-confidence. Wang and Zimmerman (2015) refer to resilience as a strength-based attribute and argue that it could refer to positive thinking or physical ability. The concept of resilience has gained momentum over the years, and more research is being conducted on it.

First, resilience can be conceptualised as a personal or group capacity that has been developed and applied in various fields of study (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Secondly, resilience can also be represented as a dynamic process that is affected by resources, adversity and the capacity of individuals (Worsley, 2014). Several studies (Masten, 2014; Wang, Zhang, & Zimmerman, 2015) concur that resilience is most appropriately conceptualised as a developmental process or a dynamic capacity rather than a static outcome or trait. Thirdly, it can be seen as an individual’s response to adversity. It is thus obvious that resilience is not a fixed state, but rather a process that is changeable, dynamic and influenced by competing environmental or external influences.

An exploration of disability as a phenomenon has revealed that people with disabilities silently face a number of challenges on a daily basis. Adversity and animosity in their environment are a given as many are ridiculed and made to feel inferior (Graham et al., 2014). Andrew et al. (2015, p. 29) highlight their plight as follows:

Disabled persons, especially children, face a host of problems as a result of their special needs. Many children with special needs live in hostile, bleak environments where their safety and security is compromised and their future jeopardized. They are disempowered and marginalized, have no opportunity for advancement, and largely remain voiceless as a result of inbuilt social, cultural, economic prejudices, violence and abuse.

Academic resilience as a construct is a dynamic developmental construct that can be defined as “the energy and drive to learn, the ability to work effectively, and the drive to achieve academically in spite of stressors and risk factors” (Ledesma, 2014, p. 4). It was against this background that the resilience theory was adopted as one of the most relevant and encompassing theories in which this study could be embedded.

The resilience theory advocates positive adaptation in the face of adversity, and thus the concept of becoming competent aroused interest in the theory. It undeniably aligned well with this project in which the experiences of academic success of students with disabilities were explored. Werner (1982) constructed a definition that speaks of the capacity to cope effectively with internal and external stressors and vulnerabilities a person experiences. According to Rutter (2012), resilience should not be seen as a once-off event, but as an interaction of serious risk experiences or adversity. Thus a person with resilience will achieve relatively positive psychological outcomes despite negative experiences. In academic discourse, the resilience approach is appealing as the purpose of the researcher is to focus on a strength-based model rather than on a deficit and problem-oriented approach (Wang & Zimmerman, 2015).

Resilient individuals/youths are in many cases victims of high risk environments where they experience poverty, a minority status, a disability, high crime rates, single parent families, divorced or separated parents, diseases, or negative psycho-sociological and biological challenges (Kumpfer, 1999; Masten, 2013). Thus the external environment rather than internal factors often turn them into high-risk young people. For example, students with disabilities are often faced with adversity as they are labelled and categorised as belonging to a minority group that is vulnerable (Graham, Weingarden, & Murphy, 1991). Students with disabilities have been described in many studies as facing multifaceted challenges in higher education, yet despite all the tribulations they face, some of them succeed and even excel in their studies. Their academic success is thus equated to resilience which focuses on strengths, and it is this

resilience that contributes to their adaptive behaviour such as developing competence and experiencing a positive sense of well-being regardless of adversity (Wilmshurst et al., 2011, p. 1). In the context of secondary school learners, Jowakar, Kojuri, Kohoulat, and Hayat (2014, p. 33) insist that “resilient students sustain high levels of achievement, motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school”.

According to Wang, Zhang, and Zimmerman (2015), the resilience theory can be applied to all disadvantaged populations to understand their journey of overcoming adversity through mobilizing their assets and resources. Meyer (1999) highlights that psychological elements and biological predispositions form a critical combination that engenders resilience that is an aggregation of protective factors. Researchers on resilience concur that, if an individual faces risk or is in a vulnerable environment, he or she needs protective factors to pull through (Rutter & Kaplan, 1999). According to Conrad and Hammen’s definition (1993, p. 594), a protective factor is “one that moderates against the effects of a stressful or risk situation so that the individual is able to adapt more successfully”. Protective factors become a construct of resilience; thus both vulnerability and protective factors bring change to one’s risky situation. Portnoi and Kwong (2015) describe protective factors as “a bank of strengths [from which] victims draw their energy” (for instance caring parents, counsellors, a disability unit, family, and academic preparation). Inclusive education for students with disabilities thus becomes an asset or promotive factor and allows them to access education just like any other student does.

Rojas (2015) extends the understanding of resilience by looking at protective factors as those factors that are concerned with the quality of a person, how the person interacts with people, and how the individual adapts in a given environment. Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills thus help a person to benefit from protective factors. This means that positive outcomes are likely to be realised if people are able to communicate, acquire problem solving skills, and plan their time effectively. The relationship between the person under risk, protective factors and the environment is crucial for the attainment of resilience. The literature on the resilience theory reveals that the effectiveness of protective factors is dependent on the character (interpersonal and intrapersonal skills) of the concerned individual and the environment. Also, protective factors may change in character depending on the case. For example, over-protective behaviour may cause harm.

Protective factors ameliorate a risky environment – thus an outcome that ought to have been negative may be turned positive (Parker, 2013). Renowned researchers of resilience who conducted studies on children and youths who had had traumatic experiences and who were at risk of psychopathology found that resilient individuals required protective factors such as self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy, the ability to deal with change, perseverance, planning skills, management skills, problem solving skills, determination, coping skills, academic and job skills, and adaptation skills (Garmezy 1993; Kumpfer & Hopkins, 1993; Rutter, 1985; Masten, 2012). The three core protective factors are summarised by Garmezy (1993) and Werner (2005) as follows:

- Individual temperament and personality (cognitive skills, positive responsiveness, reflectiveness);
- Family support (warmth and cohesion in the family); and
- Social support (support from external factors such as the school, an institutions, the church, or teachers).

Six *tenets of the resilience theory* were developed by Kumpfer (1999). These tenets encompass all the protective factors mentioned in Figure 3.1 below and are not much different from what other researchers such as Masten (2014) contributed to the resilience theory. However, Kumpfer neatly organised resilience into four domains and two transactional points between these domains.

In the construct of resilience, stressors or challenges generally stimulate disruption. This causes adversity in one's life and instigates the resilience process that is intended to render the person invulnerable. People with disabilities are either born with it or are afflicted with a disability by adverse circumstances, and they often have to live with it for the rest of their lives. Then, when entering higher education, the homeostasis is disturbed and this causes challenges or stressors that affect any new student who enters the world of the unknown. Students therefore need protective factors to succeed; that is, they need support from the external environment such as the disability unit, faculty and forums for students with disabilities, administration, and lecturers.

The *external environment* provides social support through family members, the community, the university community (such a disability unit, a faculty, or non-academic staff and lecturers) and peer groups (Jowakar, Kojuri, Kohoulat, & Hayat, 2014; Kutlu & Yavuz, 2016). The need for inclusivity in higher education institutions thus becomes critical if proper services are to be provided to students with disabilities. This kind of support could be provided by caring relations, high expectations, and encouragement for participation in meaningful activities (Jowkar et al., 2013). External environmental factors are not standard or uniform as they depend on the situation, period, culture and even the geographical area. Moreover, the external environment does not become available because of one case; in fact, these cases are always there, waiting for people in need to access, appreciate and utilise them. However, in some instances it could be the external environment that poses risk factors. For instance, students with disabilities might feel discriminated against and stigmatised by disclosing their disability status to the university.

In the *person-environment*, interactional processes include transactional factors that determine how people deal with adversity in their environment. Transactional processes may differ from person to person and may depend on many factors such as the nature of adversity itself and the environment. According to Jowakar, Kojuri, Kohoulat, and Hayat (2014) and Kutlu and Yavuz (2016), coping mechanisms develop naturally and depend on the individual and the environment. A high-risk environment may be transformed into a more protective environment through the following interactional processes, as postulated by Kumpfer (1999):

- Selective perception;
- Cognitive reframing (i.e., young people with high levels of internal locus and impulse control are more likely to be motivated to use their intelligence to achieve academically);
- Planning and dreaming (time management, prioritising, planning future activities, and knowing what one wants to achieve in life);
- Identification and attachment to pro-social people (relating to role models who are positive about life);
- Active environmental modification by the youth (i.e., the external environment needs to be switched on by actively utilising it);

- Active coping mechanisms (one has to be actively involved in each aspect of one's career or study programme in the case of students).

The concept of *internal resilience* implies that individuals who face adversity cope well when provided with support mechanisms. Internal self-resilience (internal strength) is also referred to as psychological or internal resilience (Kutlu & Yavuz, 2016; Montero-Hernandez, Levin, & Diaz-Castillo, 2014). These characteristics are known to be helpful in buffering stressful environments. One does not necessarily need to possess all these attributes to be successful, as success may depend on the achievement of different developmental tasks in different cultures or settings. These may include individual spirituality; cognitive competency; social/behavioural, physical and emotional/affective competencies; or strengths that are needed in personal environments. This view is consistent with that of Montero-Hernandez et al. (2014), who view human resilience as the ability to possess strong emotional and mental ability.

The *resilience process* explores how an individual has learnt to deal with unique short-term or long-term processes that require resilience because they engender stress. The resilience process integrates all other factors of resilience mentioned above. The achievement of positive life outcomes (or successful adaptations) is the ultimate purpose of resilience. By embracing resilience, the individual fights through adversity and achieves a desirable outcome. This outcome is achieved when the components of resilience are present, but this process may take different angles depending on each individual case.

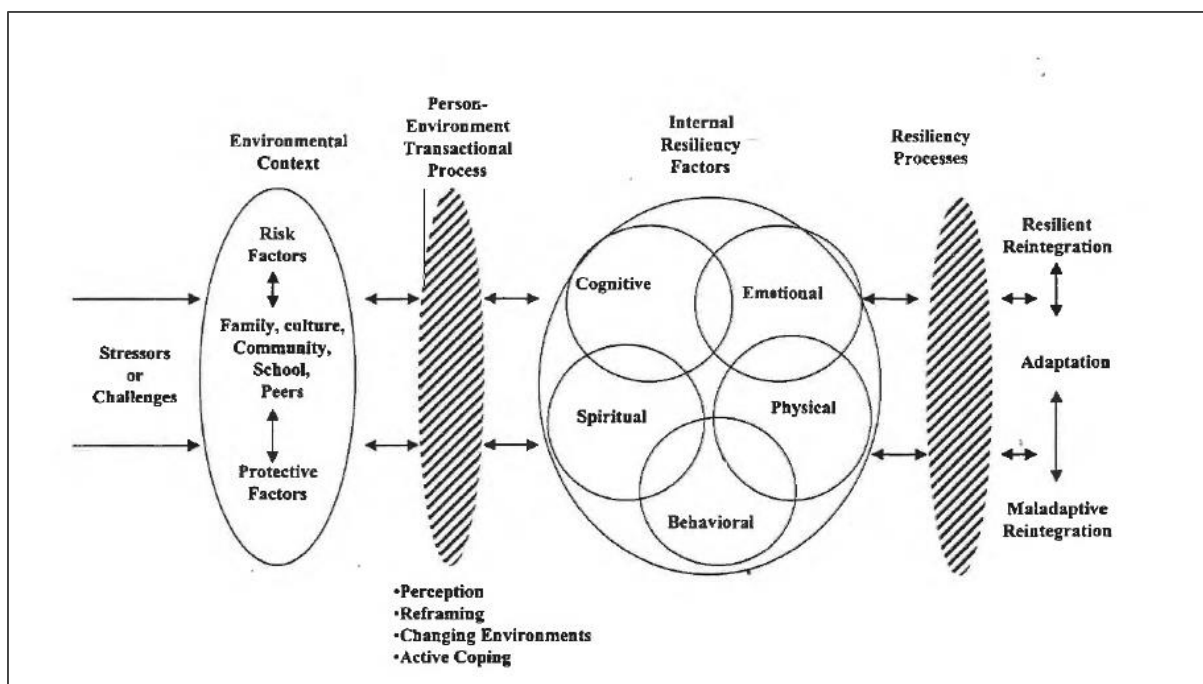


Figure 3.1: The resilience framework

Source: Adapted from Kumpfer, 1999, p. 183

3.3.3 Self-efficacy

This section explores self-efficacy as one of the theories that constituted the theoretical framework of the study. Various authors have shown that there is a strong relationship between the concepts of resilience and self-efficacy. However, there is a fine line between the two: resilience is an act of bouncing back or withstanding adversity (Cassidy, 2015), whereas self-efficacy is a protective factor that may assist the individual in resuscitating the spirit of resilience (Amitay & Gumpel, 2015; Rama & Sarada, 2017). Schwarzer and Warner (2013) affirm the connection between self-efficacy and resilience as follows:

Individuals with high levels of perceived self-efficacy trust their own abilities in the face of adversity, tend to conceptualize problems as challenges rather than as threats or uncontrollable situations, experience less negative emotional arousal in demanding tasks, think in self-enhancing ways, motivate themselves, and show perseverance when confronted with difficult situations (p. 13).

Both resilience and self-efficacy are essential for good academic performance, especially when individuals study under adverse conditions such as those do who are afflicted with disabilities. Academic success is a hard-earned performance attribute which comes through hard work, dedication, commitment and self-discipline. In this context, academic success is viewed as a

self-driven choice and effort that is supported by strong self-efficacy. The psychologist Albert Bandura has focused over many years on understanding how people perform at optimum level. Based on his studies between 1986 and 1994, he devised a concept that clarifies the purpose of such commitment which he refers to as ‘perceived self-efficacy’. His main intention was to understand humans’ capabilities and motivation to perform at high levels. Bandura (1986) devised the social cognitive theory which describes the foundation that assists learners to set goals according to their capabilities within their environment. He defines self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” (Bandura, 1994, p. 2). Three interdependent constructs form the social cognitive perspective, namely personal, environmental and behavioural constructs that determine good performance. Bandura’s theory emphasises the interrelationship that human beings have with their environment and he highlights that people’s behaviour and their way of thinking are influenced by their environment. Consequently, their environment is also influenced by their personal attributes (Ibid.).

Schunk and DiBenedetto (2016) emphasise the point that self-efficacy is not necessarily a skill, but a belief. It is a kind of belief that instigates positive thinking, or rather a belief, that strengthens capability, competency, efficiency and aptitude to cope with challenges. Kear (2004) affirms that people with self-efficacy work hard and remain focused even in failure threatening situations. They persist to see their chosen goals being achieved.

Generally, all students at all levels of education need to have a kind of self-efficacy that will propel them to perform well if they are serious about their studies. According to Köseoğlu (2015), students ought to possess academic self-efficacy as this will allow them to apply themselves positively to their academic work. Academic self-efficacy also ensures that students understand their own capabilities when setting their goals. Therefore, students may need to set different goals which may include short term goals like doing well in a particular assessment, whereas an intermediate goal could be to pass all modules in a semester. A long term goal could be to finish the qualification in record time. Time management becomes an integral part of academic success as failing to manage time will have a negative impact (Fuller, 2008; Khurshid, 2014). Self-efficacy for students with disabilities becomes critically important as some people view disability negatively. Many even believe that people with disabilities are incapable of achieving well.

Self-efficacy is conceived as a meta-cognitive process which is a multi-dimensional process of understanding one's own capabilities. This is because human beings are able to set their goals based on their perceived strengths (Bandura, 1997). However, this is dependent on many other factors that include social, cognitive, motivational and behavioural skills (Bandura, 1997; Panadero, 2015). Bandura (1989) and Zimmerman (1990) insist on the importance of self-efficacy skills. They contend that possessing pure knowledge may not help a person to accomplish copiously if he or she is not motivated and does not monitor and evaluate his/her own performance. Conversely, Schunk and Zimmerman (1989) contend that having high self-efficacy may not guarantee academic success if knowledge acquisition and relevant skills are lacking.

In terms of the *tenets of self-efficacy*, Bandura (1989) mentions five: cognition, motivation, affection (or the affective), selection and self-regulated learning. I shall briefly explain these with reference to academic success.

3.3.3.1 Cognition as a driver of academic success

According to Bandura (1994), human beings set their goals based on to their perceived capabilities and self-efficacy. Goal setting is highly regarded as a cognitive exercise by means of which one assesses available resources, support, ability, the environment, personal characteristics, skills and behaviour. This becomes a thought provoking exercise during which one conducts self-study. Academia require such skills to understand their potential and to make decisions and choices. Among the many choices students have to make is choosing a career, which is informed by the subjects they choose in high school. Such choices are directly informed by cognitive skills (Bandura, 1994). Should wrong choices or decisions be made, academic success is unlikely to be achieved. Having strong self-efficacy is thus perceived as an advantage because the academic world is a competitive space where students are categorised for many reasons. Some students may be deterred when they see other students outperforming them, thus strong self-motivation is essential for success.

3.3.3.2 Motivational processes

According to Bandura (1994), self-motivation is a product of cognitive processes as it requires one to think of one's own potential and competencies before goal setting can occur. He highlights four forms of motivational processes that people may explore from time to time: casual attributes, outcomes, expectations, and cognisant goals. Self-efficacy becomes a solid base for the motivational process. Thus, when one has strong beliefs about one's self-worth and proficiencies, it becomes easier to set goals and to understand one's own weaknesses and strengths as well as one's endurance capacity. When goals are achieved, people get motivated to set even higher goals and to learn from their failures. But this only happens when one has high self-efficacy.

3.3.3.3 Affective processes

Our environment is toxic not only in terms of global warming effects, but because we find ourselves having to deal with challenges instead of being creative about new developments. Students in higher education institutions have to deal with many challenges such as financial constraints and a lack of resources (for instance housing facilities) before they can apply their minds to academic activities. Therefore, having strong self-efficacy, strong self-belief and high self-esteem assists students to overcome some of these challenges and to avoid being depressed. However, some of these challenges may be daunting and thus pose a threat to achieving academic success. Bandura (1986) and Zimmerman (1989) suggest that personal, environmental and behavioural factors are determinants of self-efficacy and self-regulated learning. Students need to have a good sense of themselves and they need to know who they are and what their purpose is.

The environment in which one lives also needs to be understood well in order to make the right choices, as ultimately the environment has an impact on one's behaviour. Behaviour could be seen as a variable that is dependent on the environment as well as on one's attitudes, skills and competencies. Bandura (1986) refers to this interplay as a triadic reciprocity that does not occur symmetrically as one factor may be stronger than others.

3.3.3.4 Selection processes

Bandura (1994) argues that human beings have the ability to make choices about what is best for them although sometimes it may not be practical, especially for minors and minorities. Students with strong self-efficacy are able to make their career choices and pursue them successfully. This also informs how they make their daily choices, plans and strategies that could assist them in pursuing their careers. Conversely, while students with disabilities may have a free will to choose the activities, careers and situations they find suitable, they may discover that access is limited (Rule, Kahonde, & Lorenzo, 2015). In light of the foregoing, there seems to be numerous challenges in higher education that threaten the academic success of students with disabilities. Nonetheless, many continue to show a positive attitude and manage to cope with their physical deficiencies in the higher education system.

The literature suggests that there is a strong relationship between self-efficacy and performance (Lane & Lane, 2001; Pajares, 1996; Lachman & Leff, 1989; Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, Zimmerman (1989) affirms that students with high self-efficacy display better learning strategies and take charge of their own learning. Self-efficacy is perceived as holding the key to academic success, especially for students who are at university (Hill, 2004 cited in Köseoğlu, 2015). Students at tertiary level are perceived as mature people who should be able to take full ownership of their learning. This translates into self-regulated learning (which is a process) and ability that are grounded in self-efficacy. Moreover, students need to be supported to develop such strategies (Zimmerman, 1989; Zimmerman et al., 1992).

3.3.3.5 Self-regulated learning

Self-regulated learning is a processes “whereby learners personally activate and sustain cognitions, effects and behaviours that are systematically oriented toward the attainment of personal goals” (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011, p. 1). Self-regulated learners are individuals who possess qualities such as resilience, confidence, diligence, resourcefulness and the like (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986, 1990). They see themselves as motivated, hard-working, appropriately strategic, and academically competent (Nodoushan, 2012). It is believed that such learners plan their own learning process, set goals for themselves, organise their own learning tasks, monitor themselves closely in the process of learning, and continually evaluate

their own learning process. This is known as ‘metacognition’ which, according to Köseoğlu (2015, p. 131), is “thinking about thinking” or “knowledge about knowing and learning”.

Factors that influence self-regulated learning have been explored in several studies where the learner was at the forefront of the learning process (Zimmerman, 2002, 1990, 2001; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1989; Bandura, 1990; Nodoushan, 2012; Pintrich, 2000; Dent & Koenka, 2015; Köseoğlu, 2015). All these studies agree that successful learners are given authority over their own learning, take control, and are actively involved in the learning process. Self-regulated learning is seen as a self-propelled exercise in which the student makes strategic decisions and plans on how to approach his/her own learning. Pintrich (2000) defines self-regulation as “an active, constructive process whereby students set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behaviour [while being] guided and constrained by their goals and [the] contextual features of their environment” (p. 453).

Table 3.1: Pintrich’s phases/areas of self-regulated learning

Phase	Cognition	Motivation	Behaviour	Context
Forethought, planning and activation	Target/goal setting Prior content Knowledge activation Metacognitive knowledge activation	Goal orientation Adoption of efficacy Judgement Ease of learning judgements Perception of task difficulty Task value activation Interest activation	Time and effort planning (planning for self-observations of behaviour)	Perceptions of task (perceptions of context)
Monitoring	Metacognitive awareness and monitoring of cognition	Awareness and monitoring of motivation and affect	Awareness and monitoring of effort, time use, need for help Self-observation of behaviour	Monitoring changing task and context conditions
Control	Selection and adaptation of cognitive strategies for learning and thinking	Selection and adaptation of strategies for managing motivation and effect	Increase/decrease effort Persist, give up Help-seeking behaviour	Change or renegotiate task Change or leave context
Reaction and Reflection	Cognitive judgments Attributions	Affective reactions Attributions	Behaviour choice	Evaluation of task Evaluation of context

Source: Pintrich, 2000, p. 454

Dent and Koenka (2015) argue that self-regulated learning is a metacognitive process which comes with responsibilities and maturity when a student has to plan, set goals, self-monitor, self-evaluate and self-control. Students with low self-efficacy and ill discipline might find it difficult to adhere to such standards. Zimmerman (2000) contends that one’s intelligence may

not translate to academic skills if one does not adapt to self-regulated learning. This means one has to open one's mind to the full process of learning. However, it does not necessarily mean that it should happen in the absence of the support of others such as teachers, parents and institutional representatives.

Much of the current literature on self-regulated learning pays particular attention to the nature of self-regulated learning as a product of metacognitive, motivational and behavioural processes (Bandura, 1993; Zimmerman, 2000). Learning as a self-driven process depends on how the learner perceives him-/herself; that is, self-judgement to understand one's strengths and weaknesses and the causes thereof. This is termed 'self-judgement'. While the learner will be working on his/her performance and improvement, he/she has to first observe how he/she performs (self-observation), followed by self-reaction which depends on whether the learner is satisfied with his/her performance. There is consent amongst self-efficacy authors that students with self-efficacy employ different strategies for improving or maintaining their performance. Zimmerman (1989) emphasises that self-regulated learning depends on three tenets: self-observation, self-judgement, and self-regulation.

Furthermore, self-regulated learning is perceived as a dynamic process that may not occur constantly at a certain level as it is likely to be affected by many other constructs such as time management, self-efficacy and motivation (Köseoğlu, 2015). For example, a student may be struggling in one module and doing well in others, or a first year a student may have difficulties but may improve in the following year, or vice versa. The impact of the environment is highlighted by the pioneers of self-regulation. Schunk (1989) for example played a huge role in the development of self-regulated learning. Indirectly, self-regulation requires students to adapt to a given environment for them to succeed. As was highlighted in Chapter One, students with disabilities, especially those coming from special schools, have to adapt before they can focus on their academic work.

Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) highlight the importance of being acclimatised to an environment. They state: "Successful adaptation to school requires that students develop self-regulation, or processes that activate and sustain cognitions, behaviours and affects that are oriented toward goal attainment" (p. 196). On the other hand, Majer (2009) found that students from minority groups might have different motivations for attending university. For instance, they might want to escape their family background to prove their self-worth. These reasons

might also have a direct impact on their self-regulated learning process and hence impact their academic success.

Zimmerman (2002) considers the following characteristics of a self-regulated learner as critically important for attaining good performance:

- Setting specific proximal goals for oneself;
- Adopting powerful strategies for attaining these goals;
- Monitoring one's performance selectively for signs of progress;
- Restructuring one's physical and social context to make it compatible with one's goals;
- Managing one's time efficiently;
- Self-evaluating one's methods (e.g., learning and study methods);
- Attributing causation to results;
- Using feedback effectively to self-judge; and
- Adapting future methods.

In view of the discourse up to this point, one may presume that self-efficacy and self-regulated learning form the foundation of high performance that will result in academic success. Furthermore, self-efficacy could be seen as a foundation that creates a strong base for academic success. It requires positive individual experiences, effort and commitment to pursue excellence. However, the results may not necessarily be enjoyed and celebrated by the individual only, but also by many others who may claim ownership as well. Similarly, failure is a self-experience that is not necessarily endured only by the individual concerned as it also touches those around him/her (Kutlu & Yavuz, 2016). For instance, a student who overstays at the university clogs the system and denies access to new students. This comes with financial constraints for both the institution and parents or guardians.

3.3.4 Tenets of a combination of the selected theories

In this section, the link between phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy and their tenets is explored with the intent of understanding the achievement of academic success by students with disabilities in higher education settings. When I explored a combination of the theories that constituted the theoretical framework of this study, I found interesting threads that knitted

the findings together. In brief, all three elements of this framework contain a psychological factor that is abstract and personal, yet it is also common in individuals who share the HE environment. Figure 3.2 illustrates the interconnectedness of the tenets in a combination of the theories.



Figure 3.2: Combined theoretical framework: Phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy

By combining the three theoretical lenses I had selected, I enhanced my understanding of the experiences of academic success as experienced by students with disabilities in the higher education environment. Using the combined theoretical framework was beneficial in untangling confusion and showing how each of the theories was applied in the subsequent chapters. It is assumed that it will make it easy for the reader to follow the argument of the study when a combination of theories is used.

The literature review has confirmed that achieving academic success is dynamic and dependent on various factors. Therefore, because of its multi-faceted nature, using one theory would have limited the outcomes of the study. Figure 3.2 emphasises the importance of each theoretical lens and illustrates how they are entwined with one another.

For example, phenomenology as a state of being and everydayness is linked with how students with disabilities come to a university with their prior lived experiences, and how stressors and challenges in the new environment then force them to adopt self-regulatory practices through resilience and self-efficacy.

The six constructs or tenets of resilience that were discussed above expose the dynamic, individualistic nature of resilience (Jowkar, Kojuri, Naeimeh, & Hayat, 2013) and this confirms that it is both a process and an outcome (Garmezy, 1993; Almedom, 2013). Students with disabilities may experience challenges differently from their non-disabled counterparts depending on the nature of their disability, and their varied conditions may require unique coping mechanisms. The social environment, which is considered an external environment, offers support structures (such as the church, faith, the family, friends, peers and academic staff) that become automatically activated when individuals experience challenges. Protective factors assist individuals to cope with their difficult situations; however, people will react or adapt in different ways when faced with adversity as coping and adapting depend solely on individual characteristics (Kumpfer, 1999; Roja, 2015; Masten, 2014). Resilience is thus not a trait or personality characteristic, but “involves behaviours and actions that can be learned and developed in any person” (Rojas, 2015, p. 65).

Academic resilience deals with pressure in the academic setting (Rojas, 2015) and therefore requires a person to have self-efficacy in order to be self-motivated and to have self-perception and cognition (Montero-Hernandez et al., 2014) as well as self-determination and self-advocacy (Wasielowski, 2016a). Self-awareness and the acceptance of disability increase a person’s chances of socialisation. Yailagh, Abbasi, Behrozi, Alipour, and Yakhehali (2014) argue that self-determination is more critical for students with disabilities than for others as it is associated with positive outcomes that come from understanding one’s predicament, strengths and weaknesses. This requires an individual to plan and monitor his/her actions and decisions accordingly and this leads to positive outcomes. Wasielowski (2016, p. 138) notes

that “an individual with disabilities who is a competent self-advocate knows his or her rights and responsibilities, articulates a problem, and works collaboratively with the appropriate persons to solve the problem”. It is suggested that self-determination is effective in optimising success in higher education (Yailagh et al., 2014). The literature suggest that there is a strong relationship between the experience of academic success and phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy. However, according to Kutlu and Yavuz (2016), many studies have been conducted on academic resilience in many countries, including South Africa, but none used a similar combination of the theories as was done in this study. In some studies these theories were used as conceptual frames (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012), but not in combination with the others.

In the context of the current study, the combination of the three theories enhanced the individualistic approach that was adopted, as it was argued that resilience ensured the achievement of academic success. The literature has shown that the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education settings are generally different from those of other non-disabled students. For example, their experiences are dictated by their disability status even before they enrol in higher education, and thus being disabled is fraught with a variety of challenges. Phenomenology, which is a study of lived experiences, is therefore used to understand the individual lived experiences of students with disabilities as well as their shared experiences. This was a focus because the disability phenomenon may be individually experienced and yet shared as a common experience with others. For instance, stigma is not limited to a certain form of disability, yet many students with various disabilities feel the barbs of stigmatisation. Disability has been defined as a limitation (WHO, 2012) which, in many instances, puts the afflicted person at the disadvantage of being stereotyped, discriminated against and treated differently. Such experiences may be perceived as either positive or negative (Syed et al., 2011). When they are perceived as negative, it becomes equivalent to stressors that are experienced on a daily basis. The manner in which stress is dealt with may require resilience to overcome noticeable and emotional challenges and to achieve remarkable outcomes regardless of adversity (Masten, 2014). In a nutshell, in a tertiary environment disability appears to be a factor of adversity for these students, whilst academic success is seen as an outcome of resilience.

The higher education environment may be fraught with cumulative risks due to the many challenges students encounter in this setting. However, universities should also be considered

as protective environments because they are institutions of knowledge, growth and development. Transactional processes may differ depending on how the individual perceives the situation. Some may choose to try and cope while others may choose to withdraw totally. The decision whether to continue to face a challenge or to withdraw is indirectly linked to the support the person is receiving as well as personal characteristics and attributes. In each context, resilience is required. The current study thus focused on the most desirable outcome of resilience in the higher education setting, which is academic success. Academic success in this context is a process of adaptation to academic requirements. If students with disabilities do not possess resilience or attain self-efficacy, they may be exposed to intolerable stressors and be at high risk of failure given the milieu in which they have to achieve success.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter explored the theoretical framework in which the study was embedded. The interpretive paradigm was chosen as the most appropriate approach for the study as it acknowledged the views and experiences of the study participants who created their own ontology and epistemology. Moreover, the interpretive paradigm did not allow the researcher to impose on the world view of the participants. The peculiar and unique views and experiences of the participants were deemed important and could not be substituted by those of others.

An important element of this study that was elucidated was the theoretical framework that comprised a combination of three relevant theories. After extensive reading and exploration, the phenomenological, resilience and self-efficacy theories were adopted. Each theory was discussed independently to illuminate its strengths, weakness and relevance to the study before combining them to explain how they collaboratively underpinned the study. In the context of this study, these theories were interconnected and interdependent. For example, each acknowledged psychological factors, was concerned with the environment where the participants came from and where they were located at the time of the study, and each was concerned with the behaviour of people in the particular environment or situation that the study explored. A diagram was presented to illustrate the interconnectedness of the drivers of each theory.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA PRODUCTION

4.1 Introduction

Having presented the paradigmatic and theoretical framing of the study, this chapter expounds the research methodology that was adopted to drive the study. Research methodology could be considered as the engine of a study as the success or failure of a study relies entirely on it. Inappropriate research methodology might have dire consequences; for instance, incorrect or inappropriate findings may not contribute meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Mason, 2002; Yin, 2011). Against this background, the sections that follow provide details of the research design, the sampling technique, the data collection and analysis processes, the ethical considerations that were adhered to, and the trustworthiness of this study. It was envisaged that the research methodology that was adopted would assist in providing suitable answers to the research questions of the study.

4.2 A Qualitative Phenomenological Research Design

In essence, the primary goal of this research was to explore reasons for the academic success of students with disabilities in two higher education settings. In this process, I endeavoured to understand selected student participants' experiences of academic success. Qualitative phenomenological research is interested in an inductive method of exploring the 'what', 'how' and 'why' questions to gain understanding of the epistemology and ontology of a certain group or community (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Tuffour, 2017). I used this particular research design to understand the worldview of students with disabilities and endeavoured to discover what they thought of academic success and whether achieving success was important for them. I also investigated how they made meaning of academic success and why they thought of it that way. This kind of experience enquiry automatically embedded the study in a phenomenological research design, and thus the data collection process involved eliciting deep understanding of the phenomenon through qualitative enquiry methods namely interviews, observation and photo-voice recordings. Phenomenological studies respect personal perspectives and subjective interpretations that are based on the interpretivist paradigm, which

should not be seen as a limitation but a strength in qualitative research. The only way of understanding the world view of the selected students with disabilities was through sourcing information directly from them in a non-threatening manner.

Muhammad et al. (2013) refer to qualitative research as an interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary or counter-disciplinary approach that cuts across humanities. If used in a mixed method approach it becomes multi-paradigmatic. Qualitative research is a social inquiry that explores the behaviour of participants in their natural settings, and the main tool in this approach is generally interviews (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). However, qualitative research is a challenged and contested field, particularly because of its subjective perspective (Mason, 2002).

The objectives of my study were aligned to the qualitative research approach which is known for enabling understanding of experiences, meanings and interpretations as well as the perceptions people attach to their lives or social world (Andrade, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Kumar, 2011; Woodbridge, 2014). The research was conducted at two universities of technology where the students had already spent considerable time. These institutions were spaces where it was believed they would feel comfortable. According to Andrade (2009, p. 43), qualitative research is described as "...a process that investigates a social human problem where the researcher conducts the study in a natural setting and builds a whole and complex representation by a rich description as well as an examination of informants' words and views". The qualitative research design was aligned well with the philosophies of the interpretivist paradigm in that it focused on understanding how people constructed meaning, what they thought or understood, and how they interpreted experiences, processes, laws or policies that impacted their daily lives. I explored reality and knowledge through unstructured sources namely interviews, photos (photo-voice recordings) and documents (secondary data). In the process I used open-ended questions and observations (Creswell, 2013; Muhammad, Muhammad, Aijaz, Syeda, & Kamal, 2011; Muhammad, Aijazi, Syeda & Kamal, 2011). Using the qualitative methodology had various benefits as it required a flexible investigative approach where ontology and epistemology were not restricted by the environment. It opened an opportunity for gaining insight into the selected students' attitudes, behaviours, value systems, motivations, aspirations, and their culture and lifestyles (Muhammad et al., 2011). It also allowed me to penetrate and investigate their social milieu and worlds as informed by their experiences. At

the same time, I respected each individual's perspectives of reality and how that reality was constructed.

Demonstrating the trustworthiness of the study was very important as I needed to ensure its credibility. I was very careful with my positionality as I was an insider (as an interviewer and researcher) yet an outsider at the same time because I did not have any experiences of disability. Thus taking positionality into consideration was critical in determining the choice of a methodology and the philosophical assumption in terms of beliefs, values, ontology, epistemology and relationality (Flores, 2018; Sikes, 2004).

Qualitative research has many benefits that this study relied on as a way of checking its value. It was easy to adhere to the prescripts of qualitative research as there is a proliferation of literature on the qualitative research design. The following were used as guiding principles throughout the process of data collection, as proposed by various authors (Kuh et.al, 2006; Creswell, 2009, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Joubish, Khurram, & Ahmed, 2011; Thanh & Thanh, 2015; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013; Woodbridge, 2014):

- It explores experiences, beliefs and behaviours that are impossible to quantify mathematically;
- It occurs in a natural setting where human behaviour and events occur;
- The researcher is the primary instrument in data collection rather than some inanimate mechanism;
- The data that emerge from a qualitative study are descriptive and are thus reported in words;
- Reality is based on participants' perceptions and experiences and the way they make sense of their lives;
- Qualitative research seeks an understanding of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of participants;
- Idiographic interpretation is utilized, attention is paid to particulars and data are interpreted in regard to the particulars of a case rather than generalizations;
- Qualitative research is an emergent design in its negotiated outcome. Meaning and interpretations are negotiated with human data sources because it is the subjects' realities that the researcher attempts to reconstruct;

- This research traditionally relies on the utilization of tacit knowledge (intuitive and felt knowledge) because often the nuances of the multiple realities can best be appreciated in this way;
- Proving trustworthiness is key to qualitative research;
- It uses methods that attempt to provide a holistic understanding of research participants' views and actions in the context of their lives.

The nature of a phenomenological qualitative research design has its own prescripts for the researcher. This has been highlighted above in terms of how to treat participants and collect data from them. Bracketing is also one requirement of qualitative phenomenological research that I had to cautiously adhere to in the process of collecting data. Chan, Fung, and Chien (2013, p. 1) describe bracketing as follows: “[It is] a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that requires deliberate putting aside one’s own belief about the phenomenon under investigation or what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation”. Some literature on bracketing has conflicting views based on inconsistencies in the process of bracketing as there are no clear guidelines on how to set aside oneself as a researcher during data collection and data analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2010). In adhering to bracketing, I created a friendly environment where the students were able to talk freely without feeling sad about or being traumatised by their situation. More than anything, the study made me a learner. I was listening with interest as virgin information was being revealed to me as a lecturer, a member of the community, a parent, and as a person without a disability. During the interviews I took notes and also used a recorder. According to Tufford and Newman (2010), these assist in bracketing so that everything said and experienced during the interview may be captured. Fortunately, this study engendered positivity as the participants were required to share perceptions and experiences about their academic success.

4.3 Methods of Data Production

This study utilised three methods of data production: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and photo-voice recordings. These methods generated data that provided in-depth understanding of the experiences of academic success by students with disabilities. Interviews were found to be the most appropriate method to acquire in-depth understanding of the participants’ views and to understand how they perceived their academic success. The

dependability and transferability of the study were enhanced by utilising photo-voice recordings, as will be discussed in the data analysis section.

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

Different kinds of interviewing strategies may be employed in qualitative research such as structured interviews, unstructured interviews and semi-structured/in-depth interviews (Berg, 2001; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011). To allow my participants to openly share in-depth accounts of their experiences of academic success in this qualitative phenomenological research, semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of inquiry which is used to understand certain aspects of the social world view of participants (Andrade, 2009; Kumar, 2011). It also has the advantage of probing for more in-depth answers when necessary (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, & Guest, 2005; Ritchie & Lewis, 2011; Creswell, 2013). According to Blandford (2013, p. 23), such interviews “are best suited for understanding people’s perceptions and experiences”.

The conversations were guided by pre-set questions (Mack et al., 2005) that were not rigid but allowed flexibility so that the interviewees could freely share their experiences. I developed interview questions based on the following research questions of the study:

1. Which experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?
2. How do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?
3. Why do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in the way they do?

It was important to constantly remember the objectives of the study during the course of the interviews so that I could elicit the participants’ views and experiences on the phenomenon of academic success. To record everything accurately, I used a tape-recorder to augment note-taking (Berg, 2001; Creswell, 2013; Kumar, 2013). The interviews were managed in a manner that precluded the participants from ‘hijacking’ the conversation or leading the interview astray. I tried to adhere to the allocated time and the principles of the semi-structured interview; however, in some cases these measures were relaxed depending on the nature of the disability

the participant had. For instance, one participant had a speech impediment and in this case the interview lasted hour and half. The participants were made to feel relaxed and comfortable as the interviews were conducted in their own chosen environment. It was important not to disrupt my participants' life settings, thus the interviews were conducted at the universities where the participants studied.

Using semi-structured interviews is normally frowned upon by positivists on the basis of the limited number of participants that are used. However, for qualitative phenomenological research a limited number of participants is a major advantage (Bengtsson, 2016) as it enables the researcher to get in-depth information about the experiences and perceptions of the participants and to limit unnecessary generalisations. In this instance, thirteen students were interviewed for approximately an hour each.

4.3.2 Document analysis

Document analysis is a recognised method of data collection and is predominantly used in qualitative research for triangulation purposes. I viewed disability policies, registration records and registration guidelines to check the requirements and statistics in as far as the numbers of students with disabilities were concerned. The reason why I engaged in document analysis was to determine how friendly and considerate these institutions were towards students with disabilities. Furthermore, document analysis was one way of triangulation that enhanced the credibility of my study, as proposed by Bowen (2009) and Mogalakwe (2006). Document analysis is commonly used to supplement information and it involves the perusal of primary sources such as biographies and journals as well as secondary sources such as policies, newspapers and journal articles. Such documents are referred as 'non-research resources' because they were not produced for the purpose of my research specifically but they helped me to develop a better understanding and to make meaning of the data. I noted that Mogalakwe (2006) cautions that the researcher should be conscious of the credibility, trustworthiness, representativeness, meaning and authenticity of documents as some could be detrimental to a study. Bowen (2009) concurs, and recommends that the documents used should not be in conflict with the conceptual framework of the research. Taking into consideration the pitfalls associated with documents, I carefully selected documents that would be relevant to this study. I needed to sieve some information from various documents from both universities that

included disability policies. I also consulted registration documents to establish the numbers of students with disabilities. I also used an advanced pdf search function to check key concepts.

It is acknowledged at this point that the document analysis process was of limited use in this study as nothing had been recorded at the institutions under study in terms of the academic success of students with disabilities. For instance, while the MUT admission policy (MUT, 2016) declares that no person shall be denied admission/registration on account of a disability, the DUT admission policy (DUT, 2009) is not explicit on the admission of persons with disabilities, but it is committed to admitting students from designated groups. Disability issues thus seemed to be addressed peripherally. The documents that I perused mainly addressed the theme of *student governance, support and rights* in Chapter six. The data that were elicited from these documents showed whether these institutions had an enabling or inhibiting attitude towards students with disabilities.

4.3.3 Photo-voice recordings

Photo-voice recording is a relatively new research method that allows participants to fully participate in and enjoy the research process. It was first used successfully in 1994 by Wang and Burris in the Yunnan Women's Reproduction Health and Development Program in China. The main purpose of photo-voice recordings is to inform changes in policies (Annang et al., 2016; Hannes, 2014; Hermanns, Greer, & Cooper, 2015; Nykiforuk, Vallianatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011; Wang, 1999; Wang & Pies, 2004).

Photo-voice recordings were initially used in community health related research (Jensen, 2006; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). This research tool has been rapidly growing and has been identified as a method that integrates different approaches such as the educational, feminist or participatory approaches and this gives it an added advantage over other methods (Hannay et al., 2013). According to Jensen, Kaiwai, Hector, and McCreanor (2006, p. 34), "photo-voice has proven to be an invaluable research method with an inherent attraction to young peoples' participation and inclusion in social issues". The photo-voice method has become dominant in social science research and has established itself as a democratic and interpretative method as the participants are actively involved in the collection of data by means of photographs (Annang et al., 2016; Given et al., 2002; Wang, 1999; Wang & Pies, 2004). In the current study, the participants were thus actively involved in the research process by taking and submitting

photographs that depicted their experiences, concerns and coping strategies, as proposed by Hermanns et al. (2015). According to Hannes (2014), this method is suitable for use by any group, including minorities and marginalised groups, because it allows any participant to illustrate experiences through photographs. Moreover, the world view of participants is constructed through discussions of these photographs which is a method that is aligned to interpretivist and phenomenological processes. Photo-voice as a qualitative method of inquiry (Given, et al., 2014, Annang, et al., 2016; Mabry, et al., 2016) thus offers an innovative way of triangulation to improve the credibility of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is a recommendation I embraced in the current study.

However, using the photo-voice strategy came with stringent requirements for ethical adherence as highlighted by Wang and Burris (1997), Wang (2004), and Nykiforuk (2011). When applying for ethical clearance, I thus stated my reasons for wanting to use this method. The intention was to actively involve my participants so that our conversations during the interview sessions would be meaningful for them and so that they would better understand their own experiences. It was also used as a means of triangulation, as the photographs they submitted validated their experiences. I also had to train my participants on what was required of them and what they were not supposed to. I supplied them with consent forms should other people appear in a photograph (Appendix E). These days, most students use smart-phones that are equipped with advanced technology and various applications, including a fine camera and video facility. Fortunately, all my participants had smart-phones and this was a cost-effective bonus. The photographs were sent to me via Bluetooth or emails. The photographs were made available before, during and after the interviews for record purposes. We discussed why these photographs were important and what impact the event that had been photographed would have on the study.

Photo-voice was thus used to stimulate dialogue on the experiences of academic success that the students with disabilities had (Given, Lisa, Opryshko, Julien, & Smith, 2002). Wang (2004) advocates that photo-voice encourages communities to be part of policy decisions and the changes that are made that concern them. Students with disabilities, like all other students at universities, are expected to be involved in policy formulation – especially policies on disability.

Photo-elicitation moves from the concrete (a cataloguing of the objects in the photograph) to the socially abstract (what the objects in the photograph mean to the interviewee) (Bignante, 2016; Torre & Murphy, 2015). Thus coding and thematic analysis were used to ensure that all the important features that related to the topic of this study and that might be evident in the photographs were captured. For instance, on the theme of *Access*, one of the participants brought a photograph of herself where she tried to access books from the shelves in the library. This photo clearly revealed the adversities that this student faced on a daily basis and it illustrated the frustrations she – and many like her – so often experienced.

4.4 Sampling and Recruitment

Sampling forms a vital part of the research design as the researcher has to make critical decisions about who would assist with useful, relevant and trustworthy data that could contribute meaningfully to the research. Phenomenological studies do not require a large number of participants due to its nature of in-depth enquiry. In fact, it has been suggested that a maximum of twenty five participants or fewer is sufficient (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Noon, 2018; Pietkiewicz et al., 2014). I initially targeted fourteen participants – seven from each university. However, I ended up with thirteen participants with seven from MUT and six from DUT as one student withdrew at the last minute.

Using the records that were available at both universities, it was established that students with disabilities were in the region of 60 at each university in various years of study. In an attempt to align the study with the trustworthiness requirement, I considered Kothari's (2008) advice that a sample size needs to address the requirements of efficiency, representativeness, reliability and flexibility. The issue of homogeneity played a big role in the study as only academically successful students with disabilities in their final year of study were eligible.

Purposeful sampling was used as it is common in interpretive phenomenological or qualitative research (Mark et al., 2005). Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p. 108) explain that, in purposeful research, "participants are selected on the basis of known characteristics, which might be socio-demographic or might relate to factors such as experience, behaviour, roles etc. [that are] relevant to the research topic". The title of this research automatically eliminated non-disabled students, students with disabilities who were not successful academically, and first year

students as they had not progressed yet. The students were thus selected from among final year students and their representativeness was considered in terms of gender, different kinds of disabilities, study disciplines, and age.

Different kinds of sampling may be used depending on the nature of the research study, and in this research I preferred purposive and convenient sampling (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Purposive sampling is also known as deliberate sampling, judgment sampling or non-probability sampling. Another similar sampling method is called convenience sampling but it is based on easy access and is not encouraged as it may leave out participants who might be considered as out of reach, yet they may have valuable information. In all types of sampling, including those used in quantitative research, the need exists to eliminate the element of biasness (Yin, 2011).

As much as I needed a small number of participants, the process of sampling was quite challenging. Checking the records and trying to ascertain the authenticity of the process were also not easy. However, university officials kindly assisted in this regard. As the process of sampling was initially daunting, I focused on authenticity. Kotari (2008) recommends the following steps:

4.4.1 Determining the type of universe/population

It was my responsibility to determine the population that would be relevant for the study and this choice was guided by the research design. After gaining ethical clearance, I used predetermined sampling as my study was based on phenomenological principles. The target population was academically successful students with disabilities who were enrolled at DUT and MUT. I identified potential student participants by perusing relevant documents at the two institutions with the assistance of officials who worked in the disability and student counselling units.

4.4.2 Sampling unit

Determining the parameters of interest was critical when deciding on the sample. The reasons for my choice of the sample that I required needed to be very clear as it would have a direct impact on the actualization of the research project. Final year students with disabilities were

the target population because their experience of academic success would meaningfully contribute to the body of knowledge. I also argued that three years in the university system would have provided them with valuable experiences and academic resilience. However, it is generally impossible to cover the entire population when collecting data and I thus had to be selective in my choice of student participants.

4.4.3 Snowball sampling

While the initial sampling method was purposive, it became clear that the records that I had been given were incomplete and information of some students had been incorrectly captured. Getting hold of the initially identified students in either university became difficult and frustration and desperation accumulated. Snowball sampling was then considered as a second option.

Using purposive sampling and snowballing is not strange in studies involving minority groups which are also referred as 'hard-to-reach communities' (Valerio et al., 2016). Snowballing is one of the non-probabilistic research methods that many researchers have used successfully to unearth a hidden population, a smaller population, or a sensitive or vulnerable group (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Atkison & Flint, 2001; Dragon & Isaac-Maniu, 2013; Valerio; 2016). Snowballing is also known as 'chain referral' which starts with the purposive or convenience sampling of some subjects (Dusek, Yurova, & Ruppel, 2015; Journal, 2016).

The participants who were initially identified were thus requested to assist in recruiting other participants who met the criteria of the study. This was also difficult as people in vulnerable groups often do not want to be identified as such. However, this was overcome as an exponential non-discriminative strategy was used when every recruited participant was requested to recruit another participant (Etikan et al., 2016). The process of recruitment was strictly managed to avoid bias and other related challenges like cohesiveness (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Atkison & Fint, 2001). Newly recruited participants were interviewed to check their suitability and as a means of creating rapport. This was very important as I needed to gain their trust and to keep the trustworthiness of the study intact.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Immediately after acquiring ethical clearance from both universities, I started familiarising myself with the environment of the two universities involved. I walked around and visited both Student Affairs units trying to obtain records of students with disabilities. I foc(Collen Howell, 2005)used on when the students with disabilities were first admitted and the number of current registered students with disabilities in their final year of study. My search corroborated the literature in the sense that I discovered inaccurate and minimal records on students with disabilities (FOTIM, 2011; Howell, 2005).

In consideration of the ethical requirements of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, I obtained written consent from gatekeepers to utilise their records and from the participants after informing them of the aim and purpose of the study. The informed consent form further provided clarity on the rights of non-participation or withdrawal should a participant feel uncomfortable (Creswell, 2013). Participation was purely voluntary and there were no incentives as this research was not for commercial purposes. The procedures and duration were clearly communicated to them. The participants were students with disabilities, so I was careful that no harm would come to them in any way. The student counselling units were put on stand-by in case any student needed counselling during the research process. The participants were required to take photos and use a consent form for the people who might feature in the photos. The participants agreed to use their own smart-phones to take the photos. The consent form explicitly explained that photos were not for commercial purposes. Lastly, confidentiality and anonymity were critical to avoid any discrimination against or stigmatisation of the participants. These issues were covered in the consent form. Their names would not be used and the data would be stored safely where access would be limited to the researcher and relevant university officials (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The participants are referred to by pseudonyms in this study report. The list is provided in Chapter Five.

A number of challenges were experienced as I could not trace students through university emails (for an example, 2017xxxxx@dut.ac.za) as the students tended to use their private emails which were not available to the administrators and they had also changed numbers or had multiple cell phone numbers. Getting hold of students was a challenge, and I reverted to using snowball sampling. Moriña, López-Gavira and Molina (2016) experienced similar challenges at the Spanish universities where they conducted their study.

I arranged an appointment with each student who had agreed to be part of the study to explain its purpose. I sent them consent forms which I collected on the day of the interview. The matters that were discussed at the first meetings were ethical issues and the content of the consent form (which included their right to participate or not), and I emphasised the fact that the study was purely academic and that no incentives could be expected. I gave each potential participant enough time to think before signing the consent form. This was important because I was dealing with a vulnerable group of young people.

Diversity was achieved by incorporating students with diverse disabilities while their demographics and study programmes also differed. They were selected from the Social Sciences, Natural Sciences and Engineering faculties and this diversity enriched the data. This criterion was used to justify the limited number of students required. It should be noted that no particular disability was targeted by the study. Purposive sampling was ideal as information on the desired common characteristics and experiences of the participants could be elicited (Callary, Rothwell, & Young, 2015). The criteria included good academic performance, meaning they had progressed from first year level of study to their final year of study without failing.

4.6 The Interview Process

Another important benefit of my initial meetings with the participants was that I had the opportunity to explain to them how our interviews were going to be conducted and that the photo-voice method would also be used. We discussed how, where and when the photographs should be taken and which ethical implications needed to be considered. I was able to establish whether they would need cameras or whether they could use their smart-phones, but they were comfortable with the idea of using their phones because they normally took 'selfies' and videos. I provided them with consent forms in case they took photos of other people. Each participant was asked to submit at least three appropriate photos before or on the day of the interview.

Each interview took almost an hour and was conducted in a venue that was convenient for the student. The interviews were voice-recorded and I also took notes (Creswell, 2009). I transcribed each interview in a protected Word document and saved it on an external drive and online for safety and security purposes. The process of interviews stretched for 6 months due to the initial unavailability of participants. No interviews were conducted during test and

examination periods. The interviews were conducted during the week. I also arranged back-up in the person of a student counsellor should any student have need of such a service.

For the actual interview sessions I prepared questions as a guide as I would conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews. At the beginning of each interview I made the participant feel comfortable and at ease before zooming in on the actual interview. I assured them that we would have a mere conversation, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that the purpose was to hear about their experiences of academic success. Follow-up or probing questions were asked when necessary. I can report that I had a deep and fruitful conversation with each participant. They were allowed to use mixed languages such as English and a vernacular which was predominantly IsiZulu and IsiXhosa (fortunately I understand both these languages). Each interview produced a thick and rich description of their academic experiences and this was supported by photo-voice images. Most submitted at least three meaningful photographs. However, not all the participants brought photographs and, in some cases, some had not used the consent form when other people appeared in the picture. Such photographs were not used for ethical reasons.

The issue of confidentiality was given special attention throughout the study. During the signing of the consent forms I explained to my participants that their identities would be protected and that pseudonyms would be used in any report. The participants and people outside the study who appeared in the photographs gave consent that their faces could appear in the study report without being shaded. I assured the participants that the recordings would be stored safely according to UKZN policy for securing information and that future dissemination of the findings at conferences and in journal articles would be purely for academic purposes. The participants understood and consented to the use of their photographs and anonymous data.

4.7 Data Analysis

Primary data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews, the photo-voice method, and document analysis. Data analysis is the climax of qualitative research as the interpretations of the data determine the value of the research outcomes (Flick, 2013). The data analysis was a crucial stage in the research project and was quite time consuming. It was an exercise that

required critical and advanced analytical skills and was a challenging yet rewarding experience. Whiting (1999) had similar experiences.

The nature of the data that I analysed ranged from information elicited by means of semi-structured interviews to document analysis and photographs (or the photo-voice method). Renowned researchers such as Braun and Clarke (2006), Blandford (2013), Creswell (2009, 2013) and Rajkomar (2011) share the sentiment that data analysis should start with transcribing the data which is a process that must be guided by the purpose of the study. Some researchers prefer to outsource this tedious exercise. I chose to do this laborious task myself, as I wanted to understand and witness the process unfolding while taking the theoretical framing, research question and research design into account (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) emphasise the importance of considering “the theoretical framework’s subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions and intuitive field understandings” during the data analysis process, and I was persistently conscious of these requirements.

The process commenced with the transcription of the data. I made judgments about coding and theming and decontextualising and re-contextualising the data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). All these stages were critical and required my full attention.

There are quite a number of data analysis approaches available depending on the research design. Content analysis was not suitable because it recommends the frequency of a code or quantifying a phenomenon (Bengtsson, 2016), which is more inclined towards a quantitative research design. On the other hand, Miles and Huberman (1994) advocate a process of data analysis that consists of three steps: data reduction, data display, and data conclusion. However, I selected the thematic and phenomenology analysis approach.

In preparation for the data analysis process, I read extensively on thematic analysis and established that thematic analysis was common in most data analysis versions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Themes are defined as a set of patterns that emerge from the data and capture the essence of meaning while the researcher remains cognizant of the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, thematic analysis is viewed as a systematic method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns. Many distinguished researchers such as Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), Creswell (2009), Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas (2013), and

Ibrahim (2012) describe the dynamic benefits provided by thematic analysis to understand qualitative data. The thematic approach thus allows the researcher to:

- Analyse narrative materials of life stories or experiences;
- Maintain a realist/essentialist and constructionist perspective;
- Engender descriptions and interpretations that are both inductive and deductive and that allow flexible thematic analyses;
- Explore a phenomenon by means of qualitative research methods that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions;
- Highlight the aim of validation to establish a fundamental view of analysis;
- Develop clues and adapt or connect them to raw data as summary indicators for different interpretations;
- Present similarities and differences among participants' perspectives;
- Provide rich, detailed and complex data;
- Work with a wide range of research questions, from those about people's experiences or understandings to those about the representation and construction of particular phenomena in particular contexts;
- Analyse different types of data using secondary sources such as media to transcripts of primary data such as information obtained from focus groups or interviews;
- Work with large or small data sets that will produce data-driven or theory-driven analyses.

Looking at the above points, the issues of trustworthiness and rigour do surface; however, these will be discussed later in the chapter. Suffice it to say here that my data analysis process allowed me to collate, nest and explore relationships among the themes that emerged from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and this assisted me in understanding the achievement of academic success by students with disabilities.

For the purpose of data analysis, I employed a mixture of the phenomenological (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2012) and the thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) analysis methods. I established that these methods were more similar than different in many respects (see Table 4.1 below). Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis model is considered a basic and influential method of data analysis (Maguire & Dilahunt, 2017), while the phenomenological model deals

with describing and interpreting experiences on multidimensional levels and is based on unique cultures, experiences, backgrounds, languages, gender, age, emotions and personal characteristics (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Giorgi et al., 2012; Noon, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2006, p.81) argue that their thematic analysis model is an essentialist or realist method as it reports the experiences, meanings and realities of participants, or it can be a constructionist method as it examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. The flexibility of thematic analysis therefore opened an opportunity to explore the blending of both methods in my data analysis process.

Table 4.1: Comparison of the thematic and phenomenological data analysis models

The Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	Phenomenological Data Analysis (Giorgi, 1985)
Familiarisation with the data	Read for a sense of the whole
Data coding	Determination of parts establishing meaning of units
Searching for themes	Transformation of meanings of units
Reviewing themes	Determination of structure
Defining and naming themes	
Writing up	

Sources: Braun and Clarke (2006) and Giorgi (1985)

These two methods of analysis unfold in almost a similar fashion. Although the phenomenological analysis process has fewer steps, it is able to compensate for this due to a better production of themes.

An important issue about phenomenological analysis is ‘bracketing’, which should be approached with caution (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Koopman, 2015; Whiting, 1999). Hursel, the ‘father of phenomenology’, emphasises the importance of ‘epoche’, which means to remove oneself from the scene and to avoid being involved emotionally or influencing an outcome in any other form. Chan et al. (2013) and Koopman (2015) refer to this as ‘bracketing’, which simply means avoiding to connect with and to contaminate the data. However, it should be noted that bracketing does not necessarily mean that the researcher has

to approach the data as a clean slate. According to Whiting (1999, p. 64), it means the researcher needs to read the data “with attunement to both the factual content of the words and the actual experiences of the participants”. By applying the phenomenological data analysis method, I was required to understand the world through the experiences of the participants in order to appreciate and comprehend the essence of their lived worlds. Having had no prior or personal experience of disability thus contributed to the fact that I could avoid ‘bracketing’.

I was also cognisant of Cooper, Fleisher and Cotton's (2012, p. 5) suggestions for analysing phenomenological data by considering the following:

- Moving from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants;
- Describing the experience then move to an interpretation of the experience;
- Committing to understanding a participant’s point of view;
- Psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context.

These became very practical pointers when I developed the themes and had to make sense of the data. I consistently took into account that, as much as the experiences that were narrated were personal, they were also shared by the participants. This understanding allowed me to gain in-depth insight into their experiences of academic success and will facilitate the positioning of readers of this thesis as well.

4.7.1 The process of data analysis

The phenomenological and the thematic data analysis methods were employed. Both these methods require that the researcher should first get to understand what was said in the interviews, how it was said, and why it was said. That understanding became the first step towards a long and intensive process of analysing the data. I was cognisant of the fact that I needed to be systematic and consistent as the data analysis process was a scientific exercise (Giorgi et al., 2012). Stay focused on the paradigm and theoretical framework of the study was also important. In the back of my mind I kept on asking myself which experiences of being a student with a disability the participants were relaying, how those experiences assisted them in being resilient, and why it was important for them to have self-efficacy.

4.7.1.1 First phase: Familiarising myself with the data

I carefully read all the transcripts to understand the phenomenon of academic success from the participants' perspective. I was mindful that I needed to 'bracket' (i.e., avoid 'epoché') my own prejudgements and presumptions (Whitting, 1999). I found that bracketing was not difficult as: (a) I did not have experiences of disability, and (b) my participants were young people pursuing their first degree or diploma at a time and in a context that were much different from the time when I did the same. Therefore my experiences did not contaminate the process of analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to familiarising oneself with the data and Giorgi (1975) refers to the same process as 'reading and re-reading' which culminates in familiarity with the data. I listened to the voice recordings more than three times and also referred to the notes that I had taken during the interviews. Together they provided a clear understanding of what had been said and how it had been said before I processed the data. I chose not to outsource this task nor to use a computer aided data analysis programme. The transcription process was critical as it allowed me to listen to what had been said and, most importantly, to listen to how the questions had been phrased and the manner and tone of the responses to them. During this phase I was able to listen to how I had conducted the interviews, starting from how I had welcomed each student to create rapport to their responses and comments.

I transcribed each interview immediately after it had been conducted while everything was still fresh in my mind (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This assisted me in improving my interviewing skills in later interviews and devising better strategies of interviewing. I learnt from the process itself, which was a great experience. By transcribing that data I was assisted in adequately acquainting myself with the analysis process, which most authors recommend (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). During this stage I familiarised myself with the data by carefully reading each transcript and trying to understand the lived experiences of the participants. I became deeply immersed in the data. I was trying to understand what the data meant to the participants as well as what it meant to me, while keeping in mind that it was the participants' experiences that mattered most. Throughout this process I was mindful of my research questions as well as the theoretical and conceptual framework that had assisted me in shaping the process of data analysis. To systematically facilitate this process, I drew a table with headings that reflected both the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke and Giorgi's phenomenological model.

4.7.1.2 Second phase: Generating initial codes/determining the natural meaning of units

Phase two was literally a continuation of the first phase. It is common that when you read something to better understand it, you will highlight key points, make notes, and underline what seems to be important because some information will always stand out and capture a reader's attention. When analysing the data, I tried to first understand the literal meaning and then to move to the deeper meaning (Cooper & Fleisher, 2012). I was highlighting and making notes in different colours, and in this process the similarities and differences among the participants' experiences started to emerge. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), such notes are referred to as 'initial codes' while Giorgi (1985) refers to 'natural meaning'. These meanings or codes revealed surface meaning. I drew a table in which I recorded the raw data and the meanings that I could deduce and labelled (or named) comments under different headings.

At this point I must refer to the interview process during which I used a research guide that contained pre-planned questions. Therefore, to continue familiarising myself and making meaning of the experiences of the participants, I read carefully and extracted all the passages that responded to the key words in the questions, for instance: *What does academic success mean to you?* I looked through every transcript to see how each participants felt about being successful academically. I labelled the table heading as 'each participant's meaning' and then posted all meanings/feelings related to academic success in this column. I was thus able to see how each participant viewed academic success. The next column was labelled 'meaning units' (Giorgi, 1985), which is referred as 'initial coding' by Braun and Clarke (2006). Table 4.1 bears evidence of how the journey of data analysis unfolded by referring to only one theme/element of academic success, up until the final clarification of themes, which will be discussed under each phase that follows. The participants' comments are presented verbatim and may thus contain slight linguistic inaccuracies.

Table 4.2: Developing meaning

<p style="text-align: center;">Original Transcript Question: What does academic success mean to you?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Unit meaning/generating initial codes</p>
<p><i>It means the foundation of the things I want to achieve in life and in future. It means places I would like to be and things I would like to be; and without academic success I would never be [anything] without being academically successful. Academic success is a platform, an introduction to the world, which is what people get to know you by. I want people to know me for my academic achievement, greater heights and greater achievements.</i> (identity, new revelation).</p>	<p>It is the beginning of new things; It is a platform for a new life; It is an introduction to a new and better life</p>
<p><i>It means opportunities, you know. It is wide and has a lot of opportunities. I'm very much passionate about business and I would like to own my own IT company in future and explore whatever opportunities that avail themselves.</i> (looking forward to the future)</p>	<p>Opportunities; Looking forward to the future; Own business opportunities</p>
<p><i>Academic success for me means I have worked hard and I am reaping the results of hard work. I am excited! My mom is very happy</i> (impact of academic success)</p>	<p>Reaping the results of hard work; Bringing happiness to the family</p>
<p><i>Academic success is about consistently passing all your assessments and progressing well. It means hard work, not only when it is test week or examinations but throughout.</i> (consistent hard work/dedication)</p>	<p>Academic success is consciously and consistently working hard; Dedication</p>
<p><i>This success means God has been good to me. I couldn't have achieved this without Him. My prayers have been answered or my mom's prayers have been answered.</i> (faith/beliefs and culture)</p>	<p>Prayers have been answered; God is good; Faith</p>
<p><i>First, success for me means I have done well academically. I have persevered. I will be graduating next year and be the first one to graduate in my family. This means a new chapter for all of us as a family.</i> (first generation to achieve tertiary academic success)</p>	<p>Working hard academically; Overcoming challenges to achieve</p>

<p><i>Academic success does not come easily; it's hard work to continuously work and pass all your modules. It is a journey of hard work. It means new and better things are coming.</i></p> <p>(hard work/dedication)</p>	<p>Continuously working hard; Future prospects</p>
<p><i>Academic success means a number of things: it means I have worked hard and getting what I have worked for. It means I have done well and my life will never be the same. Good things are coming.</i></p> <p>(rewards)</p>	<p>Hard work; Life-changing; Desired rewards</p>
<p><i>Academic success does not necessarily mean one is smart or a straight A student; it means working with a focus. For me it was understanding my background, knowing where I come from. It is life-changing, as my life will be better in the future.</i></p> <p>(culture and background)</p>	<p>Being intelligent is important; however, one has to focus on studies and be conscious of one's background</p>
<p><i>My course has been challenging but manageable. I had to overcome some challenges. I feel good that I'll finish this year. It demanded a lot of sacrifice and planning. It meant time management and focus. Anyway, it's about preparing in advance.</i></p> <p>(sacrifice and time management)</p>	<p>Demands sacrifice; Time management; Planning in advance</p>
<p><i>It's when you study and receive a qualification, and that qualification makes you successful, changes your life. But you need to work hard for academic success. It is not just handed to any person.</i></p>	<p>A qualification changes one's life; Comes with hard work</p>

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 89), this stage of the data analysis process can be achieved by “work[ing] systematically through the entire data set, giving full and equal attention to each data item, and identifying interesting aspects in the data items that may form the basis of repeated patterns (themes) across the data set”. In phenomenology it is not necessary to determine repeated patterns, but to indicate similar experiences or meaning of experiences. This is achieved through reading openness (Whiting, 2009). Christensen (2018) notes that, at this stage, it is not about coding but about meaning making.

4.7.1.3 Third phase: Transformation of the meaning units/revelatory structure

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this phase is termed ‘searching for themes’. Thus I interrogated the ‘meaning units’ or ‘initial codes’ by asking: *Which experiences of resilience does this meaning unit reveal?* Based on this question, some themes started to emerge, but they were broad at this stage. Whitting (2009) also notes that some of the themes that emerge may not match any of the others or may have only peripheral meaning in terms of the phenomenon. I did not disregard any theme at this juncture as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that nothing should be thrown away at this point as themes are still developing. Thus one particular theme may carry a significant meaning that might be contradictory to the rest, yet it can be very important.

Table 4.3: Revolution of meaning and codes

Transformation of meaning units/ searching for themes	Determining structure/reviewing themes WHAT
New life	Better future and new identity
Opens opportunities	Opportunities
Hard work	Hard work
Progress and hard work	Staying focused and working consistently
Faith in God - answered prayers	Manifestation of God: strong beliefs, spirituality
Perseverance	Better chances; perseverance pays off
Hard work	Determination
Hard work	Better life
Working with focus	Better life
Working with determination	Determination
Qualification leads to a successful lifestyle	Good results, better life

4.7.1.4 Fourth and fifth phases: Reviewing and naming themes and determining structure

Drawing from Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of analysis, I further interrogated the meaning of the emerging themes and tried to see what other underlying meanings there were. I was continuously asking: *What does this tell me about academic success?* (Whiting, 2009). In this process, weaker themes were discarded and others were combined. It sent me back to

my research questions and to my data and I checked what had initially been mentioned as an experience, or I determined if the experience reflected resilience and whether it was answering the question of academic experiences of students with disabilities. Whilst working on finalising the themes, I was constantly aware of resilience as a key word in the conceptual framework of the study.

To further refine the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Noon, 2018), I looked at the relationship between self-determination and perseverance and realised that this relationship could be combined into the concept of self-determination. While self-actualisation was an overarching theme, self-determination and being focused were considered as subthemes. The complexity of the phenomenological process (Giorgi et al., 2012) was explicit in this iterative process and I had to look for relevant quotes that reflected the themes with a finetooth comb (Noon, 2018). Table 4.4 below shows the relationship between the themes and subthemes and their connection with the conceptual framework that comprised the concepts of phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy. As part of the data analysis process, the themes that emerged are merged with relevant quotes and these are discussed in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 4.4: List of themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Perceived reality of academic success	Understanding/definition of academic success: Academic success is hard work and requires self-determination
Spirituality	Faith and prayer
Self-efficacy	Being content with disability New self-concept and leadership Self-regulated learning Time management
Support	Family support Changing roles in terms of support Support from friends and others Self-motivation

The academic environment	Academic support Positive academic support Limited support Bad experiences associated with academic staff
Access to services	Attending classes is associated with challenges Safety at the residences
Life in a residence	
Understanding and adhering to policy	Self-sufficiency New identity
Funding system	Positive experiences of the funding system Lack of information on NSFAS
Disability unit (provision of essential services)	
Understanding own rights	Disability and employment

The analysis of the photo-voice data resonated well with the interview data (Wang & Pies, 2004). The participants avidly discussed their reasons for taking a particular photo, how it contributed to their life-world, and the story behind each photo. This process is referred to as photo-elicitation and it was effectively used to get more in-depth data from the students about their experiences of academic success in a higher education context. This link is further clarified in the data presentation chapter.

The experiences of the participants were difficult to separate as they were entangled in the phenomenological, resilience and self-efficacy conceptual framework. However, a common thread that linked their lived experiences was resilience.

4.7.2 Strengthening the quality of the study: Trustworthiness

Quality assurance in research is critical as the absence thereof may lead to inappropriate results or findings that have to be revoked. The language used for quantitative and qualitative quality assurance may differ, yet it means similar things or processes (see Table 4.5 below) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 4.5: Quality assurance

Quantitative Quality Assurance	Qualitative Quality Assurance
Internal validity	Credibility
External validity	Transferability
Objectivity	Confirmability
Reliability	Dependability

Many researchers are in agreement that trustworthiness in qualitative research is determined by credibility, rigour, transferability, dependability, transparency, and an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2013; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest various strategies for addressing the credibility of a study such as peer debriefing, prolonged engagements, persistent observation, and triangulation. Triangulation is recommended by many researchers both in qualitative and quantitative studies (Jennifer, 2002; Leung, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). As a means of strengthening credibility in this study, I used triangulation by linking the interview, documentary and photo-voice data.

Rigour and transparency occurred at every step of the research process to ensure that data analysis, interpretation and evaluation were conducted according to reputable scholarly processes. This did not only ensure the credibility of the study, but the dependability as well. Shenton (2004) refers to an overlap of these processes in complying with research requirements. To achieve trustworthiness, I kept on asking myself throughout the study how the data and my interpretations were aligned with and reflected reality as constructed by the participants (Merriam, 1998 in Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). I thus abided by the advice of Nowell et al. (2017) and (Shenton, 2004) by ‘arguing logically’ and ‘explicitly explaining’ the processes that were followed, and this ensured the dependability of the study.

Attempts are made in this study report to rigorously explain the reason for every decision I made. For instance, I explained every choice of the research paradigm, the selection of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and the data collection and analysis methods. Shenton (2004, p. 72) advises that “...steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher”, and I rigorously abided by this tenet.

The issues of transferability may be challenged in qualitative research, and thus Lincoln and Guba (1985, in Shenton, 2004) suggest that the researcher has to provide traceable processes for readers to make a decision whether to apply the findings or not. I thus provide thick descriptions of how decisions were made and which methods were used and I clearly elucidate the selection criteria for the sample. However, I am aware that phenomenological studies are rather subjective as they allude to individuals' experiences. Nonetheless, the underlying purpose of the study was to bring awareness to the academic community about the capability of people with disabilities and, more especially, to demonstrate the role that higher education institutions can play in empowering students with disabilities.

4.8 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter presented descriptions of and explanations for the research methodology that was employed while the importance to yield thick, trustworthy data was underscored. It was acknowledged that the research methodology was both the backbone and road map of the study, hence the overarching theoretical framework was based on the participants' experiences with regards to their academic success in higher education. The research paradigm in which the study was located was also adequately explored to elucidate the research design and data analysis principles that were followed. Basically, all the themes were reflective of either experiences of academic resilience or of self-efficacy. I am confident that the research methodology I employed adequately and appropriately satisfied the overarching requirement of the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. My adherence to rigour and transparency was a guiding principle and should demonstrate my scholarly integrity and competence (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It is important to note that in the next chapters (Chapter Five to Chapter Eight) the discourse will incorporate all three methods of data production simultaneously.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

The discussion is presented through the three theoretical lenses that illuminated the data, namely phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy. The previous chapter illustrated the development of themes and sub-themes for this study and I explained that my approach blended Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis with Giorgi’s phenomenological data analysis methods. The results are discussed under three main themes, namely: (i) understanding academic success, (ii) protective factors as a form of support, and (iii) the academic environment. The first two research questions are addressed in this chapter while the third question is addressed in the following chapter.

To reiterate, the data were obtained by means of semi-structured interviews, the photo-voice method and document analysis. The results are first presented under the broad theme: understanding academic success. As required by the confidentiality principle of research, fictitious names are used instead of the original names of the participants. The table below indicates the respective pseudonyms, gender and tertiary institution. The nature of the participants’ disabilities is purposefully omitted as it was not a focus of the study.

Table 5.1: List of participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Institution
Babhekile	Female	MUT
Dolly	Female	MUT
Futhi	Female	MUT
Nondumiso	Female	MUT
Pretty	Female	MUT
Themba	Male	MUT
Thulani	Male	DUT
Bheki	Male	DUT
Glory	Female	DUT

Peter	Male	DUT
Jean	Female	DUT
Mary	Female	DUT
Sizwe	Female	DUT

5.2 Theme One: Understanding Academic Success

Being a student with a disability at a higher education institution requires resilience and the development of self-efficacy that could be referred to as ‘buffers’ in a demanding environment. When a student has a disability, his or her understanding of academic success may be different from that of none-disabled students, hence the meaning attached to ‘being’ and to ‘exist’ may be totally different from that of their ‘normal’ counterparts. Against this backdrop the first research question was: *Which experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?*

When the data were analysed, the following subthemes emerged: *perceived reality of academic success; spirituality; and self-efficacy.*

5.2.1 Perceived reality of academic success

The research participants’ perception of academic success illuminated different understandings of this phenomenon, yet their understanding was also common in many respects. The participants were able to explain and define academic success and they held the general view that academic success required hard work and self-determination. They understood academic success: (a) *as a new beginning or foundation* and (b) *as hard work for self-determination.*

5.2.1.1 Academic success as a new beginning or foundation

Some saw academic success as a new beginning. For example, Nondumiso stated:

It feels like a beginning of new things I would like [to have] because I would be somewhere very high one day...[Achieving academic success] is a life-changing experience; my life will be better in the future.

For Glory, academic success was the foundation or the basis of her future success. It was a ticket to a new life:

It means [a] foundation of the things I want to achieve in life and in future. It means places where I would like to be and things I would like to be and without academic success I would never be... It is my future.

In the same vein, Themba emphasised the importance of academic success, stating that he valued it. He said:

It is when you study and receive a qualification, and that qualification makes you successful, changes your life. Academic achievement is one thing you cannot compromise for anything.

5.2.1.2 Academic success is hard work for self-determination

The participants unanimously acknowledged that academic success was the result of hard work, self-sacrifice and working with focus. They had to sacrifice a lot to realise this hard-earned achievement and this required perseverance to achieve self-determination. Jean stated the following:

Academic success is about constantly passing all your assessments and progressing well. It means hard work, not only when it is test week or examination but throughout. Academic success for me means I have worked hard and I am reaping my results of hard worked. I am excited!

Babhekile emphasised the following point:

It is when you study and receive a qualification, and that qualification makes you successful, changes your life. But you need to work hard for academic success. It is not just given out to any person.

Whilst success was attributed to hard work, some participants also believed that the background of students had an impact on academic success. Peter espoused this as follows:

Academic success does not necessarily mean one is smart or a straight 'A' student; it means working with focus. Academic success does not come easy, it is continuously working hard and passing all your modules. It is a journey of hard work. For me it was understanding my background, knowing where I come from.

Dolly also highlighted the importance of background when she said:

It is important to first understand who you are and where you come from, because we mix with different people from different backgrounds.

The participants seemed to have adopted a very strong positive attitude towards academic success. Futhi had had some challenges which had caused her to drop out for two years. She declared how determined she was to finish her studies:

I had no money [to come back to the university after dropping out]. I decided I will actually hike to save money. He [her father] made that a joke that people will laugh at me because I'm so short. Anyway, I was determined to come here. I hiked, for the first time in my life. I went to a hiking spot and a certain man took me from Newcastle which is where my home is [and dropped me off at] the MUT gate. That man was going to Port Shepstone. I did not have to change cars, it was a small car, not a truck.

Similarly, Themba expressed his determination to complete his studies:

I told myself that my disability is not going to stop me from my dream career. In engineering it matters a lot how you think, it requires your intellect. I am not going to allow disability to dictate my life or under-estimate myself. Even though some people may look down upon me, I am not going to allow that. Self-confidence is very important for me.

Glory also highlighted perseverance:

I do not give up. If I started something, I make sure that I finish it. When I see something and want it, I try my level best to get it. I've already decided that I want to be a [film/video] producer, and the only way to do that is to pass and make sure that I do all my assignments and practicals like shooting videos. I go to events and recording events to enhance my editing skills and shooting skills so that I could be an asset to the industry because I cannot just rely on my disability as an excuse to get into places. I need experience to back it up. When I want something I put my mind into it. If someone says I cannot do something I make sure that I do it successfully. I like challenges and proving wrong those who undermine me.

5.2.2 Spirituality

The participants seemed to be spiritually inclined as their statements revealed their doctrines.

For instance, Promise declared:

This success means God has been good to me. I could not have achieved this without Him. My prayers have been answered or my mom's prayers have been answered because she taught me to pray for everything I want.

Thulani also attributed his success to the greatness of God:

Academic success means a number of things: it means I have worked hard and getting what I have worked for. It means I have done well and my life will never be the same. Good things are coming and God is great.

For Babhekile, trusting in God meant everything. Even before she started working for what she wanted, she needed to invite Him into her plans. She expressed her faith as follows:

I am going to be the first child [in her family] to graduate, or be academically successful. I want to be educated, get a job, get married and have my family. I want to be different in a good way. Proverbs 16 says: 'Tell God about your plans'. I believe all these things will happen because He is with me always.

5.2.3 Self-efficacy

Believing in oneself emerged strongly as a driver of academic success. Three subthemes are presented under self-efficacy, namely being content with disability, having a good self-concept and leadership, and self-regulated learning.

5.2.3.1 Being content

The participants seemed to have accepted their disabilities and did not regard them as limiting in their efforts to attain their desired goals. Nondumiso explained her acceptance of her disability as follows:

When I am with new people I do remember that I am different, but in class I do not know [laughing]. You know, people with disabilities capitalise on their disabilities. Personally, I do not want people to feel sorry for me. Never expect people to do things for you because at some point they will disappoint you. It is

better to do things on your own because you may never achieve things if you expect others to do it for you. A disability mentality will make you succumb to hand-outs. People have their own lives, as much as they'll say, 'Ag shame you have a disability ah...ah...' you still need to have your life and responsibility to take care of it as a human being. If you don't and expect people to do things for you, you'll be disappointed. I want to achieve a lot in life so I do things myself. When I ask someone to do something for me it means I'm really pressed for help. I have learnt that and unfortunately some people with disabilities fold hands and expect people to do things for them. Unfortunately the rest of the world has its own responsibilities and you are not special. Take that mentality of disability out and do it yourself, and one way of doing it is to do well academically as it is the future.

In the same vein, Jean emphasised the importance of self-acceptance:

You know, disabilities are not the same, since I have club feet, it was not easy for people to take my disability seriously. I was content in my own bubble, I didn't want to be exposed, be out there and explain my disability. As much as I knew about disabilities but I didn't want to expose myself.

People got amazed when they got to know that I'm doing drama with my condition. Drama is about movement and balance and I have club feet, and there are movements that I can't do. You know, if you are doing something beyond your ability you get confidence and your self-esteem improves. You know, I used to be so sceptical of myself I would not take full Images. I would take half-Images that didn't show my feet; Images that wouldn't expose my entire body - my disability. You know, as times goes on you get to accept yourself. You accept yourself that this is what actually makes you unique. This is what makes people appreciate you for being yourself. The way I walk is different, that's what I need to embrace, and it's me. Drama has assisted me, I now take full Images with ease. Drama forces you to do moves, dance and walk on stage. I confidently do my monologues. I used to struggle with that but now I've improved a lot. What has assisted me is not to take my disability to my head. You know, when you have a disability you don't want people who'll pity you. The more you talk about it the more you accept yourself and others learn to accept you as you are. They understand my disability and I explain to them if there is something that I can't do. If we are given an activity, we work it out how they can accommodate me.

One student even asked me, ‘Why do you walk like this?’ I explained to her that I have a disability called club feet.

This helps a lot because when you have a permanent disability or was born with it, it’s actually not going to go away. You might as well accept it and deal with it, just live with it. You know, I’ve gone to the extent of writing a play on disabilities like script writing. The script was on a child living with a disability and how society treated him. Through that I tackled family issue, society issues, and relationships. Relationships are always a challenge, and when it comes to dating it is very hard at times.

Pretty also shared her experience of self-acceptance:

My family never gave me special treatment as a person with a disability. That assisted me because it is not something I always think about, even when I am amongst people I don’t think of my disability. Maybe if I wasn’t I would get irritated easily. Those who ask me about it, I explain to them what it’s like. I even allowed one student to touch and feel it because she was scared of me. She has her own disability but jokes about it. My life is much better; in fact I enjoy it.

I have accepted my condition. Even at home I do everything like everybody else, like fetching water, cooking, washing and cleaning. As much as the doctor said I shouldn’t be given heavy duties because my back gets sore after lifting something heavy, [I do whatever I can].

Peter shared a similar sentiment:

I remember about my disability when my leg is painful. This happens after a long day. I do not consider myself a person with a disability. My friends used to think I was faking it. Maybe it’s because I was not born with it. However, I have accepted my new status of disability.

5.2.3.2 New self-concept and new leadership roles

The participants believed that academic success had changed or would change their lives positively. Some of these changes were already happening, as Thulani attested:

This success for me means I have done well academically, I have persevered. I will be graduating next year and be the first one to graduate in my family. This

means new chapter to all of us as a family. I have become a role model not only to my close family but to the community since I don't know anyone with a disability in my [rural] area who has graduated. I think I'm the first one.

Bheki wished to fulfil a leadership role. She described her ambition as follows:

I want to be known as a successful professional person. In IT there are many business opportunities that I would like to explore next year. Besides that, currently I am in student leadership. After becoming disabled I became aware of challenges faced by students with disabilities. I am doing everything possible to advocate for students with disabilities. Many students do ask for assistance with their studies from me and back home I am in the youth committee. I am excited about this achievement.

By adopting a new and positive self-concept, the participants managed to make disability a secondary identity that did not define them. Themba even obtained a new name because of his love of soccer. He explained:

I put my energy into my studies although I find time to relax by watching soccer and reading about it. I love soccer; it's a pity that I can't play it in competitions but I organise inter-residence games and coach my team. That is just for fun. I don't want to be limited by my disability. The wardens and the student affairs officials sometimes organise sports days. My team has won many games, and it is a respected team at the university.



Photograph 5.1: Themba's team

5.2.3.3 Self-regulated learning

The participants agreed that they tended to use the learning style that they believed suited them. Some preferred to study alone while others believed in study groups. Glory stated:

I always try to read what I have learnt in class before I forget it. I study alone as I said I don't have many friends so I don't have a study group but with my friends sometimes we come together before the test just to revise. I only have assignment groups, and I don't like those groups as sometimes they don't take you seriously. You know, we have this assignment which is due next week and I have decided to take the initiative and do the presentation. It's going well so far. I don't want to fail because of other people. So there is progress.

Self-regulated learning also meant taking full ownership of their studies. Dolly maintained the following:

People are different. You need to find that the method that works for you does not work for me. But you gonna take the responsibility of finding that method. I feel we are not taking responsibility as students. As students, we feel like well, we've been to class, that's it. You go to class but don't dwell on the information

you get from it. We forget that lecturers won't put you at Seme hall [that is where examinations are written]. After class I sit and look at what happened [what was taught] in class, what we were doing during the day.

While other students worked well in groups, Glory preferred a different strategy for learning. She stated:

I basically record myself when studying. If there are too many notes I need to memorise I record myself. When there are new concepts I watch videos from YouTube. I am good at visualising things and I don't forget then. It records and stays in my mind. I think students sometimes do not understand that they need to be proactive, and have the cooperation with the lecturers, they need to study. ... It is because I feel like it's a triangle [demonstrating with her hands]: it is a teacher, you as a student and your studies. If one part is lacking, one may not perform well.



Photograph 5.2: Glory's strategy for studying

Thulani also preferred to work with his friend most of the time. He stated:

I study well with my friend because he understands me well. We have been friends since our first year, as much as there are other group members. He understands my challenges, not that I am dependent on him but we work well together to check each other's work.



Photograph 5.3: Thulani and his friend studying as a pair

5.2.4 Time management

Time management was highlighted as a contributing factor to academic success. The participants also felt that different learning strategies worked for them. Thulani explained his strategy as follows:

I try to start from 10 pm, but I'm always tired and feel my mind needs some rest. I am an evening student [evening classes commence at 17h00 to 20h30]. I finish at 20:30 and I need to rest. I have set my goal that I need to do [study] at least two or three subjects per night. It has been working well for me so far because I understand myself.

Pretty declared:

I try to listen in class and associate myself with people who know or understand better. I normal study with my friends and we have a common goal to finish our qualification in record time. I think that is going to be achieved. When it's time for assessment, I focus on trying to organise and plan my time accordingly.

Babhekile also considered a set time for studying as crucially important:

I am an evening student so I try to plan my time well. I set time for myself. I have my own routine so that my body is used to it. If you want your body to get into a routine you cannot sleep until 09h00 and 0h10 the next day. However, I do sleep a little bit early if I have a test so that I don't get a blackout in the test venue. As much as I need to be successful, I also need to rest.

To ensure academic success, the students used many strategies, even to the extent of working throughout the night and in groups. Sizwe declared:

In IT mostly we do projects, so it forces us to work in groups and meet with different external people and students. Sometimes we work throughout the night, because failing is not an option for me. Normally, I first study on my own and then with friends or a group. You need that time alone. You know, when it's test week, sometimes it gets hectic if you are writing about three modules. It means you must try and allocate your time appropriately so that no module suffers... If I happen to fail a test I make sure it doesn't happen next time. I must admit my time management is not good though. Cross-night [studying through the night] is a result of not studying in advance for assessment.

5.3 Theme Two: Protective Factors as a Form of Support

Three subthemes emerged under the theme 'protective factors as a form of support' namely support, academic environment, and understanding one's own rights. These themes emerged in response to the second research question: *How do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?*

5.3.1 Support

It was possible to categorise the different kinds of support that the participants mentioned as follows: family support, becoming the main supporters of the family, support from friends and others, and self-motivation as a form of support.

5.3.1.1 Family support

The participants were no longer ‘tied to the apron strings’ of their families, but the continued support they received from various members sustained them and supported them to achieve success in their studies. Thulani declared:

My mom has always been there for me. She prepares for me and accompanied me when I came here. It is difficult for me to use public transport on my own, so she helps me with my stuff like my big bags. You know, when we come to the university at the beginning of each semester, we bring big bags with everything. ... I do appreciate everything; even the encouragement she gives me makes it easier for me to fully concentrate on my studies.

Sizwe maintained that his family’s encouragement and motivation encouraged him to perform better:

...as much as my family inspired me because they are all career people and always there for me, but at this stage as person you have your own dreams. When you look at your environment, you see that those who chose to go to school are successful. And you see that if you don’t pursue your studies there is nothing you could do. My family is very supportive [and] you can see they are proud of me. My mom supports me, she tries her best to push me positively.

However, while some students were fortunate in receiving positive encouragement from their families, others struggled to get the support they needed. Peter revealed the following:

There is no one. [This implied no one who supported him as he was an orphan]. I have my aunt, but we don’t get along well. When I need to come back [to the university], she will only give me taxi fare, otherwise I’m on my own...I never give up! I never let anything stop me from achieving my goals. This diploma is going to be everything since I’ve no one in my life. My leg hurts so badly, the doctors want to operate on it, but that cannot be done now since I’m preparing for exams now. I’ll see to that after the exams.

Futhi felt negative about her father's support, but she felt that her mother tried to support her positively. She stated:

It is my mom, because my dad is kinda useless. I am sorry to say that, but he doesn't care. When I was preparing to come back to the university he asked me where I thought I was going.

Glory's family encouraged her to be independent:

My dad told me that I was old enough to get to the university on my own, he did not accompany me. That hurt me because I had to come with all my stuff on the first day, but I had no choice. It is only now that I appreciate that independence.

5.3.1.2 Becoming the main supporters of the family

The students' academic success became a family investment, hence various family members hoped to benefit from their success. Futhi stated:

I am excited! My mom is very happy, she has always encouraged me that I must finish so that I can assist others at home. She would say she is counting on me, finally she will be like other people. I constantly pray that I finish my studies as well and get a job and make a difference at home. No one is actually working; my sisters have temporary jobs. I want to bring positive change at home and be the first one to finish university and be successful.

Dolly shared the above sentiment:

I feel there is pressure because I know that there are people back home who expect me to finish definitely this year. They are already counting on me that I will be supporting them in one way or another. So it means I am expected to get a job immediately when I finish my diploma.

Jean asserted:

She speaks of my completion of studies as her own achievement. That is very true; my achievement is hers, she has been very supportive. Shame, every step of the way. I want to build a beautiful house for her just to improve our lifestyle and make my family happy.

Most students came from families where they were the sole breadwinners. Mary explained:

My dad is the only person working at home and we are a big family. When I finish my studies I will assist him. My sisters always speak of the fashions they like but my dad cannot afford to provide as he has to buy food and other important things.

5.3.1.3 Support from friends and others

Whilst parental support was seen as a natural obligation, some parents were unable to fulfil this role, therefore friends and extended families played an important role in some students' success. Nondumiso gave details of her ordeal:

From 2013 I wanted to study but my family delayed me because for everything I wanted I relied on others. They didn't want to assist me. I'm not sure why; maybe they were scared for me or they didn't take me seriously when I told them that I wanted to study. In 2013 I heard that MUT accommodated students with disabilities. I asked them to enquire more about going there and to find out but no one assisted me. Instead, they told me that the university was on a hill and I wouldn't cope there. They advised me to upgrade but all the colleges are far and do not have accommodation for people with disabilities. As I mentioned, there is no transport that can accommodate me easily. So that was not an option. The other problem was that my [Matric] certificate had still not been collected from the school. No one wanted to fetch it for me. I was begging them and I didn't know how I had passed. It was difficult for me to come to Durban from Empangeni on my own.

Since primary school I was attending the Open Air School in Durban. Funny enough, my brother was studying here at MUT doing Mechanical Engineering but he didn't want to assist me. I offered to pay him R300 in order for him to fetch my certificate. It's something that he could have done easily but he didn't want to. If I hadn't paid him, I would still be at home. After that I had to get someone to get the CAO form, which my brother could have done for me. I had a friend at UKZN, she used to encourage me to study, and I told her about my challenges. I asked her to apply for me online but I needed to send her all the documents which was a problem again. I needed someone to courier my documents to her, which was costly. I had to pay for everything myself: the CAO registration and for the posting of my documents. My friend did everything for me, we were communicating over the phone, until I got this Office Technology offer.

When the students were first generation students, it was likely that they had to seek assistance and encouragement from people other than close family members. Themba had such an experience. He described it as follows:

It's my surroundings. I am talking about my friends because we don't talk about this with my parents. As much as I know that they wish me the best, it will just be said in passing. We don't talk about academic work since they are not educated. The people that inspired me are my friends, as there is silent competition amongst us. Other than that my high school teachers used to motivate us a lot.

Encouragement and positive thinking by members of society contributed to the students' success. Thulani stated:

There are many people who have been helpful and supportive on my journey of education. People from the church, my high school teachers and relatives have supported and encouraged me in different ways, and I appreciate that.

Friends played an important role in the university life of the students with disabilities, especially where parents were not available to assist them. Mary stated that her friends had been supportive:

When I could not attend classes I relied on my friends. Fortunately they would bring notes or try to teach me or explain to me what had been said in class. And if we had a group assignment they would come to my room to do it [with me].

5.3.2 Self-motivation

Besides having support from their families and friends, the participants also felt that being self-motivated was important in achieving academic success. Jean explained:

At times it helps to watch motivational speakers. I normally watch YouTube videos and search for successful people with disabilities. I always want to understand how they achieve whatever they have achieved. My room is full of notes that I've posted on my wall like, "You are wonderful", "You are beyond", "Never limit yourself". These really help to motivate me.

Peter sourced motivation from his negative situation. He declared:

I never give up. I never let anything stop me from achieving my goals. This diploma is going to be everything since I've no one in my life. My leg hurts so badly, the doctors want to operate on it, but that cannot be done now since I'm preparing for exams now. I'll see to that after the exams.

Nondumiso realised that the university environment was different from the high school environment, hence being self-motivated was important for her. She stated:

The teachers used to shout at us when our homework was not done. The environment here is relaxed, you need to be self-motivated and disciplined otherwise you just fail. I did not know that lecturers don't ask if students are absent. I understand there are too many students in class for that. So if you decide not to do your work no one really cares. Understanding your own situation and what you want to achieve is important.

5.4 Theme Three: The Academic Environment

The results revealed that the academic environment had some negative impacts on the academic success of the participants. The following subthemes emerged: experiences of rejection, challenges in terms of library services, challenges in attending classes, life in the residences, the funding system of the universities, and understanding one's rights.

5.4.1 Rejection and experiences of humiliation

5.4.1.1 Admission constraints

In some instances admission to the academic programme was fraught with challenges. Mary described her ordeal as follows:

I had serious problems with my registration when I tried to register for Hospitality Management. On the day of the orientation I encountered a problem when I was supposed to go and check the venue. I realised that I couldn't go upstairs, then the HOD came to me and explained that I was not going to be part of that course because everything was upstairs and there was no alternative route to the venue. Even the working space was limited. It wouldn't be allowed to use my wheelchair. The HOD explained that to my mom and she told me. Yoo! I cried! they told us

that they would make arrangements that I could get my registration fee back. I saw my world collapsing in front of me. The registration helpers saw me crying and asked me why I was crying. My mom explained because I could not talk at that time. They promised to help us but insisted that I should get something to study. I didn't care what I was going to study anymore, I just wanted to study. They came with a list of courses that I should choose from. I chose Office Technology Management. I was desperate and frustrated.

In some instances, the support staff members were proactive in explaining the requirements upfront. In Dolly's case, important processes were explained before registration. She explained:

I have always had a love for laboratories, although I was told even by my high school teachers that I might have problems with that due to my poor sight. I applied here through COA and I got a provisional offer. I was then invited for a series of tests. I was really nervous. The marks were OK but I got so scared when I was about to take the practical test. The HOD called me and explained the requirements. It got me so scared. I could not believe it when they told me that I had qualified to do the test. He told me that I was a first student with this condition to be admitted to their department.

The students were not likely to receive support if their disability was not disclosed. Peter described his experience as follows:

One day in class in my second year, we were doing a presentation and my group was supposed to do its presentation. I was the group leader, my name was then called. I took time to stand up after I had been called for the second time. I walked to the front of the class. Unfortunately, due to my disability, I walked slowly and my speech is affected. I speak slowly and softly because I have cerebral palsy, that is the type of disability [I have]. The lecturer shouted at me that I was wasting her time and I should sit down if I did not want to do the presentation. I stormed out and cried. I went to report her. I realised that I was in a way at fault, all my lecturers were not aware of my disability since my disability is invisible. After that incident I got positive support.

Nondumiso explained how she was discouraged to register for the programme:

When I first came here, many people told me that I wouldn't make it in Office Technology because of my physical condition. This course requires a person who

can type very fast. Due to my disability, my muscles are stiff and my fingers too. So I cannot type at a high speed. I cannot do fast typing. I was told that I was in a wrong course, and I wouldn't make it. It really makes me feel good that I've proven them wrong, that even though I may have challenges I can still succeed and do well. You know, there are people who have no condition like mine but who can't make it.

I had a bad experience with the teaching staff. As I mentioned, Office Technology requires a person who can type fast. I was told that I was not going to make it, because if I knew I had a problem I should have not chosen Office Technology. This person was not prepared to assist me - she was threatening me and I started hating the subject. I was so discouraged, yet quitting was not an option because I was tired to be at home as well. I hadn't been studying for two years and could not lose this opportunity because of people who undermined others. I was determined and focused instead. I used that as a motivating mechanism. I believe I am a strong person because I've been through a lot and I don't easily quit. I don't just give up, I thank God for the strength. I decided to report the problem to Student Counselling that I cannot type fast. Mrs X (student counselling official) tried to talk to my HOD to come up with solutions, but she was not prepared to listen. Instead, she told her [that] Office Technology was not for desperate people. Mrs X spoke to another HOD, wanting me to change course. I refused because I was going to be moving to something I didn't like either. I decided to stay in this course and tried to focus. My brother and my friends were very supportive during that time. I thought I would have new challenges with that course and it was late in the year [to change to a new programme]. We had to write the first test already. I did not want to do my Diploma in four years.

People like to judge others based on their physicality and situations, forgetting that a person may do better than you think. In computers I got 61%. I surprised everybody including myself. That gave me confidence that I will definitely finish my studies on time.

5.4.1.2 Positive academic staff support

The participants also related positive experiences of support by academic staff. Futhi's lecturers showed her kind support. She stated:

My HOD knows every student by name and surname, disability or no disability. When he comes in [into the lecture room] he will first look whether the venue is accurate [conducive] and comfortable [for learning]. He would ask, “Are you okay?” If I’m not, he will send the class representative to go and look for another, better venue.

Jean also had an experience of positive academic support. She described it as follows:

My lecturers are quite supportive. Because I do drama, we do live performances like theatre. You know, in drama you need to be on stage, you feel like bare. You need to open up because when you are there people are watching you and analysing you and the moves you make.

I think it’s all about communicating your challenges. In class I am the only person with a disability and I hear that I was the first to be admitted in my programme. I spoke to the lecturer that does [teaches] movement practical module. I explained to her that there were moves that I might not be able to do due to my disability. She said that it would not be a problem, she would only assess the effort, whether I tried or not to do the exercise. It’s about trying, not being perfect. I opened up to my HOD and lecturer and they all accepted me.

Most participants showed that they were appreciative of the support they received as it made their learning much easier and manageable. Babhekile stated:

My lecturers are very, very supportive. For instance, Mr X gives me notes in a bigger font and makes sure that I’m comfortable. As my kind of disability affects my vision, he will print my notes in bigger font. That makes my life much easier. As much as I have to pass and achieve academically, I have a hindrance, an added responsibility and challenge of disability that I have to deal with.

Babhekile felt that she owed her success to a particular lecturer and was grateful for the warmth and support she received. Glory also acknowledged her lecturer for the support she received:

My success actually comes from my lecturer Mrs X, who is now my level 3 coordinator. She noticed that, apart from having a sight problem as I am used to sit in front of the classroom, I have a visual disability and learning disability called Attention Deficit Hypertension Disorder [ADHD]. It affects my performance level because I easily get bored and lose attention.

I used to walk out of class or sleep in class. I preferred to sleep otherwise I make noises and interrupted others. She approached me and asked about my behaviour. Mrs X cares about students in general and she accommodates me well with both my challenges.

While some students liked or welcomed the special accommodation given by lecturers, other students felt uncomfortable with such support, and they preferred to be treated like any other student. Thulani stated:

You know, in class I just want to be treated like any other student. I don't like special attention and I don't seek it. If I need help I ask my peers. Although my lecturers are willing to help me, because they ask me to come and sit in the front trying to accommodate me, I don't want my peers to think that I pass because lecturers made it easier for me or were just giving me marks.

5.4.1.3 Library services

The students seemed to be happy with the library services available to them, except that there were challenges due to early closure and high shelves. Thulani expressed his concern as follows:

The challenge with the library is that it closes early at 21h00 and evening classes finish at 20h30. So it means you may not go to the library after evening classes. Fortunately my evening classes allow me time to go to the library early, around 09h00 in the morning.

Due to different kinds of disabilities, some had a height problem which impacted their independence when they visited the library. Futhi brought her photo in order to emphasise the challenge of reaching books on high shelves when she visited the library;

I had a hard time because there are places that I can't reach or access and it's not nice to keep on asking for assistance. You become a nuisance and people start to avoid you. So I don't go to the library often. I seriously do not understand why libraries have such high shelves if they are serious about students with disabilities.



Photograph 5.4: Inaccessibility of books in libraries

Some participants had observed the abuse of facilities. Pretty shared her experience as follows:

The library staff is helpful. But the challenge is sometimes we have to wait for computers, although they have added new computers. The problem is some students use computers to download videos and our computer laboratory is thus not operational; it's just a hall with no computers.

Lack of resources for students with disabilities was further highlighted by Pretty who referred to the condition of the computer laboratory at the university:

That computer laboratory for students with disabilities is not effective. It's just a hall with chairs and no computers. We use our own laptops. It's just a study hall, nothing more. The other challenge is there is no security; even at night security [staff] is not visible. I don't feel comfortable to be there till late.



Photograph 5.5: Dysfunctional computer laboratory: students use their personal laptops

5.4.1.4 Attending classes comes with challenges

The students felt that it was unfair when they sometimes were unable to attend classes not because of ill-health, but due to infrastructural limitations. Nondumiso narrated an experience that hampered her from attending classes:

It was a huge challenge because no one had a disability. I was the only person who was disabled. I was scared as to how I will I mix with them. I was coming from the environment where all my class mates had a disability. So instead of being excited on the first day I was feeling terrible of the things to come. Firstly, how will I get to class? I didn't know where to go. I asked other students on wheelchairs and they told me that I needed to wait by the passage and ask people to push me. It was hard to approach people I didn't know, it was better if someone greeted me first, then I will extend the conversation to ask him to push me. On the day of orientation I was lucky as one guy asked me whether I needed help. I was very happy because I didn't even know that Bozolli where orientation was. He took me there and back to the residence. We exchanged numbers. However, I was disappointed to learn that his favour was not pure – he wanted something. When he brought me back to the residence he stayed until late and I didn't know how to chase him. I never asked him any favour because I could see he wanted to take advantage of my situation.

It was not easy as I mentioned because I would be waiting in the passage and was late for my classes. One day the other guy pushed to class and had to leave to sort out his administration issues. As we were waiting there, none came to talk to me. I was by myself until another guy asked why I was standing alone. Everybody was just talking. I felt bad. I am very shy and as a result it's hard to make friends.

Moreover, Mary could not attend classes for almost two months due to malfunctioning lifts. However, she did not allow the situation to distract her from pursuing academic success:

My first and second year venues used to give me a challenge. I accessed them through the lifts. Sometimes the lifts would not work, and that meant no classes for me. We would have to come back and wait for the following lesson. In 2015 the lifts were not working for almost two months from August to the beginning of October. I could not attend classes. ...I reported it to many people: to my HOD, lecturers and SRC, they all knew but nothing was done. I even went to the Dean and tried to go to the Vice Chancellor, but couldn't see him. Nothing was done until I went back to the Dean. The other lifts behind the building were then fixed and it's only then that I could attend. I was very frustrated, to think that no one cared.

You know, during that time it's normally examination preparation. The response I got was that the lifts were old and needed to be replaced, so they were working on it. I was very frustrated, it was just horrible to know that no one cared. I wanted to quit but I thought of my mom's sacrifice. Fortunately, I wasn't failing because I was passing all the tests. At some point I would not attend on the days when my lessons started at ML Sultan. I was demotivated, you know, when all your classmates are in class and you are the only person in the residence. I would just sleep in my room but that wasn't good for me either. So I used to motivate myself that I would pass no matter what.



Photograph 5.6: Dysfunctional lift

The structural design of the lecture rooms had a negative impact on some of the participants. One complaint was that the seating arrangements were not user-friendly. Sizwe explained:

My challenge is when we attend other modules, chairs are a challenge. I have to flip the chair before I can sit down. With my condition it becomes difficult to sit in the middle; then I always sit at the end of the row to accommodate my crutches as well. Those classes are very restrictive.

Some students preferred to attend evening classes as there were fewer students in the evenings. This also avoided the distress of attending classes during the day. Babhekile expressed her concerns with the bad state of the infrastructure at the university:

In the workshop we had, I raised my concerns in terms of my disability and [the poor] infrastructure. As I have mentioned, I attend evening classes, and walking to classes at night is a bit of a challenge. It is worse where there are no lights. The stairs here are very dangerous. We need to have lights on, and secondly there must be landmarks. I mean [ground] lights to see where a stair starts and finishes. Oh my goodness, it's so difficult to walk on them. The kind of lights used in our classes is not user-friendly since my eyes are very poor.

To avoid walking around, which normally happened during the day, students attended evening classes. Thulani justified attending evening classes as follows:

Classes are too far and scattered all over. It becomes very tiring to attend. I decided to attend the evening classes because we attend only two classes a day. I get tired to walk up and down the stairs as there are no lifts here. My muscles get tight, especially when it is hot.

Due to infrastructural defects, some students did not attend classes when it was raining. Mary explained:

If the rain is heavy I don't attend because I will be soaking wet anyway. My wheelchair gets into water and the battery stops working. You know, sometimes it rains for whole week and I do not go out because it is expensive to change the battery. There is just no way that I can attend classes at ML Sultan on rainy days. We do not have shelters from the residence that links classes or venues. We suffer a lot. There is no transport from the residence to classes, so you can imagine that assessments do not wait for fine weather. I have missed several assessments. Some lecturers understand and some don't. Explaining yourself all the time is not cool.



Photograph 5.7: No classes on rainy days

These experiences due to bad weather and other difficulties were not limited to classes, as they extended to examination venues. Futhi described her experiences when writing examinations:

As you know, we write exams at Seme hall. The chairs there are not comfortable. They are bowl-shaped and it's difficult for me to sit for three hours in those chairs. They are also slippery. When I sit I cannot balance well. I really struggle and there are no other chairs provided. You know, by the time I have finished writing, my legs will be sore and swollen because of hanging. It affects me physically. It affects my back because I need to balance and I cannot lean against the back of the chair because I can't reach it.

Sizwe had a bad experience when he had to write a four-hour examination while he was soaking wet:

One day during examination time, it was heavily raining and I had no choice but to walk using my crutches to the examination room at another campus. I was very wet by the time I got to the examination room. The invigilators did not know what to do to assist me. I also wanted to write that four-hour paper examination. Ya, it was not easy. Fortunately I passed that module.

The participants often did not feel safe going to campus. Glory explained this with reference to the Image below:

The only problem with City campus is crime. The crime rate is too high in the city centre. The minute you step out of the campus you expose yourself to danger. Many students have experienced this. Their laptops, cell phones and other belongings have been stolen from them. This happens to all students regardless of disability or not. We try to walk in groups just to protect ourselves, or rather stay on campus until transport comes. We are only safe within the campus otherwise "amaphara" will be on you.



Photograph 5.8: The risk of attending classes

5.4.2 Life in a residence

5.4.2.1 Meals and sustenance

Student life does not end in the lecture room. It is undeniable that residence life is very important if academic success is to be achieved. However, living accommodation is not always comfortable and accommodating. For example, some students experienced challenges when cooking their food, but this differed from person to person depending on their disabilities. Sizwe commented as follows:

It is difficult for me to use the kitchen, as I am using crutches. I can't carry pots. That means I must buy fast food. I decided to bring my stove, but that is not allowed. But under the circumstances I have no choice. It is expensive to buy food since I don't have funding. At the same time cooking takes up my time for studying because I'm not as fast as others. One has to live though with the situation because, seemingly, everything becomes difficult; but I don't put my mind into it.

Nondumiso had to cook in her room which is prohibited by the university. She stated:

When I first came here during the first few months of my first year, I used to eat bread until I got sick with constipation. I've since learnt to cook with the help of my friend. That excites me to eat something cooked by myself. But I had to do

something that is not allowed, and that is to bring a stove because the kitchen is in another level and I can't carry pots. The microwave is in the laboratory and it is far and there are no shelters if it's raining, let alone at night. My friend has been so good and she understands disabilities better because she helps us.

Nondumiso brought the photograph below that shows how they arranged the room in the residence to accommodate their cooking activities. She stated:

For me this Image has a lot of meaning. I am happy that I have learnt to cook, although my food sometimes... But I am fully aware how dangerous this is to me and others, because should anything happen it will be difficult to move out quickly. I wish the university had big enough rooms, especially for paraplegics.



Photograph 5.9: Struggling to cook in a room in a residence

The students faced various other tribulations in their respective residences. Jean had a problem with transport, and she stated the following:

In my first year my residence was South Beach. I didn't know at first that people/students with disabilities stayed on campus. I didn't complain because I did not want to use my disability as a key to address the issues I encountered. A challenge in South Beach residence is you need to take buses to varsity, and they get full. I found that at times I didn't have money, so I would wait for the bus because I didn't have taxi fare. But that did not bother me because I like a challenge which makes me think and be out there.

5.4.2.2 Safety and security in the residences

Some students were concerned about the safety and security in the residences, and this sentiment was shared more especially by those who stayed off campus. Futhi stayed in a place informally known as 'emhlabeni'. She moved there after a distasteful experience in her original residence two years before.

It is really hard to stay 'emhlabeni' [off-campus, self-rented accommodation]. I walk 10 minutes from there to the campus and as I mentioned I attend evening classes. It is very scary to walk over the bridge there, you cannot carry a phone or a laptop. But I prefer that to my horrible experience in the residence in 2012. Crime there is very high.

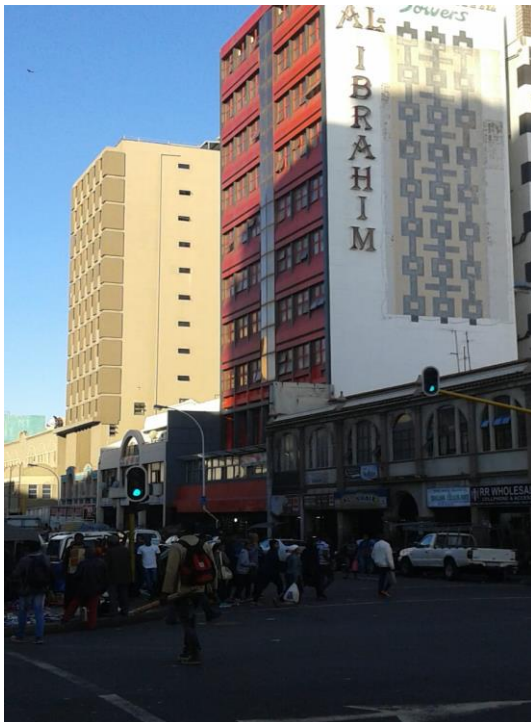
Due to limited accommodation in university residences, universities have been compelled to house students in privately owned accommodations in town. In many cases, the safety of students is compromised in these locations. Peter had a horrific experience as he was stabbed in front of his residence in town. He narrated this experience as follows:

It has been difficult throughout from having no residence, squatting in a residence in town in an unsafe environment. There are no lifts in my residence; as much as walking up and down the stairs is good exercise but I do not need that with my condition, because sometimes my leg is very sore. The environment is very unsafe. I got stabbed two months ago. I had two holes: one got four stitches and the other one got six stitches. The other one was deeper and the doctor said it missed the spinal cord by two centimetres. This environment is bad, more especially on weekends. There are a taxi rank and a tavern. I was not the first person to be attacked. Sometime in April one student was also attacked and his laptop and phone were stolen from him at the gate of the residence. We are not safe at all. I discovered the unfortunate part that we do not have surveillance cameras on the building. After the incident I went to the housing department to

ask for the footage and they could not provide me with it because they did not have it. The security guards stay inside the gate not even in front of it. We are just not safe.

The photograph below was submitted to depict the location of a residence where some of the participants stayed. Peter expressed his concerns regarding the issue of safety:

The residence is in the CBD, the busiest place in town, where lots of business is taking place, and you need to expect anything there. The next door neighbour of our residence is a tavern business which is open 24/7, yet the students need to use any available time to concentrate on their studies. At the same time transportation to the university campus is limited. Even the library hours are limited it is not 24/7. This puts our lives in danger almost every day. We are encouraged not to walk alone. Where on earth would you find someone to accompany you all the time? Student's robbery has become a norm, and this is worse for students with disabilities as they easily become targets, as I was stabbed.



Photograph 5.10: Photograph depicting the city centre where crime is rife and safety uncertain

5.5 Theme Four: The Funding System

5.5.1 Financial challenges for students with disabilities

The majority of university students in South Africa come from households with incomes that do not allow them to afford university fees or to cover the expenses of a university education. This qualifies them to be beneficiaries of the National Student Financial Assistance Scheme (NSFAS). The students revealed that application for funds and the allocation of funds were fraught with frustration which impacted the academic performance of many students.

Bheki was worried by the amount he owed and the fact that he would not receive his certificate at graduation:

It feels good but I am worried when I think of graduation. I feel bad because I won't be receiving my certificate since I owe the university a lot which I do not even know how will I pay since my sole funder NSFSA is not responding. That is stressing me a lot and it's difficult to push...

Students with disabilities are supposed to get full funding from the NSFAS, but many were in agony due to non-responsiveness. Mary also experienced difficulties which she detailed as follows:

NSFAS process is not easy, as there are too many documents required when one applies. If you are registering for the first time you need to be early because it is a daunting and frustrating process. NSFAS is not doing well, they do not respond on time. For instance, this year I only got my meals funding in May, some other students in June. This is very frustrating and makes our lives really difficult. Can you imagine, what they think we cope from the beginning of the year till this time? The allocation for books is also rather too limited and we cannot get all the books and that gives us a challenge in terms of our academic performance. In 2015 and 2016 I tried to apply for devices funding but till today I never got it. I did not apply for it this year. It is a total waste of time. There is just no point in applying. The university seems to be unhelpful in this regard as they just tell you that they submitted everything to Cape Town. When you call NSFAS head office, they always say that one or two forms are incompletely signed or missing. Then you will try to send it again, maybe three times, but they always find an excuse. There is a blaming game between DUT and NSFAS officials/administrators and

as a student you are in the middle. The SRC is not being helpful in this regard. The SRC organises strikes but they end up causing more disruptions and delays in our academic year. They always promise but they haven't achieved anything in this regard. This is very frustrating. This year in September I got R90 000 in my account from NSFAS, which I cannot access. They say they are still investigating because of the corrupt case of the student who was mistakenly awarded 2 million rand.

In some instances the students received their funding late in the year only after they had suffered academically and financially. Sizwe stated:

We are just treated the same as other students or maybe worse, because some students with no disabilities got their funding as early as February yet most of us got it in May or June. One student in a wheelchair got hers first because she was mistakenly registered as a normal student. NSFAS is a challenge, not only for students with disabilities, but generally all students are affected. I had no money for food and stationary; when it eventually came they gave as vouchers. Food vouchers are very limiting, as they allow you to buy food from Shoprite/Checkers. If it was cash we could even buy second hand books. NSFAS is a huge challenge. I heard that some students have dropped out because they don't have any other form of support as they rely on NSFAS entirely. If my family were not supportive maybe I would have dropped out as well.

Glory shared similar sentiments:

It has been a problem for me. For the past two years I have not been receiving my funding. First year they did not pay for my tuition and accommodation, so I am owing that. They refused to pay it last year. There was no clear explanation. Last year I did not get the book voucher and food voucher. I had to ask my dad. He had to hustle for money. It is only this year that everything has been paid. Also it is because I wrote an email to them enquiring about it and explaining that I was starving here. In two weeks' time the money came into my account. They paid for tuition and residence yet I met all the requirements. NSFAS misplaced my records, they lost them and this year they found my records, and NSFAS is such a mess. Records are submitted online and how did they lose my documents? This is very frustrating because you spend lesson time to go and enquire with finance and this is bad for our academic performance. It brings unnecessary stress.

Owing the university money caused a lot of stress and frustration for the students. Peter stated:

So my problem with my fees is I owe the university close to hundred thousand now. I do not know how I will pay that kind of money, the thought of it just frustrates me.

5.5.2 Positive experiences of NSFAS

Not all the students had bad experiences with NSFAS, as some found the system helpful.

Nondumiso had a positive experience which she related as follows:

It helps us a lot. They give us wheelchairs, meals, tuition fees, stationary and accommodation. Students with disability get a higher allocation than the normal students. They are really supportive. The treatment we get from the staff is great. We don't stand in queues. We have a person that deals with this specially. They take care of us.

The provision of funding gave relief to both the students and their parents. Themba commented:

We are well covered because the terms and conditions of receiving NSFAS is you must pass 60% of your modules. So far I am passing all my modules. Students with disabilities receive their funding two weeks before the general students get it. My NSFAS covered everything and it gave my parents some relief. I can look after myself now.

It is always a good thing when students have their own funding. For instance, Thulani did not have to rely on the NSFAS. He explained:

I have my bursary which has been so good and I do not have the stress of finances, I'm fully covered. It even gives me the stipend and has been providing for me from my first year. Fortunately I've been meeting their requirements because they want a person who progresses well. So I have never failed a module, I do not have NSFAS stress of completing their forms.

5.5.3 Lack of information on NSFAS

Students with disabilities are entrusted with many responsibilities in terms of managing their disabilities. For instance, it becomes their responsibility to disclose their disability status and

to look for information even in unfamiliar environments. However, due to a lack of information on where and how to obtain funds, some students with disabilities end up being deprived of the right to funding. Futhi explained how financial challenges affected her:

I was registered as a normal student with no disability. I didn't know the process. I was treated as a normal student. As much as I was aware of my disability, I didn't know what to do about it. It was only in my second year that I registered as a student with a disability. I went to student counselling, explained that I had not applied for NSFAS, and I just told her my whole story. I showed her my certificate [proof of disability] from the doctor. That certificate explained the details of my disability.

Themba also got to know what to do to access funds through a friend:

...due to lack of information, my whole first year I didn't benefit. I was registered as a general student. I only disclosed it after I had spoken to Mrs X in student counselling who advised me what to do. One ex-student told me of the benefits of students with disabilities when he heard that I was renting a room in the township and told me to enquire from Mrs X. From my second year I have then been registered as a student with a disability. During registration they normally have students who spot students with disabilities as they come. I think there was an oversight, I was not acknowledged/spotted as a person with a disability.

Bheki did not have information until a friend assisted her:

I did not know much about it. I only heard of NSFAS bursaries from a friend but I do not remember any official telling me about it. When you are new in a new environment sometimes you get overwhelmed with information and miss the important one. I went to financial aid to enquire about it and applied.

5.5.4 The Disability Unit

5.5.4.1 Positive support

Each university is obliged to have a disability unit (FOTIM, 2011), but some universities are still working towards establishing such centres whilst some units are not efficient. In such cases students with disabilities really suffer.

Babhekile was very clear about what they needed in terms of disability services:

We have so many issues that require a disability unit directly. It is difficult to deal with those issues with just other people, because they think they are doing us a favour or feeling sorry for us. This requires a permanent person employed to deal with the students' needs. I know disabilities since I went to special school from primary to high school. The Open Air school in Glenwood is a very good school. I know about different disabilities and how to cater for them but we need a department that will focus on that, not just a committee. If it existed we would be assisting students and not doing things as we do currently. This puts a lot of pressure on us. Student counselling is assisting a bit because we do not have a DU. But they deal with all students, disability or no disability. You need to book an appointment. I am sure if we can have DU our lives will be much easier in terms of attending to all our needs.

The students were quite aware of their rights and they interacted with other students from other universities. Mary explained:

The absence of a disability unit affects us because there are things/ services that we do not get because we do not have a disability unit. For instance, at other universities they tell us that if your bed is uncomfortable due to your condition they change it or give you double mattress and that is what I need. They have their own well-spaced out fully furnished kitchen. Teaching and learning aids are not available; for instance some students need bigger screens. In the absence of the DU the student counselling unit assists us with a lot of things like time concession. The problem with student counselling is it serves all students, and we are not the priority. We have to make an appointment.

The students were aware of their rights. For instance, Dolly stated:

We do not have a disability unit; instead we have a structure for students with disabilities that tries to attend to our needs, and a counselling unit. But it will be very good to have a disability unit because...they are students and need to concentrate on their studies. They are limited. If we can have a disability unit all our rights will be protected.

5.5.4.2 Inefficient service

The participants seemed to be unhappy with the services provided by the disability unit at one institution. Sizwe felt that the DU was not effective as it was new. He explained his point as follows:

I do not think this office is effective at the moment again because it's still very new. With regards to NSFAS, she emails them but she also does not get any positive response from them. She has no powers to instruct them. Other than that, she sends us emails with [information about] internships that are available. She has organised a workshop on disability awareness. This office is not effective there as there is no assistance that I have ever requested that was successfully handled.

This participants believed that the centre would improve once it was well established and supported and it would then be able to provide the services needed by students. Bheki stated:

The disability unit should be providing us with facilities we need like laboratories that will accommodate different disabilities we have. There was a time when my artificial leg was giving me problems and we had a group assignment. I could not meet my group members, so they had to come to my residence. They were refused access as we are only allowed two visitors. I had to call DU and they made a special arrangement. My group mates were allowed in then. There are no facilities for blind students. Personally, I have not received any assistance and it does not affect me because I can do everything like everybody else. Our DU is relatively new; it was opened last semester [June 2017]. It is trying to attend to such problems but they have budgetary issues.

The participants felt the university was not taking the establishment of a disability centre seriously. Peter argued this point as follows:

To be honest with you, I do not know. You know, we are also not happy with the location of these offices, as they are right underneath the Library, and it's not easily accessible [location of the disability unit is a challenge]. Students on wheelchairs struggle to access it as there are stairs and at the moment construction is underway. The university needs to take disabilities seriously. It needs to make

the entire community of the university aware of disabilities and how to accommodate each type. There needs to be a strategy with time lines for implementation and a very good plan of action.

5.6 Understanding Their Rights

5.6.1 Human rights

The South African Constitution entrenches and protects the human rights of all citizens in the country. People with disabilities are also catered for in legislation as was discussed in Chapter One as well as in the literature review (Chapter Two). However, the participants seemed to be ignorant of disability policies. Sizwe stated:

I have never given myself time to understand that [policies]. I have never seen or heard of a DUT disability policy and I do not think we have [one]. But anyway, whether I understand these policies or not, how will it change my life? I feel like I don't need that protection; as long as I'm educated I can do things, no need for complaining.

Some participants only knew about one section of the policy. Thulani commented:

Mm...I do not know any of those but I know that people with disabilities have some special rights like queuing in public places and students with disabilities use green cards at MUT. We also don't queue up. I have not followed that; I am just concentrating on my studies for now.

Dolly believed the university had not shared this information with them, as she stated the following:

I am only aware of queuing that we are excused from, and I think getting a disability bursary is part of it. Such information is not openly shared with us, you need to find it yourself as a student. At the university level I am not aware of any; maybe we do not have.

However, Glory believed that ignorance about this publicly available information should not be blamed on the institution. She stated:

Being ignorant of such important information is just our own fault. We are responsible for knowing our rights and if we do not, we expose ourselves to the

abuse and violation of our rights. We cannot fight [for] and protect something we do not know. I need to give myself time to understand these legislations so that I can fight for my own rights.

5.6.2 Disability and employment

Even though these students showed no interest in the legislation protecting their right as students with disabilities, they understood and were interested in legislation that relates to employment. Bheki was quite aware of legislation that relates to the employment of people with disabilities. He stated:

I understand the section on the Employment Equity Act that talks about a percentage of people with disabilities that companies need to employ that has increased from 5% to 7%. That tells me that there are job opportunities awaiting for me. Having a disability has become an advantage. Companies are going to head hunt us. That makes me to work even harder knowing that I'll definitely get a job.

The participants were quite aware of job opportunities awaiting them as people with disabilities. Peter indicated the following:

As I have mentioned, I understand the Employment Equity Act, more especially the section on employment of people with disabilities. I am aware that there are internships for people with disabilities. Sometime in September I was called by someone who advised me of internships available in the eThekweni Municipality [and he] advised me to apply.

While they were aware of legislation that favours people with disabilities, Jean believed that it was the responsibility of the person with a disability to look for such information. Jean stated:

I think the government is doing a lot for people with disabilities. Through policies that are in place, it offers quite a lot for people with disabilities. If you have a disability you get a disability grant. I do receive the grant too and when I applied I attached proof of my disability. Right now I'm waiting for internship from Arts and Culture because I'm a bursary holder. There are opportunities but you need to be informed. Information is out there; no one will bring it to you, you need to look for it. Therefore it means a lot of reading and research.

5.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the results laid bare the reality of the lives and experiences that the participating students with disabilities had encountered at universities of technology. What was powerfully evident was that these students had achieved academic success regardless of their disabilities and other forms of adversity. The positive manner in which they endured the many tribulations they faced was encouraging and praiseworthy. Clearly, these students' senses of self-worth was entrenched in a powerful understanding of self-worth and in their resilience. The following chapters (Chapter Six, Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight) will dwell on the main findings based on the interpretation of the data. What is prominent in these chapters is that I shall endeavour to relate my findings to existing knowledge while at the same time acknowledging new knowledge based on the data at my disposal.

CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC SUCCESS

6.1 Introduction

The underlying argument in the first part of the discourse in this chapter exposes the academic success of students with disabilities as a powerful instrument that can break through oppression. Particular attention is given to oppression in the face of being afflicted with a disability, having a low self-esteem, and poverty.

It became clear that the participants in most cases did not perceive themselves as incomplete or different. They were inspired to succeed and preferred to be treated like any other student as they also wanted to improve their lives like anybody else. Throughout my encounters with them, I experienced these young people as highly capable and having a sense of self-worth that resonated with the precepts of human rights and thus with all other non-discriminatory conventions. This attitude is supported by the social model of disability, which insists that the environment needs to be made conducive for people with disabilities to ensure not only their livelihood, but also their treatment as worthy citizens in a democratic society. Further to this argument, the academic success these students had achieved surfaced as instrumental in restructuring their identities. Their academic endeavours and their consequent academic success heralded a breakthrough that allowed them to gain a new identity that rendered their disabilities relatively immaterial.

The first section in this chapter is aligned to the first research question: *Which experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?* The following themes: perceived reality of academic success, spirituality, and self-efficacy emerged in response to the first question.

6.2 Perceived Realities of Academic Success

The research participants' perception of academic success elicited various understandings of academic success, yet it was also common in many respects. For example, their common understanding or definition of academic success was that it required hard work and self-determination. In terms of the theoretical framework, this resonated strongly with the resilience theory.

6.2.1 Understanding and defining academic success

The participants offered their own descriptions of academic success that were unique and not necessarily aligned to scholarly definitions of this phenomenon (Jayanthi et al., 2014; Vanthournout et al., 2012; Zimmerman et al., 1992). This means that through the academic success that they experienced, the participants were able to attach new meanings and realities to academic success. For example, they viewed it as emancipatory, engendering freedom, life changing, life improving, the dawn of a brighter future, allowing them to take control of their own lives, acknowledgement for who they are, and being valued as worthy members of the community. The understandings of academic success provided by the participants were distinctive and resonated with their unique situations and conditions. An implicit connotation associated with these experiences was a sense of shedding the burden of discrimination which they had experienced in the past. This was clearly voiced by Nondumiso, who stated:

It feels like a beginning of new things...It's a life-changing experience and my life will never be the same in future.

This statement is rich with meaning as it elucidates the change students with disabilities may expect when they achieve academic success. Another participant mentioned how, through academic success, she would be able to go to places that at the time she was unable to visit. Academic success for them was the key not only to success, but to a new life where they would be equal and valued.

When students go through tertiary education, they want to change their socio-economic status and their self-image (Sandoval-Hernandez, Andres', & Białowolski, 2016; Scheider & Lee, 1990; CHE, 2013). University is seen as a place for development, transformation,

engagement and partnerships (CHE, 2016), but these students took a step further by arguing that, for them as students with disabilities, university was an opportunity for a life-changing experience. People with disabilities are often described as a vulnerable group that has no access to education. Statistics seem to support this notion as limited numbers of these people have tertiary qualifications and employment (Matonya, 2016; CHE, 2007; DHET, 1997). As few as 10% of people with disabilities receive grants as a source of income (Graham et al., 2014), while many live in poverty stricken communities. However, by achieving academic success, these participants hoped for a breakthrough. It was deemed a key to their success, which was emphasised by Themba:

It is one thing that one may not compromise.

6.2.1.1 Achieving academic success requires hard work and self-determination

In essence, the respondents agreed that academic success was a hard-earned achievement that required full commitment, focus and concerted application. While the process of learning and growing to attain academic success was viewed as long and demanding, the participants did not complain about it. Instead, they exuded a sense of satisfaction and excitement. Even though some participants experienced serious difficulties during the course of their studies, many persevered. Some had even dropped out at one point due to challenges, but they were so determined to recoup that they returned to complete their studies. Bheki's and Futhi's cases exemplified the determination that helped these students to attain success.

Academic success was further viewed not only as the foundation of a new life, but as an endeavour that required dedication, self-determination and hard work. This means that these students needed attributes that would support them in their engagement with their studies. Similar findings on the relationship between academic success and self-determination are reported by Ali et al. (2013), Parker (2016) and Bandura (1993). Futhi's experiences are a case in point, as she had to take the risk of hiking on her own to get back to university. She was so determined to change her life and that of those around her that she took a very risky decision. Such hard work and determination showed her inner strength, maturity and resilience.

The participants' understanding of themselves assisted them in being persistent in their respective endeavours towards academic success. Glory and Themba mentioned the

importance of understanding their motives, character and personalities. This confirmed a significant relationship between academic achievement and personality, as suggested by Nawobi (2014) and Whannel and Whannel (2015). Similarly, Sandoval-Hernandez and Białowolski's (2016) comments celebrate the kind of academic resilience that Glory displayed. The current study found a strong relationship between self-efficacy, personality and resilience, as is illustrated in Figure 6.1. These variables are seen as filtering down and becoming an outcome of academic success which is essential for academic progress, as the participants highlighted.

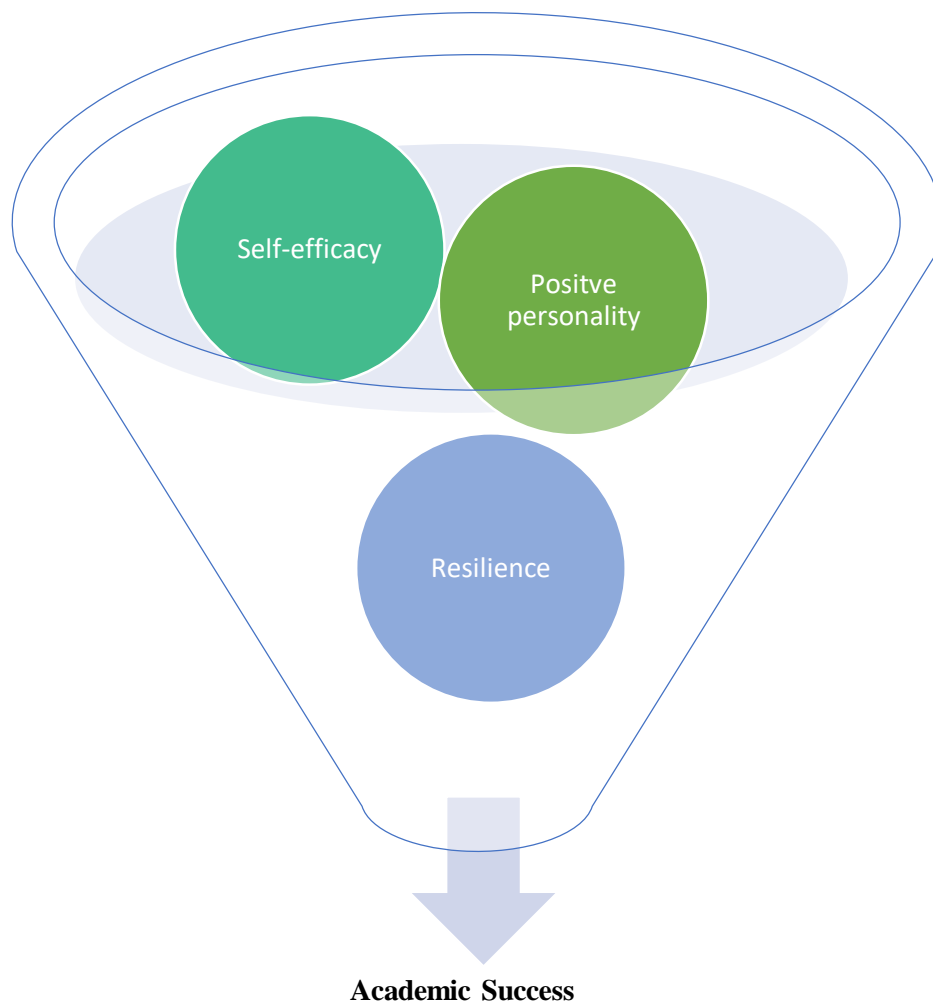


Figure 6.1: Components of academic success

It became clear that academic success requires a certain kind of personality that will enable any student, but particularly a student with a disability, to succeed. Essential personality traits are the ability to work hard, self-determination, focus, self-acceptance and self-control. Having a positive personality is critically important. The medical model (Haeghele & Hodge, 2016) suggests that students with disabilities are sensitive and vulnerable, and thus these

students have to rise above the debilitating effects of their medical conditions to achieve a fulfilling and normal life. When the medical model is used to understand students with disabilities, it depicts them as weak and in need of constant cushioning by their parents and teachers. This study argues unequivocally that this model undermines their capabilities and is degrading and debilitating. The results of my study undeniably showed that if students with disabilities are provided with opportunities, they embrace them effectively, even when the conditions are not conducive for an easy journey. According to Izzo and Lamb (2002, p. 4), students with disabilities “transition from high school to college with limited skills in self-determination and self-advocacy because their high school service providers and parents all too often take the responsibility to negotiate and advocate for [their] academic and social needs”. My study participants’ high school experiences were beyond the scope of this study, but the high regard for the perseverance shown by participants in Khurshid’s (2014) study certainly corroborated the findings of my study. Academic success is generally aligned to ‘a happy ending’ and it also has the potential to change a low self-esteem to self-confidence and pride.

6.2.1.2 Spirituality

The participants seemed to have a strong religious doctrine as praying to God was a constant and powerful factor in their experiences of academic success. Their religious background was revealed as an anchor of hope and encouragement when they encountered challenges. They believed that without God they could not have reached the level of success they had attained. However, the reviewed literature appeared to be relatively silent on this aspect of disability as religious beliefs as a driver of academic success seemed to be somewhat marginalised. Instead, the most predominant principles expounded in the literature are intellectual, behavioural and social aspects in as far as academic success is concerned. Mutanga (2015) is one of very few authors who admits that students with disabilities strongly adhere to their religion as a form of support. Bandura (1996) also argues that social and cultural (thus also religious) capital is a strong driver of academic success.

In my view, students’ religion should never be marginalised as their association with religious groups means that they are part of a social group that practises a religion, and most students adhere to the religion they imbibed in the home. Being part of a religious group and adhering to this religion, or expressions of faith, may be seen as a form of maturity. Spirituality is

about a deep understanding of oneself, one's surroundings, and one's thinking beyond the physical world and being able to transcend to an abstract world. This kind of thinking is likely to eliminate discriminative or self-punishing thoughts about being a person with disabilities, as was demonstrated by the students who participated in this study. Kumpfer (1995) views spirituality as an internal resilience factor that assists people in overcoming and coping with stress. Therefore, by attaching their hopes and trust to a deity whom they experienced as Almighty God might have assisted the students in living freely with no space for manipulative people in their lives.

Moreover, religion (or spirituality) is associated with sound values and a culture of progress, positive energy, hard work and determination and it thus becomes a source of strength. It was enlightening to see how these students attached their faith to their yearning for support, particularly as they were far from home. Thus referring to spirituality as a form of capital (Bandura, 1996) serves as a strong indicator of the support students need and utilise, and this may also benefit other stakeholders. Wang et al. (2015) consider religion as a promotive factor that helps shield individuals from high risk. It becomes a resource of strength as the church as a social institution is implicit as a support structure and the presence of and support among its members further ameliorate vulnerability.

South African universities are tolerant of diverse religions and many religious groups are recognised, provided they follow the right channels as determined by each university. Welcoming religion in the university setting does not only benefit the students but the university itself, as religion is believed to have doctrines that encourage harmony, peace and righteousness. Students thus enjoy the right of association to any religious group at our universities.

6.2.2 Self-efficacy

Believing in oneself emerged as an important factor that the students embraced in order to achieve academic success. According to Majer (2009), students from minority groups as well as first generation students tend to have a strong sense of self-efficacy which allows them to strive for academic success. Self-efficacy is discussed under three subthemes: being content with disability, self-concept and leadership, and self-regulated learning.

6.2.2.1 Being content with disability

The participants seemed to have accepted their respective disabilities as they were not barred from attaining their desired academic goals. The results showed that the students did not consider themselves as people with disabilities. None of them were in denial as they appeared to have embraced their respective conditions. Shakespeare and Watson (2002) argue that people with disabilities do not want to confine themselves to the condition of being disabled, as they deem themselves human beings who were born with a right of choice. Peter confirmed that disability did not define his identity:

I remember about my disability when my leg is painful, this happens after a long day. I do not consider myself a person with a disability. My friends used to think I was faking it.

Disability was not viewed as something that limited their endeavours to attain academic success, yet they were aware of being different from their peers. Jean's journey of accepting herself could be seen as motivational and a lesson that many people may embrace. For instance:

- Other students with disabilities could learn how important it is to embrace oneself before expecting others to accept one. Using opportunities that are available is important. Jean used her experiences of having a disability to write a drama script that she hoped would be performed live or televised one day.
- By first accepting herself, she was able to disclose her disability to her lecturers and her peers who accepted and accommodated her unconditionally. She received appropriate assistance and was enabled to develop her talent and craft.
- Classmates worked with Jean and focused on her capabilities and strengths, not her disability. Jean mentioned how her classmates accommodated her:

If we are given an activity, we work out how they can accommodate me.

Jean's story clearly demonstrates that it is important for people with disabilities to choose a career that can unearth many hidden talents when opportunities are embraced.

The participants came from families who did not wallow in misery because of their disabilities. This does not mean that these young people were abused; rather, their families wanted them to feel and be treated like everybody else. They thus unconsciously used the

social model approach in their understanding of disability. This was confirmed by Pretty who mentioned that she was expected to do all the chores that everybody else in her family did.

A positive upbringing taught the students independence which in turn had a positive impact on their self-image, and this supported them especially when they lived away from home. Bandura (1996) mentions a personality skill for self-efficacy, which is being self-satisfied. This enables one to develop more life and academic skills. When people are content and satisfied with themselves, it becomes easier to deal with outside challenges as contentment has a positive psychological impact. Self-efficacy facilitates a positive self-concept which becomes fertile soil for academic achievement (Whannel & Whannel, 2015). Students with high self-efficacy are thus likely to be successful even beyond their studies, which means that their employment prospects are bright. According to Wasielewski (2016, p. 138), students with disabilities who have a positive self-awareness and who accept their disability “are more likely to be accepted by others and have a greater sense of belonging”. Borgart (2015) confirms that students with a strong self-concept have lower anxiety and psychological distress levels and are more satisfied with themselves than those who are cosseted and wallow in self-pity. The participants confirmed that self-acceptance was important for them, hence they had developed self-esteem and self-confidence.

Similar to Borgart (2015), Graham (2014) argues that people with disabilities who have a positive self-image are unlikely to be dissatisfied with themselves. Thus my participants’ self-awareness assisted them in facing their challenges head-on as they had learnt to disregard their disabilities as a limitation. It was clear that these students did not appreciate people who pitied them as pity might perpetuate being conscious of the disability and they might be victims of helplessness, discrimination, and the medical model approach. The participants wanted to be treated like any other citizen and hence they were capable of standing on their own two feet. This thinking was aligned to constructive models of disability such as the social, human rights and justice models that allow people with disabilities not to feel like half citizens, but like equal individuals.

Positive thinking and self-acceptance are undoubtedly necessary for academic success, and the discourse in Chapter Two clearly revealed that academic success depends on multiple intelligences and resilience (Parker, 2009; Nawabi, 2014).

6.2.2.2 New self-concept and new leadership roles

Academic success appeared to have changed the participants' social status, as the themes of a new self-concept and leadership roles emerged. By achieving academic success, the participants felt that they were being considered as people who added value to their society. People with disabilities are prejudicially referred to as being dependent on others, and this is strongly expounded by the medical model. However, holding a leadership role at a university is not easy given the diverse cultures and numbers of students and staff that a student needs to interact with. Thus only people who have self-confidence and believe in themselves dare take on leadership responsibilities. Yet the participants demonstrated that when people with disabilities have self-efficacy, their social integration has no boundaries (Rigler, 2015; Nawabi, 2014; Riddell & Weedon, 2013). This also changes how others view them.

According to Riddell and Weedon (2013), the identities of students with disabilities may change when they go to university, especially when they come from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or special schools. The university environment has a positive impact on the development of students' identity in general. More specifically, the leadership roles that some of my participants accepted at university and in their respective communities thus gave them new identities. They were no longer identified by their disabilities but by the positive contributions they made. For example, Bheki noticed that by being in a leadership role he was more exposed but people looked up to him as a role model and a source of information. His influence also touched the destiny of others. He stated:

I am doing everything possible to advocate for students with disabilities.

Being a leader member of an executive committee for students created a new language of confidence and the expectation of being academically successful and respected.

The participants argued that when they believed in themselves, others started supporting them and they gained respect and recognition. For instance, Themba rose above his disability and took on the role of a soccer coach. Being a coach and sport organiser rewarded him with the nickname of 'Coach', which he proudly carried as a badge of honour. Many students on campus now referred to him by this name. Themba proudly submitted a photograph of himself and the team he coached, which enhanced his voice and gave credibility to his sense of self-worth and

new-found confidence. As sport is seen as entertainment and a social construct, it helped him to destress and revive his energy, which he needed to better focus on his studies.

According to the self-regulated learning model, students find their own appropriate strategies for learning (Zimmerman, 1989), and when those strategies work for them they gain self-confidence and their academic performance improves. Many also become role models for other students, even those without disabilities. They also inspire their families and communities. For instance, Thulani mentioned that his community was pleased with his success.

6.2.2.3 Self-regulated learning

The participants' understanding of self-regulated learning underscored the fact that they had self-efficacy. This claim is aligned with what they regarded as contributing factors to their academic success. In line with Pintrich's (2000) definition of self-regulated learning, they explained how they pursued academic success and the strategies they used in order to attain this goal. Pintrich's (2000) definition of self-regulated learners states that they ought to own their learning and have self-control, which means that they need to have a firm grip on their learning strategies.

Many different strategies were used to manage their studies. Some chose to study with friends or in a group. Choosing a study partner was one strategy of choice, but they were cautious and did not want people in the groups who would judge them. Thulani mentioned that Accounting was a very challenging programme and required that one had to practise almost every day to be successful. He thus submitted a photograph that showed him hard at work with his friend in their spot in the library. He took pride in this collaborative study strategy as it would assure success. Babhekile mentioned that she spent most of her time in a particular corner where she had studied with her group members for a long time. She declared that without her study group it would not have been not possible to attain third year level. According to Köseoğlu (2015), self-regulated students are able to devise strategies when faced with difficulties. Such students typically ask for assistance from their peers, educators, administrators/management and parents. Dolly argued that it was a student's duty and responsibility to find an appropriate method of learning and she alluded to three aspects of self-regulated learning, namely self-advocacy, self-efficacy, and reflection. These are essential factors in achieving the desired academic outcomes (Bandura, Zimmerman, & Pons, 2001).

When students understand their capabilities, it makes a positive difference and they devise new strategies that fit their own style of learning. For instance, Glory mentioned that she recorded herself and watched videos to grasp important points she was struggling with. She was quite aware that success manifested itself when there was cooperation between a student and lecturers and when the student engaged meaningfully with subject content. Babhekile was also very clear about an academic relationship which she believed should be reciprocal. She stated:

I feel when you are a student, you find that you attend all classes without fail, but some still do not make it. It's because I feel like it's a triangle [demonstrating it with her hands]; it is a teacher, you as a student and your studies...but the real studying happen[s] when you are on your own. It's a very important time but we don't realise that the important learning is not in class. It is what you do after class and what you do before class.

This academic relationship is emphasised by the self-efficacy and self-regulated learning models, as they encourage ownership of learning through active involvement (Pintrich, 2000). It is well understood that students may experience different constraints in their environment as well as other challenging dynamics, but they need to be encouraged to stay focused.

6.3 Time Management

Time management is considered one of the most important skills in life and is one of the most important ingredients for academic success. Failing to manage time effectively comes with harsh consequences (Fuller, 2008; Khurshid, 2014). For students it may result in missing lectures, or getting to class late and missing valuable information, which could lead to underperformance. University students ought to manage their time efficiently as there is no one who reminds them of their schedules. Time management is one way of showing maturity and independence at university (Akareem & Hossain, 2016; Kappe & Van Der Flier, 2012).

The participants seemed to use different strategies in pursuit of academic success. Spending time alone to study was highlighted as critically important, and this illuminated the element of owning the process of learning, a sense of independence, and wanting space to reflect (Munro, 2014). One participant even mentioned that reflecting was central to self-regulated learning. Reflection as a strategy demands that students take time to take stock of their academic life. Thus students need to look back at their performance time and again and devise strategies to

maintain or improve their performance, depending on their goal. This means reviewing time schedules to focus on modules that require more time. The literature on self-regulated learning and self-efficacy also mentions time management as one of the most powerful tools in as far as self-regulated learning is concerned (Schunk, Bandura, & Pons, 1992; Schunk, 1997; Zimmerman, 1992). For example, the consequences of failure to manage time effectively resulted in some students having to spend sleepless nights trying to cover work in preparation for their tests or an examination. Sizwe disclosed that he had once been caught off guard and had to work right through the night, which had not been a rewarding experience:

Cross-night is a result of not studying in advance for assessments.

6.4 Conclusion

In general, it is critical that all students devise their own individual strategies for learning or studying. Students with disabilities are likely to have an extra responsibility as they need to manage their disabilities depending on the intensity of the affliction. When they set their schedules, they should also take that into consideration. For example, Babhekile declared:

I am an evening student so I try to plan my time well. I set time for myself. I have my own routine so that my body is used to it.

At MUT students have a choice either to attend their classes in the evening or during the day. Although this arrangement of evening classes was initially designed for working students, other students are allowed to use this opportunity as well. The majority of my MUT participants attended evening classes for various reasons, but mostly because they believed it assisted them in achieving good results. Most of them found evening classes more convenient due to their disability constraints and it allowed them to study during the day and rest at night after classes. One could consider this choice a sign of maturity as the students chose an option that suited their capabilities and strengths. Bandura (1996) emphasises the need for self-advocacy if a student wants to be successful. Köseoğlu (2015) also argues that mature students are able to devise innovative strategies that assist them when they have to work under pressure.

The discourse in this chapter concentrated on the first research question, and it became obvious that the participants' experiences of academic success were due to enthusiasm, hard work, determination, and a better understanding of the self. It is also important to note that their

success had not come without challenges, but that through self-efficacy skills they were able to manoeuvre their positions and make choices that enabled them to succeed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the results pertaining to protective factors as a form of support. Providing students with access to a university but not supporting them is tantamount to no access at all (Tinto, 2014). All students need support to succeed, and all structures around students should be geared towards providing support. In terms of the resilience theory, support is important for vulnerable people as they may not be able to pick up objects or stand on their own if not supported. Under protective factors as a form of support, three subthemes emerged, namely: the need for support, the academic environment and support, and understanding one's own rights. The discourse in this chapter thus responds to the second research question: *How do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in the way they do?* The participants' engagement with friends, family, lecturers and the university environment elicited rich meaning in terms of their ability to achieve well academically.

7.2 The Need for Support

Experiences of positive support were highlighted as an important factor that assisted the participants in achieving academic success. Students with disabilities are social beings just like everybody else and they need support, which confirms the African saying: "Umntu ngomuntu ngabantu", which means 'human beings rely on others to be what they are'(Nwoye, 2017). Thus adherence to this credo promotes interdependence as we are beings who live in a social system where we interact with others but where we also need to find our individuality. Being able to source support has some underlying implications for one's personality and attitude. Support does not just drop from above or seek out people, but people need to seek support. Therefore, there are many factors that are associated with support. First, it may mean that a person has assessed a situation and has realised that assistance is required. Secondly, it may mean that an individual is able to choose relevant individuals to give the support that is needed. Thirdly, it may also mean that the person is a sociable being who is able to mingle comfortably with others. It was against this backdrop that different sources of support were mentioned by

the participants: family, the changing nature of family support, support from friends and others, and self-motivation.

7.2.1 Family support

Most participants shared positive experiences of support, particularly in terms of the support they had received from their parents over the years and during the first year at the tertiary institution. One participant mentioned that his family was very proud of him. The parents' happiness could be seen as two-fold: first, they were proud of their child's achievement just like any other parent would be. Secondly, they were proud because their child had a disability but had managed to overcome the stigma and drawbacks of being disabled. Taub (2008) argues that university students are generally close to their parents and constantly share anecdotes of their university experiences with them. Similarly, the participants declared that they benefited from their parents' financial, moral and inspirational support. The role of parents in their children's lives sometimes seems to have no boundaries, and this is particularly obvious during the transition from high school to university (Fernández-Alonso, Álvarez-díaz, Woitschach, & Suárez-Álvarez, 2017; Wartman & Savage, M., 2008). Whilst parental involvement may be seen in a positive light, too much involvement is not good, especially in the higher education environment. Parents who are too involved in their children's academic affairs are referred to as 'helicopter parents' as they tend to hover too close in their children's lives (Vinson, 2013). This could result in students not developing appropriately and losing their independence. None of my participants mentioned that their parents were too involved in their studies or university lives, and I thus assumed that the involvement of those parents who were still alive was moderate. Parental involvement in higher education was not necessarily dismissed, as the participants welcomed their involvement. The literature supports this in terms of self-efficacy in that students who are supported by their parents tend to do well academically (Shourbagi, 2017; Yamauchi, Ponte, Ratliffe, & Traynor, 2017). Conversely, some participants had had negative experiences due to a lack of parental support while others had endured mockery, bribery, and neglect by their own parents and siblings. Some were orphans and needed the support of siblings or other surviving family members. However, as all these students demonstrated resilience and self-efficacy, they managed to pull through and perform well.

7.2.2 The changing role of family support

In many instances, African societies believe in extended families where one's success becomes the family's success. Indirectly, those who are successful are expected to uplift their siblings as well as the entire family (Ferrara, 2015). In this study this emerged as a practice regardless of whether the person had a disability or not. When looking at this in more depth, the disability effect does not count much when someone has to become a provider or a breadwinner in the family. Students' academic success becomes a family investment as many members of the family hope to benefit from their success.

Some participants came from poor backgrounds. It is mentioned in the literature that people with disabilities are often born in poverty stricken families (Naami, 2014; Naidoo, 2010). In such cases many students are first generation university students (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015). Such students find themselves under pressure or are motivated to complete their studies so that they can support their families. They are aware that their academic success is not just for themselves but will uplift the standard of living for others as well. This point was clear when Mary stated that she came from a very big family and that her father was the sole breadwinner. Jean was also aware that achievement was a return on investment and she wanted to build a beautiful house for her mother, as this would change the family's lifestyle and status. Thus academic success had an economic and social motive and impact as well. Graham et al. (2014) found that approximately fifty percent of people with disabilities were the breadwinners in their households and they provided either through employment or grants they received from the state.

7.2.3 Support from peers and others

Family and university staff may not be available all the time for students, thus other sources of support become critically important. This study revealed that sources of support for students with disabilities were not limited to their families and academic staff, but that peers were deemed an important source of support as well. Peer support is crucial as students may be able to talk to one another in a comfortable manner without any fear of judgement. Conversations with adults may sometimes be strained given the effects of generation gap issues.

First generation students are more likely to source assistance outside the family as there might be no one to provide career guidance and support within the family (Portnoi & Kwong, 2015). The participants acknowledged the role of peers and friends in their academic success. For instance, Nondumiso would not have been able to enrol at university without the assistance of her friends. Her own family did not believe that she would make it at university and she experienced abuse from them. They demanded bribes for any kind of assistance they offered her.

To be socially integrated always helps in difficult circumstances and without it one may not get the necessary support. Some parents may even make it hard for their children to succeed (Wang et al., 2015). The comment by a student that her father was “useless” and “does not care” was a case in point; yet she overcame this adversity as she was resilient enough to persevere. Interacting with others rather than with one’s own negative family is a coping strategy that many students use (Zimmerman, 1997). This is a form of self-efficacy that opens many doors to success.

According to the participants, their motivation and academic success also made their respective communities and friends lend a hand in times of need. Their communities fulfilled the credo of ‘Ubuntu’, which is a principle that enforces caring for one another. Ubuntu is not restricted to family relationships but is about the spirit of caring for everybody, which resonates well with the principles of inclusive education and the call for diversity in education (Walton, 2018). My participants thus experienced attention from many people who cared about their academic success. Even those whose parents were not able to provide for them were supported and did not feel alone. Thus the absence of parents and family members on the academic journey of some participants did not have a significant or negative impact on them as other members of the community assisted them in a number of ways.

7.3 Self-motivation

Academic success was illuminated as a personal journey that required the students to be at the cutting edge in order to attain their desired goal. This is in line with the phenomenological principles of understanding the world through one’s own experiences (Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman et al., 1992). The participants’ circumstances, their environment and the realities they experienced made them work with determination to achieve their goal. Each person has

his/her own motive for studying. For example, some students may study because their parents have told them to do so, some study to change their lives, and some study because everybody is doing it. Not all students that enrol at universities achieve success, yet the participants of this study demonstrated that success was possible because they were self-motivated. This is in line with the principle of self-regulation as posited by several authors (Pintrich, 2000; Schunk, 2005; Zimmerman, 1989; Zimmerman et al., 1992). Zimmerman (1989, p. 11) lends support to the concept of self-motivated learners when he states: “When students understand that they are creative agents, responsible for and capable of self-development and self-determination of their goals, their self as agents will provide the motivation...” (p. 11).

Ali and Nodoushan (2012) point out that self-motivated learners play an active role in their own learning. They seek advice and are able to recognise their own weaknesses and strengths. I found that my participants were able to realise that the university environment was different from the high school environment, and therefore they devised and acquired strategies in order to cope successfully in this very demanding setting.

Some participants argued that attaining a qualification would make them independent and therefore they were not going to allow anything to stop them from achieving their goal. This kind of positive attitude is emphasised by Zimmerman et al. (1992), who also state that students with high self-efficacy and strong self-esteem are very likely to be resilient, set high goals, and are self-determined enough to persevere.

The participants in the current study were also fully cognisant of the challenges of the university environment and were conscious of the drawbacks of their own backgrounds (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Zimmerman, 1989). Zimmerman (1990) emphasises self-belief, setting one’s own goals, and self-evaluation as important for being motivated. When students understand this, they change their attitude and fears positively and become self-motivated and self-disciplined. Several studies have revealed that self-motivated students try to accomplish their goals even under adverse circumstances (Köseoğlu, 2015; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997).

7.4 The Academic Environment

The results revealed that the academic environment had an impact on the academic success of the students with disabilities, whether this impact was negative or positive. The following subthemes emerged under this theme: experiences of rejection, library services, attendance of lectures, life in a residence, the funding system, and understanding one's rights.

7.4.1 Experiences of rejection and humiliation

Some students with disabilities faced humiliation and rejection at the two universities under study during the admission and registration processes. This was because they were either given insufficient information, no information, or ambiguous information. This resulted in frustration and a sense of feeling unwelcome. The ordeal experienced by some of the participants tainted these institutions with an undesirable image. The overall impression was that admission practices were inefficient. This finding was consistent with that of Matsedisio (2007), who challenged the benevolent philosophy of universities when dealing with students with disabilities. The latter author argues that students with disabilities normally find themselves doing courses they do not like because other careers are unable to accommodate them. This is also what Nolwazi and Mary experienced. They had to take whatever programme was available so that they could continue with their registration and admission. In such cases students with disabilities are disadvantaged because they have to adjust to a new environment just like all other first year students, but their career choices are far more limited. This also means that they have to find an alternative career which is often not on their list of career choices at the beginning. In some instances they are desperate and just take whatever is offered to them. This form of discrimination may not only lead to poor academic performance, but may also result in unemployment.

A negative image was painted of unsupportive and unkind university staff who were not prepared/trained to help students with disabilities (FOTIM, 2011; Howell, 2005), and this exposed a weakness as the universities did not equip their staff to work with such students, regardless of policies. Thus, due to a lack of universal design and inclusive education policies or the application thereof, many students with disabilities may continue to experience rejection. The experience when Mary was humiliated on her first day at the university in front of her mother and other students is a case in point. Such experiences are consistent with the findings

of McGregor et al. (2016), who exposed tribulations when students with disabilities visited faculties looking for information. These authors suggest that universities need to improve their communication channels in order to service students better.

The provision of information seems to remain a challenge at universities as students, especially those with disabilities, continue to be deprived of information in terms of registration and courses. In as far as the Promotion of Access to Information Act no. 2 of 2000 (South Africa, 2000a) and the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act no. 3 of 2000 (South Africa, 2000b) are concerned, this amounts to discrimination against people from designated groups. Universities should provide information about their courses and requirements through their websites, pamphlets and newsletters to prospective students. Offering a student 'anything' to study undermines the intellect of the student and limits career choices and planning. At the very least, the university in Mary's case should have offered her counselling to assist her to deal with and accept the proposed course, but this did not happen and exposed the student to more vulnerability and the threat of dropping out.

However, when comparing Mary's to Dolly's case showed that the latter student was handled more professionally. She was made aware of likely challenges due to her disability prior to admission and registration. It allowed the student to be prepared for any outcome while there was ample time to make an alternative career choice. However, Nondumiso's experience was similar to Mary's as no one offered her an alternative. She clearly experienced rejection.

Such experiences diminish students with disabilities and tarnish their self-esteem and confidence in themselves. For most students with disabilities, the playing field at university is not level, yet they are expected to perform at the same level as and work harder than their counterparts (Gorman, 2009). Universities are obliged by legislation to commit to full open access, more especially as the South African government is implementing the massification of tertiary education. According to the White Paper on Post-School Education (DHET, 2013), universities must focus on increasing students' access and improving their success rate as well. This means merely admitting students to universities is not sufficient, as their success is crucially important. However, if students with disabilities are being treated as third class citizens, access will remain limited for them. The literature suggests that most universities appear to have no urgency in terms of accommodating students with disabilities. Currently, it could be said that universities are working in silos, as even within faculties and departments

there is no conformity and consistency in terms of the admission and registration of students with disabilities (Ohajunwa et al., 2014).

7.4.2 Positive support by academic staff

Despite the unsatisfactory treatment that some participants experienced by academic support staff, almost fifty percent of the participants enjoyed excellent support. Although the accommodation they were allocated was not professional or in line with inclusive education, some staff members made a personal effort to assist the students.

The employment of trained staff members is vital if universities are serious about inclusive education. For instance, the accommodation allocated to students may not be appropriate for students with invisible disabilities. Students with learning disabilities will hardly reveal their challenges until assessment scores are available. This was evident when I analysed the university records for sampling purposes, as none of the participants were categorised under learning disabilities. I found this a reason for concern as assistance may be inappropriate in a number of ways if accurate records are not available. University officials may also use their own discretion when they offer assistance in a particular situation, but this may cause some challenges since it may not be approved of or is not in response to any policy. For instance, the lecturer who was prepared to change a venue to accommodate Mary was extremely kind, but he may have acted against regulations, particularly if other students complained that he was wasting their time.

While some students appreciated the attention they received from their lecturers, one student did not welcome any special treatment as he perceived it negatively. His argument was that his efforts would be watered down and he believed that others would think he passed just because the lecturers made it easier for him. Mutanga (2013) also found that a student had refused to be categorised as disabled and had preferred not to receive any preferential treatment even though he received a time concession when he wrote assessments. Such behaviour could be linked to earlier experiences of stigmatisation.

It is an accepted fact that people with disabilities may sometimes be very sensitive and guard against anything that attempts to undermine their capabilities, as disabilities are not always related to a sickness (Kendall, 2016). It is for this reason that some students prefer not to

disclose their disability status and insist on being treated like any other student (Engelbrecht & de Beer, 2014).

Even though some lecturers make concerted efforts to accommodate students with disabilities at their own discretion, it still remains important for universities to conduct formal staff training. Researchers such as Kendall (2016) and Ohajunwa et al. (2014) maintain that, for inclusive education to be implemented successfully, lecturers need to be informed of issues around disability as part of the transformation agenda. Such training will have an impact on universities at large in terms of attracting students with disabilities, retaining the ones in the system, and improving their academic success. Tinto (2014) is concerned about the fact that universities attract students but fail to support and retain them.

7.4.3 Access to the library and books

A library service is one of the most essential services that universities provide, but some students are denied full access for various reasons. Emong and Eron (2016) highlight the challenges that students with disabilities face when visiting a library. A photo-voice image in my thesis also shows how a student struggles to access books in the library. Futhi explained that she sometimes felt humiliated and excluded as a student as she had to ask for assistance in order to get the resources she needed. Such exclusion may cause students to feel discriminated against even though the university might not be aware of their plight.

The CHE (2005) and the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) suggest that library services should be open 24/7 and should even provide online access. This would benefit not only students with disabilities but entire university communities. Seemingly, dissatisfaction with library services depended on the individual disabilities and other personal needs of the students, as some participants did not complain about physical access or frustrations encountered when visiting the library. Most participants were happy with the service, although they suggested that the operating hours of the library should be extended. However, a close scrutiny suggests that the students might not make use of this opportunity as one student admitted that he got very tired after evening classes and would rather rest. It may thus be unreasonable to demand the high costs of running a library for extended hours if very few students might make use of this opportunity, particularly as online information is available 24/7.

However, it has been suggested that the issue of very tall book shelves should be addressed and this complaint was endorsed by the study participants as the inaccessibility of the highest shelves is against the social model approach. Tall shelves deny students easy access to library resources which could be seen as an epistemological issue. It takes away the freedom of reading widely as short students need to rely on someone to take books for them off the shelves. The photograph that Futhi submitted depicts how difficult it was for her to retrieve books from the highest shelves. Going to the library reminded her constantly of the fact that she was different because she either had to be accompanied by a friend or announce her presence in the library so that she could be assisted.

The limited IT facilities in the library also came under scrutiny as there were no specific provisions for students with disabilities. This complaint is endorsed by Emong and Eron (2016). The challenges that some participants had to endure when visiting the library made them reluctant to use the library services on a regular basis. This finding is consistent with that of Mutanga (2017), who also explored access and infrastructural challenges for students with disabilities in higher education institutions. In his literature review, access is persistently presented as a main challenge at universities. Furthermore, Chaputula and Mapulanga (2017) suggest that private libraries are even worse than university libraries. The needs of people with disabilities in terms of access to information seem to be disregarded at a much larger scope outside university institutions. Similar to academic staff, library staff also need to be trained to effectively assist *all* students with their academic research.

7.4.4 Access to lecture rooms

Another important finding revealed that the participants experienced challenges with access to lecture venues. The photo-voice image that one participant submitted depicted narrow corridors that he had to negotiate in a wheelchair on rainy days. He explained that the university did not have enough shelters to cover the pathways leading to classes. This posed a challenge as it became difficult to attend classes and illustrated unequal opportunities for students with disabilities, particularly as lecturing sessions do not stop on account of weather changes. The question remains: *How did these students succeed under difficult and exasperating conditions?*

Several studies (Emong & Eron, 2016; Kendall, 2016; Redpath et al., 2013; Tugli et al., 2013) state that there are quite a number of obstacles in terms of access and support for students with

disabilities in higher education institutions. One study suggests that students in wheelchairs in particular face more challenges than able-bodied students who can walk to classes (Chiwandire & Vincent, 2017). The students with disabilities in my study agreed that accessing classes, regardless of weather conditions, was a daily challenge that they needed to deal with. In cases where they did not have automated wheelchairs, it became tiring to propel the wheelchair. Nolwazi's experience was typical of what such students go through when they need help, and girls are even at risk of being sexually abused when accepting assistance from strangers who may have nefarious intentions.

It also surfaced that the distance from residences to classes and from class to class posed a challenge. Change-over time is typically ten minutes, which may not be sufficient for students with disabilities. For instance, moving from MUT main campus to the Natural Science campus across the road, or from the DUT Steve Biko campus to ML Sultan campus takes more than ten minutes for a student who has mobility challenges. The worst challenge is that the students need to cross very busy roads where reckless and speeding drivers of taxis compete for passengers. There are no road signs to caution the road users that students with disabilities may be crossing the road. The safety of students with disabilities, and indeed all students, is highly compromised in this regard.

One photograph that was submitted by a participant depicted the road that needed to be crossed. In his words, this was "a scary experience" even though speed humps had been constructed. It is common knowledge that most taxi drivers are impatient and always compete for passengers, which makes crossing any road where there is a congestion of mini-bus taxis unsafe. It also isolates students with disabilities from their friends as waiting for them could cause them to be late for classes. Furthermore, it subjects students to abuse and humiliation as they may need to beg others to push them if they are in a wheelchair. These findings are echoed by Chiwandire and Vincent (2017) and Engelbrecht and de Beer (2014) who corroborate the difficulties and confinement that students in a wheelchair experience in institutions of higher education.

Mary submitted a photograph of a lift with a sign 'out of order' and she mentioned that it had taken the university almost three months to fix the only access she had to upstairs classes. Such oversight and discriminatory negligence are unjust and not acceptable. It is unfortunate that such interruptions and loss of time are not taken into consideration when students are assessed. Any act of denying students access is against all human rights legislation. South Africa is one

of the signatories of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and all its agents should thus protect the rights of people with disabilities.

For students who are using automated wheelchairs, rainy weather is a challenge as they need to avoid puddles of water. My participants who used wheelchairs mentioned that they did not attend classes on rainy days for two reasons. One was that the battery would be affected and they would also get wet trying to get to classes. Universities and the NSFAS do not cover the cost of wheelchair maintenance and some participants mentioned that they had not received funds for any assistive devices. Such challenges have led to some participants attending evening classes for various reasons, for instance long distances and many lessons on one day in venues that are far apart. Some participants also alluded to uncomfortable lecture hall arrangements for students with physical impairments, and even positioning their chairs posed a challenge. One participant with dwarfism complained that sitting on the available chairs was uncomfortable as her feet were suspended and this made her very tired. She mentioned that after some time they got swollen, especially when it was hot. If she sat back she could not reach the desk in order to take notes. She also attended evening classes. For the participants who had a choice of either day or evening classes life was relatively manageable. On the other hand, those who had limited choices suffered due to adverse circumstances.

Attending evening classes was not an option for students with visual impairment as a lack of signage and insufficient lighting in the corridors were barriers. Moreover, crime was deemed rife even on the campuses and the safety of students was compromised regardless of their disability status. Staff safety is also compromised in such environments. Universities are negligent in this regard, and it is not justifiable that students are accommodated in such unsafe environments.

An analysis of the findings suggests that the universities are underprepared to accommodate students with disabilities given all the physical challenges that were revealed. As much as it may be understood that the status of universities in terms of financial muscle is not the same, more traditional universities benefited prior to the advent of the democratic government. However, more appropriate facilities could be provided at each university if the attitude is positive towards the accommodation of students with disabilities. These students have special needs, which means that the assistance they are rendered should be uniquely designed for their needs (Kendall, 2016).

The Department of Higher Education (DHET) is allocated a budget for infrastructural development every financial year according to the Strategic Policy Framework on Disabilities for the Post-School Education and Training System (DHET, 2018). The purpose of this funding is to gradually remove infrastructural barriers and have a universal design that will accommodate all students. Additionally, the document suggests the following as a means of providing open access and support to students with disabilities:

It is important to ensure that the necessary assistive devices, including ICT infrastructure and programmes and appropriate teaching and learning methodologies are in place early in the year so that students with disabilities will not end up under-performing owing to late provision of assistive technology, assistive devices and resources, including human support, where necessary. Without this, students with disabilities will not be able to compete on an equal level with their peers (DHET, 2018, p. 59).

However, as was mentioned above, the participants in my study struggled under adverse environments at the universities under study, and this was unnecessary. At this juncture the experiences of the participants reflected that there was indirect discrimination, which is illegal. According to all legislations that promote the rights of people with disabilities worldwide, reasonable adjustments have to be made to accommodate people with disabilities. The study revealed that students survived by self-advocating and taking ownership of their own education with the understanding that this would change their lives (Emong & Eron, 2016; Lourens, 2015). This is highly commendable, but I cannot help but wonder what heights these students could have attained if they had been better supported.

7.4.5 Life in the residences

Many students spend a lot of time in residences and these venues become their homes. They should therefore be places where students feel secure, where they are happy, and where they can relax and learn. These are also spaces where they socialise and mingle with other students. However, universities globally experience residence challenges and thus use alternative buildings in order to accommodate their students. In many cases the buildings and accommodation do not have the required facilities, and this may compromise students in various ways. According to the students, the two universities where the study was conducted tried to accommodate all students with disabilities in campus residences, but space was limited.

It came as no surprise when some participants expressed their distasteful experiences of life in these residences.

A number of challenges were highlighted, for instance the administration and management of the residences and access to essential services within the residences were sub-standard. In some instance kitchens and laundromats were not on the same level as the rooms, which made it difficult for some students to use these facilities. Some students cooked in their rooms knowing that it was against the rules for safety reasons. Limited study space was also mentioned as a challenge at one university as the participants mentioned that they did not have space at all in the residence, while others had space but it was not in a good condition. For example, there were no computers, noise was not controlled, security was not tight and it made the students uncomfortable to use the facilities after hours. These challenges made the pursuit of academic success difficult.

Due to ill-treatment and the maladministration of residences, some students moved to private rooms. For example Futhi, who studied at MUT, decided to move out and to live in a township in a place informally known as 'emhlabeni'. This place is characterised by informal dwellings that are not conducive for studying. Peter, who was at DUT, stayed in a room on city campus but was stabbed in front of the gate when returning from visiting a friend one Friday evening. There was no security and it was discovered that surveillance cameras were not operational. The photographs that Peter submitted depicted that the environment in which his residence was located was not suitable for the purpose of accommodating students in general, let alone students with disabilities. The city residences were not initially meant for students, thus their specifications do not meet the required standards of university residences. Universities also do not have control over the surrounding areas, so students may be exposed to many activities that might distract them from their academic work. As much as these experiences may not be unique to students with disabilities, the universities ought to take precautions and ensure the safety of students in residences in general. Safety and security have to be tightened up on and off campus where there are students. For example, security guards must be visible all the time.

7.5 Impact of the Funding System

A large percentage of students studying at the two universities are from townships and rural areas. Many come from a poor socio-economic background and people with disabilities are prevalent in these poverty stricken communities (Majola & Dhunpath, 2016; Naidoo, 2010; Sedibe & Buthelezi, 2014). The financial problems experienced by the participants were thus not unique, and it is a known fact that most students at South African universities apply for funding before the end of each year for the following year. This process is often hampered by insufficient information and many participants thus experienced challenges with the completion of their applications. In some instances, the participants did not know that there was a special fund (NSFAS) for students with disabilities, and they only discovered this when their applications had already been sent. Many authors concur that funding remains a challenge as university funding becomes thinner (De Kadt, 2015; Loewen & Pollard, 2010). Although the implementation of free education may seem to be a relief, teething problems are experienced at every stage of the process, as was also the case for some of my participants.

In as much as the NSFAS has been effective in providing students with funding for accommodation, lecture fees, textbooks and meals, this study revealed that, in some instances, students with disabilities experienced difficulties. For example, some students disclosed their disability but did not get into the relevant funding structure or did not get funding at all due to administrative errors. They also revealed that it was not guaranteed that they would receive the funding for technological assistive devices. The Strategic Policy Framework on Disability (DHET, 2018) for students with disabilities insists that assistive devices be provided early in the year to avoid unnecessary attrition rates. However, the universities under study both seemed to be moving very slowly towards the provision of these vital facilities and this could impede the success of students with disabilities. According to a report by the CHE (2005), personal attitudes hamper the distribution of financial resources and this has had adverse consequences for teaching and learning.

Students and their families suffer a lot when funding is not forthcoming as most students come from financially strapped backgrounds. According to Kisanji in Polat (2009), some students drop out due to a lack of funding as their parents cannot afford to sponsor their children's education. The absence of funding deprives them of their right to education. It was

disheartening to listen to Promise's experiences, especially when she explained that she had not received funding for her assistive device for a period of three years:

In 2015 and 2016 I tried to apply for devices funding but till today I never got it. I didn't apply for it this year. It's a total waste of time; there is just no point in applying. The university seems to be unhelpful in this regard as they just tell you that they submitted everything to Cape Town.

This comment demonstrates the negligence and maladministration of funding by both the university and the NSFAS. Universities ought to protect the rights of students and intervene where necessary, as the progress of students may be hampered by poor funding allocations. McGregor et al. (2016) also point out that universities should play a role in mitigating obstacles for students with disabilities. When students fail and drop out, the reasons for such poor output are not recorded, but attrition rates reflect badly on university records. Universities and funders ought to view the attempt of attaining academic success as an attempt of moving away from poverty and stigma (Kisanji, 2009), particularly on the part of students with disabilities.

Conversely, it must be acknowledged that some students had received excellent support from the NSFAS and they applied these funds positively to achieve academic success.

7.6 The Role of the Disability Unit

A disability unit at any university is considered an essential service that universities are obliged to offer (FOTIM, 2011). Disability units are administrative head offices that attend to the needs of students with disabilities. All the special needs of students are facilitated through disability units, as was explained in Chapter Two. Nonetheless, MUT did not have such a unit at the time of the study, and the needs of the students with disabilities were channelled to the Student Counselling unit. This was fraught with challenges and the participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the arrangement. At DUT such a unit was in place but it was fairly new as it had opened its doors only in June 2017. However, the various challenges the participants encountered, particularly upon registration, confirmed a lack of efficient services by this unit.

The participants in general were not satisfied with the services rendered. The MUT students raised the following issues:

- The Student Counselling staff was supposed to assist them, but they were not treated as a priority. The unit did not cater specifically for students with disabilities and they needed to queue or make an appointment like any other student.
- A permanent department or structure was needed urgently to cater for their needs. In essence, they argued that the ‘voice’ of students with disabilities needed to be heard and acknowledged.
- Should such a unit be established, they suggested that it should be staffed with qualified people who would understand their needs.

The DUT participants’ views were very similar:

- A main concern was that it seemed as if the unit had not been established with the physical needs of students with disabilities in mind, as it is located right underneath the library and there are stairs that need to be negotiated.
- The staff servicing the unit was perceived as unqualified.
- The disability unit was apparently not equipped for its purpose. In many instances, students had been told that there was no budget.

All the participants seemed to know what they needed and felt strongly about poor services or the non-existence of a disability unit. This reflected badly on the stance of the universities in terms of their accommodation of students with disabilities. The Strategic Policy Framework on Disability (DHET, 2018) acknowledges the absence or inefficiency of disability units as a systems challenge. This suggests that they are not supported and are expected to fend for themselves in order to succeed. In such cases it becomes difficult to point fingers solely at universities, as it becomes clear that the problem may originate from the DHET. Unfortunately, students are left in limbo and continue to suffer.

Contrary to the situation described above, the participants demonstrated resilience and a relentless attitude. They remained positive and believed that, for any effective change to occur in their lives, they needed to be involved and resilient. Some participants were grateful of the assistance they had received. However, this does not preclude the need for a functional disability unit at each university, as it is very important for the academic success of students with disabilities. According to Loewen and Pollard (2010, p. 5):

Disability service professionals have an important role and crucial responsibility in moving their profession, students, and the campus towards a social justice model by supporting disability pride, offering equality, and promoting participatory democracy to disabled students.

7.7 Students with Disabilities and Their Rights

South Africa is a democratic country and people are aware of their basic human rights that are enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The Bill of Rights (South Africa, 1996) promotes equality and embraces diversity in all aspects of life, thereby protecting the human rights of all citizens of the country. People with disabilities are also catered for by legislation (see Chapter One and Chapter Two). However, some students did not seem acquainted with their rights both within and outside the university. They displayed no interest at all, and only those who had had to defend themselves and those in leadership positions knew about policies on disability. The lack of interest in their rights as disabled people could be interpreted in many ways. For instance, it could be assumed that they did not regard themselves as disabled and thus were not interested in policies and regulations for disabled people. It could also be that they wanted to change their thinking about being overly protected because it might stigmatise them, or they were ignorant for no particular reason. What was clear, however, was that the lack of information on disabilities at both the universities had a negative impact on the students' understanding of their rights. For instance, when I perused the assessment policies of both universities, I found that neither spelt out the rights or privileges of students with disabilities such as special venues or facilities in classrooms for these students. Moreover, during the interviews none of the students commented on any action taken to lobby for their rights in any regard. The participants' only interest was in their academic work and social activities and they silently endured the challenges they faced. One young man had a keen interest in sport and created an environment where he could excel without demanding any special privileges. However, all students should be encouraged to participate in various spheres of life in order to engage meaningfully with others and to embrace their future careers. Kendall (2016) also emphasises the importance of interaction with policies as those policies address the needs of all people and could open doors for them.

Academic success may translate into further studies and employment opportunities. Most of my participants looked forward to gainful employment rather than to furthering their studies,

probably because their socio-economic backgrounds dictated that they needed to find employment urgently. Fortunately, some indicated that they were aware of the Employment Equity Act of 1997. This Act dictates that employers need to employ at least 7% of people with disabilities, and this gave them hope of finding employment even if the country was in a recession at the time. However, although most of the participants were hopeful of employment, some were sceptical as they felt that it would be a new struggle to adjust to the work environment. Sullivan (2011) cautions that employment might disappoint them, as some workplaces still view people with disabilities from the medical perspective. Similarly, Naami (2014) argues that people with disabilities face new challenges in the workplace and that the environment is not always supportive of their needs.

While South African legislation (such as the Employment Equity Act) favours designated groups such as people with disabilities, work opportunities require that any candidate should be suitably qualified for the job. The students that I interviewed would be well qualified when they graduated, but their fear of discrimination and insecurity should not be ignored. This point is also made by Majola and Dhunpath (2016), Naami (2014) and Ndlovu and Walton (2016). In this regard, human resource departments as the custodians of employment policies in organisations need to play a vital role. Majola and Dhunpath (2016) also suggest that updated policies on the employment of people with disabilities should be established and closely monitored, and it is urgent that workforce diversity should also include people with disabilities.

7.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the results exposed various realities and experiences that guided the students with disabilities at the two universities of technology under study to achieve academic success. However, it was also clear that academic success did not come easily but required endurance and resilience. Universities were revealed as negotiated spaces for students with disabilities, and seemingly every space had its own hurdles which they needed to negotiate. It pushed them to a point where they always had to have a strategy for survival, whether inside or outside the classroom. While various crude and challenging conditions were difficult to negotiate, they learnt through resilience and perseverance to understand their capabilities and they thus developed self-efficacy and were able to devise workable strategies to study hard and to achieve well.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: EDUCATION CHANGES LIVES

8.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the discussion on the experiences of academic success of students with disabilities at universities of technology, and I thus reflect on the last question: *Why do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in the way they do?* The narrative is drawn from discussions in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven which addressed the *what* and *how* questions pertaining to students' academic success. At the same time, the discourse reflected on the combined theoretical framework of the study that embraced phenomenology, resilience and self-efficacy. These three theories were intertwined in the discourse as the participants' experiences reflected all three phenomena. I mentioned earlier that phenomenology is the study of lived experiences, and in this thesis the lived experiences of the students with disabilities who studied at two tertiary institutions were explored. The resilience and self-efficacy theories were adopted in conjunction with phenomenology as they illuminate people's strong inner ability to face adversity and to 'bounce back'; i.e., to demonstrate resilience. Such people thus succeed although they are vulnerable and live under stressful conditions.

The results that emerged from the data related specifically to the theories of resilience and self-efficacy and also engendered the following subthemes: independence and future prospects, overcoming disability and poverty, and development, empowerment and emancipation. These themes and subthemes resonate with the educational model that was discussed in Chapter Two. The argument that is raised in this chapter is that education changes lives.

8.2 Life-changing Experiences

8.2.1 Independence and future prospects

The participants' experiences are the focus in this section because it was these experiences and their response to them that guided my conclusions of what made the students succeed in the way they did in higher education. In Chapter Six and Chapter Seven the themes and subthemes

of support, self-regulated learning, self-determination, spirituality, and a good understanding of self as the pillars of academic success were highlighted. An in-depth analysis of these themes thus revealed that a spirit of independence and the hope of future prospects were the main drivers that propelled the students on the path to academic success.

The issue of future prospects recurred in many statements (see Chapter Six). It appeared that the students' primary focus was to positively change their lives and find employment in the near future rather than to remain at university to further their studies. The participants' focus was thus on economic self-sufficiency and independence. For example, Mary saw her future as follows:

I see myself owning businesses. I'll be working maybe for someone and then try to run my own business. I want to be a boss one day.

Given the socio-economic background of the country as well as the general perceptions and expectations of graduates, employment was the primary focus for most.

Another factor that emerged was that people with disabilities often find themselves having to work twice as hard as others to prove their capabilities. Thus finding employment or running their own businesses could change how they are perceived. Only two of the twelve students showed keen interest in furthering their studies. For example, Jean stated:

Academic success is a platform, an introduction to the world, which is what people get to know you by. I want people to know me for my academic achievements. [I want to reach] greater heights and greater achievements.

Futhi's focus was on uplifting her lifestyle and home environment, but she also showed interest in furthering her studies and obtaining a post-graduate qualification one day:

I want to bring positive change at home and be the first one to finish university successfully. In fact, I would like to further my studies after this diploma, maybe to a Master's level.

Such positive aspirations could be attributed to the students' experiences of being academically successful which would have been impossible if they had not been resistant and resilient. Their situation of being students with disabilities in the relatively unfriendly higher education environment undoubtedly taught them to adopt various survival strategies. In general, academic

success was an enabling tool for all these students and the dream of success engendered a positive chemistry in the participants.

By viewing the findings through the social model lens I was guided to understand that disability does not take away the right of being a human and of being a member of society. In fact, it brought to light the notion that people with disabilities are fully-fledged social beings who have dreams and inspirations and who believe that the achievement of a better life is attainable through education. Babhekile expressed her dream as follows:

I am going to be the first child [in her family] to graduate, or be academically successful. I want to be educated, get a job, get married and have my family. I want to be different in a good way.

8.2.2 Overcoming disability and poverty

As the literature reveals a strong correlation between disability and poverty, it is critical that students with disabilities experience an urgency to change their lifestyle (Bines & Lei, 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Graham, Selipsky, & Moodley, 2010). The findings revealed that the participants had experienced stereotyping, poverty and discrimination, and therefore being academically successful became the counterpoint against the stressors exerted upon them by society. I detected a strong urgency in them to show that they were not only part of society, but worthy members. This attitude demonstrated that they wanted to negate their impairments and do the same things other students do, and maybe even go beyond any restrictions they had.

Moreover, the urge to be actively involved in the development of their own communities was strong. For instance, Jean wanted to use her education and experiences to create awareness of the plight of people with disabilities and she strongly believed that she could play a role in fighting stigma:

I want to use my drama in this [in educating people about disabilities]. I like visuals, so I want to write about that. As much as we have disabilities, our disabilities are not the same. We have different stories to tell, because our experiences are not the same. It's what I would like us to share with them, our experiences, good or bad.

The students believed that sharing information and making others aware of how to deal with their disabilities in tertiary institutions might ameliorate their experiences of adversity and pain.

Furthermore, they felt they could assist prospective students to make informed decisions about their future career choices. Such forward thinking about sharing their knowledge and experiences showed maturity, advocacy, selflessness and self-realisation, which are all part of the attributes of resilience and self-efficacy that drove them to success:

We want to create awareness of disability [among learners with disabilities] even at high school level so that, by the time they come to university, their confidence and self-esteem are good. We want them to know that disability does not prevent us to achieve our goals in life. I'm sure many students will benefit from it.

This desire is consistent with the philosophy of the activist group of disability and resonates with the credo of the National Disability People of South Africa. Members believe that nothing should be offered to people with disabilities without their involvement. This view is a rebellion against pity and handouts as people with disabilities want to show that they are capable human beings, understand their rights, and that their development lies in their own hands. Peter echoed this sentiment as he identified a gap in the information he received during registration which he wanted to address:

I am thinking of running more workshops to assist students with disabilities to be proactive, do things on their own and accept themselves. Because if you do that it's very much easier to have good control of your studies. This year I was assisting during the registration process. I saw students with disabilities struggling with many things, which was mostly lack of information.

I recently noticed with interest that MUT had information desks for students with disabilities where they assisted them. They handed out pamphlets and tried to identify students with disabilities in order to assist them with the process of registration. This desk was mainly manned by students with disabilities although other students also assisted. Such students are known as peer supporters (or helpers). Peter stated:

I was a peer helper, assisting during registration in spotting students with disabilities... It was quite fulfilling to share information with a person that needs it.

Such initiatives do not assist only the students in need, but also boost the confidence of the assistants.

8.2.3 Development, empowerment and emancipation

It is imperative to note that disability is not a status of choice, as was mentioned in Chapter Two in the literature review. People are either born with a disability or acquire it as a result of an accident, a disease or a traumatic event. Of the subthemes that emerged from the findings are development, empowerment and emancipation which are terms that describe why students with disabilities succeed in the way they do in the higher education context. People with disabilities come from a minority group that experienced considerable harshness and discrimination under apartheid. However, while freedom came for other citizens of the country, their freedom has still been curbed to a large extent. People with disabilities and activists such as WHO, UNESCO, and UNCRPD are continuously fighting for their basic accommodation and inclusivity in social spaces. In this context, environmental and infrastructural constraints still seem to be the main contributing factors in the oppression of people with disabilities (Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013; Mutanga, 2013; Soudien & Baxen, 2006;). Therefore, in as much as the social model view of disabilities has limitations, this view is helpful in improving conditions for people with disabilities at higher education institutions.

Central to the issue of inclusivity in higher education are the phenomena of emancipation and empowerment, especially for minority groups such as people with disabilities (Shih, 2016). These people need to be empowered to gain their independence regardless of any impairment. Empowerment is a process of equipping people with skills, educating them, and changing structures in the attempt to support marginalised and minority groups (Daniele, 2017; Crowther, 2013). It is undeniable that inclusive education should become instrumental in the empowerment of students with disabilities as it is defined as “a process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes” (Daniele, 2017, p. 10). New knowledge thus becomes the main source of development, empowerment and emancipation.

At the centre of the development of people is education (Kumar, 2017; Ryyänänen & Nivala, 2017; Undiyaundeye, 2013) as it is vital to the growth, knowledge and skills development of all people in any country. The education history in South Africa, especially that of black communities, is embedded within apartheid policies that led to inequality and marginalisation. It is thus unfortunate that when the doors of education eventually opened,

opportunities have remained relatively closed for people with disabilities. Access to higher education for students with disabilities is still engulfed by challenges that might deter them from seeking access. In South Africa education is a basic human right (South Africa, 1996), and through education people will live a better life.

Various studies have confirmed the strong relationship between poverty and disabilities, especially in African countries (Graham et al., 2014, 2010). The UNCRPD (2006) also acknowledges that many people with disabilities live in poor rural conditions, especially in developing countries. According to Tesemma (2014, p. 122), “poverty and disability are intertwined”. It is acknowledged that this statement may not be applicable in all instances, but people who live with disabilities often live in poverty because the majority do not have qualifications or skills that enable them to find employment. This means that their families take care of them, which is an added financial burden when the household income is already strapped. In some cases where people with disabilities are employed, they are paid low wages due to their generally low level of education. This often leaves them devastated as some need assistive technology or medication which is not cheap and may eventually make them dependent (Koszela, 2013; Loewen & Pollard, 2010). Consequently, very few people with disabilities find gainful employment (Kumar, 2017; Sibanda, 2015). This was confirmed by one of the participants:

If you are disabled it’s hard; you have to rely on your education and you are not like everyone else who can go and do anything and get money. Some people can be domestic workers and so on. But for us education is a priority; you need to get education. Otherwise you’ll remain at home and get a social grant which is not enough. I always thought about my future, my mom’s sacrifice that I can’t let her down.

The participants felt that being educated would give them a new identity and boost their self-esteem (see Chapter Six) and they saw education as a tool towards empowerment. Impairment may not only be physical but may also be emotional and psychological as society discriminates against and excludes these people in various ways. The empowerment of people with disabilities is thus encouraged globally, nationally and locally by several organisations including private structures, NGOs, the public sector and universities. The concept of empowerment is commonly used to refer to the skills development of

marginalised groups such as women, Black communities, people living with disabilities, and other minority groups. According to Ryyänen and Nivala (2017):

Empowerment is understood as raising awareness of the structural conditions of individual lives and finding possibilities for change. The individual-oriented understanding of empowerment concentrates on life situations and on how people experience them. Empowerment is seen, first and foremost, as an individual process of finding one's inner strength, of supporting personal development, and strengthening personal capabilities in order to survive difficult life situations and to find paths to well-being (p. 36).

The effectiveness of empowerment requires the full participation of the individual who is being empowered. The results of empowerment are usually enjoyed by many people in a country and thus it is crucial for economic development. This is emphasised by Strom (1950, in Madaus, 2011) who states: "If the country is to capitalise on the total talent reserve in its young people, then the resources of this group [people with disabilities] must not be overlooked" (p. 10). It is acknowledged that the boundaries between education, development and empowerment are blurred, but it is undeniable that students with disabilities will benefit from any form of education as they will be exposed to all three phenomena, particularly if they have achieved academic success in some form or another.

It is a reality that in some deep rural areas people are still without proper housing, sanitation, roads, libraries or basic infrastructure, and thus life in deep rural areas is not easy. People are waiting for development to reach these areas and are suffering in the meantime. However, while social inequalities and the scourge of poverty, especially in townships and rural areas, may have negative connotations, these adversities also contributed positively to the academic success of some of the participants as they were motivating factors that encouraged the students to be academically and emotionally resilient. In this way they were able to improve their lifestyles and those of their families. Themba stated:

When you look at your environment you see that those who chose to go to school are living a better life and I have dreams to become something in future. Since I come from rural areas there is not much happening and I could not imagine myself sitting at home doing nothing. I have big dreams—my own IT company!

Some participants came from families where none was employed or there was a single parent who was the sole breadwinner. In some instances their social grant was used to support their families. The devastating conditions of many households contributed to the participants' motivation and resilience to persevere in their studies. They thus seemed able to transcend hardships and adversity and to pursue their dreams. Their main focus was on finishing their qualifications which they believed might lead to a successful life and gainful employment. Academic success thus became a means to an end, and this translated into emancipation from the bonds of discrimination, inequality and poverty. According to Portnoi and Kwang (2015), emancipation is seen as a social betterment, which is applicable to students with disabilities. By focusing on their studies, the participating students were propelled towards a better future through their resilience and self-efficacy. They thus disrupted the disability discourse that believes they have no voice and are disempowered (Andrew et al., 2015). Their success may thus be viewed as a source of transformation and positive change, not only for themselves but for their families as well. Futhi envisaged how her academic success would contribute to her family:

My mom is very happy, she has always encouraged me that I must finish so that I can assist others at home. She would say she is counting on me, finally she will be like other people. I constantly pray that I finish my studies as well as get a job and make a difference at home. No one is actually working, my sisters have temporary jobs. My social grant is not enough to support my family, and I need a good income. I want to bring positive change at home and be the first one to finish university successfully.

Sometimes the disabilities people have restrict freedom of movement and they may be confined in one space. Nolwazi wanted to change her confinement at home in a deep rural area in Northern KwaZulu-Natal. She stated:

It was very difficult and frustrating, I was stuck in one place. When I'm at home there is no place I can go to. We are in a deep rural area where there is one bus that goes to town a day. Taxis are a little bit far and all these are not wheelchair user-friendly. At some point I got sick and could not sleep at night. The doctor said I was stressed and it was true, I was very frustrated to stay at home doing nothing. I can't even assist with chores because the space is limited. I cannot drive through with my wheelchair. Even the yard at home is not that big so I'm limited in every way. One day I will have my own place and things will definitely change.

This narrative demonstrated that, for some student, being at university was not only to gain knowledge, but it was a ticket to a free and better life. This underscores the subtheme of emancipation that can only be achieved through education. Nolwazi believed that her education would empower her to change her adverse situation and that of her family. Most importantly, she had long endured the reality of a disabling environment, even to the extent that she could not pursue her studies immediately after Matric. Her experiences underscored the philosophy of the social model which highlights the debilitating impact that the external environment has on a person with a disability. It is such environments that perpetuate poverty and illiteracy, particularly among people with disabilities.

Nolwazi's case was similar to that of Mary and others, who also could not attend classes because of dysfunctional lifts and inclement weather conditions. An evaluation of these cases elucidated the point that people with physical disabilities have adverse experiences of confinement that cause frustration and a sense of exclusion. In this context, the infrastructure at tertiary institutions remains one of the biggest obstacles for students with disabilities. This argument is supported by Lane (2017) and Matshedisho (2007). The ripple effect of a lack of inclusivity in higher education is an enormous disadvantage for students with disabilities, and this often directly impacts the successful completion of their studies.

Another form of confinement was not so literal but equally debilitating, as the study found that students with disabilities were sometimes compelled to pursue a qualification that was not of their choice simply because they could not be accommodated in a particular course. This finding is corroborated by previous studies on students with disabilities in higher education (Mantsha, 2016; Matshedisho, 2010; Mutanga & Walker, 2007). I detected that my participants who found themselves in this situation were frustrated because there was a strong possibility that they would be stuck for the rest of their lives in a career they did not like. In these cases, the students showed remarkable resilience by persevering and trying to make the best of a situation that was beyond their control.

8.3 Leadership Roles

On a very positive note, the involvement of students with disabilities in leadership roles was a powerful emancipatory strategy (Andrew et al., 2015). By exposing themselves to participation

in such roles they were able to influence decision making and served as a voice for students with disabilities (Mutanga, 2015). Leadership is an important construct of resilience as resilient people have to make decisions or choices that may sometimes not be favourable (Ledesma, 2014). One noteworthy finding was that a student with a disability was prepared to raise her voice and to express her concerns regarding the lack of user-friendliness of the university environment. Babhekile stated:

In the workshop we had, I raised my concerns in terms of my disability and [the poor] infrastructure. The university needs to take disabilities seriously. It needs to make the entire community of the university aware of disabilities and how to accommodate each type. There needs to be a strategy with time lines of implementation [and] a very good plan of action.

Babhekile was the chairperson of a committee for students with disabilities and demonstrated her leadership qualities by actually raising her voice and speaking out in a workshop against the poor infrastructure that impacted students with disabilities. One could only surmise that, should Babhekile be able to actively advocate for better facilities for students with disabilities, her participation in a leadership role would directly help the university community understand the position of students with disabilities better.

The government of South Africa discourages prejudice, stigmatisation and discrimination against people with disabilities, and this is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and other pieces of legislation (see Chapter Two). People with disabilities are capable individuals who should not be judged by their limitations – instead, they need to be continuously supported by providing them with enabling environments. Clearly, the participants desired academic success but, even more so, they wanted independence, emancipation and to be recognised as members of society who do not need a negative label.

8.4 The Spirit of Resilience

The discourse above has established a sound background as to why the students with disabilities who participated in the study succeeded in the way they did in the higher education context. In brief, they wanted to be independent, empowered and emancipated. Moreover, their resilience and persistence also underscored the reasons for and the manner in which they achieved success, reached their goals, and realised their dreams.

Being resilient has stood out as an active process that requires personal involvement and dedication to achieve a goal. However, this does not mean that people have to be continuously and purposefully exposed to hurtful situations in order to prove a point. The findings illustrated that the students with disabilities bore extra burdens that they needed to deal with. Moreover, as much as their experiences might have been common to a large degree, the challenges they experienced depended on the type of disability they had and the context of the challenge itself. I underscored the fact that these students used different approaches to deal with their respective challenges and that their achievement in this regard depended on their capabilities and available resources. In chapters Five, Six and Seven it was stated that the participants managed to be academically successful by using different strategies to study. It was clear that they needed to put in extra effort and be resilient and self-reliant in order to attain the results they were able to achieve.

Resilience is considered a high order skill that is underpinned by many other skills that need to be applied in order to get to the point of resilience (Van Breda, 2018). These skills are communication skills, intrapersonal skills, problem solving skills, decision making skills, self-awareness and intelligence. It is noteworthy that these skills are effective for self-efficacy and resilience as well (Bandura, 1993; Zimmerman et al., 1992). In no particular order, Figure 8.1 below illustrates the skills and attributes that one needs in order to bounce back from distressful situations. All the participants demonstrated these skills.



Figure 8.1: Skills associated with resilience

8.4.1 Communication

The ability to communicate meaningfully is seen as a powerful tool in any situation as, without communication, it becomes difficult to elicit the necessary support (Pintrich, 2000; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016). Students with disabilities should learn to communicate their needs to different stakeholders, even in cases where they get frustrated when channels of communication are not clear. This was evident in the experiences of the participants during registration, where a lack of information was identified as a frustrating challenge. In some cases people chose not to listen to their needs, and these situations required assertiveness and perseverance as additional components of resilience.

8.4.1.1 Self-awareness and intrapersonal skills

The participants agreed that having a good understanding of self is important. According to Yailagh et al. (2014), self-awareness and intrapersonal skills are critical in understanding

one's ability, and this understanding translates to the next order of empowerment and development. If an understanding of the concept of self is lacking, it may be difficult to fully project oneself towards future prospects. Such a person will be content but ignorant and may not develop strategies to develop and grow. However, when a self-concept has been developed and when intrapersonal skills have been refined, the disability is no longer an issue and the person's identity is intact. For example, Jean stated:

When you have a permanent disability or was born with it, it's actually not going to go away. You might as well accept it and deal with it; so just live with it.

Thus intrapersonal and self-awareness skills are critical in developing an identity and being comfortable with it (Zimmerman, 2014). For instance, accepting who you are and what you look like is very important in determining future prospects.

8.4.1.2 Intelligences and decisiveness

Inner ability translates into many other positive attributes such as positive behaviour and the manner in which one responds to a specific environment and its challenges. Being academically successful does not only depend on one kind of intelligence such as IQ, but other types of intelligence are equally important, such as emotional intelligence and social intelligence. The participants displayed various kinds of intelligence that assisted them in being academically resilient. For example, the student who was known as 'Coach' demonstrated intellectual, social and emotional intelligence when he started coaching a soccer team. For this he required strong emotional and intellectual resilience and his social skills were powerfully enhanced as he was able to draw separate individuals together in a cohesive team. Also, his social skills were obviously enriched as he exuded such a forceful impact that even students outside the team acknowledged his leadership position by calling him 'Coach'. Moreover, by applying these various intelligences he constructed a strong self-image and self-awareness which, in turn, contributed to his academic success.

8.4.1.3 Problem solving

Coupled with the intelligences referred to above is the ability to make informed decisions and to solve problems. Any person who possesses resilience displays these skills time and again, and thus a situation in which one is vulnerable requires decision making that will determine

future outcomes. Some decisions may not be easy. For instance, Peter chose to write an examination rather than to have an operation to ease his pain.

8.4.2 Resilience as a beacon of hope

The devastating situations that students often find themselves in often generate a spirit of resilience that serves to shape their focus. This study demonstrated that negative experiences have the potential to produce positive results if one concentrates on positive goals and is enthused through a spirit of resilience. It is this ability to ‘dig deep’ that gives students with disabilities the urge to want to succeed, no matter what challenges they may encounter. Peter desired to be emancipated by achieving a qualification and was very passionate to complete his study programme no matter what difficulties he was experiencing at the time. His boldness and resilience resonated in the following comment:

I never give up! I never let anything stop me from achieving my goals. This diploma is going to be everything since I’ve no one in my life. My leg hurts so badly, the doctors want to operate on it, but that cannot be done now since I’m preparing for exams. I’ll see to that after the exams.

The phenomenon of resilience increasingly gained momentum and became stronger throughout the discourse. This is because the participants displayed positive energy towards developing their careers and themselves with the purpose of being emancipated from the bondage of poverty, confined spaces, discrimination and dependency. They projected a positive attitude towards any obstacle that threatened their success. Nolwazi experienced hunger and malnutrition because she could not cook, but her focus was on survival and achievement:

I told myself that if others survive, how will I not because I wasn’t the first student with a disability at the university. I really didn’t care; I told myself that it won’t kill me if it means no food for me. I will survive. My focus is to change my life. When I came here it was indeed difficult. I used to eat bread because I couldn’t cook until it made me sick but I survived.

The discourse referred to many harsh and adverse experiences for my participants, but each in their own way showed strong character and pulled through. None decided to quit. Thami explained why it was important for him to persevere and not to give up:

It is because I know that there are people back home who are expecting that I finish definitely this year. They are already counting on me that I'll be supporting them in one way or another.

It was mentioned in Chapter Seven that it is common amongst African communities for a successful member of a family to take care of the entire family. This was a common experience and goal among the participants, particularly as a university qualification was perceived as a main contributor to success in a knowledge-based economy, for socio-economic development, as a status symbol, and for a better future. Against this background it must be mentioned that, at the time of the study, the country experienced dire economic challenges with high unemployment rates and graduates finding it hard to gain employment. Nevertheless, it was interesting to see that the participants were not only positive about finding employment, but they were enthused about becoming economically self-sufficient. Quite a few aspired to become entrepreneurs and create employment for others.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter is concluded with the understanding that the participants' experiences of academic success were informed mainly by their lived experiences in adverse backgrounds where poverty, inequality, a lack of inclusivity, and poor family support prevailed for most. However, regardless of these challenges, they were academically and emotionally resilient which resulted in self-efficacy. It was my contention at the time of completing this study that all my participants would complete their studies in the allocated time as their resilience and self-efficacy would no doubt be the fuel that would drive them towards completing their studies successfully. As students with disabilities, they exuded resilience and commitment and demonstrated that they were responsible individuals who relied on self-efficacy rather than on hand-outs. As an adult and researcher with no prior experiences of people with disabilities, I stood in awe of their forcefulness and was enthused by the indomitable spirit that they radiated.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Introduction

The main goal of this study was to explore the academic experiences of students with disabilities at universities of technology that were instrumental in ensuring their academic success. This chapter concludes the study report by summarising some salient points. During my analyses and evaluation of the data, various themes emerged that I discussed in an attempt to address the three research questions:

- Which experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?
- How do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in universities of technology?
- Why do the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities contribute to their academic success in the way they do?

The study was based on the interpretivist paradigm and utilised phenomenology as well as the resilience and the self-efficacy lenses to explore the academic experiences of students with disabilities in order to determine the factors that led to and sustained their success as tertiary students who were afflicted with disabilities. The first question was addressed by describing their understandings of academic success. It was found that these understandings resonated with their own identities, as was discussed in Chapter Six. There was consensus amongst the participants that being disabled was not necessarily an obstacle to performing well. They had a shared common goal, which was to complete their qualifications in the allocated time as this would enable them to develop themselves and to impact those around them positively.

The second research question addressed the protective factors that contributed to their experiences of academic success. The last research question sought to determine the rationality of the experiences of academic success for these students. These factors were illuminated in Chapter Eight as independence and future prospects, overcoming disability and poverty, and

development, empowerment and emancipation, which were found to be the main facilitators of their academic success.

The study was embedded in the interpretivist paradigm that allowed me to employ a qualitative research design which, in turn, facilitated the use of interviews, document analysis and photo-voice images. Photo-voice images were used to visually illustrate the strengths and concerns of the participants, to create knowledge through dialogue about the issues that drove and impacted their achievement of academic success, and to influence positive change in universities' policies pertaining to students with disabilities (Wang & Burris, 1997). The results based on the photo-voice images reflected various experiences of suffering, threats, support, learning strategies, survival strategies and entertainment. This mixture of experiences could be used by policy makers to engender change in university policies in order to address the adverse experiences of students with disabilities on the campuses under study.

To consolidate the discourse, I draw attention to the salient point of shared lived experiences, and I address some recommendations for future studies. I conclude by offering final pertinent remarks.

9.2 Shared Lived Experiences

All the participants had a disability of some kind, whether it was physically visible or invisible, and I could conclude that their experiences of disabilities in the context of higher education were diverse. As much as they all had disabilities, their experiences were not challenging in the same way and they had different approaches to deal with their respective disability challenges.

All the participants came from poor to relatively poor home environments where they had encountered support or, in some instances, obstruction and even abuse. It must be noted that their economic status was not a criterion for inclusion in the study, but it was one of many discoveries during the course of the study. A common feature was that each of these participants demonstrated perseverance, self-efficacy and resilience as they had all achieved well academically and expected to obtain their well-deserved qualification at the end of that year.

The participants shared various experiences related to their diverse disabilities and all aspired to succeed in their studies regardless of their disabilities or debilitating challenges. Clearly, the higher education environment added to the adversity they experienced, but their high self-efficacy and resilience propelled them to persist and pursue their studies successfully. These students showed high levels of maturity and thus understood their current state as students with disabilities, but this did not prevent them from dreaming about a better future. All these students exuded a sense of achievement and they were willing to embrace opportunities and an inspiring positive energy.

Clearly, students with disabilities often have to navigate their way with difficulty in the challenging environment of higher education (Chapter Two, Chapters Six, Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight). Institutions of higher education could learn from this study on how to support and make their campuses conducive for the successful achievement of students with disabilities. I found that the experiences of the participants at the two universities under study were not very different as there were various commonalities (see Table 9.1 below). Similar experiences were also found by Mutanga (2015) at the University of Venda and the University of the Free State as well as by Mantsha (2016). Various studies have thus demonstrated unequivocally that students with disabilities experience challenges in the academic environment at universities, and this confirms that tertiary institutions that have not yet done so should transform their environments to enable students with disabilities to succeed in their studies.

Table 9.1: Summary of challenges commonly experienced by students with disabilities at the study sites

Common Areas of Concern	Durban University of Technology	Mangosuthu University of Technology
University policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residence and draft assessment policies make no mention of students with disabilities except for concession time. • Student Handbook does not mention students with disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft residence policy silent on students with disabilities • Assessment policy does not mention accommodation of students with disabilities
Teaching and learning practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance depends on lecturer and student 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance depends on lecturer and student

	arrangement – not formalised	arrangement – not formalised
Computer laboratory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-existent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not resourced
Study centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-existent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-existent
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available on request 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available on request
Disability Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available but not fully resourced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-existent; relies on student counselling services
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSFAS – externally controlled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NSFAS-externally controlled
Technological assistive devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited availability in selected departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited availability in selected departments- no braille facilities
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety is a concern on and off campus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety is a concern on and off campus
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many buildings are not responsive to and accommodative of the needs of students with disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many buildings are not responsive to and accommodative of the needs of students with disabilities

Table 9.1 illustrates that the participants were cognisant of adversities in the higher education environments where they studied. Stressors were, inter alia, the higher education system/environment, a lack of funding, frustrations and anxiety, and even the attitude of some family members. However, the students were not blinded or debilitated by adversity as their ultimate goal was to be academically successful. Figure 9.1 below illustrates the shared lived experiences (phenomenology) of the participants. At the centre of this diagram are the connectors that keep the system functional and dynamic. This ‘glue’ is comprised of resilience and self-efficacy and ensures that academic success is achieved.

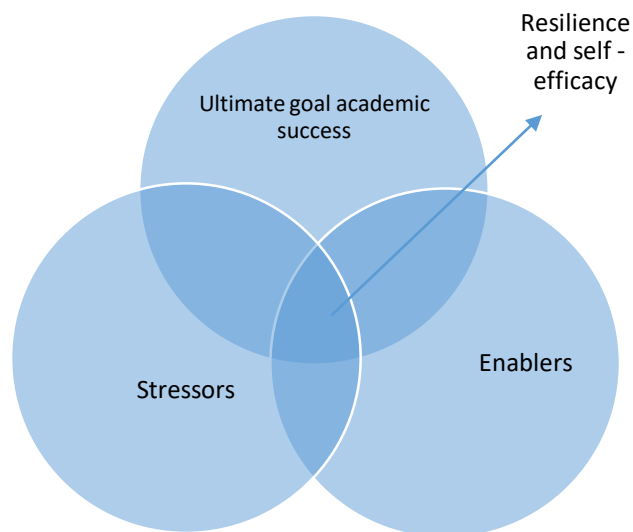


Figure 9.1: Graphic illustration of the shared lived experiences of students with disabilities that ensure academic success

Table 9.2: Summary of results

Ultimate goals to achieve academic success	Stressors	Enablers
Independence and future prospects	Lack of inclusivity	Support
Empowerment, development and emancipation	Curriculum	Self-efficacy
	Teaching and learning	Self-regulated learning
	Residences	Spirituality
	Funding	Resilience

9.3 Main Findings

9.3.1 Lack of inclusivity

Regardless of the two universities' open policies that ostensibly embraced the presence of students with disabilities on campus, these students encountered challenges that demonstrated

a lack of inclusivity and that unnecessarily made their lives more difficult. The higher education environment is supposed to bring new opportunities and hope and allow young minds to unrestrainedly explore the massive body of knowledge in which they are interested and that will enable them to find gainful employment in an environment where they feel at home. Unfortunately, some participants first needed to wrestle with an unwelcoming environment which directly and indirectly discriminated against them before they could focus on their studies.

Throughout this report, the issue of inclusivity was highlighted as a main barrier in the higher education context for students with disabilities. This finding was consistent with that of previous studies, but in my view this is an issue that needs to be addressed as a matter of grave urgency. Attrition (or dropout) rates were not a focus of this study, but the low percentage of students with disabilities that were enrolled at the tertiary institutions under study was noted when I scrutinised the enrolment data. As this ratio is contrary to every piece of legislation in our democratic country, one can only urge that tertiary education institutions, particularly those that are recipients of students from disadvantaged societies, should step up and address this shortcoming.

9.3.2 Academic success and resilience

Against all odds, my participants were resilient young people who consistently performed well. Resilient people succeed in awkward situations (Wang et al., 2015) and my participants were no exception. Resilience and self-efficacy are instrumental in understanding the self. In this study it was evident in the manner in which these young people with disabilities embraced the challenges they encountered at the higher education institutions where they studied. It was also evident in how they understood themselves as people with disabilities. By understanding their challenges they were able to devise strategies and skills to survive and even excel in the academic environment. To devise these strategies, they exercised resilience and ‘dug deep’ to unearth spirituality, self-efficacy and self-regulated learning. They also sought support from different people such as their peers, some lecturers, family members and other friends. The process they embraced resulted in continuous self-development. Against this background, universities need to assist students who cannot rely on their physical abilities to achieve academic success, and thus the professional development of relevant staff members is of paramount importance.

To break the chains of poor academic performance and unwelcoming tertiary environments for students with disabilities, cognisance needs to be taken by all role-players in tertiary education and policy making environments of the following:

- Stigma, prejudice and discrimination cloud the lives of people with disabilities and should thus be uprooted long before students enrol for university courses. This needs to start at grass roots level where leaders of society – politicians, spiritual leaders, health care workers and teachers – should inform communities and families of the value and humanity of people with disabilities. This should start at primary school level. The medical and mental health models should be abandoned in favour of more appropriate models that underscore that people with disabilities are as important as every other person in society. One such model is the *effective model of disability* that promotes resilience and self-efficacy through capability thinking among individuals with disabilities (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016). This study corroborated the findings of similar studies that students with disabilities have a large array of talents. For example, some participants functioned well in entertainment, sport, leadership and business endeavours while also achieving academic success. Therefore, with reference to the *effective model of disability*, disability should not be viewed as an obstacle (WHO, 2011).
- The transformation of universities must be a reality and not mere lip service. Thus policies that address the needs of students with disabilities should be taken out of their folders and actively applied. Strict monitoring is required to ensure that officials are trained and do their jobs.
- Students with disabilities must be afforded spaces and opportunities for individual growth and development in their own right. Infrastructural improvement should be a priority in this regard. Library shelves should be lowered, lifts should be in a working condition, ramps should be constructed, streets should be made safe, and walkways should be covered not only for the benefit of students with disabilities, but for all.
- Each student who has a disability should be given a voice and be acknowledged as a worthy citizen of our democratic society.
- Leadership roles should be allocated to students with disabilities – not as a hand-out but as a hand-up – to give recognition to their strength and resilience. If opportunities are created for these young people to shine as worthy and recognised leaders of society,

their contributions as leaders will be resounding, as many have resilience and a strength of spirit that was forged in the fire of adversity.

Effective support mechanisms for students with disabilities are critically important. This is consistent with recommendations by Matsha (2016), Lourens (2015) and Mutanga (2015). Students with disabilities need support from all stakeholders such as HEI management structures, the CHE, the DHET, and the community at large. Internal stakeholders such as various departments' administrative and academic staff as well as student bodies also need to be sensitised to the plight of students with disabilities.

9.4 Implications of the Findings for Future Studies

- Future studies should focus on specific disabilities and these students' experiences of achievement of academic success. For example, the experiences of students in wheelchairs were incidental in this study, but my data and insights suggest that their plight was perhaps the most dire of all. Such a study will be a step in the right direction as it will recognise their rights and give a voice to people who do not enjoy the freedom of movement.
- The study has shed light on the challenges that students with disabilities continue to face in tertiary institutions, which suggests that integrative planning should be considered in planning the future for such students in tertiary institutions. All policies, regulations and guidelines must give recognition to this vulnerable group instead of wallowing in the current 'one-size-fits-all' approach (South African Government, 2015, p. 52).

9.5 Conclusion

Inclusive education needs to be viewed as a freedom struggle because students with disabilities want to be emancipated. In this struggle there will be those who will survive and those who will fall on the way until the battle is won. Those who have managed to succeed should be congratulated on their achievement. However, universities should guard against taking that glory as their own (Mutanga, 2017). A FOTIM (2011) report exposed that, in 2011, many universities did not have policies on disability in place. It was disappointing to note that, by 2019, not much had changed in this regard given the findings of this study as illustrated in

Table 9.1 above. For instance, the two universities where this study was conducted seemed to be lagging behind in accommodating students with disabilities.

Universities need to develop policies, operational plans and strategies for the effective implementation of regulations pertaining to students with disabilities (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Mutanga, 2018). The literature that was perused cited many instances of poor implementation of the disability policy in inclusive higher education. Such reports should be scrutinised and their recommendations should be used to address and eradicate challenges. Universities that have not yet considered inclusive education, or that are in the process of implementing inclusive education policies, need to tailor make their regulations to their own environment. Inclusive education is one way of making universities enabling environments for students with disabilities and, should it be accorded the dedication it deserves, it may open up many opportunities for university communities and stakeholders. Focus should be on:

- Easy mobility for students with disabilities in terms of NQF requirements. This is a paramount consideration. Any student should be able to relocate to any university without fear of not being accommodated, and thus uniform standards in terms of inclusive education should be devised and adhered to.
- High standards: Management teams of reputable institutions should strive for world class standards and a good reputation.
- Training: Staff members who are trained will have sustainable life skills and they will be better equipped to support students with disabilities.

While my recommendations do not ignore the economic effect that inclusive education presupposes (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012), transformation may not necessarily cost money but will require positive attitudes. For instance, adding information about available facilities for students with disabilities on the university's website, recording the nature and number of students with disabilities, and keeping record of their progress or attrition rates will be easy steps in the right direction.

South African legislation exudes a positive and supportive attitude towards people with disabilities. However, if legislative guidelines and regulations are not implemented and monitored properly, these pieces of paper or online websites will make no difference in the

lives of people with disabilities. There should be consequences for offenders who fail to accommodate students with disabilities, as this negatively impacts their right to education.

I believe that the final words of this thesis should belong to the students who so enthusiastically participated in the study. I would thus like to share two extracts: one by Babhekile and one by Themba. Their voices and words touched me deeply and will send a powerful message to all students with disabilities, prospective students, and university communities at large.

Babhekile stated:

I told myself that my disability was not going to stop me from my dream career. I am not going to allow disability to dictate my life or under-estimate myself. Even though some people may look down upon me, I'm not going to allow that. Self-confidence is very important for me.

Themba said:

I would like to advise them not to put their disability in the hands of other people and also not to put disability in their own minds. People will pity you at first and they will start laughing at you. They shouldn't let any person look down upon them. Understanding your rights and focusing on your studies are crucial in making your living conditions better. You should understand your condition and ask for help from relevant people. It's also good to find something that interests you. For instance, I do music.

I salute these powerful young people and all the students with disabilities whom they so ably represented.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Research approval



18 July 2017

Mrs Princess Thulile Duma (207528086)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Mrs Duma,

Protocol reference number: HSS/0847/017D

Project title: Experiences of academic success of students with disabilities in Universities of Technologies in South Africa

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

In response to your application received on 05 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)

/ms

Cc Supervisor: Dr Lester Brian Shawa
Cc Academic Leader Research: Dr SB Khoza
Cc School Administrator: Ms Tyzer Khumalo

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

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag XE4001, Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/8390/4567 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4800 Email: hrb@ukzn.ac.za / svshemmi@ukzn.ac.za / rohung@ukzn.ac.za

Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Appendix B: Application fo ethics approval

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Note to researchers: Notwithstanding the need for scientific and legal accuracy, every effort should be made to produce a consent document that is as linguistically clear and simple as possible, without omitting important details as outlined below. Certified translated versions will be required once the original version is approved.

There are specific circumstances where witnessed verbal consent might be acceptable, and circumstances where individual informed consent may be waived by HSSREC.

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: 13 August 2017

Dear Madam/ Sir

My name is Princess Thulile Duma (20752886) student from UKZN in the School of Higher Education. My contact number is 072 480 3755 and email address at ptduma@mut.ac.za

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research of experiences of academic success of students with disabilities. The aim and purpose of this research is to:

Explore the experiences of academically successful students with disabilities to determine the factors that contributed to their academic success while studying at a university of technology;

Examine how the experiences of students with disabilities contributed to their academic success; and to

Critically examine why the experiences of students with disabilities contributed to their academic success in the way that they did.

The study is expected to enroll fourteen students where seven students will be from Mangosuthu University of Technology and the other seven from Durban University of Technology (DUT in any campus as there are many campuses it will depend on the HEMIS report as to where they are located). The participation will involve interviews for one hour duration but before interviews participants will receive an hour training on photovoice, as they will be required to take some photos that relate to the study. The interviews will be conducted a week later after they have taken photos. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be a year.

The study may involve discomforts as it is based on disabilities some students may feel uncomfortable to be identified as such. There are no direct benefit to the participants, however university community especially academia will. The knowledge created from the study may be used for policy formulation and improving teaching and learning, also understanding the academic success of students with disabilities. Without your participation the study will not be successful as there are no alternatives participants that may be used.

Other than the discomfort that may be caused there are no further risks that the participants may encounter. However, the service of student counselling unit will be made available should there be any of the participants need their attention.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number: HSS/0847/017D).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at 072 480 3755 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

Participation in this research is voluntary you may withdraw at any point and in case where you refuse to participate there will be no negative consequences on your side like cost or penalty incurred. However, in case you decide to withdraw you will be requested to put that in writing. Kindly note that; the researcher may terminate your participation should you not honor your appointments.

Participation in this study comes with no monetary benefits or any other benefits. Participants will be offered the opportunity to declare the type of anonymity and confidentiality in their involvement in this study. Although names will not be mentioned materials from the study might be attributed to the role holders.

The primary data will be stored at Higher Education, Training & Development, where the study is based. The disposal process will be done at the unit according to the University of KwaZulu-Natal regulations related to disposal procedures.

CONSENT that was completed by participants

Ihave been informed about the study entitled- **Experiences of academic success of students with disabilities in universities of technology in South Africa** by Princess Thulile Duma.

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 072 480 3755.

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 researcher 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

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

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

Video-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Use of my photographs for research purposes YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date

Appendix C: Research approval from Mangosuthu University of Technology



08 February, 2017

Mrs P.T. Duma

Mangosuthu University of Technology

Dear Mrs Duma

It is my pleasure to inform you that permission to conduct project titled: "Experiences of academic success of students living with disabilities in universities of technology" has been granted.

Permission to conduct the project is granted on the condition that any changes to the project must be brought to the attention of the MUT Research Ethics Committee as soon as possible.

Good luck with your research.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Anette Mienie", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Dr. Anette Mienie

Director: Research

031 9077354/7450

anette@mut.ac.za

Appendix D: Research approval from Durban University of Technology



Directorate for Research and Postgraduate Support
Durban University of Technology
Tromso Annexe, Steve Biko Campus
P.O. Box 1334, Durban 4000
Tel.: 031-37325767
Fax: 031-3732948
E-mail: moyos@dut.ac.za

6th March 2017

Ms Princess Thulile Duma
c/o School of Education
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal

Dear Ms Duma

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT THE DUT

Your email correspondence in respect of the above refers. I am pleased to inform you that the Institutional Research Committee (IRC) has granted permission for you to conduct your research "Experiences of academic success of students living with disabilities in Universities of Technology in South Africa" at the Durban University of Technology.

The DUT may impose any other condition it deems appropriate in the circumstances having regard to nature and extent of access to and use of Information requested.

We would be grateful if a summary of your key research findings can be submitted to the IRC on completion of your studies.

Kindest regards.
Yours sincerely

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

PROF. S. MOYO
DIRECTOR: RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE SUPPORT

Appendix E: Consent for taking and using my photograph

Consent for taking and using my photograph

I consent to be photographed as part of the research project on “*Experiences of academic success of students living with disabilities in universities of technology in South Africa.*”

I am aware that my picture might be published to show the results of the study. For instance, my picture may be used in a thesis, in book chapters, on a website, in journals, in a conference presentation and all other scientific channels.

Name..... Sign..... Date.....

Appendix F: Turn-it-in report