

**TOWARDS AN AFROCENTRIC PARADIGM FOR UNDERSTANDING
STUDENT SUCCESS IN THE COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AT A UNIVERSITY
IN KWAZULU-NATAL**

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DISSERTATION

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DECLARATION

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DEDICATION

To my family for your strength and warmth.

My mother Mrs M.D. Zuma and my father S.B. Zuma

My dearest Dr. Sandile S.S.S., Sizolwethu, and Thoba Buthelezi.

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies on the problem of poor students' throughout in higher education in South Africa had tended to work within the paradigm of understanding in which research and the outcome of research are portrayed as objective and predetermined. Unfortunately, such approaches produce models and theoretical frameworks that err in disregarding the historical and the contextual in people's lives. On the other hand, deductive and unilateral (one size fit all) perspectives and methodologies that assume that people's lived-experiences and realities are neutral and value-free similarly fail to account for university students' success or failure that emanate from the dynamic and unique nature of the culture and the context in which they live and work. Hence, the complex and diverse nature of South African students' population in higher education institutions do call for innovative and participatory methods of inquiry this is able to generate comprehensive conceptual models to inform prospective intervention programmes.

In contrast to these past approaches, the present study utilized a grounded theory methodology to facilitate the co-contribution of student participants in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data aimed at answering the persistent question about the factors that influence students' learning outcomes in higher education. The objective of the study was to facilitate the emergence of conceptual schemes or models that could inform a framework for understanding the first-year student's success at a university in KwaZulu-Natal province. The study employed focus group discussions to stimulate a controlled and detailed inquiry into what enables and/or constrains 2012 first year students' academic success at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg campus. The study involved 108 students who participated in seven participatory focus groups. Additionally, the study integrated the lessons learnt and data obtained from three first year students' participatory focus groups in 2011 who took part in the pilot phase of the research project.

The results show that the narratives of the students draw attention to the existence of some socio-economic factors, social class issues, socio-academic programmes and institutional infrastructure with potential to either impede or promote the success of students at the university. Fundamentally, some of the major themes that emerged from the study included the persistence of social inequalities in shaping the lived experiences, identities and perceptions of some of the students. The findings also indicate that majority of the student participants are aware of their agentic role within the learning process and did acknowledge

the operation of some negative and positive influences of certain systems towards their success at the university. The results of the study further showed that even though institutions of higher education in South Africa, such as the UKZN have progressive policies, it is crucial to constantly profile students and engage them especially at the first year level to demystify inherent negative ideologies about campus life and address particular identifiable students' concerns and challenges to ensure successful socio-academic integration and easy alignment between the student-institutional expectations.

The findings of the study equally showed that the lived-experiences of students are diverse and dynamic and do embrace a both/and, or a combination of African and Western values, ideologies, and practices. Such findings suggest that the complex realities of the students' campus life should always be taken into account when any attempt is made to promote planned institutional intervention programmes for the benefit of the students. The study highlights the relevance of the Afrocentric paradigm in the study of students' performance in higher education and the need for the application of multi-perspective process of inquiry when designing research projects that aim to explore a culture-sensitive phenomenon such as academic success in higher education in South Africa. Based on these findings it is recommended that future studies of students' performance in higher education would benefit from the application of participatory methodologies that give voice to the marginalised and the dominant worldviews of the participants. Such approaches hold enormous promise of yielding rich and holistic information that could contribute towards emancipation of the students and facilitate transformation of institutions of higher learning in the South and other regions of Africa.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and outline of the research problem

While access to South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has increased, improved success and graduation rates have yet to be achieved (Republic of South Africa, Department of Education (RSA, DoE) 1997, Sec. 2.29; Petersen, Low & Dumont, 2009). On the contrary, it is generally acknowledged that progression and retention of students at South African universities currently rank amongst the lowest in the world (Bitzer, 2009; Jama, Mapesela & Beylefeld, 2008; Letseka & Maile, 2008; *University World News*, 2008). Furthermore, graduation rates for white students are more than double those of black students (Letseka & Maile, 2008). According to recent reports by the Human Sciences Research Council, as many as 40% of students drop out of university in their first year of study (*University World News*, 2008), with graduation rates estimated at only 15% (Letseka & Maile, 2008). Thus, *equity of access* has not translated into progress in terms of *equity of outcomes*, signaling the need for urgent institutional efforts to increase throughput rates (RSA, DoE, 2008, p. 19).

The conceptualisation of higher education throughput rates (both nationally and internationally) has tended to rely on a unitary, single and universalistic perspective and has been transposed to other contexts to become a blueprint ('one-size-fits-all') aimed at identifying a single explanatory framework. However, given the diversity of the South African student population, it is improbable that such a model would provide a good fit for the data. Different analytic reasons are likely to account for failure or dropout rates among students from a diverse socio-economic and political landscape such as South Africa (Berkhout, in Lemmer & van Wyk, 2010; Bradbury & Miller, 2011; Morrow, 2009; Boughey, 2002, 2005, 2008).

Current theoretical models of student success are grounded in the realities of American college students and do not sufficiently address South African *structural/social diversity* and *inequality*. The current study aimed to explore South African students' discourse and the meaning they attach to their academic performance by engaging them from an Afrocentric perspective. The researcher sought to gain knowledge through interactive and participative methods that are embedded in what Brown (1993) called 'Southern' traditional ideologies and values.

This explorative research focused on students within the localised institution of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in the College of Humanities. The focus group approach was used to identify and understand the reasons for student success and establish the factors that constrain success at first-year level. Elements of a conceptual framework were established and used to propose recommendations for intervention programmes that would respond to the immediate challenges facing students at South African universities.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Studies on student success in higher education have: (1) focused on correlates of student attrition (e.g., demographic variables such as race) rather than on the determinants of student success (i.e., analytic reasons), and (2) have tended to approach the problem from a purely deficit perspective. As a result the black African student has emerged as an ‘at risk’ or ‘non-traditional’ student in the South African higher education context (Lemmer & van Wyk, 2010; Dass-Brailford, 2005).

Apart from the paternalistic (and, indeed racist) nature of such a perspective (cf., Anti-Racial Network, cited in RSA, DoE, 2008, sec. 4.2), such a perspective: (1) fails to adequately address the determinants of attrition rates (i.e., the structural, and other variables associated with such rates) and, (2) cannot account for the fact that a significant proportion of black African students are successful in their higher degree studies (i.e., notions of competence and/or resilience cannot be accommodated in such explanatory models). There is thus a clear need for studies grounded in the realities of the South African context in order to address the analytic issues relating to the difficulties experienced by South African students.

According to Boughey (2008), the reasons cited for lack of student success in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) include a lack of academic skills such as metacognitive and reading skills and study methods that promote retention of information; gaps in conceptual knowledge resulting from misconceptions derived from overreliance on common sense knowledge; lack of critical thinking skills; poor language development; and affective factors and divergent cultural values and norms that hinder the integration and assimilation of students in the dominant culture within HEIs. Global research (Geisler, 1994; Spenner, Buchman & Landerman, 2005) on HEIs in developed countries indicates that middle-class students’ home background rather than their school better prepares them for higher education. Researchers like Boughey (2008), Gee (1990), and Haggis (2003) concur with

Geisler (1994) that a student's sociocultural context and the assets that student brings to the institution are critical.

Boughey (2008) argues that meanings are not inherent in the text itself, but are derived from the context. She makes a distinction between autonomous literacy, which tends to be more pluralistic in nature and the ideological model of literacy, which advocates for a multiplicity of literacies inclusive of oral communication. Meanings cannot simply be constructed from logic and logical thinking about words without the context and other forms of support. Morrow (2009, p.37) also asserts that curriculum change that does not interrogate grammar; and values that shape and guide inquiry fail "to respect the distinctions between knowledge and propaganda..." thus limiting teaching practices. He calls for a "paradigm shift" and "disembedding" of the traditional culture. Van Wyk (2010) points to the tension between Western and African forms of knowledge which results in difficulties around epistemological access. Entitlement to access to HEIs does not presuppose academic achievement and the culture of entitlement undermines and delegitimises educational achievement (Morrow, 2009 p.75). According to Berkhout (2010, p.2), "*the characteristics that shape our thinking are born out of seeing something in relation to something else*".

The major challenge facing researchers within the African context is "*disrupting taken-for-granted conceptualisations*" (Berkhout, 2010, p.2) of what constitutes valid knowledge when it is not articulating the authentic voices of local people. It is important to note that HEIs exist within the global context as social constructs that serve a particular purpose within the parameters of certain ideologies. The South African HEI strives to position itself as a global citizen that promotes practices which "...favour historically constructed global patterns of schooling..." without seriously engaging with more challenging notions of complex and ambiguously constructed identities of groups (Berkhout, 2010, p.11). The current study raises the issue of how a South African institution such as UKZN engages with diversity in its student body and acknowledges multiple experiences in knowledge production.

It is, therefore, imperative for researchers and policy makers to continuously challenge the assumptions made to justify interventions by attempting to tap into the lived experiences of students and not simply offering interventions based on the 'inherent' disadvantage of students. In their study of first-year philosophy students' assignments Bradbury and Miller (2011) found that students drew on common experiences in their home context in order to make sense of the new academic text. However, within the academic context this experience, which is the students' main asset when they enter university, came across as naïve and 'un-

academic,’ and thus unacceptable as an academic text. Morrow (2009) shows that the current education system privileges certain contexts over others in order to sustain universities, consequently denying some students epistemological access. He further distinguishes between academic achievement and educational achievement. Morrow (2009) also makes a distinction between the concept of achievement in competitive activities and that related to academic ones. One can thus conclude that those students that are often labelled as ‘non-traditional’/‘disadvantaged’ have limited opportunities to experience educational achievement.

1.3 Knowledge Systems and Education

Twenty-two years into democracy, academic and political freedom in South Africa has not translated into decolonialised intellectual traditions, rituals, and habitus in teaching and research (Nyamnjoh, 2011). The opposite can be observed in the way that universities promote universalistic and uncompromisingly foreign cultures, populations, and predicaments for the sake of globalisation (Nyamnjoh, 2011). African universities subject themselves to international rating standards designed for foreign contexts, with negative consequences for many who are excluded or barred from access. However, there has been some progress in terms of the number of academic development programmes offered to support students who are seen as ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘underdeveloped’ within HEIs.

According to Boughey (2008) and Gee (1990), academic development has a long history that has been informed by different ideological and discursive positions. Student support programmes became more prominent when previously white universities were subjected to the provisions of the University Amendment Act no. 83 of 1983. This Act aimed to regulate the number of black students admitted to liberal white universities. In resisting this attempt, university student support services were “infused with concern for non-discrimination and equality” (Boughey, 2002). The main focus of the student support initiative was to address the socio-economic and educational background of students who were perceived as having the potential to meet the academic demands of the university. As a result, psychometric assessments and correlation studies became more critical in the admission and placement of students in various fields of study. The earliest South African Foundation Programmes employed psychologists and social workers to deal with black students’ ‘problems.’ Effectively, this approach locates the ‘problem’ in the student rather than in the institution – something that was pointed out as early in the late 1980’s (Boughey, 2002). Nowadays, foundation programmes often teach ‘life skills’ – one has to ask, though,

‘whose life?’ and ‘whose skills?’ as students that attend university do have life skills – they are just not recognised because they differ from the dominant ones. These deficit assumptions remain prevalent and are still being used to conceptualise the reasons for the lack of academic success of ‘underprepared’ or ‘disadvantaged’ students (Bradbury & Miller, 2011; Morrow, 2009).

Nyamnjoh (2011) asserts that the current South African education system does not differ significantly from apartheid education. The deconstruction of the curriculum is critical in creating access. The South African Minister of Basic Education has called for changes in the curriculum, including mother tongue instruction at foundation level. However, language and curriculum review within South African HEIs with a view to domesticating or renegotiating epistemologies that are informed by local knowledge, cosmologies, and worldviews does not seem to be the main agenda within the South African context (Nyamnjoh, 2011). The curriculum review agenda is likely to lag behind given the pressure on universities to maintain their position or advance in the world ranking tables which favour Northern and Western masculine values and culture. Globalisation has put pressure on universities to meet demands to produce what Bozalek and Boughey (2008) call “knowledge workers.” The drive for high ranking overshadows opportunities that exist within various HEIs to engage with other, authentic forms of knowledge production that could enhance student success.

Lifeworlds and experiences cannot be imported and the decontextualisation of knowledge for the sake of homogeneity and imperialism should be viewed with skepticism. Non-European cultures (including African cultures) do not need a European connection to be legitimate (Hoskins, 1992a, 1992b). Some scholars (Ahadi, 2007; Hook, 2004; Mkhize, 2004a; Sigogo & Modipa, 2004) call for indigenisation and Africanisation of knowledge for it to be relevant and practically significant in the African context. The Afrocentric perspective is concerned with the dialectical relationship between the individual and society and the individual’s lived experiences, focusing on meaningful interactions. It is critical of self-contained individualism but embraces the notion that African people are authentic and argues that African cultures must be treated as original and unique. Afrocentrism can be equated with what De Lissovoy (2010, p. 279) terms the ‘decolonial pedagogy’ which critically challenges hegemonic positions perpetuated by colonial history and Eurocentrism that have influenced the conceptualisation of student success.

In the South African context, such a conceptualisation is compounded by many factors such as race, socio-cultural ethnicity, and political, socio-economic and social class

discourse. Berkhout (2010, pp. 4-5) identifies some of the factors that can be used to analyse the education system and conceptualise the reasons for students' poor academic success in HEIs. These include governance aspects such as the nature of government and control structures; the legislative framework and the administration and management that implement policy and regulate the education system; financing models; and the way education is structured. Others relate to learner characteristics such as demographic information about learners and the socio-economic variables that affect them. HEIs' learning and teaching practice are also important considerations, including the quality and nature of pedagogy and the type of assessment practices and conceptualisation of success, as well as and language competency, focusing on the language of instruction. Sociocultural aspects include the nature and quality of support provided; and how cultural, religious and other forms of diversity are assimilated by the individual, the institution, and society. The methodological and epistemological facets include the ideological position of the institution as well as the economic and political climate that shapes access policies and creates opportunities for the student beyond the HEI, transformation, and innovations that continuously challenge the functioning and stability of HEIs.

These key facets highlighted by Berkhout (2010) are central to many studies and debates among South African scholars (Lam, Ardington & Leibbrandt, 2011; Deacon, Osman & Buchler, 2009; Moagi-Jama, 2009; Boughey, 2005, 2008; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Morrow, 2009). Challenges faced by students within HEIs, including poverty, unemployment, death and HIV amongst others, have created a certain calibre of tertiary students within the African context that differs in critical ways from the traditional student in developed countries (Amanda, Alan, & Catherine, 2013; Moagi-Jama, 2009).

According to Boughey (2002, 2005), sociocultural mismatch between students and the higher education learning environment compound students' challenges. Academic achievement is not only a predictor of student retention, but is also an indicator that the student is coping with academic demands and a measure of throughput rate (Petersen et al., 2009). It has shown highest correlation with social class (where social class is white, middle class, Western, Northern, and masculine). Therefore, it remains critical to problematise the university environment which is populated by a majority of students' whose home environment is significantly different from what is considered to be a 'social class.'

Pierre Bourdieu is one of the main proponents of the term 'social capital'. The term implies a resource embedded in the nature of social relations based on shared networks, norms, and trust which allow individuals, groups and communities to achieve desired goals

(Coleman, 1988; Mitchell & Bossert, 2007). Social capital is a context-specific and goal-oriented resource, which aims to achieve certain desired outcomes. According to Van der Gaag and Snijders (2005, p.3), the term could comprise of a “...*varied collection of possibly useful resources: access to advice, love, practical assistance, attention, influence, physical strength, knowledge, expertise, status, money, food, health care, etc*”. Students who appear to lack the practices, norms and networks that are cognate with the expectations of the university are excluded. The university is a social construct that has certain values, norms, and resources which individual students, groups and society can draw on to achieve desired goals; hence it is a good proxy for other forms of social capital.

Social capital can be defined as all the human assets that are accessible to the individual and can be drawn on to foster positive adaptation. Locher et al. (2005, p. 749) identify the essential features of social capital as “active engagement and participation in group life” with others. According to Almedom (2005b, p. 943), “*a meaningful assessment of social capital must examine individual access to, rather than possession of, social capital, a property of groups, and therefore an ecological variable.*” However, some of the current practices, norms, and values embedded in the historical context and conceptualisation of HEIs are not responding to the needs of the diverse and dynamic student body. The poor academic progress of students at tertiary institutions can be explained using social capital theory in that some students are excluded by virtue of not being part of the network that promotes certain qualities and the norms of the HEI.

The main task of the university is to enable students (that were marginalised and excluded) to become participants in and users of a shared disciplinary practice that is initially beyond their reach when they join the university community (Bradbury & Miller, 2011; Morrow, 2009; Sedumedi, 2002). The current study acknowledges the centrality of understanding the framework of meaning that students attach to their academic success. Academic performance and students’ experiences of teaching and learning can only be understood by focusing on the experiences of the individual within the group and organisational context (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Therefore, it is important to understand how students in a South African university successfully participate in academic practices and to explore students’ understanding of themselves in relation to the practice in which they are trying to become participants.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Despite the plethora of research and the vigour with which the study of throughput rates has been undertaken, new findings continue to emerge due to the dynamic nature and calibre of students, which makes it difficult for HEIs to apply a generic theory of academic achievement. This calls for a contextual and localised investigation of factors that facilitate or impede academic progress.

The aim of this research study was to:

- i. Explore the constraining factors that influence the success of students within the College of Humanities at UKZN.
- ii. Explore the enabling factors that influence the success of students within the College of Humanities at UKZN.
- iii. Analyse the factors that influence student success at UKZN in order to identify the elements of a contextually relevant conceptual framework that could inform policies and support strategies at South African tertiary institutions.

The research questions were:

- i. What constrains student success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?
- ii. What enables student success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?
- iii. What are the elements of a conceptual framework that could be used to understand student success in the College of Humanities at UKZN and inform policies and support strategies in South African tertiary institutions?

1.5 Significance of the Study

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), “the significance statement should show how the study will contribute to research traditions or foundational literature in a new way” (p. 35). The current study sought to understand the interrelation between inhibiting and facilitating factors that contribute to students’ academic success within the College of Humanities at UKZN. This will assist in identifying the support mechanisms required for students to successfully complete their studies. Interventions that are contextually relevant are critical in order to ensure that they achieve maximum benefit. Such interventions could facilitate a high level of commitment and growth within the individual student and the institution as a whole. The study also aimed to shed light on the influence of pre-university background and post-enrolment factors on the academic performance of first-year students at a university.

A longitudinal study by Lam et al. (2011) of racial differences in secondary school advancement in urban South Africa found that a large part of student performance remains unexplained after controlling for infrastructure differences. The inequalities emanating from apartheid are evident but do not adequately account for differences in student academic achievement and the decision to complete their studies.

There is a fair degree of consensus on the basic factors that impact academic progress, leading to high throughput rates (Petersen et al., 2009; Van Der Gaag & Snijders, 2005; Thomas, 2002). However, the explanatory models of student academic success currently used in South Africa are not organically/locally generated and validated within the African context (Marshall & Case, 2010 SA studies). While borrowed models (mainly American college students' lived experiences) are useful, overreliance on such models can obscure African social realities in universal debates due to a lack careful attention to African centred epistemological and methodological issues.

According to Habermas (1976), a person's lifeworld has three dimensions: culture, society, and person. This is affirmed by Mkhize (2004a) who states that it is possible to move beyond the individual-society dichotomy. Mkhize (2004b) draws on Bakhtin's argument on dialogism that "*a person's utterance incorporates voices of social groups and institutions.*" Mkhize (2004b, p. 68) adds that, "*we make it [the world] our own when we appropriate it (from others and the social, cultural sphere) by populating it with our own intentions and accent.*" Bakhtin (1981), Mkhize (2004b), Collins, (2004) and Hook (2004) propose that knowledge can only be understood within its context, leading to the call for a 'critical psychology' (Hook, 2004). Hook (2004) defines critical psychology as interrogation of the taken-for-granted assumptions concerning reality, human nature, and knowledge, which are simulated and perpetuated by psychology. Critical psychology is a conscious critical framework based on the assumption that people's cultural contexts, concepts, beliefs and world views are plural and dynamic, and that attempts to create the 'truth' can result in marginalisation and exclusion.

The current study contributes to the body of knowledge on the interrelations between student life at and beyond HEIs and academic achievement. It aimed to advance the debate beyond the racial divide and identify assets that students from diverse backgrounds could use to facilitate academic achievement within the South African context. The study aimed to build a substantive theory and draw on the context, which, according to Bryant & Charmaz (2012) has power over the theory. The research was not based on assumptions but used context-based interactions to develop themes and guide further research.

1.6 Assumptions of the Study and Critical Analysis of the Relevant Principal Theories on which it was Constructed

The current study was not based on a specific theory but adopted grounded theory, and used different concepts and tools. The objective was to generate a theory rather than use “off the shelf” theories which are informed and embedded in Western philosophies and principles. Bryant and Charmaz (2012) and Sandelowski (2012) describe grounded theory as a systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory, and enable new information to emerge. The major difference between grounded theory and other methods is its specific approach to theory development, i.e., grounded theory suggests that there should be continuous interplay between data collection and analysis. The ultimate aim of grounded theory is to develop formal theories (a form of metasynthesis) that are both (a) ethnographically faithful to the specific experience and (b) transferable to experiences other than those from which they are derived (a form of analysis generalisation) (Sandelowski, 2012).

Other theories provide a partial account of how one could understand the interrelationship between the person, the context and culture. These include the Ecological Systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), and Realistic Evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Robson, 2002) and were referenced where relevant to the understanding of the emerging concepts of this study.

Many spheres influence students’ realities; some could be located in indigenous knowledge systems, be embedded in socio-cultural approaches, or relate to the principles of social construction models. HEIs are a social construct that is embedded in social systems. According to Pawson and Tilley (1997), behaviour, social events, and social conditions cannot be understood from the different layers of social reality. However, because social reality and the effects of one relationship impact on other social conditions, it is important to clearly stipulate the focus of any study of this social structure. The unit of analysis in this study is the student who functions within a larger system and is shaped by internal and external factors. Therefore, this study cannot claim to uncover all aspects of the social reality of student success but must acknowledge that other critical role players provide a different and valid perspective on this issue.

The Afrocentric paradigm is used, as the unit of analysis in this study is African students and this paradigm embraces the notion of multiplicity, ontological pluralism, i.e., many beliefs about the nature of reality and multicultural dialectic. The use of the term

paradigm is ambiguous (Asante, 1991; MaZama, 2001). Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) assert that a paradigm is not a monolithic interlocking set of philosophical assumptions but a more practical orientation that emphasises individual components of philosophy and theory as guiding research activities. According to these scholars, the purpose of a paradigm is not to build theory but to use philosophical tools to address problems in society. The principles embedded in the Afrocentric perspective were used as a tool to guide the research process. These principles include but are not limited to interconnectedness, participative production and sharing of knowledge, and affirmation of lived experiences (Mkhize, 2012).

Asante (1991); Kuhn (1962 cited in MaZama, 2001); MaZama (2001); and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) identify the key synergistic, interrelated aspects of a paradigm which are: (a) paradigms have a metaphysical organising level which entails worldviews and an epistemological stance; (b) they also operate at a sociological level meaning that they involve beliefs shared by a community of researchers; and (c) they have exemplars or models of how research is conducted within a field of study. Embedded in the philosophy are methods that are cognate to the paradigm and the questions it seeks to answer. Any value judgement of research should be grounded on the conceptual scholarship, implementation, and the level of detail but not merely by the 'genre within which it is conducted' (Paul & Marfo, 2001). However, there is consensus that the research questions are influenced by the community of practice (Asante, 1991; Clark & Baddie in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; MaZama, 2001; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) which guides the research methods and informs the metaphysical component entangled in the paradigm. These aspects of any model or paradigm define the operational usefulness of the constructs in any research.

Over the years, scholars have sought to define the interrelations between the person, culture, and context. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2010) argued that Bronfenbrenner's and Vygotsky's theories are fundamentally consistent with constructivist principles such as "...active agency and relativity to social context..." (p.102). Vygotsky (as cited in John-Steiner & Mahn, 2006) emphasised the situatedness of knowledge as well as the importance of the role of socio-cultural interactions in the acquisition of academic concepts and associated values. The social constructivist approach also acknowledges that multiple realities are co-constructed with the researcher, i.e., the kinds of questions that the researcher asks shape reality and the construction of meaning. There is no doubt that a theory such as the biopsychological model made a serious attempt to move beyond the individual and demonstrate the role of context in relation to the person. However, a common thread amongst these theories is the fact that they are framed by Northern discourses, meaning that they were

developed and contextualised in Western countries and have to be continuously adapted to become relevant in different contexts such as South Africa. The African voices in these dynamic theories are secondary, which provides the basis for investigation of theories that take the African perspective as the primary informant. Hence, the current study aimed to develop a conceptual framework informed by South African voices.

Models and approaches which can be generalised in all contexts fail to acknowledge the importance of the unit of analysis as the point of departure. The metaphysical organisation of these theories and the paradigm does not provide adequate philosophical tools and exemplars that are embedded in the lived experiences of African higher education students to the extent that the Afrocentric paradigm does. A paradigm is not a philosophical stance (Johnson & Gray, 2010); therefore, the Afrocentric paradigm was used in this study not as a theory but as a philosophical tool to solve problems that exist within the African context. Elements of different models and different conceptual frameworks were used to the extent to which they facilitated our understanding of the phenomenon.

The realist approach is concerned with providing explicit answers to the question of why a programme works, for whom, and under what circumstances (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Detailed findings from the why, whom, and what questions could provide valuable information to policy makers on how to refine or adjust programmes or provide an analytical framework for new programme development.

According to Robson (2002, p.33), “*at the heart of realism is the assumption that there is a reality that exists independent of our awareness of it.*” The real world is not only very complex but is stratified into different layers of social reality that incorporate individual, group, and institutional and societal levels. Robson (2002) notes that, human realities can only be understood in terms of their place in different strata or layers of reality; therefore, it is critical to call on mechanisms at various levels within the micro, macro, group, and organisational level. One cannot assume that the same set of mechanisms will have a universal effect in different contexts. It is imperative to explore what is happening in various contexts and to seek new insight into the same phenomenon within new perspectives.

Social programmes, such as those offered in HEIs, are real and involve the interplay of individual and institution, and of structure and agency. HEIs’ teaching and learning programmes produce the desired outcome only if they introduce appropriate ideas and opportunities to groups in appropriate social and cultural conditions. According to Pawson and Tilley (1997), ideas and opportunities are mechanisms. Together with the appropriate social and cultural conditions required to produce the desired effects, they lead to the desired

outcome. This relationship can be conceptualised by using the conceptual matrix outcome = mechanism + context. Stamme (2002) terms the mechanism and the context (which is the space between input and output) the 'black box.' The current study was not concerned with the realities of students in an HEI that are not immediately and empirically accessible, nor can these realities be deductively derived from generic models. Instead, it aimed to explore students' reality which could exist independent of our knowledge.

1.7 Research Methodology and Methods

The study was located within the interpretivist paradigm and used ideographic explanations, i.e., the main focus was on understanding a group of students located within a specific place and setting, and inductive reasoning, i.e., "...reasoning from a particular to the general" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010 p. 71) as well as descriptive statistics (Johnson & Gray, 2010; Neuman, 2006) to understand socio-cultural situated knowledge. Robson (2002; p. 475) emphasises the importance of inductive methods by stating that "what is needed is not only the explanatory structure or mechanisms but also knowledge of the particular set of circumstances". The researcher is aware of the dialectical nature of knowledge and used a qualitative research design. Triangulation of theories allowed for complex data analysis and has the potential to produce different outcomes (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Price, 2012).

As noted earlier, this study was exploratory in nature and used grounded theory to explore the experiences of first-year students in the College of Humanities at UKZN. Grounded theory is an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data (Sandelowski, 2012). Nonprobability, purposive and convenience sampling frames were used to identify participants for Participan focus groups from the population of first-year, first-time students registered within the College of Humanities at UKZN. Spenner et al. (2005) attribute the achievement gap of the first-year student to a range of pre-college factors that ameliorate or exacerbate the gap. Existing models of student success are concerned with presumed causal links; however, it is critical to understand the conditions under which particular outcomes are observed. This should not be seen as an attempt to make universalist claims in the same way as the positivist (Manicas & Secord, 1983), but rather as an effort to regard knowledge as a social and historical product that can be specific to a particular time, culture, or situation. The realist approach is, therefore, concerned with understanding the perspectives of

participants which then creates opportunities for redress of imbalances. Robson (2002) asserts that realism can incorporate an emancipatory approach and promote social justice.

The Participan focus groups method was used to elicit in-depth information on the factors affecting the academic success of first-year, first-time students within the College of Humanities. The end product was information collated into themes that incorporated the perspectives of all the group members instead of just one researcher. Participan focus group discussions were facilitated to saturation point. Focus group discussions “... *illuminate and define boundaries and relevance of the categories*” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012, p. 47). The data analysis process was reiterative and continuous and involved coding and categorising data by sensitive abstracting and theorising. This allowed new ideas to emerge inductively, thus limiting biased presentation of findings and preconceived ideas. The summaries were presented in checklist matrices and networks. These summaries were continuously cross-checked and reviewed with the research project team to enhance the validity of the themes derived from the data. Data interpretation was undertaken and relevant conclusions were drawn from both the pilot and the main Participan focus group.

1.8 Delimitations of Scope

The current study was limited to first-year, first-time UKZN students with a South African bar-coded identity document. The researcher concurs with Smith (2010, p.35) that “*culture, context and the recognition of multiple realities are salient features of the naturalistic research context where meaning is construed.*” The researcher explored first-year university student discourses about factors within various life-worlds that affect their academic success at the university. The sample contained mixed racial groups which were relatively equivalent to the demographic profile of students at UKZN. The nuances of experiences were generated within the diverse student population and the Participan focus group methods moderated the domination of individuals. Consequently, the data collection method enabled the emergence of the initial codes and themes in a participatory and inclusive manner. Therefore, the findings of the study could be applicable to other HEIs with a similar context that have undergone a historical-political transformation that is comparable to the South African context (Republic of South Africa, Department of Education (2008). It should be noted that these findings would require further validation in similar and comparable HEIs in order to confirm the experiences of students in other relevant settings and within the same institution.

1.9

Definition of Key Terms

Afrocentric, Africentric, or African-Centered: According to Bangura (2012), the second Africanist scholar to define Afrocentricity after Asante was:

“...Wade Nobles [1990, p.47] who defined ‘Afrocentric, Africentric, or African-Centered [as being] interchangeable terms representing the concept which categorizes a quality of thought and practice which is rooted in the cultural image and interest of African people and which represents and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of African people as the center of analyses. It is therein that the intellectual and philosophical foundation [with] which African people should create their own scientific criterion for authenticating human reality’ exists” (p. 109).

The Afrocentric paradigm was used in this study because the unit of analysis was African students and this paradigm embraces the notion of multiplicity or, ontological pluralism, i.e., many beliefs about the nature of reality, and a multicultural dialectic. A paradigm is not a philosophical stance (Johnson & Gray, 2010); therefore, the Afrocentric paradigm was used in this study not as a theory but as a philosophical tool to address problems that exist within the African context. The principles embedded in the *Afrocentric, Africentric, or African-Centered* perspective were used interchangeably as tools to guide the study and the research process.

Exclusion – Refers to the process of restricting access or blocking people from furthering their education in an HEI such as a university.

Higher Education Institutions, University or College: The terms, university and college mean different things in different contexts. Countries such as the USA and the UK use the concept of college to refer to post-secondary institutions that offer one or two-year qualifications. However, other HEIs that offer three or four-year degrees might also offer such qualifications (van der Berg, 2007). In most countries, universities are regarded as prestigious institutions, and students often progress from college to universities (Bean & Eaton, 2001). To some extent, the concept of college and university has been amalgamated in some institutions of higher education that offer elementary programmes such as six months to two-year certificate programmes as well as undergraduate degrees up to postgraduate level. Varsity College in South Africa is an example of an institution that offers a variety of programmes from different institutions at undergraduate and postgraduate level as well as at the certificate level. Students in what are formally referred to as universities in South Africa often gain entry through an appropriate basic education exit certificate such as Matric which

grades students who have the ‘potential’ to succeed at HEIs. Certificate programmes and short courses in HEIs such as universities are often geared towards employed people that seek to advance their skills in a particular field of study. The term *Higher education institutions* is usually used interchangeably with colleges and universities. These institutions provide a higher level of education at tertiary level. In this study, HEIs refer to colleges that offer academic programmes that are geared towards a qualification or a three-year diploma programme as opposed to a skills programme that requires minimal academic demands (van der Berg, 2007). Universities are institutions of higher learning where prospective students must meet entry criteria such as obtaining a matric certificate to register for a Bachelor’s degree. The all-encompassing term HEIs is used in the current study.

The term *‘Learners’* is often used to distinguish children and youth in basic and secondary education, i.e., from children and youth in reception grade through to grade 12 (matric) (Eiselen & Geysler, 1993; van der Berg, 2007), while the term *‘students’* generally refers to youth and adults in post-matric institutions such as universities and colleges. However, other scholars use the terms learner and students without distinguishing the education level (Lemmer & van Wyk, 2010; Waghid, 2010) while some use the term *learner* to refer to those enrolled in universities (Bradbury & Miller, 2011).

Student dropout – is defined as the process through which students leave an HEI such as a university prior to graduating (Kerby, 2015; Bean, 1985; Feldman, 2005; Louw, 2005).

Student success - is the achievement of a student experience in which the student is able to reach their desired goal of completing a degree and graduating (Jones-White, Radcliffe & Huesman, 2010; Lemmer & van Wyk, 2010; Dass-Brailford, 2005; Prinsloo, 2009; Rendón et al., 2000).

At-risk students - are students who are susceptible to failing to complete a degree and leaving the institution as a result of voluntary or involuntary withdrawal (Eiselen & Geysler, 2003; Chetty, 2014; Cross, Shalem, Backhouse, & Adam, 2009; Boughey, 2009).

1.10 Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 introduces the study and provides a background. It also highlights the broad empirical and theoretical issues related to student success in higher education. Chapters 2 and 3 review international and local debates on the key factors that influence student success in higher education. These chapters also highlight the attributes identified in the literature as critical to academic achievement, and expand on theories of risk and resilience within higher

education. Social class issues and the effect of cultural and social capital are examined and a detailed discussion is presented on institutional practices, support mechanisms and policies supporting access, and the retention and progression of students in higher education. The repositioning of paradigms and epistemological issues within the African and South African context are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 presents the research methodology and methods employed to conduct this study within the context of the repositioning of sociocultural aspects as central in methodological and epistemological debates within the African context. A detailed description is presented of the research design, research methods, sample frames, data collection, and data analysis methods. The methodological and operational justifications that inform the movement towards the Afrocentric perspective are highlighted. Chapter 5 presents the analysis and interpretation of the data. This chapter incorporates the emerging themes generated from the Participatory focus discussions. The results are discussed in Chapter 6 using critical reflection, with their interpretation largely informed by the current literature on the factors influencing student success, focusing on the African-centred understanding of elements that shape students' experiences in HEIs. This chapter outlines the elements of a conceptual framework to inform policies and support strategies at South African tertiary institutions. Finally, Chapter 6 presents a summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for policy and practice as well as future research. The study's limitations are also discussed.

1.11 Conclusion

The introductory chapter outlined the critical issues that shape the conceptualisation of the experiences of students in higher education. It is evident that current models of student success are paternalistic, imported and universalistic. The need for more inclusive and African-centred perspectives was highlighted. A paradigm shift towards an Afrocentric perspective was identified as a possible framework to conceptualise students' experiences in a South African university. The following two chapters review the literature and debates on students in higher education and justify why an African-centred perspective is useful in the South African context.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW PART 1: THEORIES OF STUDENT RETENTION AND THROUGHPUT RATES

2.1 Introduction

The experience of being in a transitional phase such as entering an HEI like a university cannot be quantified nor can the depth be understood in totality. Many researchers have attempted to understand this complex phenomenon using different methods of research and conceptual frameworks (Bean & Easton, 2000, 2001; Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Jama et al., 2008; Lynham & Chermack, 2006). These studies notwithstanding, the expected outcome of students' engagement with HEIs continues to baffle scholars, academics, and students, particularly in terms of how it could be enhanced to ensure academic success.

This chapter unpacks the different ways in which the experiences of African university students are understood in the literature. It explores some of the theories and models that have been developed to understand students' experiences in different contexts. A further objective is to critically engage with how these models advance our understanding of students' academic success within the African context, particularly in South Africa.

The researcher acknowledges that other factors such as studying in a foreign country influence students' academic performance in higher education. However, the literature review focuses on understanding the generic and specific variables that influence African students' academic success and persistence to complete their studies in HEIs. Various theories, concepts, conceptual frameworks, and models are explored that seek to understand the different factors that influence student academic achievement. The focus is on the experiences of first-year university students in HEIs.

2.3 Process of Theory Building

Some of the theories and conceptual models presented in this chapter are developmental and reiterative and as such the process of theory development is essential to provide a contextual background.

According to Tinto (1975), a theoretical model moves beyond description to an explanation of the factors that lead students to leave HEIs. Therefore, a sound theoretical model seeks to explain the nature of the relationship between the different factors. Lynham and Chermack (2006) identify two cycles of theory building which begins with the

identification of key variables or the units of theory, while the second phase is boundary setting which delineates the context in which the theory can be applied. Therefore, the applicability of the theory is context dependent (Jama et al., 2008). Jama et al. (2008) aimed to explain the factors that influence retention of ‘non-traditional’ students in a South African institution. They extended the principles highlighted in Tinto’s (1975) theory by highlighting what they understood to be a typical cycle of progression for students in a rural HEI context.

According to Braxton et al. (1997), another way of developing theory is to borrow and apply new concepts from another theoretical perspective [e.g., psychological and organisational perspectives as indicated in Bean and Easton’s theory (2000, 2001)]. Alternatively, the theorist can integrate units of two or more interrelated theories to form a more comprehensive explanatory model for a phenomenon. This often requires reconciliation and validation of interdependent constructs for the integrated model (see Cabrera, Nora & Castañeda’s, 1993) using a structural equation modelling test of an integrated model of the student retention).

Van Rensburg’s (2012) lecture notes for the SANTRUST programme identified a number of criteria that separate a theory from other descriptive models. According to this researcher, a theory involves complex, systematic relations among a number of factors and moves beyond the hypothesis. Theories are often interdisciplinary and as such transcend the original discipline. They are also usually analytical and speculative and thus cannot be easily confirmed or disproved as the subject is often complex. Theories are a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural; they therefore demonstrate a high level of reflectivity and inquiry into the categories we use in making judgments and decisions about a phenomenon. The international and South African theories discussed below demonstrate to some extent the process of elaboration and integration and also explain theoretical models that move beyond description.

2.4 International Theories on Retention, Persistence and Throughput in Higher Education

The problem of retention, persistence, and throughput in South African higher education is a serious impediment to the development of the country. Scott et al’s. (2007) study of a 2,000 first-time student cohort found that only 30% of the students graduated within five years, while the majority (56%) dropped out and only 14% were still registered. According to Feldman (2005), 50% of students drop out of university before completing their

studies and about a third drop out during the first term. According to this study, student dropout is mainly associated with black students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (often referred to as ‘non-traditional students’). Furthermore, historically elite and former so-called ‘white’ universities are also affected by high rates of student dropout. Thomas (2002) asserts that the introduction of student fees in the past two decades created the conditions typically associated with non-traditional students. Some benchmark studies on HEIs in South Africa note that the challenge of low throughput has long been of concern (Feldman, 2005; Scott et al., 2007). The results of the 2,000 student cohort study conducted in two South African universities before the merger of the University of South Africa and Technikon RSA indicated that 59% and 85% of undergraduate students, respectively left without graduating (Scott et al., 2007). There thus seems to be a huge discrepancy between student participation and throughput. According to Scott et al. (2007), this could be attributed not only to students’ under-preparedness, but also the failure of the higher education system to address the challenges confronting contemporary communities. Misalignment and lack of effective articulation between secondary school education and higher education often result in high dropout at first-year level of study in HEIs.

A number of theories have been developed to explain why some students in higher education fail to complete their studies. Some of the foundational explanatory models are mainly informed by perspectives based on a particular conceptualisation of social reality. For example, Spady’s (1970) theory was largely informed by the sociological perspective. He developed the sociological model of the dropout process. Tinto’s (1975) theory on the conceptual schema for dropout from college which was influenced by Spady’s theory draws heavily on sociological factors and seeks to integrate various social systems that influence students’ decision to persist or to drop out. Bean and Easton’s (1985) conceptual model of the dropout syndrome draws heavily on psychological and organisational perspectives. It is important to understand how the process of theory building unfolds as this has contributed to how academic success and underachievement, and dropout/stopout have been understood in HEIs to date.

3.3.1 Spady’s sociological theory.

Spady’s (1970) sociological model of the undergraduate dropout process postulates that student dropout is a function of student-institutional fit which is best explained by the level of compatibility between the environment and the individual student. According to Jones (1986), Spady (1970) used Durkheim’s (1897) suicide theory to explain integration

between the individual and the larger community. According to Durkheim (1897) a combination of well-adjusted individual experiences, collective affiliation, and moral integration ties the individual to the social system. Similarly, Spady (1970) argues that individuals that are not sufficiently integrated into societal structures and have a low sense of connectedness and or hold highly divergent moral values are more likely to commit suicide due to low normative congruency which is the result of their alienation from societal values and norms. Students' inability to fulfil both academic and social demands, which according to this theory, is the measure of adequate integration, can lead to the decision to withdraw or to dropout from an HEI.

According to Spady's (1970), students with high levels of institutional commitment tend to obtain good grades, and enjoy sound friendships which strengthen social integration. Others, that he refers to as 'persisters', fail to achieve high academic standards but value the intellectual development fostered through engagement with their studies and faculty staff, and are likely to continue studying despite low levels of social integration. Academic potential and normative congruency are to some extent the function of family background in that socioeconomic status, family values, and race, amongst other factors, influence the strength of the student-institution match.

Although Spady's theory seeks to describe the conditions under which dropout occurs, it fails to explain why some students with low levels of institutional commitment continue to pursue studies in higher education. Tinto (1975) noted the lack of differentiation in Spady's theory between students that drop out voluntarily and those that do so involuntarily. To some extent, the theory lacks a critical aspect of theory building in that it is more descriptive than explanatory, lacks the specificity of context, and does not account for voluntary withdrawal.

3.3.2 Tinto's integration theory.

Tinto's (1975) integration theory on dropout from college has informed many studies on retention and dropout in HEIs at both local and international levels (see Andres & Carpenter, 1997; Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993; Jama et al., 2008). It is similar to Spady's sociological model of dropout in that both assert that interaction processes determine students' social and academic integration. Tinto's theory extends Spady's theory in that it moves beyond normative congruency and academic potential to include organisational characteristics (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Drawing on exchange theory, Tinto (1975) provided a more

comprehensive interactionist perspective of the student-institution relationship to account for the reasons why students dropout from college (Berger & Braxton, 1998). The exchange theory proposes that human beings engage in cost-benefit factor analysis, i.e., they seek rewarding behaviour and interactions and avoid costly emotions and behaviour. Therefore, students that are well-informed about the occupational opportunities and demands associated with a qualification are more likely to have high goal commitment.

Students' goal commitment can be described as clear goals and plans to complete their studies. If commitment to a particular HEI is low, students are most likely to involuntarily or voluntarily drop out (Tinto, 1975). An individual student's goal commitment is assessed by the standard of grade performance and the level of their intellectual development; whilst institutional commitment is judged by the number of meaningful interactions with peers and faculty staff. Therefore, an institution that fosters greater social integration at the initial transitional phase increases the degree of institutional commitment. However, Tinto (1975) noted that even if the degree of social integration is low, a student with high academic integration, which is measured by the desire for intellectual growth and a good grade point average, might decide to 'stick it out' to fulfill their academic goals. A high level of goal commitment is associated with persistence. The South Dakota Board of Regents indicates that students sometimes tend to ignore the discrepancy between personal expectations and the institutional environment. A high level of integration combined with low academic grades is most likely to result in involuntary withdrawal on the basis of academic exclusion due to poor performance.

According to Tinto (1975), student integration is a complex phenomenon that traverses the three stages of separation, transition, and competence. The theory posits that critical individual attributes, pre-college experiences, and family background determine the degree to which an individual student is able to overcome the challenges of transition. A successful transition is judged by the level of integration with the social and academic systems. Such integration leads to goal commitment and/or institutional commitment. The degree to which the individual student commits to the institution, combined with a high level of goal commitment, often leads to persistence and completion of studies. According to Tinto's (1975) integration theory, a high level of institutional affiliation decreases the probability of dropping out or transferring to another institution. The sense of alienation and isolation resulting from the misfit between individual values and expectations and the institutional environment sheds some light on how HEIs impact on the decision to voluntarily or involuntarily withdraw or persist with one's studies.

Although Tinto's (1975) theory failed to adequately capture key aspects of organisational characteristics, its acknowledgment of the function of the institution laid firm ground for theorists such as Bean (1985) to explore the role of the institution in student retention or dropout. Tinto (1988, p.447) proposed that student retention should be viewed beyond the first year of study but should incorporate a "... *a time dimension by describing the longitudinal stages of the process of integration, in particular, the early phases of separation and transition which precede incorporation into the life of the college*". Jama et al.'s (2008) study added to this dimension although it was not longitudinal. The longitudinal perspective adds more depth to the understanding of how the process of integration unfolds at various stages of students' academic life. According to Cabrera et al. (1993) the main criticism of Tinto's theory is that it fails to provide a plausible explanation of how external factors impact on perception, commitment, and preference to voluntarily or involuntarily withdrawal from the institution. The models seem to adopt an individualistic-deficit perspective in that student dropout, or retention is primarily attributed to student related factors.

3.3.3 Bean's psychological theory of retention.

Bean's (1980) and Bean and Easton's (1985) psychological theory is informed by mainstream psychological concepts and theories such as Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) attitude-behaviour theory; Bandura's (1995) self-efficacy theory; Rotter's (1966) locus of control theory; and Lazarus' (1966) theory on coping behaviour. Bean (1985) identified a number of endogenous and exogenous variables to explain why students dropout or persist in higher education. The endogenous factors are socialisation and selection factors such as grade point average, student-institution congruence, and institutional commitment. Exogenous factors that impact on the social and academic integration of students in HEIs include academic factors, and social-psychological and environmental factors. Although Bean's (1985) theory provides useful concepts, there seem to be no clear boundaries between exogenous and endogenous factors and the relationship between them is somewhat linear.

According to Bean and Eaton (2001), goal orientation, which can be defined as the student's intention and attitude towards an institution, leads to particular behaviour which could be voluntary or involuntary withdrawal from the institution of higher learning. Students with positive perceptions and experiences of an institution tend to have strong loyalty to it and are likely to persist (Bean & Eaton, 2001). When the student-institutional fit is not positive, students require good coping skills to adapt to the new environment despite

the challenges and differences in values, norms, and beliefs between the student and the institution.

Bean and Eaton's (2001) theory highlights the complex interrelationship between the various elements of the psychological model of college student retention, with these elements being:

- Pre-entry and early characteristics such as past behaviours, personality, initial self-efficacy, normative beliefs, coping strategies, motivation to attend and skills and ability.
- Environmental interactions which are characterised by bureaucratic, academic and social interactions as well as interactions involving factors that are those external to the institution.
- The psychological process and outcomes relating to self-efficacy, coping processes, and attributions as well as the student's locus of control.
- Outcome expectations which result in a variety of responses and outcomes such as academic integration, a certain level of academic performance, social integration, a congruent or incongruent student-institutional fit, institutional commitment or lack thereof, intention to persist or not to do so and observed behaviour such as persistence or dropout.

As early as the 1980s Bean acknowledged the need to understand the interrelationship amongst various concepts and variables that influence the persistence of an individual student in a particular institution. Although Bean's (1980) psychological theory attempted to extend the variables and the decision to persist beyond the individual student's cognitive processes, it fails to provide a clear guide on how early characteristics continuously influence the decision to persist or dropout. As highlighted by Prinsloo's (2009) critique of the model, the interchange of exogenous and endogenous variables is not uni-or bidirectional but multidirectional. Bean and Eaton (2000, p.59) warn against its uncritical use of the theory and acknowledge that "*individuals from different cultures or of different genders perceive the world differently.*" The disparities in contextual factors in various HEIs, along with new empirical knowledge, call for on-going research on the relevance and applicability of the model in various settings. More knowledge is required to understand this phenomenon that has long been a puzzle for American and European HEIs and now seems to be a global phenomenon for common and different reasons. Tinto (1975; 2002) emphasises the specificity of context when researchers work with institutions of higher learning. Bean

(1980) differs from Tinto's theory in that academic integration is considered a background factor (in the same way that pre-college academic performance is considered a background factor). It seems that Bean (1985) is concerned with the student who is already in higher education and fails to make a clear distinction between the precollege, transitional, and outcome phases in the conceptual model of dropout syndrome.

According to Bean, institutional commitment is the main variable (Prinsloo, 2009). It functions at the psychological, economic, social, and intellectual levels. This level of institutional commitment is appropriated in the level of engagement and perceptions of being able to influence institutional rules and the fairness of the application of such rules; the degree to which the institution is able to provide work related opportunities once students have completed their studies; and the degree to which students feel they are benefiting intellectually from the institution. In subsequent studies, Metzner and Bean (1987, p.25) established that "*social integration variables had no significant effects at all on dropout.*" Prinsloo (2009) asserts that Tinto's theory of student integration regards academic performance as the indicator of academic integration whereas Bean's (1985) student attrition model posits that it is the outcome of students' psychosocial and academic experiences within the institution. This provides useful knowledge for policy planners and implementers in developing student-centred support programmes.

2.5 South African Theories on Retention, Persistence and Throughput in Higher Education

The shift in the early 1980s from providing education that disproportionately favoured the elite to being accessible to the masses called for scholars to investigate the phenomena of student retention, dropout, and integration. Theories that were foundational in conceptualising why students drop out of higher education were: Spady's Sociological theory, Tinto's Integration theory, and Bean's Psychological theory (all of which are based on the experiences of students in Western countries, such as US). Scholars in developing countries have sought to adapt, validate, and challenge these theories to suit what is often referred to as underrepresented minorities and diverse students. For example, in South Africa, Prinsloo (2009) developed UNISA's conceptual model and Jama (2008) and Jama et al. (2008) developed the circles of progression theory taking the South African context into account. South African HEIs' formation was shaped by the political, social, geographical and economic history of the country. Prinsloo (2009, p.90) asserts: "*[The] ...common [South African] context is the impact of our colonial and apartheid past on the role of higher*

education” ... which is defined “...by the socio-historical, political and economic layers...” It is against this background that some South African institutions’ mission statements seem to respond to this unfavourable past. This is indicative of the country’s transformational and emancipatory agenda (Council of Higher Education (CHE), 2000). For example, UNISA’s vision is “*Towards the African university in the service of humanity*” (Prinsloo, 2009, p.91), while UKZN seeks to be the “*Premier University of African Scholarship*”. Given that education drives certain ideologies and aims to preserve or advance some socio-cultural practices (Bernstein 1977, 1996; Freeman, (1999). Soudien & Baxen, 1997), interrogating praxis is critical in the transformation of the curriculum and education systems. The models discussed below demonstrate this argument.

3.3.4 Social-critical model for understanding and enhancing student throughput and success at UNISA.

Prinsloo’s (2009) model is firmly grounded in the notion that HEIs have a significant role to play in enhancing student success and retention, and improving throughput rates. An institution can achieve these objectives if it improves students’ experiences and provides student-centred services.

Prinsloo (2009) proposed five key constructs to inform UNISA’s conceptual model: the student as a situated agent; the student habitus; the institutional habitus; the dynamic nature of the student walk, and a broad definition of “success.” These constructs are summarised below.

2.4.2.1 The student as a situated agent.

Students have a sense of agency, and the outcome of their academic success is not only a consequence of environmental and institutional influences. Students engage in informed decision-making about choices such as the decision to persist, dropout or stopout in order to fulfill goals best known to themselves. The artificial separation of environmental and endogenous variables and the decision to withdraw is driven by a complex network of support (or lack thereof) and other varied contextual factors. The systems theory captures the whole-part relationship as the whole and its parts are intertwined. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, and without the parts, it does not exist. Students are not merely elements of the higher education infrastructure but autonomous agents who make choices to be part of an institution.

Prinsloo (2009) draws a distinction between the inter- and intra-personal domains and dimensions of agency. Elements of the inter-personal domain are captured in Spady's theory, including self-efficacy, attribution theory, and locus of control. Prinsloo (2009) made a contribution by including anomie or alienation. The inter-personal dimension of student agency incorporates different layers of relationships where individual identities and attributes are formed and consolidated. To label the student as deficient in social capital shows a lack of regard for their sociocultural background and hence devalues the capital embedded in their community of origin and what the student can bring to the education system. However, some scholars (Kerby, 2015; Berger, 2000; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2000) have made an effort to understand the assets that students bring to higher education (Prinsloo, 2009). The move towards strength-based perspectives rather than deficit ones has changed the manner in which academic performance, retention, and persistence are understood in higher education. Prinsloo (2008, 2009) argues that students should be viewed as situated agents in that their biographies and autobiographic details are a consequence of their dynamic, interdependent habitus within and outside their home environment. As such, the personal and the social meaning they attach to their learning experiences in higher education is co-constructed and accorded meaning by significant others in their lives through continuous interaction.

Prinsloo (2009) further challenges the portrayal of students as people with the sole responsibility to voluntarily or involuntarily withdraw from higher education. Her argument is based on the premise that student academic progress is a shared responsibility and that the learner's response must be understood in relation to other mechanisms that seek to support or fail to support the student. *"We [Prinsloo and her colleagues] therefore propose that this construct of the student as situated agent implies situated relative autonomy and situated co-responsibility"*, (p. 98)

Prinsloo (2008, 2009) further argues that the habitus is informed by different processes, some of which are within the student's control while others are not. Hence, Bourdieu's theory on social and cultural capital (Berger, 2000) has been extended to include other forms of capital such as economic and cultural capital (Kuh & Love, 2000). The students' lifeworlds, ontological perspective and epistemological dimension (views of knowledge) could differ in significant ways from that of the institution. Based on this incongruent epistemological dimension, scholars such as Marrow (2008) and Scott et al. (2007) have argued that although students have gained access to higher education, they are

unable to participate fully due to differences in the manner in which institutions operate, prioritise and validate certain practices and value some forms of knowledge over others.

2.4.2.2 Institutional habitus.

According to Prinsloo (2009, p. 104), “*the institutional habitus (like student habitus) is a collective notion consisting of physical, psychological, socio-economic and cultural traits, habits, and rituals of institutions.*” The more cognate the student and institutional habitus, the easier it is for the institution to adapt to the student’s needs and expectations. Integration and assimilation of the student into the institutional culture is often disembodied and is presented as the student’s responsibility (Dall’Alba, 2005; Tierney, 2000) without taking into consideration the multiple layers of “*...the relationship between the epistemological and ontological dimensions of teaching and learning and the impact of the codification of disciplinary knowledge on teaching and learning*” (Prinsloo, 2009, p.105.). Dall’Alba (2005) warns against the simplistic view of knowledge transfer as something that is mechanical and argues that knowledge is not just simply the product of a cognitive process, but is who we are, meaning that it is embodied and appropriated through our daily interactions and practices.

Operational habitus is a key factor of institutional habitus. According to Prinsloo (2009), it focuses on the administrative configuration of the institution which defines the mode of curriculum delivery, its pace, and selection criteria. While these operational aspects of the institution are beyond the control of the individual student, they affect access to HEIs and students’ academic performance.

2.4.2.3 The dynamic nature of the student walk.

Like other scholars such as Tinto (1980), Bean, and Easton (1985), Prinsloo (2009) recognised the different phases and cycles in the academic process. According to Prinsloo (2009), the walk is a dynamic circular process that begins at the preregistration and registration stage, and incorporates tuition and assessment cycles to the point where students graduate and find employment. Davis and Sumara (2005) agree that this recursive process is complex, reiterative, and non-comprehensible which results in unexpected consequences and outcomes. They therefore propose that there is a need for adaptive changes within the system and a functional tracking system to address the needs of at-risk students. The authors caution against a linear view of the relationship and emphasise non-linear exploration of the interdependent interrelationship between various units and variables of the theories.

2.4.2.4 A broad definition of “success”.

Prinsloo (2009) argues that it is unfair for institutions to judge student success based on whether they are able to integrate, assimilate, or fit into the system. Instead, she maintains that the institution should move beyond adjusting to student needs and take a proactive stance to create an inclusive learning environment that is flexible and adaptable to changes within and outside the control of both the student and the institution.

The above discussion captures a number of theories as well as concepts that have been empirically tested and validated using various methods. The following section focuses on some of the concepts relating to understanding student success in higher education, mainly drawing on local empirical work.

Prinsloo’s (2009) conceptual model contains a number of propositions:

The concept of student success incorporates a positive student experience that enhances retention and progression. The expected outcome of a successful student walk is graduation, entry to the labour market, and meeting the demands of “...*active, critical citizenship and democratic agency* (p.16)”. The student’s experience within an institution might be an indication of success despite not completing a qualification.

Student success and positive experiences are a direct outcome of the congruent and reciprocal relationship between student-institutional attributes and identity during various cycles of the learning process. There is, therefore, a need to acknowledge the co-construction of the institutional and individual habitus and various forms of capital and move beyond rigid, linear, and simplistic perceptions of this relationship.

Transformation of student habitus is indicated by appropriate academic literacies and numeracy, conceptual skills, sufficient command of the language of teaching, and learning and acquisition of a discipline-specific and broad vocabulary. Such students demonstrate a positive attitude, and the desire to master and adapt their practices to maximise gains in their environment.

On the other hand, institutions of higher learning that are effective and conducive to learning are characterised by high quality and effective academic policies and practices, offer an academic programme that provides opportunities for articulation and differentiation, and have student-centred operational policies and practices. Such institutions understand their institutional agency and their leadership takes proactive and reactive steps to offer support to all students at different levels.

“The formation and transformation of student and institutional identity and attributes is continuously shaped by overarching conditions at the macro, meso and micro levels (p.120).” Therefore, the institution and the student share mutual and different situated experiences and have co-responsibility in uncovering and managing multiple and dynamic challenges and attributes that arise through this interaction.

Prinsloo’s (2009) theory provides a comprehensive synthesis of theories relating to students in open learning distance education. The model captures the socio-cultural nuances of a developing country such as South Africa and acknowledges the need for a non-linear and reiterative process (Koen, 2007; Smith et al., 2007; Nwoye, 2015). It provides a critical perspective on existing Northern models that dominate debate on the phenomenon of student success while capturing the view of various scholars (Nwoye, 2015; Proglar, 2012; Mkhize, 2004a, 2004b) that the epistemological and ontological positions that dominate Southern and Northern communities are distinct. Bourdieu’s (1971) sociocultural theory and other perspectives (Berger, 2000; Tierney, 2000) that seek to extend Bourdieu’s initial theory offer a probable explanation that is aligned to students in African and developing countries. Whilst the theory is useful, the methodological processes followed failed to incorporate the key players who are its direct recipients. In consolidating and reviewing international and local literature, the theory is not able to identify and develop what Papoutsaki (2007) referred to as *“...alternative distinctive ways of learning and understanding of local knowledge...”* (p.1). It fails to provide an opportunity for key role players to *“...contribute their own perceptions and definitions of all that constitutes integration”* (Rendón et al., 2000, p.150). The concern that Prinsloo (2009) raised in the development of the UNISA integration model theory has thus not been adequately addressed.

2.4.3 Jama, Mapesela and Beylefeld’s retention theory for non-traditional students: circles of progression.

Jama et al.’s (2008) retention theory was developed in response to the need for localised and contextual models to explain student retention and progression outside the Eurocentric and American perspectives. Many scholars have sought to develop models that capture the complexity of student reality and diverse student profiles (Bean & Metzger, 1985; Smith et al., 2007; Tinto, 1997). Jama et al.’s (2008) theory seeks to address student retention by providing an explanatory conceptual framework to understand the challenges faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and thus provide effective student support. Although the model was developed in the South African context, it emerged from Tinto’s

integration model and addressed the need to understand the reiterative cycles of progression that impact on non-traditional students' completion of studies.

According to Jama et al. (2008), traditional students go through four cycles. The first is the pre-entry phase which encompasses their assets and capital prior to registration. These include family and school background, financial capital, and proficiency in the language of teaching or lack thereof. The second cycle is initial entry which determines the quality of the student experience at a social and academic level within the institution. In phase two, students are expected to adjust to the university environment and be open to the transitional challenges associated with living in a communal setting or commuting. Failure to process and appropriate the overwhelming volume of information received during orientation, and a lack of stable resources to finance their studies, combined with a poor grasp of the institutional structure leads to poor academic and social integration. Failure to communicate using the university language can result in poor support for students due to miscommunication.

Language remains a determining factor even in the third cycle which is about the teaching and learning experience. Students are introduced to discipline-specific concepts while still grappling with the new language of teaching and learning. A lack of financial resources can exacerbate this situation as students lack the necessary resources to meet the material demands and other costs associated with their area of specialisation. A lack of role models and reference sources in being a university student can foster misalignment of expectations and demands from the family and the student. Ill-informed conceptions of the resources and support needed by university students deepen the vulnerability of disadvantaged students. The retention of the student in the fourth cycle which is on-going and academic integration is also affected by financial and language issues. The focus at this stage is consolidating students' knowledge in the field of specialisation and preparing them for professional practice. The student requires a network of support to model, encourage and provide opportunities to apply the theoretical aspects of the education programme. This requires both economic and social capital in that significant others need to understand the critical role of practice or in-serve training in meeting the qualification requirements.

Jama et al. (2008), Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014), and Ndimande-Hlongwa, Balfourb, Mkhize, & Engelbrechta, (2010) confirm the significant role played by language proficiency when second language students are confronted by academic demands. Scott et al's. (2007) study of learners from disadvantaged education backgrounds highlights the

impact of a lack of capital that is embedded in the language of learning and teaching. Jama et al. (2008) extended Tinto's (1975) theory and demonstrated the reiterative and circular influence of various factors such as financial capital and language proficiency from pre-entry to employment stages. The purposeful sampling of disadvantaged students and a rural HEI limits the applicability of this model. Furthermore, Jama et al. (2008) failed to acknowledge other mediating factors that are embedded in socio-cultural contexts. This model also fails to account for how the psychological, spiritual, and historical-political factors continue to frame student experiences at university. Finally, overreliance on Western theories, such as Tinto's (1975) model, limits the enrichment of endogenous (local, indigenous, traditional) knowledge and delays the transformation and knowledge production that is embedded in local epistemologies (Papoutsaki, 2007; Prinsloo, 2009).

2.4.4 Other theories that explain student retention, persistence, and throughput.

Cabrera et al. (1993) acknowledge the centrality of the social and external factors (identified in both Tinto's integration model and Bean's student attrition model) by expanding on the interrelations between:

- environmental influences that enhance institutional commitment such as approval and encouragement by friends and family, the perception of attending an institution of choice, the prospect of secure future job opportunities, and a sense of belonging,
- perceptions of sound social integration as evidenced in wide and deeply personal relationships and the ease with which these meaningful relationships were developed,
- the level of satisfaction with financial support,
- endogenous variables such as the level of academic integration measured by academic performance, the level of satisfaction with curriculum, and attitudes towards academic experiences in a particular institution,
- the level at which the individual is committed to completing their studies in a particular institution or a different institution.

Cabrera et al.'s (1993) contribution to the debate on student attrition and integration is that environmental factors not only contribute to shaping commitment to the institution but exert pressure on academic interaction and institutional commitment, which leads to higher or lower intention to commit to persist with studies.

DesJardins, Ahlburg and McCall's (1999) event history model contributes to the debate by adding a time dimension, indicating the need to further explore the different ways

in which voluntary and involuntary withdrawal in the form of stopout (“the first occurrence of non-continuous enrolment”), dropout and graduation (“the awarding of a bachelor’s degree anytime within the (approximately) seven-year window”) from HEIs can be understood. According to DesJardins et al. (1999, p.377), stopout is defined as “*the first occurrence of non-continuous enrolment*” and dropout is when [the student]... *exits the institution and does not return at any time during the subsequent observation period...*” Stratton, O’Toole and Wetzel’s (2008) multimodal logit model of college stopout and dropout behaviours maintains that first-year students’ withdrawal from higher education could be explained by the concept of stopout rather than dropout. According to Stratton et al. (2008), first-year students tend to register for another programme after temporarily suspending their studies. Stratton et al. (2008) and DesJardins et al. (1999) adopt different time frames for stopout and dropout. According to Stratton et al. (2008), dropout occurs within a year of continuous enrolment, while stopout refers to no more than a year of absence after the commencement of continuous enrolment. DesJardins et al.’s (1999) event history model indicates that although the exogenous variables remain constant, they continue to have a varied effect over time.

A student is an individual who has their own sense of agency, and the decisions students make to persist, or dropout are not merely the sum total of influences outside the individual. Ozga and Sukhnadan (1998) assert that the interaction between the student and the institution should not be unfairly biased towards labelling the student as a problem. The model’s heavy reliance on individual thought processes as the ultimate decision maker presents the process of social and academic interaction as well as institutional commitment as mainly the student’s responsibility. Scott et al. (2007) question the scope and locus of responsibility in higher education which seems to adopt a deficit perspective of students who fail to meet the expected criteria or norms.

Ozga and Sukhnadan’s (1998) explanatory model highlights the significance of variables that could be beyond the immediate control of the student. The authors note the influence of a diverse student population, the economic climate, and the demands of the job market which increase competition among students. When students recognise the incompatibility of their choice of career or if they experience unplanned external crises, they often make the decision to terminate their studies. Ozga and Sukhnadan’s (1998) examination of the influence of exogenous and endogenous factors on what is termed completers and non-completers. These scholars concluded that non-completers tend to be reactive in their choice of careers based on their interests and career and life aspirations,

while non-completers tend to have reactive reasons when making subject or course choices based on expectations and approval by significant others.

False, and at times biased information, from sources of career information such as online searches, teachers, and institutional advisors impact on the level of preparedness of student to align themselves with a cognate career choice. Ozga and Sukhnadan (1998) found that mature students have access to more reliable institutional information than their younger counterparts.

Stratton et al.'s (2008) study on students that continuously enroll, dropout, and stopout found that the parents of students that tend to continuously enroll completed college; students who dropout are likely to be older rather than younger men, and that the chances of dropout are higher for those receiving loans and lower for those receiving work-study aid as compared to those receiving no aid. Further, students who stopout tend to be individuals attending a two-year institution, with married women being more likely to interrupt their studies than unmarried woman. Thus, situational circumstances present as a persistent barrier to completion of studies. Morgan and Tam (1999) define situational barriers as those emanating from a change in a student's life circumstances such as the birth of a baby or a change in marital status. Over and above situational barriers, Morgan and Tam (1999) identified failure to meet admission criteria which they referred to as institutional barriers; individual student's dispositions that inhibit persistence and motivation, and failure to access discipline content, i.e., epistemological barriers.

Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1992) argue that the impact of financial aid is underplayed in most studies. Most impact studies group the financial aspect of student enrolment with other non-financial factors such as precollege background, academic ability, and motivation (Cabrera et al., 1992).

Cabrera et al.'s (1999) model also make a distinction between academic achievement and intellectual and academic development. The separation of what is termed academic integration creates a false dichotomy between academic achievement and intellectual and academic development as both are functions of cognitive processes. Without the ability to develop intellectually and academically students are more likely to underachieve. Baird's (2000) comprehensive social/ecological model makes a similar argument. This model highlights the importance of cognitive appraisal and its activation or arousal response. The individual student copes by adjusting the environmental and personal system in order to achieve a certain level of equilibrium. Both Baird's (2000) comprehensive social/ecological

model and Cabrera et al.'s (1992) theories of college persistence predominantly function at the cognitive level.

Tinto (1982, p.688) asserts that “*our theoretical models serve to explain only a portion of the wide range of behaviours that constitute the universe of social interactions.*” Tinto (2006, p.6) adds: “*Leaving is not the mirror image of staying. Knowing why students leave does not tell us, at least not directly, why students persist.*”

Prinsloo (2009, p.86) argues that although Tinto's interactionist theory/model enjoys “*near paradigmatic*” stature, it “*is partially supported and lacks empirical internal consistency*” (Braxton 2000, p.3). Braxton and Lien (2000) further assert that despite its paradigmatic dominance, Tinto's theory requires revision. Multi-institutional tests provide strong support for Tinto's theory while single-institutional appraisals “*accord modest empirical backing*” (Braxton & Lien, 2000, cited in Prinsloo, 2009, p. 86).

2.4.5 Summary of the limitations of the theories presented.

The limitations of the theories presented above include but are not limited to, the following:

- Braxton (2000, p.2) highlights the lack of empirical internal consistency;
- Johnson (2000) cautions that retention, persistence, and academic success should be viewed as cultural constructs and cognitive maps that enhance our understating of student experiences;
- It is important to note the differences in what can be perceived as psychological stressors by Northern and Southern student bodies, e.g., the importance of finance (John, Cabrera, Nora & Asker, 2000);
- Inadequate career counselling and poor choice of courses increase dropout among younger students compared to older students who are more influenced by internal factors;
- The impact of being a first generation student on academic success;
- Language is a critical component of teaching and learning that impacts cognitive dissonance and confidence;
- Students experience a number of poverties while in higher education (see, for instance, Schenck, 2008);
- Acknowledgment of the stigma attached to support programmes that focus on at-risk students;

- The need for compatibility between the student and institution's expectations (Koen, 2007);
- Difficulties relating to organisational resources, e.g., supervisors for a Masters programme;
- The pivotal role played by interpersonal and intrapersonal factors in student retention (Spady, 1970);
- Race and gender are variables for student dropout (Bean, 1980). Stratton et al. (2008) included family roles and current family characteristics such as married, unmarried, new baby, etc.;
- Self-efficacy, attribution, and locus of control contribute to intention to leave or student success (Parker, 1999).
- Rendón (1994) claims that models overlook academic success and focus more on academic failure and advocates for a validation model as opposed to a deficiency model.

2.4.6 Empirical Studies on Retention, Persistence, and Academic Success

A number of empirical studies have advanced, extended or validated existing models or theories on student retention, persistence, academic success, and throughput in higher education.

Metzner and Bean (1987, p.27) identified seven variables that influenced utility (students' interest in the practical outcomes of their education at the university such as better employment opportunities and job-related skills), namely major and career certainty, outside encouragement, course availability, and educational goals, academic advice, average study hours and hours enrolled.

Scott et al., (2001) investigated how to improve teaching and learning in South African higher education. The focus of this case study was identifying forms of support in teaching and learning to improve the quality of the educational experience. The findings show that students' performance in higher education is racially differentiated and biased against students from low socio-economic backgrounds. According to HEIs, there is a need to respond at a systemic level in order to achieve positive academic outcomes including but not limited to the reform of core curriculum frameworks; building educational expertise in the sector to enable the development and implementation of teaching approaches that will be effective in catering for student diversity; and clarifying and strengthening accountability for educational outcomes (Scott et al., 2007, p. viii in Prinsloo, 2007).

Cliff and Hanslo (2009) identified a number of key competencies that are critical for academic preparedness and students' academic literacy. The level of preparedness to engage in academic discourse within the learning and teaching context depends on a number of complex, multilevel and technical academic literacy skills. According to Paulo Freire, students who are expected to reproduce what they have learnt without being exposed to high order cognitive functioning skills are disempowered. This is evident in the extent of plagiarism in higher education; poor analytical skills characterised by a propensity to be prescriptive or normative; and inability to differentiate between principles and examples (Cliff & Hanslo, 2009).

Under-preparedness is not unique to students from socio-economically disadvantaged or dysfunctional schools but could be a consequence of traditional pedagogic teaching principles which enforce rote learning and deprive students of making sense of the learning material. Schools are under pressure to achieve a pass rate of 100% and educators end up helping students even during exams, with dire effects on their ability to conceptualise and learn independently. Secondary school educational outcomes and the demands of higher education are often in conflict as educators do all that is possible to help learners learn the basic skills in order to meet university criteria. South African primary school learners performed worst out of 40 countries in reading ability and higher education students' reading ability is hampered by teaching practices (Howie et al., 2007).

Agolla and Ongori's (2009) study of undergraduate students at the University of Botswana on the causes of stress among students identified academic workload, overcrowded lecture halls, poor academic performance, low motivation, lack of experience in managing themselves and the situations faced by students as the main factors. It is evident from the literature that if academic requirements and what Theron (2012) refer to as the social ecologies demands exceed the available adaptive resources of the student in tertiary education, this results in stress and compromise the resilience of students. The emotional wellbeing of students in higher education has been the subject of debate in many studies (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Lin & Chen, 2009; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000; Theron, 2012; Theron & Theron, 2010). Although these factors are highlighted in the literature, it is not clear how academic programmes are stressful to students. It is critical for HEIs to ensure that students' goals and needs are integrated into the university strategy to ensure academic success and progress. Goodman (1993) advocates for universities to meet students' personal goals and values by creating a conducive learning environment.

Some of the studies discussed here are presented according to the risk factors, impact, and outcomes in Table 2.1 (below):

Table 2.1

Factors Affecting Student Performance at Undergraduate Level

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
Abd-Elmotalieb & Saha (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor perception of the academic climate and low academic self-efficacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor academic performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High academic self-efficacy mediated academic climate and academic performance in theoretical faculties High sense of self-efficacy: Acceptance of more challenging tasks, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> high ability to organise time, increased persistence in the face of obstacles, lower anxiety levels, flexible use of learning strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High ability to adapt to diverse educational environments
Adu-Pipim Boaduo (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Colonization globalization and other geopolitical and socio-economic factors that are barriers to transformation and advancement of education in Africa 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confusion, Cultural displacement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction of Political Education for Propagation of Democracy in Africa African countries should come up with political system to solve African problems: Through growing politics in higher learning institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance understanding of political ideologies and activism

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
			Make political education a compulsory subject	
Anderson (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'At-risk high school students.' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor academic success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of pre-college schooling • Student motivation • Individual ability • Completion of academic coursework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic success • Persistence
Aslam, Shahzad, Syed & Ramish (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incongruent and shortage of various forms capital • Relative grading contributes to unhealthy competitive classroom environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limits knowledge sharing • Foster negative student relationship 	<p>Proposal: Social Capital Theory</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural dimension – social interaction • Relational dimension – High level of trust, • Cognitive dimension - shared language, shared vision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance knowledge and resources sharing • Better academic integration
Barker (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racial under-representation (students of Colour) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor academic success • Invisibility • Discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive family • Peer support • Faculty support for students of colour: • university organized study groups, peer tutoring & provision of conducive study areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase student connection thus increase academic achievement • Increased ability to navigate college

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
Chetty (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over reliance on low order questioning thinking – e.g. memorising and recalling information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failure to separate relevant from irrelevant information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> focuses on the emotional, physical and knowledge development Modification and scaffolding the learning process to reduce cognitive demands combining of mini-lectures with in-class, small group work on problem sets developing skills in self-assessment and the constructive assessment of peers time management, language interpretation and life skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer support has minimal on the grades of minority college students increase in the conceptual understanding of the student higher throughput in the first semester of an undergraduate programme Continuation to Honours Masters level
Crisp & Nora (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working too many hours; Inadequate financial aid to pay college fees; Enrolling part-time in college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor academic outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The level of maths course taken in high school; Parents with higher level of educational attainment (proxy for social capital); increased financial aid; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased likelihood of being successful in the second and third year of college

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delaying enrolment to college; enrolling in a developmental course; enrolment intensity; number of working hours per week • Socio cultural variables; Academic experience 	
Cross et al. (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disadvantaged socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. • Performance oriented approach; emphasis on high participation at the detriment of high performance • Foregrounding individual over social presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural and linguistic displacement • Poor integration of individual and institutional responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal regulation • Individual responsibility • Institutional intervention for equity • Adapted teaching practices • Inclusive language policies • Extended curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High academic performance
Dearnley & Matthew (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear and anxiety of failure • Pre-occupation with not knowing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surface learning orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective thinking • Developing study skills • Greater connection with learning activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic attainment • Low student attrition • Autonomous professional practice

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly motivating cycle: reflecting, connecting, confidence building, challenging practice and esteem building. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of skills, knowledge and motivation to enhance independent learning High motivation
Diseth, Pallesen, Brunborg, & Larsen (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surface learning approach Low rating of course experience Overuse of multiple choice questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor academic achievement Encourage surface learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deep and strategic approaches High effort (amount of time spent studying) Prior academic performance Favourable course experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance academic performance due to increase quality of learning
Dukhan, Cameron, & Brenner (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of <i>social</i> and <i>cultural capital</i> Educational disadvantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor prediction of academic demands Poor academic performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Realistic reflection of academic requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More adaptable to university academic demands

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
Eiselen & Geysler (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First-generation students' experiences and inadequacy of previous school background plus learning in the second language • Unawareness of independent learning and self-regulation • Poor time management • Poor role mastery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays in acquiring effective study methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second generation students tend to have experience and inclination to employ self-regulated strategies at university • Home habitus that encourage learning • Institutional intervention - Additional support for transition • Peer networks 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less diligent students • Wrong study methods • Poor verbal expression • High stress levels and poor social integration • High-stress level for at risk students • Attribute outside sources as reason for being unsuccessful e.g. parental influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance risk profile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievers are more diligent • Higher cognitive ability • Achievers have better communication skills • Underachievers integrate well socially • Nature of study habits align to university environment • High level of psychological motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good academic outcomes

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At risk students procrastinate • Dysfunctional study habits • High social integration but low academic integration 			
Gordon, Dumbleton, & Miller (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment still aligned to racial demographics and linked to sociocultural factors • Transformational processes and the drive for wider participation of students that disregard the diversity of students and lack of willingness to learn from these differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-level attrition of historically disadvantaged students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core values and principles that shape non-traditional student world views such as respect for themselves (students) and other significant others in higher education such as the tutors who respond to the personal challenges of students in a respectable manner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective route for qualification for a range of students from diverse background • Improved transition into the programme

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minority student status, under-representation within the institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lower success rankings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English ability & academic integration academic success Critical mass specifically for underrepresented group Student aspiration and academic attitude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic success Enhanced level of comfort for students which encourages success Increase availability of role models, sense of belonging & social integration
Heikkila, Lonka, Niemen & Niemivirta (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-regulating students Insufficient study skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High levels of stress; exhaustion; lack of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-directed students Adaptive cognitive & motivational aspects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highest grades Improve general well-being High self-efficacy
Higgs & van Wyk (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transformation process of HEI's – previous historical, institutional and cultural differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fragmented knowledge of social forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on African perspective on teaching Policy context - to satisfy needs of equity, redress & development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible success & increased graduations

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of recognition of indigenous forms of knowledge 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional landscape – should address equity, efficiency, and effectiveness Funding Quality of teaching and learning University teaching and African philosophy 	
Jones-White et al. (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Living on campus in the first term of enrolment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase odds of graduating from same institution or another institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change needed in higher education policy Alternative methodologies to standard logit model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced understanding of students' success
Kappe & van der Flier (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low scores on conscientiousness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Takes longer to graduate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conscientiousness related skills: planning, time management, and organization Intrinsic motivation Study motivation Personality (openness to experience, neuroticism) and intelligence Adequate financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve time to graduation Successful career
Karimi, Khodabandelou, Ehsani, & Ahmad (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative usage of new media - social networking sites (SNS's) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce motivation to use SNS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive and motivational usage of SNS's: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information seeking Faculty-related information sharing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved social relationships

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overspending time on social networks 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social integration with peers: discussion of coursework and formulation of study groups. Maintain relations with family Information seeking: Finding jobs 	
Kember (1989)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unrealistic expectations about the course, institution, and institutional environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unrealistic expectations may contribute to dropout 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher expectations for future occupational status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High attainment, once ability was controlled
Kim & Hargrove (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Campus racism Racial micro – aggression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Segregation and alienation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same – race peer encouragement Self – efficacy Family interactions Religious support Mentoring system Relationship with faculty and administrators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graduation High academic achievement
Koen (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weak academic faculty or department The extent the institution apply rule-forming behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor student retention Poor progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extent at which institution promotes or monitor these in teaching and learning within the university and departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive or negative socialisation experience

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
Masjuan & Troiano (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extrinsic motivation • Naïve beliefs about the function of higher education studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative effect on marks • Lack of student commitment and disengagement from studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capabilities and skills • Study conditions • Appropriate learning conditions • Intrinsic motivation • New information technologies – institutional intervention • Professional expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Success in the studies
Montmarquett, Mahseredjian, & Houle (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed student 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time student are comparatively more likely to persist than part-time students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher probability of dropping out than full-time students
Parker (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student who are biased towards external locus of control • External financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-completion in distant education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student who are biased towards internal locus of control • High self-efficacy • Level of self-directiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student's success in distance education
Pretorius, Prinsloo & Uys, (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not obtaining full matric exemption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower academic attainment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full matriculation exemption • Passed mathematics at matric level • Studying in a home language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory academic success
Pearce & Down (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-traditional academic route 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural processes of exclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mature students • Underscore positive relational pedagogy between student and lecturer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduation

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low socio-economic status • Interrupted schooling 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory model of communication and student engagement • Relational dimensions of teaching, learning, and assessment 	
Ramnarain & Molefe (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of former discriminatory education policies • Inaccessible and irrelevant curriculum • Strong extrinsic orientation towards grades and social status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced enjoyment of school and purpose to learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformational education policies • Interaction with teacher, school, and parent • Strong performance – goal orientation • Increase conceptual understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase mastery
Scott et al. (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underprepared staff • Large class size • Reliance on traditional teaching style without ongoing staff development • Under-resourced institution and departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class size affects the probability of persistence in a non-linear way • Increase in educational attainment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair and adequate distribution of resources • Intellectually stimulating environment • Academic context: type of programme; modes of delivery that are student-centred • Ongoing staff development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the probability of persistence over an early dropout • High moral of staff and academics; high institutional commitment & high retention of students

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
Stephens Fryberg, Markus, & Johnson (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggle of 1st generation college students • Working class background disadvantage • Cultural mismatch theory • Norms & Independence generation • Experience of setting – discomfort • Task construal – task more difficult • Task performance – perform poorly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor academic performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University culture that recognises, appreciate and accommodate cultural diversity. • Expansion of dominant rules of college expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduation and academic success
Snowball & Boughey (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of English as Additional Language in Economics undergraduate programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of English as Home Language in Economics undergraduate programme • Language development programme • Adaptation of assessment methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Advantage

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender bias and social class effect Increased student diversity Large class size Language incompetence 			
Shulruf, Hattie, & Tumen (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demographic disadvantages of at risk groups Age, gender, and ethnicity at the individual level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May decrease retention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School structure and interventions targeting at-risk students Self-efficacy Age, gender, and ethnicity at the individual level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May increase retention
Thomas (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disadvantaged student socio-economically Significance of financial issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decrease student retention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic preparedness, Academic experience Institutional expectations & commitment Academic and social match 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student retention

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finance and employment • Family support & commitments • University support services • Institutional Habitus: staff attitudes, inclusive teaching & learning, promotion of social relations, choice, flexibility & support, diversity of social spaces 	
Tremblay, Garg, & Levin (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial strain • Low socioeconomic status • Perceived stress • Inadequate social abilities • Lack of social support • Poor high school academic history • Gender (employed male students) • Extended number of hours in a paid job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative effect in the first year of study • Poor academic progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socio-economic stability – sufficient family resources • Excellent high school grades • Not living in single parent household • Having a paid job but working fewer hours • Higher mark in Maths • Older students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University persistence • Academic success

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
Tucker et al. (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived competency and autonomy • Low teacher involvement • Low student engagement • Low-income and African identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student disengagement from learning • Teacher disinterest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher involvement • Adopting process model motivation • Student engagement • Meaningful caring and supportive teacher behaviour • Individualized academic tutoring • Training in adaptive skills • Sharing of positive feelings • Parent training • Teacher training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved student engagements • Enhanced relatedness • Enhanced teacher involvement
Van Zyl, Gravett, & de Bruin (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult transition from school to University – separation phase • Low socioeconomic status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor social integration and academic integration • Lower degree completion rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good previous academic performance • Maths higher grade • Good study attitude • Orientation programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in social and academic integration

Study	Risk Factors	Impact	Protective Factors	Impact
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of appropriate study attitude Increased age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alienation and isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional interventions: language, computer and life skills. Social integration, family, and peers 	
Vermeulen & Schmidt (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor learning environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor student behaviour Low student motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involvement in extra-curricular activities Good quality learning environment collaborating with staff and better teacher-student and student-student interactions High student motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase students' acquisition of knowledge; mastery; Positive effect on starting salary and long-term effect on earning graduation, high academic achievement, increased learning outcomes Job competence, satisfaction, and career success

Table 2.1 shows that the major concern is that the academic programme should be multifaceted and should aim to empower individual students with knowledge and skills to appreciate their diversity. HEIs are expected to transform their teaching and assessment models and practices to align with students' level of development, and enhance their academic language skills to meet the demands of their work. Cross et al. (2009) affirm that students who experience cultural and linguistic displacement at the institutional level can compensate by taking individual responsibility and better regulate their thoughts, belief systems and expectations. However, the institution still has a role to play by ensuring that the teaching practices and course content are inclusive and do not marginalise some students whose experiences are not cognate with those of the institution. The table also highlights the need for augmented programmes and academic activities that target at-risk students in HEIs (Chetty, 2014; Cross et al., 2009; Snowball & Boughey, 2012).

2.4.7 The politics of education

Most of the foundational theories (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975; Bean, 1980, 1985) were conceptualised based on a fairly homogenous group of students and therefore challenges confronting minority groups have thus been marginalised. Vygotsky (1978) advocates for a socio-cultural understanding of student academic and intellectual development, while Bourdieu (1971) argued that social and economic capital perpetuates inequalities in society as well as in education. According to Berger (2000, p.97), the main drivers of social inequalities in higher education are the direct or indirect effect of "*informal interpersonal skills, habitus, manners, linguistics, educational credentials, and lifestyle preferences.*"

Certain symbolic resources which are appropriated through cultural practice are accorded more significance in some communities than others (Berger, 2000). The fact that certain interpersonal skills, habits, and lifestyle and language preferences are accorded higher value and status affects minority and majority groups in different ways. When students enter an HEI, their capital resources as well as those of the institution and community are optimised if they subscribe to norms and values that are similar to those held by the institution. Berger's (2000) analysis of Bourdieu's social capital theory suggests that students who are socially and academically well-integrated tend to have habitus that is congruent with institutional habitus. However, it is not clear whether the students come with

this habitus or whether the institution cultivates it. The student's choice of institution is not only influenced by significant others as indicated in Bean and Eaton's (2001) theory, but by social capital that is embedded in social and organisational systems where tacit and explicit information is shared and appropriated (Aslam et al., 2013). Bourdieu's (1971) theory provides a probable explanation as to why certain students persist in certain institutions while others fail to adapt to those institutions despite good academic performance. This theory brings to light the agency of the institution which can facilitate or maintain certain cultural habitus. Berger (2000) proposes the need for alignment between the student's amount and type of cultural capital and that of the organisation.

The political and socio-economic climate shapes trends in higher education. In South Africa, transformation in higher education is informed by the principles embedded in the country's constitution such as equity, and redress (DoE, 1997; DoE, 2007; Ellery, 2011). The culture of higher education is largely informed by the conceptualisation of HEIs which is embedded in their historical role. Morrow (2009) affirms that "*cultures of HE are contingent products of particular historical circumstance*"; such cultures change continuously to achieve their objectives. The coexistence of political idealism and educational realism in higher education continues to challenge the implementation of transformational policies (Hartshorne, 1996; Deacon et al., 2009). Therefore, enduring socio-economic and racial differentials in education outcomes cannot be adequately addressed by a mere shift in resource allocation (van der Berg, 2007; De Villiers & Steyn, 2009) or by what is perceived as equitable distribution of resources.

The challenge to HEIs is to acknowledge the fact that culture is a product of the collective, and as such, needs to be inclusive. Therefore, change should be engendered by critical consciousness, the desire to bring about social justice, and the drive to create symmetrical power relations (even if the balance is temporary). Morrow (2009) argues that the politics of academic practices are aspects of a framework that serves to maintain structures of oppression and domination in society. As such, academic practices are continually being formulated and reinvented to suit the purpose and interests of those who seek ideological and cultural domination and thus maintain asymmetrical power relations (Plogler, 2012) and global intellectual hegemonic practices (Gasovic, 2002). The notion of human emancipation which is part of the HE agenda is largely dependent on one's ability to understand oneself in relation to others, and through active participation in high order thinking that is informed by one's experiences. When the marginalised try to mimic and

consume that which is perceived to be the ideal or universal without being grounded in their own context, the gap is widened.

The polarisation of higher education is becoming increasingly evident as society focuses more on reproducing itself than including and embracing other forms of knowledge (Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011; Plogler, 2012). Such polarisation prompted Plogler (2012) to call for a review of the concept of decolonised universities. He notes that, by their very nature, universities are colonised spaces. Plogler (2012) argues that colonisation is about dominating others and suppressing their lived experiences in order to integrate them into a world view and culture that is regarded as superior and is representative of the experiences of the dominant group. This knowledge hegemony requires a deliberate effort to censor other forms of knowledge, and a curriculum that perpetuates dominant ideologies while excluding the knowledge base and requirements of the minority.

Martin Cornoy (cited in Progler, 2012) describe colonised knowledge as knowledge that seeks to divide beyond the curriculum; it involves the hierarchical structuring of social class in a more socially acceptable manner to ensure that the privileged remain privileged. The polarisation of HEIs is both internal and external, and moves beyond the institution, to the intercontinental and international levels.

There has been much debate in HEIs about evidence-based learning which is typical of the Science and English fields of study (Madue, 2008; Progler, 2012). Even within a discipline or field, there are different understandings of what is defined as valuable knowledge. *“Self-evidence academic institutions are characterised by increased enrolment of students, large donor grants and more share of funding from government subsidies; high marketability value as results of grants and corporates patents”* (Progler, 2012, p.49). Such institutions (and consequently students in them) are mainly concerned with how best to outshine another comparable department. They are not concerned with how best the institution can become more inclusive and how it can integrate other forms of knowledge. To this effect, universities tend to marginalise and polarise all communities irrespective of their social class.

The use of the class system is more entrenched and difficult to deconstruct in communities and institutions which are classified as developing. In such institutions, the main aim is to undo the legacy of the past while trying to catch up with the ideals of the global community. The need to ‘develop’ and be ranked among the best universities is perpetuated by a number of factors such as grants, subsidies, and a general drive to increase

access to students previously denied such (Progler, 2012). In turn, this creates a further backlog as most colonised or previously disadvantaged HEIs confront unique challenges due to the diverse needs of their learners who differ in significant ways from those of the upper/middle social class.

Institutions that are able to produce large volumes of research and new senior and elite thinkers (Progler, 2012) are more likely to be recognised and their staff has easy access to employment opportunities that secure them high class and social status. When other social classes perceive such status as desirable, they aspire to enrol in such highly favoured institutions. As a result, these institutions can select from many gifted students, some of whom have been groomed to fit with the university's ideologies, ethos, and culture from birth. To some extent, society is socialised in insidious ways to accept the HEI as the only form of legitimate knowledge base while ignoring other forms of knowledge.

As early as 1960, scholars argued against universities being polarised from people's daily experiences. Carl Kerr coined the term 'multiversity' as an alternative to such dichotomies. Universities have been slow to respond to what Progler (2012) calls 'hyper-modernity' and some have not yet developed a strategy for curriculum delivery that resonates with the student as customer.

To a large extent, conservative researchers and scholars tend to defy the pressure to hyper modernise their institutions (Progler, 2012). Others have succumbed by expanding their departments and approaching the private sector to subsidise their endeavour to preserve what they perceive as valuable knowledge. In some institutions, faculties have closed due to poor student enrolment. The quality of teaching and learning in some institutions has been compromised by providing students with poor quality education.

Progler (2012) further argues that the university as an institution must be fully accountable, not only to business and government, but should create space to engage and provide an opportunity for dialogue between civil society, families, communities, and employers. Including marginalised groups offers an opportunity to restructure the university community and curriculum to respond to the real needs of students and the divergent needs of various communities for the benefit not only of the few.

Civil society and the families of elite students in foreign countries have minimal influence on what happens in HEIs. This is largely the result of HEIs active recruitment of international students from marginalised or disadvantaged communities. According to

Progler (2012), students on scholarships or bursaries are most likely to accept what happens at HEIs and parents are not able to inform proceedings in the institutions or the curriculum. Students feel obligated to do what senior members of staff want them to do in order to continue to receive financial assistance. This is not necessarily unique to international students; students understand the power dynamics of the student-lecturer relationship.

The quality and quantity of education in HEIs are subject to on-going debate in various fora. Scholars have proposed different ways to balance quality and quantity (Ellery, 2011; Nsamenang, 2011). Staff members in HEIs are also becoming more polarised with regard to perceived expectations within higher education. Progler (2012) categorises the involvement of academic staff in higher education into two groups, i.e., those that teach (normally large classes), and those that focus on research oriented learning. Those who are new in the institution find themselves under pressure to teach large classes and produce many scholarly research articles. Distinctions between staff members, the student as client approach, and pressure on universities to be self-sustaining, which is reinforced by the withdrawal of subsidies, further entrench asymmetrical power relations, and hence perpetuate the class system within these institutions.

Progler (2012) suggests that universities should strike a balance between the need to respond to business and the desire to reproduce high-level academic thinkers. Academic programmes should be redesigned or developed to provide students with work-related skills whilst encouraging critical reflective practices which integrate research. The need for critical consciousness in education is a pedagogical challenge and scholars such as Paulo Freire (1972), David Rose (2005) Julian Nyerere (1968a, 1968b), and Graeme Bloch (2009) have written extensively on this subject.

Progler (2012, p. 57) advocates for learning skills for an agrocentric lifestyle and global skills. Different forms of knowledge are critical for students' emancipation. It is important to acknowledge that knowledge is not mutually exclusive. Students do not need to know either good research skills or practical knowledge; they can be seamlessly integrated. The polarised or mutually exclusive view of HEIs as either research sites or vocational centres has resulted in a large number of graduates without jobs or any prospect of finding employment. For the most part, undergraduate degrees do not seem to have sufficient currency as is indicated by the high levels of unemployment among graduate students (Pauw, Oosthuizen, &, Van Der Westhuizen, 2008; Statistics South Africa, 2011). Students often

have no alternative but to return to HEIs to acquire non-degree qualifications or more research skills. Such postgraduate studies are more aligned with the needs of the labour market and students in these programmes are often encouraged to engage with potential employers.

Universities continue to unethically produce an excessive number of students who are set up for unemployment. The higher education system has become like a beauty pageant which aims to exclude as many participants as possible to fill the limited number of places. However, unlike in pageants, students are not aware that they are being selected for the sake of being excluded.

To what extent do institutions provide support through policies and selection criteria that balance the expectations of government, students, and the university culture and ethos? These practices have implications for students entering their first year of study. Proglor (2012) argues that selection of first-year students is mainly focused on meeting the needs of lecturers, institutions, and government in that order. However, the power play among these stakeholders has a direct impact on students' supervision and the quality of education. To this end, stringent examinations and selection procedures are used.

Universities are no longer at the centre of knowledge generation, but are controlled by the business sector to generate critical knowledge to inform policy. To this end, HEIs work in a peripheral bubble of knowledge which is perpetuated by self-appreciation by similar scholars who want to be at the top-end of the bubble. Alatas (2003) warns against this vicious cycle of knowledge domination and refers to it as intellectual imperialism (Alatas, 2012) which perpetuates eurocentric academic dependency and what Fernandez (2012) calls neocolonialism. Scholars such as Friedman (1965) and others (Alvares & Faruqi, 2012; Shih & Wu, 2012) emphasise a growing tendency among scholars located in dominant institutions to coerce those at the periphery to accept their standards, philosophies and procedures through various means such as socialisation and institutionalisation of ideologies and theories. The mass production, transmission, and ranking of knowledge produced by dominant researchers influences scholarship at a global level and inflates appetites for received knowledge, especially among those institutions and researchers that want to move closer to the centre of the asymmetric exchange of academic knowledge production (Alatas, 2012; Shih & Wu, 2012).

In order to be acknowledged and access these self-perpetuating practices, HEIs' knowledge generators remain oblivious to the new centre of power created by institutions

and research centres which remain outside HEIs. South African based institutions such as the Health Economics Aids Research Division (HEARD), Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA) and other non-governmental organisations continuously extend the frontiers of knowledge production in the health sciences. Universities are becoming more subservient to the true generators of knowledge, consultants, who are working with business/government to produce expected/critical knowledge and skills for enhanced service delivery. While these high-level research outputs are to some extent driven by experienced and competent researchers from certain universities, the university community fails to adjust its ethos and curriculum to accommodate grass-roots knowledge generation (data collection and analysis through field work/field workers). Thus, highly specialised field work seems to be competently managed by people who have no entry to university, yet are able to capture lived experiences better than university trained students/graduates. This disembodied accumulation of knowledge fails to acknowledge the active agency of learners in higher education and many researchers thus call for an epistemological shift (Barnett, 2004; Dall’Alba, 2007; Morrow, 2009). Reassigning meaning out of context has a detrimental effect on higher education scholarship (Young, 2008). Ellery & Lotz-Sisitka (2011) highlight the need for embodied knowledge and encouraging learners to call on their everyday knowledge in learning.

The question is: what is the role of HEIs? What assumptions are made about university students’ capacity before they are accepted in an HEI? What do the practical and relevant knowledge production mechanisms tell us about the kind of training, teaching, and learning methodologies that should be employed in HEIs? Private education institutions are increasingly becoming institutions of choice (Akoojee & McGrath, 2007) due to their ability to patiently and competently nurture and prepare students to acquire knowledge and graduate. Although these private HEIs charge higher fees, they have higher throughput rates (Sonra, 2012). Although state-funded organisations charge lower fees, the costs lie in poor progression rates and inadequate support for students who are clogging the system due to high failure rates (Akoojee & McGrath, 2007; Johnson, 2000). It could thus be argued that wasteful expenditure in public HEIs and low throughput more than compensate for the high fees charged by private institutions. Students in state-funded HEIs frequently change their fields of study or academic programmes due to inadequate career counselling and thus remain in the system for a long time. Those that leave the system are stranded due to a lack of employment opportunities. They end up in skills training institutions which are normally outside the university system.

The government has gained sufficient ground with regard to universities providing skills training but has strengthened the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETAs) and the South African Qualifications Authority to provide the roadmap (Higgs & Van Wyk, 2006; Nel et al., 2009). NGOs/community-based organisations (CBOs) are accredited to provide skills training even for university graduates. However, this polarised education system continues to exclude those that are supposed to benefit. The choice between the vocational route and the academic research route continues to create tension and does not resolve the problem of a shortage of relevant skills and unemployed graduates.

A number of students/ employees have undergone skills training, and many have at least a first degree. Yet HEIs are reluctant to provide education related to the work environment. More often than not, universities, especially in the humanities, are denigrated to the status of consultants for their knowledge and skills when conducting ‘community-driven’ research. Most university students that acquire internship posts and permanent positions are those with more professional qualifications. The question HEIs need to ask is, to what extent do they provide real opportunities for students (Pauw, et al. 2008) or do they adopt the ‘take it or leave it’ attitude when providing opportunities for education?

Students graduating from certain disciplines such as languages find it difficult to find employment. Postgraduate diplomas such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) are oversubscribed due to the lack of career progression in the student’s chosen field of study. Current statistics at universities like UKZN indicate that more students apply for the PGCE degree than for full-time post graduate studies. Students are often pressured to enroll for postgraduate studies that will lead to employment. To some extent, the university is preparing a large volume of educators by default. The question is, if quality educators are the key priority for a country like South Africa, why is this not a deliberate and concerted effort? The government has failed to enforce some of its policies, and universities remain largely untransformed (Govinder, Zondo, & Makgoba, 2013; Makgoba, 1997a). On the other hand, some attempts have been made to address equity, access, and resourcing of institutions and students.

Govinder et al. (2013) and Makgoba (1997a) maintain that HEIs have remained largely untransformed and resistant to change. The questions that need to be raised are embedded in the review titled *“How have institutions failed to heed the call for transformation and how have they successfully transformed key aspects of the institutions?”* HEIs need to seriously engage with issues such as the indicators used to measure

transformation and who informs such indicators without losing sight of the fact that they are not as value free and objective as they are portrayed in the literature. Boshoff (2009) warns against uncritical acceptance of global university rankings as the 'holy grail' in determining a university's standing. HEIs need to establish the extent to which these indicators exclude/include/marginalise certain populations. Leaders in HEIs need to ask themselves why these indicators should not be seen as generic and universally accepted, but should take the context into consideration given the history of HEIs in South Africa. Boshoff (2009) assert that the ideologies that guide paternalistic notions of inclusion should be continuously interrogated and challenged in order to address equity and access issues.

The consequences of past exclusion are entrenched in the South African education system. The extent to which previous policies perpetuated polarisation and entrenched the class system is a challenge for the future. It is, therefore, critical to interrogate carefully current policies at the national and institutional levels as well as at the global level in order to understand the factors that perpetuate exclusion and promote inclusion. Good practices that increase student retention can to some extent facilitate their academic performance. In order to understand what enables or hinders learners' performance in HEIs, it is important to understand the specific practices that are unique to certain disciplines.

Segregated knowledge production, and the use and appropriation of this knowledge contribute to poor academic progress. Students, especially those that come directly from secondary schools, often marvel at their lack of preparedness for higher education (Boughey, 2008; Bradbury & Miller, 2011; Morrow, 2009; Prinsloo, 2009). Little is done to teach students as early as high school how to appreciate and use the knowledge systems that exist within their home and families. Learning is geared towards routine memorisation. The discrepancy between knowledge gained in high school and knowledge acquired at HEIs becomes more evident as students are confronted with more complex tasks in their studies. Difficulties in bridging the gap can be attributed to the way universities package knowledge, i.e., university knowledge versus knowledge of the self (Dall'Alba, 2007; Ellery, 2011). This does not prepare students in a holistic manner to understand the self in relation to the world.

When students are rushed to apply information without sufficient foundation on how this knowledge was acquired, i.e., the basic principles as in science, they fail to acquire the independent thinking skills required at postgraduate and higher levels. Students in the exact sciences are distinguished by their ability to reflect critically and apply acquired knowledge in real world settings (Ellery, 2011). Most students that enter mathematics and science fields

have a more solid background in these subjects in their secondary education. However, despite having studied cognate learning areas before coming to university, such students do not perform competently even at first-year level (Ellery, 2011). The assumption that such students are able to solve complex mathematical and science problems leads to high failure rates, as they have not acquired the independent problem-solving skills and background knowledge that are required in their field of study.

Students, especially those from disadvantaged schools are often taught by under-qualified educators (van der Berg, 2007) who themselves do not have sufficient background knowledge to impact on learners. Both the teacher and the learners rely on memorisation which stifles creativity and independent thinking. According to Ellery (2011), the opposite is true for students in the humanities; even though students in these disciplines have not taken Psychology or Social Work at high school level, they are able to competently acquire the minimum criteria to pass the course. This is because these disciplines focus on their lived day-to-day experiences. They learn and appreciate the value of the knowledge gained, and this knowledge is immediately transferable to others; yet many students are not given the status they deserve. Only a few acquire professional status, thus creating an inter-professional hierarchy.

The disjuncture between knowledge and culture, idioms, and rootedness due to thinking and learning in a foreign language can result in poorly-developed thinking patterns and retard independent thinking and innovation (Alvares, 2012). Language can be used to perpetuate the hegemony of the oppressor. Neo-linguistic imperialism highlight the impact of imposing language and its influence on the development of holistic academic skills. Gunnar Myrdal's (1968) analysis of Asian education identifies the common characteristics of students from colonised countries. Among other things, he highlights a lack of critical thinking, especially among international students, acceptance of the curriculum, rote learning and memorisation, the belief that knowledge is limited to textbook knowledge, and mimicry of content devoid of culture. Education institutions in colonised states place much emphasis on examinations and formalised curriculum. Alvares (2012) affirms Myrdal's (1968) observations and identifies other assumptions associated with university education such as the belief that valuable knowledge is book knowledge, prioritising the university as an institution to disseminate rather than generate knowledge.

It has been argued (Geisler, 1994; Snowball & Boughey, 2012) that the manner in which the basic and higher education systems prepare students differs. As such there is a

need to re-orientate and enculturate students when they enter higher education. According to Geisler (1994), in basic education, knowledge is presented as ‘true’, that is, in an objective manner which leaves minimal room for learners to question or dispute what is observed in written text. This disengages students from themselves as knowledge producers (Ellery & Lotz-Sisitka, 2011; Ellery, 2011) and promotes a culture of knowledge consumption. Unlike the colonialism of the past which was about direct military rule and subjugation, globalisation is an incipient, subtle but pervasive phenomenon; the victim is usually the last to know (Alvares, 2012). The victim loses the ability to apply their judgement and to understand that which is borrowed. Asante (1999) argues that reconstituting the curricula in universities is as critical as the conceptualisation of the curricular that was established as a vestige of the colonial past to wipe out students’ cultural identity. The main purpose was to cultivate and universalise Western culture, philosophies, values, and heritages. Transformation in HEIs is a moral obligation and there is accordingly a need for a paradigm shift to promote social justice and redress.

2.8 Conclusion

There is overall consensus in the literature on the basic factors that impact academic progress. There have also been continuous shifts in acknowledging and redressing the challenges facing students in higher education. Different theories using varied research methodologies have captured the dynamic and at times radical shift in what constitute a conducive learning environment. A person does not simply become a student by virtue of being in higher education; some level of transformation and reorientation needs to occur before they can claim to be a student. When students enter higher education, they are expected to critically engage with the learning material and identify gaps in the text.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW PART 2: REVIEW OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION FROM AN AFRICAN-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the manner in which retention, persistence, and academic performance can be conceptualised within the African context. Similarly, it explores African-centred and other relevant research methodologies that could be used to conceptualise research in African HEIs. Euro-American Psychology, a hegemonic tool that has been used to promote cultural colonisation, is discussed, as well as African-centred responses to this perspective using Afrocentric, Africentric and African-centred world views. The chapter also examines whether the models, theories, and concepts that inform our current understanding of students are culturally congruent with the diverse higher education student body in South Africa. At the centre of this argument is what scholars regard as African-centred perspectives.

3.2 Euro-American Approaches in the Social Sciences

Hoskins (1992a; 199b) argues that Eurocentric historians continue to falsify, misrepresent and distort human and world history. For example, Grill (2003, cited in Horsthemke, 2006) paints Africans as an homogeneous group of lazy, mediocre individuals who fail to embrace modern democratic civilization, in order to justify why Africa has remained marginalised and uncompetitive in the global economy. According to Asante (1999), such arguments are perpetuated by uncritical reliance on borrowed theories and models and naïve ignorance of people of African descent. Similarly, Hoskins (1992a; 1992b) asserts that the toxic Eurocentric psychological dependency witnessed in previously colonised peoples and communities, such as Africans, was fostered through miseducation and Eurocentric dominance.

Many scholars have accounted for these disparate views by distinguishing between African and European cultures (Asante, 1990, 1999; Fanon, 1986; Graham, 1999; Mkhize, 2004a; Schiele, 1997, 2000). The major distinction is underpinned by the epistemological and ontological positions that each assumes. African scholars have expressed their displeasure at the use of imported theories and knowledge systems that do not use Africans as the unit of analysis (Asante, 1990; Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011; Ojiaku, 1974). These

scholars assert that, as long as theories continue to be based on Euro-American values, experiences, culture, and norms and fail to elevate the African as the primary subject of study, such practices will continue to marginalise African students.

Scholars like Graham (1999); Mkhize (2004a); Nsamenang (2011); and Nwoye (2013, 2014, 2015) agree that the foundational values, ideologies, and philosophical views that inform the Euro-American perspective are distinct from those that underlie the African-centred one. These authors argue that despite the fundamental differences between these schools of thought, the epistemological and ontological foundations of theories about the nature of human beings and the sources of knowledge in general, and traditional psychology in particular, stem from a Euro-American perspective.

Furthermore, Cahan and White (1992) argue that the history of the social sciences (which encompass disciplines such as Psychology) has been largely influenced by the need to demonstrate that, like exact sciences, the social sciences can be studied objectively through experiments. The quest for objective and value-free knowledge, which is aligned with the positivist view inspired the study of the nature of human beings within one context, with the results of such experimental studies being applied to others in different contexts (Arnett, 2008). This universalisation of experience and knowledge, often by Euro-Americans aligned with the positivist paradigm, does not consider the subjective experiences of individuals and the critical role that context plays in shaping them (Dei, 1994; Cahan & White, 1992).

The tendency to decontextualise knowledge has been the subject of debate among some scholars (Asante, 1990; Arnett, 2008; Cahan & White, 1992; Nwoye, 2015). Asante (1999) asserts that people's lived experiences are grounded in a cultural context. Asante (1999) argues that, "...driven [by] the desire to make a particularism universal or to express a type of Western triumphalism that reduce other people to the margins of history" (p. vii), European scholars perpetuated an imperialist discourse of Western knowledge as superior and applicable to all people. International discourses driven mainly by Africans on the continent and in the diaspora are opposed to the idea that Western knowledge is universal (Ani, 1994; Dei, 1994; Graham, 1999; Schiele, 1994). Arnett (2008) affirms this view in his paper, '*Why American Psychology Needs to Become Less American.*' Arnett (2008) concludes that influential psychological discourses at the international level continue to be based on the experiences of minority groups in America and European countries. Arnett (2008) observes that, while America and European-English countries represent about 5% of the world population, even in current times, scholars continue to ignore the lived experiences of 95% of the population in their research initiatives and scholastic discourses. Furthermore,

Arnett (2008) asserts that theoretical formulations in the social sciences are often drawn from the homogenous group of higher education students that are favoured by researchers as a data source because they are a readily available population in research institutions. Tinto (2006) also concedes that early student retention theories were based on data collected from a homogeneous group of students using mainly quantitative approaches.

The danger of objectified and decontextualised knowledge, which is often the result of experimentation is that it tends to promote people's displacement from the centre of knowledge production and alienate them from the knowledge produced. When knowledge production aims to identify general principles that are applied to all people from a population which is not representative of the entire population (Cohan & White, 1992), such practice needs to be viewed with suspicion. The literature notes that the struggle for recognition as a subject, rather than as an object, has been a unifying element among African scholars on the African continent and in the diaspora (Asante, 1990). Holdstock (1981) blames the poor visibility and acceptance of the discipline of Psychology on the African continent in general and in South Africa in particular, on the assumption that Western approaches are universal meaning that they are equally applicable to other cultures. Generalising that which is particular has created a significant deficiency in the applicability of Western psychology outside Western-English speaking countries (Arnett, 2008; Holdstock, 1981). This is not to say that Western psychology has not made a meaningful contribution to international scholarship. However, the opposite is also true. As Holdstock (1981) argues, had it not been for the hegemonic nature and legitimisation of Euro-American scholarship and the failure to recognise the counterparts of Western culture, much could have been gained from indigenous and alternative knowledge systems. Many of the challenges confronting indigenous communities could have been resolved had the experiences and contextual factors facing the majority (in terms of numbers) of the world's population been the subject of scholarship for mainstream theories in the social sciences (Arnett, 2008).

Cultural colonisation continues to insidiously perpetuate an inferiority complex amongst African scholars, continental Africans, and those in the diaspora (see Bangura, 2012) who persist in believing that their experiences and practices must be validated using Western knowledge systems. To a large extent, racism, unilateral acculturation and the desire to dominate other cultures during the colonial and to some degree post-colonial African contexts, created resistance by some indigenous communities who opposed forced acculturation (Asante, 1990, 1999, 2000, 2007). Acculturation can be defined as the

“modification of culture of a group or an individual as a result of contact with a different culture” (Mkhize, 2004a, p.30).

The nature of Euro-American scholarship rendered people from non-Western countries passive objects of study that have no meaningful contribution to offer in the production of knowledge (Tedla, 2005; Myers, 2009; Asante, 1999). Asante (1990, 1999) has written extensively on the negative effects of the use of Africans as objects rather than subjects of study in much research in the social sciences. Asante (1990, 1999) provides wide-ranging examples of how the history, culture, and image of African people have been distorted and devalued in social science literature and research. One of the main concerns is the manner in which some of the earlier findings on great human civilisations have been omitted or distorted in the literature, especially those that link Egypt to all the major academic, scientific, medical, philosophical, and technological innovations. *“But the Europeans were eager to promulgate the idea of Greeks as the masters of early human civilisation”* (Asante, 1990, p.45). Asante (1990, 1999) and others’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Nwoye, 2013) attempt to reclaim cultural, philosophical, and other forms of heritage in order to reposition and reaffirm Africa’s contribution and leadership in many key areas of great human civilisations. Asante (1990, 1999) argues that Africa should receive due recognition for guiding some of the Greek scholars who studied for many years under African gurus in Kemet (ancient Egypt). The distortion and reclaiming of African historical contributions continue to be a contested subject of discussion among both Pan African and Euro-American scholars (Asante, 1990, 1999; Arnett, 2008). Asante (1990, 1999) views Eurocentrism as ethnocentric in that it presents Europeans as superior and others (non-Europeans) as inferior. Asante (1999) goes further to challenge the claim that *“only the Europeans had the ability to construct rational thought”* (p.2).

It seems that Eurocentrism not only seeks to demonstrate Western knowledge as superior to that of other non-Western forms of knowledge (Tedla, 2005) but also views the nature of knowledge and the nature of the human being in a particular manner. Mkhize (2004a) claims that *“traditional Western psychology is premised on the independent view of the self”* (p.26). Mkhize (2004a) adds that *“the self in traditional psychology is regarded as a bounded, autonomous entity: it is defined in terms of its internal attributes such as thoughts and emotions, independent of social and contextual factors”* (p.26-27). Tedla (2005) is also critical of the Western view of the primacy of individual interests over communal needs, which is typical of prominent Western metaphysics.

Another typical characteristic of traditional Euro-American scholarship is the presentation of a dichotomous relationship between the self and the other. This individual-social dualism was largely promulgated by the Cartesian view that the self and the social environment in which the individual exists are separate entities (Mkhize, 2004a). Many scholars (Graham, 1999; Mkhize, 2004a, 2004b; Tedla, 2005) argue that the dichotomous and fragmented view of the self as separate from the context constitutes one of the distinguishing characteristics between Eurocentric and African-centred understandings of the nature of the human being. Tedla (2006) points out that the Western view tends to polarise the essence of human existence by making an artificial distinction between the mental and the practical aspects of life when both are equally essential.

Scholars aligned with the post-positivist paradigm have made attempts to acknowledge the influence of the social environment on individual behaviour (Bean, 1980; Bean & Eaton, 2000). These efforts notwithstanding, traditional Euro-American theories and models present the individual as a passive being whose behaviour is shaped by external factors (Graham, 1999). There seems to be a lack of co-influence between the individual and the environment as the environmental factors seem to have a unidirectional influence on human behaviour (Graham, 1999). This linear-causality, i.e., a unidirectional cause-effect relationship between the individual and the social environment, has raised concerns among many scholars (Cahan & White, 1992; Graham, 1999; Tedla, 2005).

According to Habermas (1976), a person's lifeworld has three dimensions: culture, society, and person. This idea is affirmed by Mkhize (2004b) who states that it is possible to move beyond the individual-society dichotomy. Mkhize (2004) draws on Bakhtin's argument that "*a person's utterance incorporates voices of social groups and institutions.*" Mkhize (2004b) concludes that "*we make it [the world] our own when we appropriate it (from others and the social, cultural sphere) by populating it with our own intentions and accent.*" Bakhtin (1981), Mkhize (2004b), Collins, (2004) and Hook (2004) propose that knowledge can only be understood within the context, leading to the call for 'critical psychology' (Hook, 2004).

The principles embedded in African values and the concept of *Ubuntu* have been instrumental in shaping on-going debate about the need for theories, models, and practices that are African-centred (Hanks, 2008; Khoapa, 1980; Mkhize, 2004b; Ramose, 1999). As Hook (2004) notes in *Critical Psychology*, the African-centred perspective is aligned with the field of critical psychology.

Common foundational principles inform the move towards an African-centred perspective in various fields of study (Graham, 1999; Hook, 2004; Jamison, 2008; Myers, 2009). The principles that have been the subject of debate are those that relate to incongruences in the world view, ontology, and epistemological perspectives that distinguish African-centred and Eurocentric perspectives (Mkhize, 2004a; Asante, 2011; Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011; Nwoye, 2015). It is, therefore, essential to discuss the purpose and African ways of understanding students in higher education.

3.3 The African-centred Perspective

What are the main aims of the Afrocentric, Africentric and African-centred paradigm? Although these terms are used interchangeably in this thesis, it is important to note that there are a few differences. The Africentric perspective embraces the dual heritage of relevant Western and African knowledge systems in order to deal with the challenges of contemporary Africa (Nwoye, 2015). According to Dei (1994, p.4) “*Afrocentricity is about the investigation and understanding of phenomena from a perspective grounded in African-centred values.*” According to Schiele (1994, 1997) and Nwoye (2015), one of the aims of the Afrocentric perspective is to broaden the conceptual knowledge base of the social sciences and provide a platform for acknowledgment of the transcendence of material and spiritual interconnection and interdependence of human life. Based on the literature (Schiele, 1994, 2000; Myers, 2009), it seems that the Afrocentric paradigm is also a deliberate attempt to sensitise human service organisations to the congruent and incongruent needs, experiences, and objectives of people of African descent. Such a paradigm could foster acknowledgment of the idiosyncrasies of communities as a crucial element of knowledge production and assist such organisations to forge more productive and meaningful institutional-community relations.

Nwoye’s (2015) theoretical synthesis in an article titled, ‘*What is African Psychology the Psychology of?*’ notes that the aims of African Psychology within the broader frame of an African-centred perspective are to:

- a. Rehabilitate negative images about African people that have been perpetrated in the public domain by Euro-American scholars and even continental African scholars;
- b. Detoxify the colonial mentality that perpetuates an inferiority complex and paralysis amongst African scholars;
- c. Affirm that the experiences, values, and practices of African people are legitimate and worthy of scientific, scholarly attention. Both Achebe (1989) and Nwoye (2015)

assert that African scholarship is not solely focused on the primitive rituals and practices of the past experiences of African people but the past and current issues faced by them and those of African descent.

In other words, an African-centred perspective is a form of resistance against colonial domination and a drive to conscientise scholars of African descent about their intellectual alienation from African-centred traditional education and knowledge systems (Obiechina, 1992). According to Nwoye (2015), such education has the potential to provide constructive direction and help African scholars to move beyond mimicking Western scholarship to rediscover the significance of traditional education and what it can offer contemporary Africa.

3.3.5 Conceptualisation of an African-centred perspective.

According to Meko (2006), Africans have a responsibility to enhance Africa and reflect African values in their scholarship. Relevant African education takes the culture and environment of people of African descent into account. Therefore, such education is anchored in a common cultural vision that recognises the equality of theory and practice. Meko (2006) emphasises the need to redress the domination of hierarchical Western knowledge and maintains that African knowledge is centric, meaning that it is un-hierarchical; hence it can affirm other forms of knowledge, including Western knowledge systems. Scholars such as Nwoye (2015) and Nsamenang (2011) acknowledge Western and African knowledge systems as part of the heritage of people of African descent. However, the shared cultural experiences and philosophical foundations that bind people of African descent together are much more important (Asante, 1999, 2004; Myers, 2009).

African people have a social responsibility towards their fellow human beings (Makgoba, 1997b; Meko, 2006). African scholars (Makgoba, 1997b; Moulder, 1995; Mporu, 2001; Pityana, 2004; Ramose, 1999; Seepe, 2004) assert that theories and models that are imported from the West often alienate people of African descent and fail to respond to the contextual difficulties they face. Makgoba (1998) refers to these models as transplantable and pseudo-colonial and argues for authentic and distinct African scholarship, models and theories. African scholars can end their alienation by promoting African values and culture and embedding their scholarly practice in the African world view. The African-centred perspective promotes the study of Africans and their various forms of existence as subjects and rejects the objectification of people of African descent and indigenous communities (Asante, 1999; Graham, 1999; Tedler, 2005; see Neville, Tynes and Utsey,

2009). The rejection of the objectification of Africans in the literature challenges the positivist paradigm which positions the researcher as an expert over the lived experience of the subject of study. Researchers (Arnett, 2008; Jamison, 2008; Schreider, 2000) argue that relevant and useful research initiatives should be centred on the African experience and recognise that the experiences of Africans are worthy of exploration in the academic field. More often than not, studies on African cultures, experiences, and ideologies are portrayed from the deficit model (Asante, 1999; Nsemenang, 2011). The failure to differentiate between what is distinct and what is deficient often leads to false claims and incomplete understanding (Mekoa, 2006).

According to Karenga (1993), the African worldview encompasses the following key principles: the centrality of the community; respect for tradition; a high level of spirituality and ethical concern; harmony with nature; a society of self-hood; veneration of ancestors; and unity of being. African scholars in the diaspora and in Africa seem (Richards, 1980) to agree with the philosophical view that by nature, Africans are communal beings and that they prioritise harmonious relationships and the unity of living and non-living forms of life. From this perspective, human life does not begin and end with the individual but is transcendent and incorporates the spirits of the living and the living dead.

By implication, the Afrocentric paradigm is inclusive in that it acknowledges all forms of existence at the physical and metaphysical levels. Afrocentricity can cohabit with other perspectives and is not hegemonic. It acknowledges pluralism and the multiplicity of cultures (Asante, 1991; Mekoa, 2006, Housessou-Adin, 1995; Nwoye, 2015a). African-centred scholarship is dialectic in its conception of the nature of knowledge (Mkhize, 2004a) which makes it impossible to have one legitimate and superior view of knowledge.

According to Asante (1999), the Africentric epistemological position asserts that classical African civilisation is the point of departure for knowledge production that informed many fields of study such as medicine, philosophy, and technology. Western society's denial of the pivotal role of the African continent in achieving advanced knowledge in maths, medicine, philosophy, and other fields of study has been highly contested by Western and African scholars. Asante (1990, 1999) asserts that Africans should be proud of the significant role played by earlier African scholars and people in general in bringing about the civilization of the world. Asante's (1990, 1999) theory of African scholarship provides a well-researched and thought-provoking account of how history has been distorted to present a superior image of Western civilisation and the manner in which Greece is viewed as the proxy for white males' God-given authority to control and govern the universe due to their

natural ability to outshine all other human beings in the universe. Another important aspect of the epistemological debate is that there are other ways of knowing such as intuition in Afrocentric research and therefore, distinct African sources of knowledge should become the subject of study (Schreider, 2000).

Afrocentricity calls for African-centred researchers who immerse themselves in the history, language, philosophy, and mythology of the people being studied (Okafor, 1996). For the purpose of the humanist research advocated by Asante (1990), the empirical authority of any authentic Afrocentric research endeavour is "...verifiable in the experiences of human beings..." (p. 25). Mekoa (2006) identified three main qualities of an African scholar that can advance African-centred scholarship. The first is competence which encompasses the analytic skills that can be acquired through training but are not necessarily transferable. The second quality is clarity of perspective, which implies that the researcher must be well grounded in the fundamental issues that constitute the subject. The last quality calls for an understanding of the object, which encompasses some understanding of key interrelationships that shape the interaction between the subject and the distal and proximal world; in other words, the contextual issues surrounding and outside the subject must also be the focus of analysis.

Amongst other things, African-centred scholars should be grounded in the historical events and ideologies that continue to promote the alienation of people of African descent (Mekoa, 2006). The diverse sources of the alienation of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora are acknowledged, including cultural roots and cultural land due to forced removals during colonisation; factional fights which are the consequence of socio-political and economic instability; and natural disasters (Mpofu, 2001; Myers, 2009). To a large extent, colonisation and imperialism have served as common denominators that unite Africans and other previously colonised communities outside the African continent. The identity of Africans in the diaspora and on the continent is influenced by the subjugation of power and domination by European countries. In this regard, Mekoa (2006, p. 264) observes that "*While all other people of Africa have experienced the severity of colonialism, in South Africa the effect of displacement and dispossession were most far-reaching*" (Mekoa, 2006, p. 264).

Although some of the current and past challenges facing the African people are not a direct consequence of colonisation but could be accounted for by many factors (such as ignorance, the arrogance of African leaders and failure to be competitive ; cf., Asante 1999), some scholars (Asante, 1999; Myers, 1992, 2009) argue that these are the residue of the colonial mentality that seeks to undermine and continue to mentally colonise the African

people. The colonial mentality created disharmony and disunity in order to demonstrate the superiority of Western governance systems, authority, and knowledge. Hence, the drive to regain the indigenous knowledge system, especially in developing countries, has not only been a direct retaliation against Western domination (Asante, 1999; Utsey, Belvet & Fischer, 2009) but serves as the means to preserve local knowledge (Mpofu, 2001) and restore the dignity of indigenous communities.

Much has been written to demonstrate the particularistic aspects of the African human spirit on the continent and in the diaspora. Scholars (Asante, 1999; Tedla, 2005; Myers, 1992) note that, as far back as the years of slavery, the people who were enslaved appropriated what is now considered as the values of '*Ubuntu*' and prioritised collectivism versus individualist values. As observed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, African people's ability to forgive has confirmed their generosity of spirit (Mekoa, 2008).

Ubuntu recognises a person as a person and is also associated with kindness, gentleness, humility, respect and love (Booth, 1977; Myers, 1992). Others such as Zimbabwean scholars, Samkange and Samkange have used the concept of *ubuntuism/Hunhuism* to capture the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. According to Shutte (1993), *Ubuntu* refers to a general attitude, behaviour, and way of life. He argues that there is a need to understand humanity as a reality and as a value.

Ubuntu is a philosophy that emphasises humanity and serves as a spiritual foundation for African societies (Nafukho, 2006; Ramose, 1999). Nafukho (2006) identifies three of Bangura's (2005) basic tenets of the *Ubuntu* philosophy. The first is religiosity, which implies that African people are deeply spiritual beings in their connection with the metaphysical and physical worlds. Ancestors play a significant role in mediating physical human existence to God who is deemed the Creator of all things (Ramose, 1999). In the African context, religion is critical in daily life as it informs people's belief systems and practice (Nafukho, 2006; Ramose, 1999). The second tenet is consensus building. Consensus requires a certain level of appreciation for diverse belief systems, respect for differences, and a common understanding of shared values. According to Bangura (2005), these value systems include peace, togetherness, and oneness/unity in strength. It seems that for the values to be fully realised and appropriated, the community should have reached a certain level of consensus and share the belief that what is being valued applies to them. Furthermore, values can inform human existence if there is an authentic appreciation of human rights as well as genuine acknowledgement of indigenous and exogenous cultures.

The third tenet is that of dialogue. As opposed to a monologue, where one views one's understanding of the world in one's narrow cultural context, dialogue acknowledges the inherent power that exists in people in various contexts (Nafukho, 2006). According to Bangura (2005), dialogue represents an attempt to extend oneself and expose one's humaneness for an enriched personhood and society. The person within a community is thus part of a larger network and as such is an interdependent member of that community. Nafukho (2006) further asserts that "*the word individual signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships with other*" (p. 410). Thus, the individual cannot take precedence over the community (Nafukho, 2006). The I/other dichotomy is overturned in the philosophy of *Ubuntu* (Louw, 2010) in that the communal is underscored and the individual is considered an extension of the community. Louw (2010) adds that it is important to distinguish between a communal and a collectivist approach. According to Louw (2010), communal refers to what Leopold Senghor (1965) called a 'community based society, not merely a collection of people.'

It seems that there are strong parallels between *Ubuntu* as a philosophy and Africentricity, partly because the Africentric paradigm is centred on what is considered authentic to African societies (Nobles, 1990b). Louw (2010, p.7) captures the key aspects of the *Ubuntu* philosophy as follows:

"But, be it noted, within the context of the Ubuntu ethic, personal identity does not primarily reside in individualistic properties, but in relationships" (Du Toit, 2004, p.33). Ubuntu defines the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others. Individuals exist in their relationships with others, or, to borrow from Christian de Quincey, "we don't form relationships, they form us" (cited in Forster, 2007, p.275). This is not to say that one's identity is dictated by others. Rather, as Dion Forster (2007, p.273) points out, in the context of the community that is Ubuntu, personal identity resides in reciprocal interconnection: although "the community enriches, builds up, maintains and develops the individual, ... it is the individual who enriches, builds up, maintains and develops the community". True Ubuntu excludes an oppressive communalism. Instead of enveloping the African subject, so to speak, it allows him/her to grow and prosper "in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others" (Ndaba, 1994, p.14). Ubuntu, claims Forster, suggests that an individual "grows more fully human, more true [sic] in [his/her] identity, through engagement with other persons" (Forster, 2007, p.274)."

It is evident from Louw's (2010) comprehensive citation that the *Ubuntu* philosophy emphasises the moral, ethical, and humane values that guide the decision process, actions, and behaviours of African societies (Ramose, 1999). Both the Africentric perspective and the *Ubuntu* philosophy move beyond moral issues and provide a more comprehensive knowledge base for Africans to view life in general, based on an epistemological, ontological perspective. In a sense, one can conclude that the values and principles of *Ubuntu* are appropriations, humane elements of being African (Nafukho, 2006; Ramose, 1999) and are translated into action (Ngubane, 1979) in various contexts. The *Ubuntu* philosophy guides the entire individual learning process in the sense that it informs various dimensions of human existence such as physical, mental, social, spiritual, and moral aspects (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992).

Gade (2011) maintains that the concept of *Ubuntu* has evolved over time to embrace changing social, contextual, and ideological conditions. According to Gade (2011), during the 18th century, the concept of *Ubuntu* was used to define a human quality. During the 1960s, it was connected to philosophy and ethics which then translated into African humanism in the late 1970s. Gade (2011) claims that, with the advent of democracy, especially in South Africa, *Ubuntu* was used as a unifying term for a democratic constitution which links the value of individual existence to a larger whole. The concept of *Ubuntu* was seen as a distinct African world view which was simultaneously linked to the proverb; *umuntu ubuntu ngabantu* meaning 'I am because we are, you are because I am.' According to Gade (2011), the link between the concept and the proverb in the literature signifies its existence. However, Ramose (1999) argues that African societies are oral by nature and most of their history is transmitted orally. To expect to find the concept in Western literature and draw conclusions on its significant aspects such as the African societal worldview perpetuates a Eurocentric ideology. Schreiber (2000) argues that there are other ways of knowing. The text is one of the universal ways to judge the significance and authenticity of knowledge. Many scholars have warned against the tendency to rely on the observable mode as an objective measure for gaining knowledge (Asante, 1999; Myers, 2008; Schreiber, 2000). It seems that such claims affirm Asante's (1999) observation that scholars who are misguided by Eurocentric hegemony would find it difficult to conceive that African communities could have such deep-rooted conceptions about the nature of human beings and life. The *Ubuntu* philosophy and proverbs such as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* reveal the complex value systems that are embedded in African people's ways of life.

The proverb cited by Gade (2011) was not coined by the scholars that produced mainstream literature but was ingeniously and collectively informed by the lived experiences of people of African descent. It is probable that many African communities have lost their connection with and understanding of the concept (Asante, 1999; Nobles, 1980) due to various hardships and oppressive modes of existence. However, to make claims that certain proverbs and other forms of knowledge systems can be authenticated by a literature review is a fallacy. Scholars should avoid limiting understandings and knowledge to that which is observable (Graham, 1999). Knowledge resides in different forms and shapes and is not limited to the written text. Asante (1999) asserts that for long periods of time, indigenous communities were objects rather than subjects of study. The period that Gade (2011) cites as the dearth of the active use of the concept of *Ubuntu* is not premised on contextual factors nor justified with probable explanations. To a large extent, Gade's (2011) biographic outline of the concept of *Ubuntu* affirms what Asante (1999) calls the lack of visibility of African cultures and ways of life in mainstream literature, which implies a lack of interest in African societies as worthy subjects of scholarly discourse.

Gade (2011) notes that the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa demonstrated the lived experiences of *Ubuntu* not only as a philosophy but as a way of life. To some extent, this brought the concept to the forefront as an authentic African philosophy. The widespread use of African proverbs, especially during late 1990s, was an acknowledgment that African communities have something to share with the international community.

According to the Constitutional Court, *Ubuntu* is “*part of the deep cultural heritage of the majority of the population*” (Port Elizabeth Municipality Various Occupiers, 2005, p. 37). McEachern (2002) argues that *Ubuntu* is not a new concept but is part of the old order of the African humanist philosophy or world view. Gade (2011) pointed to the importance of spirituality in Buthelezi's (2004, p. 129) study by citing that “*Africans are religious and spiritual in their daily activities and their collectivist relationships. They have always been like that even prior to 1652 when the Wreck of the Haarlem dumped the Whites in South Africa*”. Gade (2012) offers a comprehensive regional understanding of the various conceptions of *Ubuntu*. In an article, *What is Ubuntu? Different Interpretations among South Africans of African Descent*, Gade (2012) provides a synthesis of the manner in which the concept is understood from various perspectives.

3.3.6 An African-centred education and research agenda.

Moletsane (1999) calls for a multicultural curriculum that seeks to affirm individual identity “...as its focus and place emphasis on developing and validating different ways of seeing, thinking, speaking, and creating knowledge and meaning” (p. 38). Such a curriculum is not compatible with the values and assumptions embedded in the African-centred perspective. Studies that prioritise the individual at the expense of the group in which the individual is located perpetuate the individualist view of the human being which is not in line with the African world view. This does not mean that, from an Afrocentric perspective, an individual only exists in the group and has no agency (Mkhize, 2004b). This perspective advocates for redress in many aspects of the human existence of African people.

It has been well established in the literature (Makgoba, 1997a, 1997b; Moulder 1995; Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011; Pityana, 2004; Ramose 1999; Seepe, 2004) that dominant American and European cultures had the upper hand in the conceptualisation of current African education systems. However, scholars acknowledge the need to re-evaluate and reformulate theories and models to meet educational needs in post-colonial contexts (Horsthemke, 2006; Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011). Makgoba (1997b, p. 177) argues that “*knowledge is a human construction that by definition has a human purpose*”; therefore, it cannot be value free or neutral in the manner in which it is conceived, formulated and developed. The consensus amongst scholars that call for the Africanisation of knowledge is that Euro-American knowledge dominates the curriculum, thoughts, teaching practice, and the entire education system. The question is, for whose benefit and purpose do HEIs construct knowledge?

Calls for the Africanisation of education by scholars such as Makgoba (1999); Moulder (1995); Nsamenang (2011); Pityana (2004); Ramose (1999); and Seepe (2004); and Tedla (2005) are based on the need for cultural and contextual sensitivity in the education system that is located in the rich indigenous knowledge systems of the people of the African continent. It is proposed that such an Africanised education system should encompass and draw on hermeneutics, discourse analysis, Marxism, and feminism in order to provide the relevant means to deal effectively with the challenges facing African people (Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011; Nwoye, 2015a). There seems to be consensus that, in Africanising education, the research agenda should reflect Africans’ authentic experiences. Makgoba (1997b) affirms this call for authenticity in knowledge production by asserting that, “*university education has to be relevant not only to the people but also to the culture and environment in which it is being imparted*” (p. 179).

Moulder (1995) asserts that the excellence of a research programme lies in the way in which the problem is tackled rather than the problem itself. Ojiaku (1974) warns against African scholarship and knowledge that is not grounded in African soil and underscores the power of knowledge. Furthermore, Nsamenang (2011) argues that the African-centred perspective provide an impetus for alternative ways to understand the philosophy and research that ground the experiences of people of African descent and challenge cultural colonisation. According to Mkhize (2004a, p.25 summary of Gergen et al., 1996; Sinha, 1990), “*the vertical – that is top-down, the one way – transfer of knowledge, ideas, values, and practices from developed to developing societies is a form of cultural colonisation.*”

This lack of regard for indigenous knowledge systems has resulted in many scholars proposing methodologies and approaches that are aligned with the participants’ worldview. Graham (1999) and DeReef (2008) assert that any research that aims to inform practice and enhance the livelihoods of African communities must prioritise Africans as the unit of analysis and should be embedded in their culture, ideology, philosophy, and practice. Researchers working within the African context must ensure that history, socio-political and geographic factors, and the psychological and spiritual aspects of being an African are taken into consideration. Ramose (1999) further argues that the curriculum must draw on the lived experiences of being an African.

Furthermore, Ramose (1999) proposes an overhaul of the epistemological paradigm underlying current education systems and highlights the need to review the epistemological foundations of the education system in South Africa. The epistemological misfit of the current education system has been identified by other South African-based scholars such as Snowball and Boughey (2012) Makgoba (1999), and Morrow (2009). Ramose (1999) asserts that, if social justice is to be achieved and racism eradicated, universities need to reject the supremacy of dominant theories and knowledge systems. Universities have a responsibility (Makgoba, 1997b, 1998) to bring to the fore the humanity of their students, especially indigenous African people (Ramose, 1999) who have been humiliated, dispossessed, and miseducated (Asante, 1999; Ramose, 1999). The concept of students in higher education is a social construction; thus, it should not be objectified to imply universalistic characteristics that exist for all students in all contexts. Students have different realities, knowledge, and truths about their experiences and as such should be understood as a whole rather than as one entity, that of being a student. The plurality of the self (Louw, 2010) which is foundational in African philosophy is lost if students exist outside the various contexts that define them.

The role of education is to help students deconstruct and reconstruct new forms of knowledge and reclaim a positive African identity (Dei, 1994). Africentric education is an appropriate vehicle since it is non-hegemonic (Dei, 1994) and is thus open to possibilities drawn from both African and Euro-American knowledge systems.

Schreiber (2000) argues that traditional intercultural research initiatives conducted within the Eurocentric perspective failed to acknowledge the centrality of African ideals, values, and history. An authentic Africentric research process should be centred on the lived experiences of the cultural and co-cultural group (Schreiber, 2000). Research inquiries are largely driven by researchers' world views (Schreiber, 2000) which are the driving force for other dimensions of knowledge production. According to Henderson (1995, cited in Schreiber, 2000), other dimensions that are informed by the worldview of the researcher are paradigms, theories, formal models, hypotheses, and laws (probability statements). Schreiber (2000) notes that knowledge production from an Africentric perspective is driven by non-hierarchical, multiple, and plural perspectives that are informed by the lived experiences of others. Consequently, there is minimal risk of hegemonic discourse in an Africentric knowledge system because all cultural-based knowledge is authentic and sourced from multiple perspectives (McPhail, 1998). McPhail (1998 in Schreiber, 2000) points out that when the knowledge base is centrally positioned, "*... all centric positions are interrelated and interdependent, and therefore no one can be privileged over the other*" (p. 657). The Afrocentric perspective advocates for a cultural agency that can free scholars of African descent from intellectual domination and empower them to take charge of their destiny as well as foster confidence for the marginalised to break from oppression (Progler, 2012; Schreiber, 2000). How the ideals and the philosophies that are African-centred can be appropriated in the education system and higher education, in particular, is explored in the following section.

3.3.7 African-centred Understanding of African Student Academic Performance and Experience in Higher Education

Myers (2009) observes that achieving cultural congruence involves being grounded in the African experience and staying true or authentic to that experience. It is difficult to ignore the existing contextual factors that dominate HEIs; hence, the current study also takes into consideration that the majority (in terms of numbers) of students who enter HEIs are considered to be the minority, due to a number of significant factors that make them culturally different from what is commonly known as *traditional students*. The desire to

assimilate the dominant culture seems to be the easy route to what Tinto (2006) refers to as integration. Studies have indicated that the manner in which the student is integrated and the reason why they want to integrate determine the outcomes of this integration. The assumptions that students hold about themselves in relation to others in the institution and how these others consider their position and role will to some extent, influence the level of assimilation and internalisation of the dominant culture, and the level of preservation of own cultural beliefs, norms, and values.

Based on the literature, it seems that a number of aspects should inform theories and models that speak to the experiences of people of African descent (Jamison, 2008; Nobles, 1980; 1990). Nsamenang (2011) asserts that imported theories and models that are not authentic to African people's experiences should be subjected to critical review. Therefore, it is essential to establish the criteria for this critical review of mainstream models and theories, including those that seek to explain students' experiences and academic performance in higher education. Many of the theories and models on student retention, progression, and dropout were conceptualised based on Euro-American student experiences (Prinsloo, 2008). Knowledge production in the social sciences was constructed in a manner that was aligned with the positivist paradigm. This paradigm assumes that human beings can be studied objectively and that the knowledge produced from such value-free scientific studies can be generalised to other people who differ in significant ways from the objects of study (Cahan & White, 1992).

Foundational theories on students' academic performance, retention and progression reflect values and assumptions that are regarded as Eurocentric. Spady's (1970) sociological model of the undergraduate dropout process prioritises the student-institutional fit. This mechanistic approach to student dropout fails to acknowledge students as people with agency. Both Spady's (1970) model and Tinto's (1975) integration theory acknowledge the importance of the level of integration between individuals and the broader society. Jones (1986) assert that both used Durkheim's (1897) suicide theory to explain that, like individuals who commit suicide, students who drop out of college lack the collective and moral integration which binds them to society. However, the unit of analysis is the individual who lacks essential skills and psychological assets to overcome the adversities they face in higher education.

Tinto (2006) notes that traditional theories on student retention problematised the student in terms of his/her lack of necessary attributes, skills, and motivation. The individual student's role in accessing education was underscored over that of the institution. The

classroom as the proxy for many institutional systems, especially for non-residential students, is now brought to the fore as an important consideration in student retention in higher education. Tinto (2006) further acknowledges the need for continuous connections with the community of origin for the success of students in higher education. Tinto (1975, and subsequent publications) moved beyond the dual institutional-personal and incorporated the various influences that shape the student's decision to persist with their studies. It seems that it is now acknowledged that both endogenous and exogenous support networks are required for a student to adjust and succeed in higher education.

Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration presents the different aspects of the individual in distinct phases that begin with separation from the family of origin and the familiar context, while the second phase is the transitional phase which calls for students' assimilation, alignment, and adaptation to the dominant culture, ideologies, and practices of the higher education system. The final stage is competence which is measured by the level of social and academic integration. Academic progression is the outcome of fragmented segments in that it does not demonstrate the circularity of human experience. Human beings do not just fit; they co-influence their environmental *habitas* and their values, behaviour and attitudes are not simply the consequence of external forces (Graham, 1999; Myers, 2009). This externalisation disempowers and alienates students from what is written about them.

Bean (1985) portrays the choice of institution as critical to college students' desire to pursue and continue studying. This perspective fails to acknowledge alternative ways of knowing and deciding on the choice of institution. Scholars such as Nwoye (2015) and Asante (1999) emphasise that people of African descent rely on a number of sources of knowledge such as intuition and dreams. The African-centred paradigm prioritises the centrality of ancestral or other spiritual callings which are transmitted through dreams as alternative ways in which people decide what is best for them and their community. In traditional Eurocentric theories of psychology, spirituality, and religiosity are not the subjects of scholastic inquiry (Nwoye, 2015). Yet, this is one of the key aspects of human existence for Africans (Nwoye, 2015). Failure to acknowledge the centrality of the spiritual, mental and physical connection within the Africentric perspective renders interventions ineffective when working with students of African descent (Noble & Goddard, 1984).

Spirituality, which is viewed as a coping mechanism (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004) according to the resilience theory, is a valuable key protective factor (Caldwell-Colbert, Parks & Eshun, 2009). Spirituality/religiosity is part of what is considered *Ubuntu's* metaphysical aspect, which represents the invisible being in one's life, and human beings

enter the metaphysical through prayer or other appropriate means (Ramose, 1999). Eurocentric dominance has affected even this important domain of human existence through the subjugation, colonisation, and acculturation of African societies (Ramose, 1999). Scholars propose that various structures within communities should foster the independence of spiritual cultures (Ramose, 1999) and provide opportunities for active socialisation (Bently, Adams & Stevenson, 2009) in order to overcome the insidious power relations and oppression embedded in racism and cultural and spiritual/religious hegemony.

The negative labelling of students as 'non-traditional' is prevalent in traditional models of student retention, persistence, and academic performance (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). Based on the Afrocentric paradigm, this is an indication that any phenomenon that did not fit into the Western scientific scheme was interpreted negatively or labelled as some form of pathology (Caldwell-Colbert et al., 2009). The current study argues that the tendency to label students with different assets and from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds persists. Students in higher education are still labelled based on their perceived deficits such as 'underprepared students' (Bradbury & Miller, 2011), 'disadvantaged students' (Boughey, 2005), or 'low-income students' (Tinto, 2006). Failure to recognise the multiplicity of student existence and preoccupation with a dichotomous categorisation goes against the African-centred perspective which recognises the plurality and multiplicity of existence (Mkhize, 2004a).

Bean (1985) further argues that the individual prospective student is most likely to favour a particular institution if it is highly regarded by the significant other. This argument is in line with the African-centred paradigm in that collectivism shapes an individual's decisions (Mkhize, 2004a). However, the African-centred paradigm emphasises collective unity which moves beyond presenting the individual as the product of external forces. The Afrocentric paradigm recognises familial/communal agency; that is, pursuing studies in a particular field for the family honour and uplifting the community's name. Based on the principle of plurality, it seems that the individual represents and is an extension of his or her community and appropriates these selves in multiple forms of existence, one of which is being a student. According to Forster (2010), plurality expresses the notion that more than one state can exist at a time. On the other hand, multiplicity suggests that there are many different stages of existence and that one moves from one to another (Forster, 2010). Judgment of what is desirable and expected is based on cultural values which Asante (1990, 1999) argues have been omitted in Euro-Western models that assume that all experiences are universal. Although such practices are not peculiar to people of African descent, many

scholars argue that these characteristics are typical of the values of communal African and Pan African communities (Graham, 1999; Myers, 2009).

Within the African-centred perspective, the outcome of dropping out of an HEI is an indication of a dysfunctional system that is larger than the individual. Efforts to intervene at the individual level might not produce the expected results, that is, retention of the student within higher education. Sociodemographic factors such as socioeconomic status and gender (Speight, Blackmond, Odugu & Steele, 2009) and biopsychosocial, economic as well as spiritual factors should be factored into the development of any explanatory models or theories of retention, persistence, and academic performance. The ability to successfully negotiate culturally diverse environments and having the competence to overcome challenges could influence the level of adjustment in a new environment such as an institution of higher learning.

The African worldview emphasises the values of connectedness, the interdependence of all living and non-living organisms in a harmonious and cooperative manner, spirituality, and a deep sense of kinship (Mkhize, 2004a, 2008; Nobles, 1991). In contrast, according to Nobles (1991), the Eurocentric view favours domination and control of the environment. The same could be applied to the mainstream theories that imply that retention, persistence, and graduation are an indication of the level of control the individual student has over their environment. Failure to graduate is thus a weakness that could be attributed to the individual's lack of survival skills. According to Nobles (1991), survival is an important element in both the African worldview and the Eurocentric perspective. The difference lies in the unit of analysis; in terms of the African-centred view, survival goes beyond the individual student to communal survival, while the Eurocentric view focuses on the individual. This prejudiced view of the individual as the main source of and solution to, the problem of (involuntary) dropping out continues to prioritise the individual over the networks in which he/she is embedded. In the same breath, it is erroneous to assume that African students are a culturally homogeneous group; as noted by Speight et al. (2009), there is a need to distinguish between cultural uniformity and similarity. Speight et al. (2009) assert that the concept of African societies is not based on their uniformity but on similarities amongst African cultures. It is equally true that culture on its own is not sufficient to account for inter- and intra-personal/ societal variations. Factors such “... *as the influence of developmental level, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality/religion, ability status and social class*” (Speight et al., 2009, p.369) should be used to conceptualise the lived

experience of people of African descent. The current study argues that the same factors should inform the conceptualisation of students' experiences within the African context.

3.3.8 Multicultural experiences of students in higher education institutions.

The negative experience of being a Black African has been described, bounded and predicated by negative, stereotypical images in the literature that claim that people of African descent are intellectually and culturally inferior to Caucasian racial groups (Parham, 2009). Based on this common background, it is relevant to share and learn from the experiences of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. Black American or African American scholarship has provided the necessary leadership in attempting to explain the experience of being a black minority in a Euro-American dominated society as is evident in the *Handbook of African American Psychology* edited by Neville et al. (2009). While the contextual factors differ in significant ways, the experience of being African American offers insight into how some of the experiences of Black African students may be understood in contemporary society.

Speight et al. (2009) warn against merging African and Euro-American elements without underscoring ethnicity and racial issues. Such an uncritical stance tends to ignore the tensions that exist between African and Euro-American psychosocial and cultural experiences. The same concern applies to theories on retention, persistence, and academic performance that fail to recognise racism, ethnicity, culture, and other key elements of the lived experiences of African people. According to Speight et al. (2009), the racism-driven approach and the Africentric approach emphasise different aspects of the experiences of people of African descent. Racism is viewed as negative and seems to adopt a defensive stance by emphasising concepts such as healthy adaptation and coping within an oppressive environment, while the Afrocentric view highlights the confirmation of identity and shared cultural values which individuals could use to attain psychological wellbeing (Speight et al., 2009).

Speight et al., (2009) used various models to provide a comprehensive analysis of how racism affect the psychological wellbeing of African Americans. These racism models define the mental health of African Americans using racism as the source of stress, and identified critical internal and external factors such as "... *perception, language, problem solving, coping, vigilance, self-esteem, the locus of control, nuclear and extended family support, social institutions and group identification as possible protective and risk factors*" (Speight et al., 2009, p. 365). According to Brown's critical race theory (2003; see also,

Speight et al., 2009) four racism-related tendencies might influence the healthy functioning of Black minority students within Euro-Western environments: (1) displaying self-defeating behaviour and attitudes; (2) being estranged from the racial aspect of self, due to internalised negative notions of being Black; (3) not being able to express emotions such as anger which is associated with oppression or racism; and (4) denying the existence of racism realities. For Black Americans and the majority of Black African societies, to a large extent, the history of colonisation indicates that the experience of being a Black minority community is a shared experience. It is for this reason that, while it was developed based on the experiences of the Black American population, the critical race theory is relevant to people of African descent who share similar experiences of racism and oppression.

Different studies on African students have cited the desire for identification with the collective (Mkhize, 2004a, 2004b; Mkabela, 2005) as an important factor in what Tinto (1975) refers to as integration. The desire to compromise authentic identity for the sake of fitting in, is not unique to African students but has been presented by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) as a psychological process called 'shifting.' According to Myers (2009), while this constant inward and outward shift offers the short-term benefit of gaining temporary acceptance in a particular social group, it could result in a loss of self-esteem and anxiety as the individual cannot be faithful to his/her philosophical views.

Hudley's (2009) and Jenkins's (1990) studies found that academic self-concepts among people of African descent are linked to academic achievement more than to other general facets of a positive self-concept. The question that thus arises is: how can institutions in African societies that are dominated by Western ideals of thought, action, and being contribute to the empowerment and affirmation of students from different cultural backgrounds? How can the institutional environment assure students that the assets they bring to the institution of higher learning are valuable resources and not a disadvantage?

3.3.9 Familial and Structural Factors Shaping Students' Learning Experiences from the Africentric Perspective.

One of the challenges confronting the education system is the disparities between basic and higher education. Boughey (2008a), and, Eiselen and Geysers (1993) affirm that secondary school education does not adequately prepare students to acquire literacy skills for university. The basic schooling system encourages more accepting and routine learning practices than HEIs, which tend to present information as tentative (Snowball & Boughey, 2012). According to the literature, this difference in teaching practice is mediated by the

parenting style and the culture and attitude towards learning and teaching within the home environment. Why and how the home environment mediates learning depends one's epistemological and ontological position (Iruka & Barbarin, 2009). Iruka and Barbarin (2009) assert that "*culture may influence the literacy environment through families' expectations, and beliefs about what children should know, the age at which particular kinds of knowledge are appropriate, and who is responsible for directing and facilitating children's learning*" (p.178). The literacy environment promoted at home has direct bearing on how the child engages with other learning environments, including HEIs. Protection, which is at times experienced as authoritarian, and the controlling parenting styles (Iruka & Barbarin, 2009) that are characteristic of some Black African societies might elevate protection over critical modes of enquiry during the early years of learning in order to protect the child from a perceived dangerous environment. However, higher education requires critical engagement rather than uncritical acceptance of information. The parents' socioeconomic status (SES) also influences dialogical practices which according to Iruka and Barbarin (2009) are mediated through teaching strategies such as questioning that enhances critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as the parent-child engagement (Iruka & Barbarin, 2009).

In the African context, theories and models of retention, throughput, and student academic success should thus be grappling with the question of how parents should be involved in their children's higher education. This requires skillful mediation on the part of the institution to help the student to make the transition without losing their beliefs and value systems. The learning environment should provide opportunities for learning facilitators to reflect on how their value system differs from those held by the students they teach and how best to develop what Au (1993, in Iruka & Barbarin, 2009) 'calls culturally responsive teaching practices'.

South Africa's history has been plagued by apartheid and poverty, and some of the policies that seek to redress past imbalances have contributed to the phenomenon of 'entitlement' (Morrow, 2009) and general expectations among students that the government will intervene. Negative stereotyping and collective branding of a particular ethnic group could strengthen the sense of solidarity. The culture of solidarity /collectivism rather than communal existence highlighted in slogans such as *an injury to one is an injury to all* and *pass one pass all* is still prevalent in some Black African communities. This general approach to life could threaten an individual's potential for growth if they fail to conform to group norms and values.

Another important consideration in the literature is the negative effect of stereotypes. Fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's identity might cause a form of paralysis that prevents students from participating in meaningful academic activities. Hudley (2009) refers to this as a stereotype threat. Overcoming an ethnic or racism-related stereotype threat could be seen as a protective factor where goal mastery rather than goal performance attainment is encouraged (Hudley, 2009).

A shift from the negative to the positive aspects of race stereotypes might be of benefit, especially in a newly democratised environment such as South Africa where race still insidiously affects the learning environment. Higher education institutions set different standards of entry for Black African students; this is possibly driven by elements of the stereotype threat theory which posits that academic performance is negatively affected by racial stereotype threats. Initiatives to remove "...the stigmatised ability stereotype can lead to more positive outcomes for African Americans" (Hudley, 2009, p.216) and for other African students. Another protective factor is the ability to *disidentify* with the group that is the subject of negative racial stereotypes by internalising cognitive separation that distinguishes the individual from their ethnic group (McFarland, Lev-Arey & Ziegert 2003).

The culture ecology theory that is extensively discussed (see Ogbu, 1993) is also a useful tool in understanding the relationship between achievement and motivation. Based on Hudley's (2009) brief explanation, this theory posits that when students in the minority group realise that school success does not result in the same monetary, career, and social status as students from the dominant group, those from the minority group may adopt attitudes and behaviour that are counterproductive to academic achievement. However, Hudley (2009) notes that lower achievement tends to be mediated by social class and SES, which determine the level of goal achievement. As such, Hudley (2009) concludes that adopting a whole-group and monolithic identity approach (such as studying Black Americans) in order to understand student motivation in an academic environment is not useful. Other factors could contribute to what students perceive as inequitable access to opportunities.

A attribution theory which accounts for what people believe is the reason for the outcome of an event, (e.g., why the student passed or failed an examination), has been used as a framework to explain differences in academic performance (Hudley, 2009). According to Hudley (2009), the four major reasons cited in the literature are "(1) effort, (2) innate ability or aptitude, (3) task characteristics, and (4) luck" (p.190). Thus, motivation should be understood in broader terms from a less homogeneous perspective by considering other factors such as student expectations and negative attitudes as well as the oppositional identity

which is the outcome of a perceived lack of opportunities despite equivalent qualifications indicated in cultural-ecological theory.

It is against the background of various aspects such as stereotype threat, cultural-ecological theory and *disidentification* highlighted above that student experiences in higher education should be explored. Davis and Simmons (2009) argue that expectations and perceptions of being stereotyped as well as the strength of racial identity play a role in academic performance. Negative perceptions of the in-group could result in poor academic outcomes for members of the group who are perceived of as inferior or inadequate or perceive themselves as victims of stereotype threat. This could affect the support they offer one another when performing tasks that require peer support. Peer education as a source of learning is in line with the interconnectedness principle that is characteristic of people of African descent (Nafukho, 2006), but it could be undermined by negative stereotype attitudes. The literature notes that students prioritise social aspects of learning as they tend to provide moral, emotional and social support (Nafukho, 2006). It is therefore important to view students' lives in higher education as communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) in that learning is an active process of engagement that is continuously co-constructed. According to Nafukho (2006), such learning requires self-regulation, reflection and abstraction. Thus, the role of the learning facilitator and the inquiry method in facilitating learning, should be grounded in the understanding that students are capable of critical thinking and reflection and can overcome intrinsic and extrinsic barriers.

It is on the basis of the belief that human existence is purposeful that one should interrogate all probable philosophical views that guide student beliefs and actions. Letseka (2000, p. 179) affirms this notion by stating that, to "*the extent that all people have a philosophy that guides the way they live, their perceptions of other, and the decisions and choices they make about every aspect of their lives, African philosophies must exist*". While it is not the intention of this thesis to make unfounded claims about African philosophy, a vast body of literature points to the principles embedded in the concept and philosophy of *Ubuntu* in various African societies as foundational in understanding the inherent values and morals that shape and guide human existence amongst people of African descent. Scholars such as Gade (2011, 2012) and Louw (2010) have traced the origins and the manner in which the concept of *Ubuntu* is used in various regions within and outside Africa. *Ubuntu* is also regarded as a human quality which elevates a person close to the creator of all things, God (Mkhize, 2004a).

Ubuntu underscores consensus and agreement (Ramose, 1999). How HEIs handle plurality is a challenge that requires ingenious approaches and sensitivity. Based on the African philosophy, the student is a human being functioning in a communal setting. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* embraces both autonomy and cooperation, and should cater for both the community and the exclusive needs of individual members of the institutional community (Louw, 2010). Such appropriation of the communal is observed in the election of public representatives such as the Student Representative Council (SRC) which is democratically elected by the whole student body. According to Louw (2010) and Ramose (1999), plurality and individuality can be handled through the principle of agreeing to disagree. This is what makes power sharing distinct in African communities (Louw, 2010).

Based on the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, one can conclude that, in terms of this African world view, the student has a conscience and endeavours to maintain a harmonious state of equilibrium between living and non-living organisms. Harmonious relationships are at times in a state of disequilibrium due to disconnect with the ancestors and God as the source of life (Mkhize, 2004a). It is difficult for a person to value and respect something they do not understand. This is why many scholars have called for political consciousness in the education system and the use of ethnic/cultural and students' socioeconomic and political history as a resource rather than a liability (Horsthemke, 2004; Makgoba, 1998).

The African world view acknowledges that God is the supreme source of existence and as such is regarded as the 'Supreme Being' (Mcunu, 2004). A harmonious relationship should be maintained at horizontal level, that is, between the Supreme Being and the person and at the vertical level, between the human being and other human beings. Mcunu (2004) asserts that human dignity is intrinsic and rooted in personhood. Embedded in this human dignity are values and principles such as respect, freedom, and free will. Mcunu (2004) further argues that for intrinsic human dignity to thrive it requires humane and dignified life conditions.

Ujamaa principles such as human dignity, equality, solidarity, and humane existence have been acknowledged as critical for African societies (Nyerere, 1970). Mcunu (2004) and Mkhize (2004a) argue that it is not possible to separate the body, mind and soul and limit human existence to the observable. According to Nkondo (2007), a framework that fosters the *Ubuntu* philosophy entails the following:

- recognition that the community provides the background and the context and that an individual's life is bound up with the community; by nature, human beings are embodied social beings,

- recognition of emotional legitimacy,
- creating a national morality and fostering principles not as a code of rules but as a way of life,
- celebrating shared citizenship, culture, language, solidarity and democratic community responsibility,
- equitable distribution of resources for the common good based on cooperation and co-determination,
- reorganisation of perceptions and values and incorporation of other equally valid cultural values.

Furthermore, the Africentric paradigm acknowledges the importance of rituals and undergoing rites of passage for a person to transcend to personhood (Ramose, 1999). The notion of re-emergence is well-captured in Tinto's (1997) models on student retention, while Jama et al. (2008) built on these models by developing a framework to understand student circles of progression. Within the African world view, this transition is not only marked by visible indicators, but by the internalisation of values and principles. Therefore, within the Africentric framework it will be critical to identify indicators and markers for students' unsuccessful or successful transition within higher education. What role could peers play in supporting and monitoring students as they go through different transitional stages in higher education?

Ramose (1999) warns against objectifying the self, based on current circumstances. Ramose (1999) asserts that this is not possible due to the dialectical movement of affirmation and negation. This means that a student's experience is dynamic and changes constantly as circumstances change. According to Ramose (1999), both the existential and the African views adopt a dynamic and non-static approach in defining the person. However, according to the existential view, it is the individual that defines the self, whereas in the African view the self is defined on a communal basis. One can conclude that, based on Ramose's (1999) thesis that students are in a state of being, the state of becoming cannot be fully grasped. It is on the basis of this natural transition that students should be viewed and the institution must endeavour to facilitate new insights and encourage a process of modification and refinement of the student's outlook on life.

3.6 Conclusion

Although the Africentric paradigm provides philosophical and practical guidance in terms of the morality, ethics and ideals of an African-centred education, it offers few details on the nature of the curriculum, how the learning and teaching process should be structured, and the assessment practices that will enhance retention, persistence and a high success rate in higher education. More information is needed on the possible role of the institution or faculty in promoting the academic success of students in higher education.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology and design used to conceptualise the current study. It interrogates philosophical questions such as the nature of the epistemological and ontological questions that should inform higher education research for the holistic development of students. The chapter also deliberates on central methodological issues that could be prioritised when conducting research in higher education. It explains how various aspects of the African-centred approach were used as a guiding framework during the planning and implementation of the current study. A reflexive account of the principal researcher's perceptions and ethical considerations, as well as the strategies adopted to enhance the validity of study are highlighted.

4.2 Challenges of Conducting Research in Higher Education

The formidable challenge of promoting students' academic progress has been of concern for many decades. This challenge is of particular interest to South African HEIs given the ongoing legacy of apartheid, entrenched socioeconomic inequalities, and differential access to quality education (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that many institutional strategies that aim to enhance students' success are not based on research but rely on anecdotal evidence (Koen, 2007). Furthermore, current explanatory models or frameworks that account for students' academic success or failure are derived from 'Northern models' that uncritically and extensively draw on Northern theoretical, philosophical, and ideological positions (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). As discussed in the previous chapter, such tendencies tend to universalise students' experiences and portray research as an objective and predetermined process.

4.2.1 Institutional oriented sources of information about student academic performance.

Models that account for students' experiences in higher education tend to use deductive and unilateral (one size fit all) methods (Cabrera et al., 1992; Jones, Coetzee, Bailey & Wickhman, 2008; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). Such perspectives are inclined to disregard the critical voice of the participants as collaborators and agents of change and present research as a neutral and value free process. Becker (1970) argues that sociological inquiry is not a

neutral endeavour. All social research is informed by a certain paradigm, philosophy, ideologies and values. Paradigms that disregard students as agents of change can no longer be sustained due to the dynamic and complex nature of students' experiences. Therefore, the nature of the questions that researchers pose and the sources for the responses to these questions impact the lives of people whose lived experience as students is under investigation.

According to Papoutsaki (2007), increased dissemination of Western education and knowledge in higher education research has been influenced by a number of different but interrelated factors at different levels of the ecological system, such as society, the individual, institution of higher learning, and the curriculum. He further highlights how HEIs prioritise 'global' research methods in their curriculum planning and implementation. Papoutsaki (2007) notes that HEIs acknowledge students' academic performance when they seek to demonstrate that they have assimilated 'common' international research practices. Moreover, HEIs are burdened with the task of producing institutional-centred reports under serious financial constraints. In their endeavor to fulfill bureaucratic functions, they employ what Dearnley and Matthew (2007) refer to as practice-orientated research that focuses on the breadth rather than the depth of the phenomenon. As such, institutional research fails to build new theories due to the misalignment between the study design and the phenomenon. Dearnley and Matthew (2007) caution against overreliance on top-down implementation of theory and of downplaying the importance of bottom-up approach when conducting research in higher education. Top-down approaches have limited descriptive ability and at times fail to reflect the lived experiences of students in HEIs, limiting our understanding of the multiple complex transitions which influence learner achievement. Dearnley and Matthew (2007) advocate for a synthesis of the bottom-up and top-down approaches.

Students' participation is therefore an integral aspect of any social research that investigates the foundational elements that enable and constrain students' academic success in HEIs. Current models that explain student retention and throughput tend to universalise student experiences and thus populate similar methodologies without applying the essential rigour of enquiry as to whether the research method and design are appropriate to the research questions and context. The underrepresentation of African students' experiences in current models that explain undergraduate students' academic achievement or underachievement has been well documented (Koen, 2007; Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Highly pressured and large HEIs often rely on readily available theories and data; and employ familiar methods to make

decisions about the character of students and the interrelated factors that enhance their academic achievement.

Brand (2009) warns against imposing an external truth or reality and ascribing meaning to an object. Brand (2009) provides valuable reflections on how disciplines tend to generate similar research methods that fail to sufficiently capture the complexity of the phenomenon and those factors that fall outside the scope of the researcher. As such, scholars are most likely to develop stand-alone models which support existing approaches, rather than novel models that connect with alternative viewpoints. Smith (2010, p.35) asserts that *“culture, context and the recognition of multiple realities are salient features of the naturalistic research context where meaning is construed”*. Therefore, it is imperative to consciously employ inclusive research methods and conceptualise studies about human affairs in a critical manner so as to promote social justice and enhance the participation of marginalised groups, especially in diverse HEIs such as those in South Africa.

4.2.2 Context-driven research.

There seems to be convergence of ideas between what researchers consider to be key characteristics of qualitative research and what is considered as ethical and fair research practices within the African-centred paradigm. Creswell and Clark (2007) asserts that *“qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or group ascribe to a social or human problem”* (p. 37). It is critical to keep in mind that mainstream theories and methodologies reflect one aspect of social reality, which is largely that of Euro-American communities, and therefore researchers should actively seek methods that facilitate the inclusion of people whose experiences are not represented in mainstream literature. Graham (1999) acknowledges that there are other ways of knowing and as such, practitioners need to embrace equally valid worldviews that might not be part of their training.

According to Bradford, Porciello, Balkon, and Backus (2007), colonialism seems to have undermined ways of knowing and doing; therefore, there is a need to reaffirm the validity of contextualised and localised knowledge systems and assure various communities that there are other ways of knowing. HEIs therefore have the responsibility to redress the distorted images that underrepresented individuals and communities have about their knowledge systems, culture, and belief system (Nwoye, 2015) by employing methodologies that acknowledge the centrality of underrepresented voices in academic research. How the

research agenda is negotiated and implemented could exclude or integrate a fundamental sector of the population in the co-construction of relevant knowledge and theories. Disembodied information in developing countries (Bradford et al., 2007) has contributed significantly to the increasing number of unemployed graduates who fail to appropriate and apply knowledge gained in higher education in real life settings.

Pistrang and Barker (2012) argue that a qualitative research design is valuable for the inductive generation of theory especially when investigating the experiences of undertheorised areas of study. The participatory research methodology is therefore appropriate when the researcher is more concerned with a collaborative research partnership than incorporating the participants in the research (Chappell, 2000). A participatory research methodology emphasises the bottom-up approach which allows the participants to provide insight and guidance on how the phenomenon can be understood and resolved. The role of the researcher is to create appropriate conditions for the organically generated responses and solutions that are embedded in the participants' personal meanings and experiences.

Papoutsaki (2007) acknowledges the failure of Western research models to produce expected outcomes in facilitating viable development in local societies. As such, she argues for contextualised research that acknowledges the centrality of socio-cultural diversity and empowerment of a broader, skilled group of local people. Context-driven research helps us to gain distinctive knowledge of appropriate intervention methods for local communities. Papoutsaki (2007) also calls for the recognition of young researchers. According to Papoutsaki (2007), young researchers need to gain an understanding of their cultures and communities, and not merely rely on imported models and theories that are embedded in foreign epistemologies and ontologies. *"There seems to be a paradigm shift towards integration of local knowledge into educational systems"*... and a need for adaptation of *"...research priorities and practices to better reflect local points of view"* (Papoutsaki, 2007,

p. 2). It is therefore important to make a clear distinction between the imported (Western) and local (non-Western) education system.

The former [Western educational system] refers mainly to formal, standardised, compartmentalised, specialised and systematic ways of imparting knowledge to individuals. The latter [non-western educational system] refers mostly to traditional, indigenous ways of education that are less formal, more holistic and based on local knowledge systems and addressing the needs of a community and not individuals (see Kawagley & Barnhardt, 2006; Ma Rhea, 2004; Huffer & Qalo, 2004; Thaman, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 2003). The western or western based educational system is seen as the predominant model of education around the world today (Papoutsaki, 2007, p. 5-6).

Research is a process of knowledge generation (Conti, 1997) which can include or exclude key informants or aspects of the phenomenon under study. If the research is grounded in the lived experiences of people and informed by local knowledge, it can serve as a research engine for endogenous (local, indigenous, traditional) and sustainable development (Papoutsaki, 2007; Dearnley & Matthew, 2007). The domination of Western forms of knowledge production and theories, as well as mis-alignment of the epistemological foundation between the research population and the researcher, has the potential to exclude local knowledge systems.

4.2.3 Engaging students in higher education research.

The process of socialising students to research and orientating them as producers rather than consumers of knowledge requires a multicentric approach. Asante (1991) asserts that researchers need to thoroughly interrogate their own epistemological and ontological viewpoints as well their inherent limitations that influence their research practices. Van Wyk (2010) acknowledges that there is tension between Western and African forms of knowledge. The African-centred perspective embraces plurality, interconnectedness, and simultaneous multiplicity (Mkhize, 2012). It is against this background that researchers should interrogate the elements of the research process that are inclusive and participatory. To a large degree, this enables deeper understanding of students' experiences and serves as a means to collect data about the same phenomenon from various standpoints, i.e., the process of data collection moves from a descriptive level to an abstract level.

4.2.4 Acknowledging students as co-producers of knowledge.

Deviating from a traditional discipline or mode of inquiry creates tension and may limit the acceptability and perceived usefulness of a study. Moreover, many disciplines tend to be normative and rigid adherence to ‘mainstream’ ideologies, methods and approaches seems to limit understanding of how students cope in higher education (Higgs & van Wyk, 2006; Waghid, 2010). There is ongoing debate on the theories around engaging students in higher education (Chappell, 2000; Higgs & van Wyk, 2006; Waghid, 2010) and how to move towards a more reflective practice of engaging students such that they become co-producers of knowledge. Recognising students in the co-construction of knowledge in a context that reflects their experiences is driven by progressive and critical enquiry that aims to bring about balance and equity. The social emancipation of both researchers and other minority groups in higher education is a topical issue in the 21st century (Chappell, 2000; Higgs & van Wyk, 2006; Waghid, 2010). Engaging students is not just about extracting knowledge and reproducing it or demonstrating what Waghid (2010) refers to as performance mastery. The aim is to help students to reflect critically on the knowledge and not act in a mechanical fashion during the education process. Mechanically appropriating education tends to produce students who lack awareness to interrogate the ideological assumptions and the impact of education on their own experiences (Giroux, 1988). Therefore, in attempting to engage students, researchers must pay attention to the epistemological assumptions that remain unchallenged, yet powerful, in knowledge production.

4.2.5 Methodological issues relating to students in higher education.

The choice of a methodology and paradigmatic framework to guide the process of enquiry is critical in context-specific research initiatives. Attempts to generate relevant data informed by the lived experiences of the participants require thinking beyond the norms and conventional methods of enquiry. It is not surprising that most data collected about students in higher education rely heavily on mandatory information that is captured during registration, or on the readily accessible academic results that can be retrieved from faculty officers (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Some studies in higher education use structural causal models and structural modelling methods that seek to quantify the complex phenomenon of students’ experiences in higher education (Bean, 1980; Cabrera et al., 1993). Deterministic methods tend to perpetuate the ideologies and interests of the dominant worldview and suppress other equally relevant, alternative perspectives. Although such practices are convenient for researchers and produce valuable information, they tend to

undermine the generation of potential new knowledge. Collaborative research methods that prioritise students' lived experiences are possible if the researcher takes a proactive stance to employ inclusive research methodologies. Higgs and van Wyk (2006) argue that researchers should not simply seek to affirm mainstream theories but should endeavour to consider the participants' values, interests, and needs. As noted by Giroux (1988), such research could serve the dual purpose of revealing the shortcomings of the educational context whilst providing the opportunity to reorganise the institution to be more responsive to students' needs.

The difficulties in researching students in higher education lie in the fact that cultural and social capital changes continuously (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Koen (2007) affirms this point by asserting that the distribution and legitimisation of students' knowledge is a collaborative effort which is embedded in sociocultural, political, economic, and locality hegemony. While researchers acknowledge the importance of promoting equality and engaging students in a non-discriminatory manner, unequal student academic performance, which has been extensively documented as an apartheid legacy in South Africa, continues to threaten the delicate process of democratising learning and the inclusion of learners in higher education (Waghid, 2010). Therefore, researchers need to interrogate the ideological assumptions and impact of their own received education and other experiences that shape their research.

4.2.6 Student-centred research practices.

Asante (1991) and Paulo Freire in his book, *'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'* assert that students should be an integral part of knowledge production and not merely become seekers of knowledge. Centricity is about placing the experiences of students of African descent at the centre of knowledge generation and consumption (Asante, 1991). Students' active participation in research and policy development is dependent on the paradigm and perspective of the facilitators of knowledge producers such as researchers and scholars. Scholars working within the African-centred perspective acknowledge that knowledge is not universal, but is derived from multicultural human experiences which are of equal value (Asante, 1991; Graham, 1999; Nsemenang, 2008). According to these authors, a non-hegemonic and non-hierarchical approach to education and research practices provides the impetus to celebrate a variety of cultural perspectives, alleviate the marginalisation of African people, and reverse the effect of the cultural and psychological dislocation of marginalised communities.

4.2.7 Addressing the inadequacy of researchers' training.

There are concerns that current theories (including research methods) fail to reflect the diversity of worldviews and do not reflect the authentic lived experiences of African people. Even when professionals such as Social Workers and Psychologists attempt to humanise their profession and bring about social justice, the theories that ground their training are misaligned to the realities of the communities they serve (Mkhize, Mathe & Buthelezi, 2014). Graham (1999) argues that there is a need to conscientise practitioners on how they engage with African communities and to foster awareness of the inadequacy of the training they receive in HEIs which is largely informed by Euro-American theories and models. Furthermore, Graham (1999) argues that methods and theories dominated by Eurocentric worldviews impede the achievement of social justice, equality, and self-determination that can bring about empowerment and affirmation of African people. Thompson and Pierson (1996) advise that practitioners working within the African-centred paradigm need to adopt anti-discriminatory practices and be vigilant of subtle forms of cultural oppression in an ethnic-sensitive approach. Anti-discriminatory practices “...*take account of structural disadvantage and seek to reduce individual and institutional discrimination, particularly on the ground of race, gender, disability, social class, and sexual orientation*” (Thompson & Pierson, 1996, p. 6 in Graham, 1999, p. 105).

4.2.8 Other theoretical considerations of the current study.

Bradbury and Miller (2011, p.1) argue that “*the process of education needs to equip prospective university learners to enter [the] distinctively discursive world of academia*” by providing what Morrow has termed “epistemological access” or creating what Bourdieu and Wacquant term “cultural capital”. Researchers such as Bradbury and Miller (2011); and Morrow, (2009) have raised the issue that academic literacy is assumed to be an automatic outcome of competency in reading and writing whilst ignoring the frame of reference or epistemic assumptions embedded in academic literacy. These assumptions create a fragmented understanding and impose a burden on the social and cultural capital accessible to students to deal with the demands of being a university student in an HEI. The barriers that students experience within the classroom are likely to feed into other areas of knowledge generation such as research and policy formulation. Therefore, research initiatives in higher education need to create opportunities for students to actively and meaningfully participate in order to gain in-depth understanding of how they contribute to knowledge production.

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), “*the significance statement [of the research agenda] should show how the study will contribute to research traditions or foundational literature in a new way*” (p. 35). The current study contributes to the body of knowledge on the interrelations between student life at and beyond HEIs and academic achievement. This should advance the debate beyond the racial divide and allow for the identification of assets that students from diverse backgrounds can use to facilitate academic achievement within the South African context. According to John-Steiner and Mahn (2006), Vygotsky emphasises the situatedness of knowledge as well as the importance of the role of socio-cultural interactions in the acquisition of academic concepts and associated values.

Existing models on student academic performance are concerned with presumed causal links; however, it is critical to understand the conditions under which particular outcomes are observed. This should not be seen as an attempt to make universal claims in the same way as the positivist (Manicas & Secord, 1983), but to regard knowledge as a social and historical product that can be specific to a particular time, culture, or situation. The realist approach is therefore concerned with understanding participants’ perspectives which then creates opportunities for redress of imbalances. Robson (2002) asserts that realism can incorporate an emancipatory approach and promote social justice.

HEIs are a social construct that are embedded in social systems. According to Pawson and Tilley (1997), behaviour, social events, and social conditions cannot be understood from the different layers of social reality. However, it should be noted that because social reality and the effect of one relationship impact on other social conditions, it is important to clearly stipulate the focus of any study of this social structure. The unit of analysis in the current study is the student who functions within a larger system and is shaped by internal and external factors. Therefore, this study cannot claim to uncover all aspects of the social reality of student academic performance but must acknowledge that there are other critical role players who can provide a different and valid perspective on student academic performance.

Bhaskar (1986) asserts that social structures are critical in social reality because they are the medium in which one can see the interplay between context and mechanism and the degree to which they reinforce each other. The context of the university is more stable than the context of the student in their first year at university; meaning that the university is in a better position to support the student as the university environment’s assets exceed those of the student and often set the rules of engagement and the general ethos, even amongst students. Therefore, even though a university might be experiencing changes and challenges, it must provide mediating mechanisms to help students to cope with the demands of being a

student in a HEI. However, the individual is an agent whose reality is informed by contextual social relationships; therefore, it is impossible to disengage the individual from the whole system. Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that all phenomena exist beyond the mind in the objective world. Such a perspective can account for the agency of the individual within the social structure and process and could provide causal descriptions of the forces at work.

Multiple perspectives uncover multiple realities. According to Robson (2002, p.33), “*at the heart of realism is the assumption that there is a reality that exists independent of our awareness of it*”. The real world is not only very complex but also stratified into different layers of social reality that incorporate the individual, group institutional, and societal levels. Human realities, as stated by Robson (2002), can only be understood in terms of their place in different strata or layers of reality; therefore, it is critical to call on mechanisms at various levels within the micro, macro, group and organisational level. One cannot assume that the same set of mechanisms have a universal effect in different contexts. It is imperative to explore what is happening in various contexts and to seek new insight into the same phenomena from new perspectives.

4.3 Research Methodology

Despite the plethora of research, and the vigour with which the study of throughput rates has been undertaken, new findings continue to emerge due to the dynamic nature and caliber of students, which makes it difficult for HEIs to apply a generic theory of academic achievement. This calls for a contextual and localised investigation of the factors that facilitate or impede academic progress.

4.3.1 Research objectives and questions.

The focus of this research was to understand the interrelation of inhibiting and facilitating factors that contribute to students’ academic success within the College of Humanities at UKZN. This would assist in identifying the support mechanisms that students need and could use in order to complete their studies. Interventions that are contextually relevant are critical in order to ensure that such mechanisms achieve maximum benefit. Such interventions could facilitate a high level of commitment and growth within the individual student and the institution as a whole. The study also hoped to shed light on the influence of pre-university background on academic performance.

The aim of the research study was to:

- Explore constraining factors that influence the success of students within the College of Humanities at UKZN.
- Explore enabling factors that influence the success of students within the College of Humanities at UKZN.
- Analyse the factors that influence student success at UKZN in order to identify the elements of a contextually relevant conceptual framework that could inform policies on support strategies at South African tertiary institutions.

4.3.2 Research questions.

The study sought to answer the following key questions:

- What constrains student success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?
- What enables student success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?
- What are the experiences of first-year students at UKZN?
- What are the elements of a conceptual framework that could be used to understand student success in the College of Humanities at UKZN and inform policies and support strategies in South African tertiary institutions?

4.3.3 Conceptual framework.

Given the above-mentioned theoretical arguments the study adopted grounded theory as the key theoretical framework. As a bottom-up approach (Creswell, 2007), grounded theory was used to understand students' experiences in higher education from their own perspective rather than engaging in deductive theorising about their experiences using existing theoretical frameworks or models. The grounded theory approach does not seek to prove a particular hypothesis or theory, but focuses on context-based interactions to develop themes and guide further research processes. Bryant and Charmaz (2012) assert that, in adopting a grounded theory approach, there should be continuous interplay between data collection and analysis.

According to Creswell and Clark (2008), there are three types of grounded theory designs, namely, semantic, emerging, and constructivist (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p.373). Charmaz (2011) concurs with Creswell and Clark (2008) in identifying the constructivist design as one version of grounded theory; however, the author captures the essential characteristics of semantic and emergence design by using concepts such as objectivist and post-positivist. Semantic design is more structured and uses specific ways to

analyse data, whereas emerging designs use a flexible procedure to identify codes, themes and to inductively derive theory. The constructivist design focuses on reflecting the evolving perceptions, perspectives, beliefs, and insights of the participants that, according to Charmaz (2011), integrate relativity and reflexivity. The current study integrated emerging and constructivist designs in that it allowed for the flexible construction of codes and themes rather than using prescriptive methods. The constructivist design was incorporated in that, as new information emerged and students unpacked the concepts and gained insight, the codes and themes were repositioned to reflect new understandings. This participatory method of enquiry provides the opportunity to democratise and co-create the content and the method (Denzil & Lincon, 2011) in order to understand the phenomenon. Participants' involvement as co-researchers and co-subjects (Heron & Reason, 1997) enhances understanding of the multiple realities and interpretation of what Guba and Lincon (2005) refer to as 'co-created findings.'

In adopting constructivist grounded theory, the study acknowledged the intersubjectivity of the research process and that the researcher cannot possibly be a neutral observer (Charmaz, 2011; Room; 2015), but is continuously influenced by the context and other sources of information during the data collection process. The researcher does not possess privileged knowledge about the phenomenon but is a facilitator in the co-construction of knowledge. Facilitation of knowledge generation is non-hegemonic in that the researcher and the participants are positioned in a non-hierarchical manner which allows the multiplicity of realities and the plurality of voices to emerge during data analysis. Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent presuppositions that ground the researcher's research experience and shape his/her ideologies on the nature of knowledge and ways of knowing. Consequently, research aligned to the constructivist grounded theory is cautious about generalising the study's findings to populations not represented in the sample. In this way, a qualitative design that uses grounded theory to examine understudied population groups that are marginalised in mainstream literature fosters social justice. Charmaz (2011) asserts that certain grounded theory strategies promote social justice inquiry.

In qualitative research, contextual sensitivity is important in understanding human behaviour. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) identify the characteristics of authentic qualitative research within the African context that promotes data collection that is context and culturally sensitive. There seems to be consensus in the literature (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Neuman, 1997) that the setting of the study should be as naturalistic as

possible, meaning that data collection should be conducted where the phenomenon occurs; however, MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) caution that direct observation of phenomena could be time-consuming. A qualitative research enquiry should be context-sensitive in order to gain an holistic understanding of the human experience and how situational factors such as socio-political, gender, ethnicity, race, and class issues (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010) shape the interpretation and meaning people attach to the phenomenon.

Consequently, the researcher is able to derive authentic interpretations from the data if the data collection process involves direct participation by the population under study; MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) refer to this process as direct data collection. MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) affirm the importance of rich narrative descriptions that capture the phenomenon in depth. A high level of detail not only helps to understand the complexity of the phenomenon but enables interrogation of taken-for-granted narratives. As such, qualitative studies are process oriented in that they seek to understand how and why the behaviour or phenomenon occurs and not just its end results (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Another key characteristic of qualitative research highlighted by MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) is that data are analysed inductively. This means that data are synthesised from the information gathered from those that experience the phenomenon without imposing preconceived hypotheses. This bottom-up approach enables new data to emerge and promotes new understanding of complex issues that initially seem disconnected. Qualitative research is participant-centred, *“in other words, there is a focus on the meaning of events and actions as expressed by the participants”* (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 347). This has been an ongoing concern for African-centred scholars (Asante, 1991; Graham 1999; Nwoye, 2015) who argue that research on any authentic human phenomenon should be informed by those under study. The unit of analysis is a critical component of a contextual and culturally relevant study, especially for people of African descent who, according to Asante (1991), have been mainly studied as objects rather than as subjects.

Qualitative research that is grounded in real life human experience is likely to evolve in order to adjust to the needs of participants, accommodate the unique circumstances of the research setting and incorporate information that is not accessible to the researcher at the start of the research project. MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) refer to this evolving research plan as an emergent design and add that the full account of the data collection process is usually compiled retrospectively, that is, when data collection is complete. Due to

the complexity of the data collection process and of the phenomenon, it is, therefore, prudent for the researcher to acknowledge that the research process itself cannot fully capture all the complexities and different understandings of the phenomenon (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher should thus use investigative methods that maximise opportunities to capture the various aspects of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, i.e., incorporating what could be called a plurality of perspectives.

4.3.4 The nature of research.

The current study used a qualitative design and was located within the interpretivist paradigm. According to Brand (2008), the interpretivist paradigm is particularly concerned with the complexity of a range of meanings individuals give to their experiences. Therefore, individual experiences cannot be studied and interpreted with the same degree of certainty as in the hard sciences. The current study used inductive reasoning and idiographic explanations in that it investigated the phenomenon from the inside and did not assume the objective reality of students' experiences (Neuman, 2006; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). Robson (2002, p. 475) emphasises the importance of inductive methods: "*so what is needed is not only the explanatory structure or mechanisms but also knowledge of the particular set of circumstances.*" The study was exploratory in nature and used a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of first-year students in the College of Humanities at UKZN. Spenner et al.'s (2005) study of first-year college students indicated an achievement gap, which was evident in the first semester. They attribute this gap to a range of pre-college factors that ameliorate or exacerbate it. The researcher explored student discourses on factors within various life-worlds that affect their academic performance. Selection was based on participants meeting certain criteria (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006).

The researcher concurs with Smith (2010, p.35) that "*culture, context and the recognition of multiple realities are salient features of the naturalistic research context where meaning is construed*". The sampling process was consultative in that the parameters were debated by the PhD research project team members, which comprised of the principal researcher, the supervisor, discipline experts and the research assistants.

4.3.5 Ethical issues relevant to the research.

Permission was obtained from the UKZN Ethics Committee to conduct the focus groups with a medium-low risk population group of first-time, first year students within the College of Humanities (see Appendix A). Participation in the study was voluntary and

participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point without any negative consequences. The researcher explained the aims and objectives of the study and possible benefits to participants during the recruitment and data collection phase. All participants signed a consent form granting their permission to participate in the study and for the focus group proceedings to be recorded. Participating students in the pilot study were given an incentive of R80 on completion of each session and those that participated in the main study were given an incentive of R100. The researcher relied on implied consensus to maintain the confidentiality of the group discussion. The venues selected were secure, with minimal disruptions. All research documents and cassettes were kept in a lockable cabinet and will be retained for five years, after which the documents will be shredded, and the tape recordings will be incinerated.

The researcher put quality assurance measures in place, such as training all the facilitators, to ensure the integrity of the study and that the participants' dignity and rights were upheld. The researcher and the research assistants debriefed the students; however, letters were written to the University Student Counselling Centers to alert them of possible referral of students who experienced high levels of distress during the focus group discussions.

One of the main dilemmas in the current study was adjusting the research plan to accommodate the participants' feedback and the sources of information that emerged during the research process. In order to enhance the level of participation, the research time frames were adjusted to suit the majority of the research population. The use of incentives was debated at length by the research team, and justification for the incentive was reviewed and explicitly stated in the ethics forms. Romm (2015) has raised concerns about the use of incentives to demonstrate appreciation for the time and effort participants put into a research project. Monetary remuneration to the participants for adjusting their routine to accommodate their research participation is consistent with the principle of reciprocity that is characteristic of African culture (Mkhize, 2004a). However, in as much as it is important to show appreciation for the participants' contribution, the researcher has the responsibility to act in an ethical manner where incentives are concerned. Researchers need to be aware of the long-term consequences of using monetary or other incentives for research initiatives within research-led institutions. Such behaviour can lead to future resistance to engage in research initiatives that do not provide monetary or other forms of reward.

The ethical and moral issues surrounding incentives in reciprocal relations conflict with the values of *Ubuntu* that grounds the Afrocentric perspective. The researcher is usually

the primary beneficiary during data collection as the person who has the need to answer the research questions and complete the study, whereas the participants might benefit in some way from the study but might not be well positioned to appreciate their short-term contribution. Hence, an incentive serves to assure the participants that their contribution is acknowledged and appreciated through the use of verbal and non-verbal communication as well as other incentives. It is important to acknowledge that no research occurs in a vacuum; previous studies and practices also shape perceptions of what is appropriate and not acceptable within the field. The same principle applies to the issue of incentives. One can agree with MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) that informed consent is a negotiated dialogue between the researcher and the participants. If students feel that the research project is exploitative in some way and the researcher fails to reciprocate, they vote with their feet by not enlisting to participate in that research project.

However, if the population is motivated by financial gain, there is the danger of obtaining a skewed sample. Undue influence of the participants in research is not a new phenomenon. The danger of sample bias if there are monetary incentives is further compounded by social class and other socioeconomic factors. However, assuming that students have no agency and that they only engage in research and other academic activities due to external factors is a fallacy. Horsthemke (2006, 2009) argues that human beings have a sense of agency and that they choose to appropriate certain principles and act in a manner that affirms their identity and humanness. The *Ubuntu* philosophy and the Africentric paradigm advocate for the moral agency of people of African descent to disrupt the taken-for-granted perspective that they have nothing to contribute to knowledge generation. The notion of consumerism, where students simply accept what is presented to them instead of making a meaningful contribution, should be actively challenged in higher education. Irrespective of the incentive, student participation should be encouraged, and researchers should endeavour to inspire them to engage in the research process as collaborators rather than as vessels from which they can extract information.

The reliability of information depends on a number of factors and cannot be guaranteed as perceptions and experiences change over time. Reliability of data was ensured by presenting the same questions to the focus group participants during the data collection process. Piloting the data collection instruments helped to identify bias or ambiguous questions.

The researcher could not guarantee the confidentiality of the information discussed by the focus group members and relied on the participants' good will to maintain

confidentiality. Although there were potential language barriers because South Africa has 11 official languages, facilitators were paired, taking their language competencies into consideration. Another limitation of the study is that its findings cannot be generalised to all students enrolled within UKZN as different schools in the university might have unique challenges and their students might be different to the ones sampled in the current study.

Students' voluntary participation and the provision of financial incentives could have biased the sampling for this study. Furthermore, while the researcher sought to avoid pre-determined theoretical assumptions, to some extent, the choice of two key research questions to present to the Participlan focus groups for discussion involved prior selection of a focus for discussion. Finally, the bias of the principal researcher (emanating from the background of being a Black African woman, and the form of education received in a predominantly Western educational system) could have influenced the results in a particular direction.

In qualitative research the validity of a study refers to the degree to which the observed phenomenon is interpreted and understood in the same way by both the researcher and the population under study (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). It was thus critical for the researcher to capture the participants' lived experiences and verify that the codes and themes that emerged during data analysis were aligned to the realities of the students. Confirmation of the accuracy of data is referred to as member checking (Charmaz, 2011; MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Neuman, 2007). Engaging the participants in the formal and informal review of data is one strategy that is designed to enhance the validity of a research project. In the present study, participants were engaged in not only generating responses to probe questions, but were also involved in the preliminary thematic analysis of the data and in evaluating the researchers' attempts to organise data into a coherent framework. Furthermore, verification of ideas was obtained by means of scrutiny by impartial colleagues, which was part of the process of data triangulation. According to MacMillan and Schumacher (2010), triangulation moves beyond using multiple data collection methods and includes different strategies that provide multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon. "In its broad sense, triangulation also refer to use of multiple researchers, multiple theories, or perspectives to interpret the data; multiple data sources to corroborate data, and multiple disciplines to broaden one's understanding of the method and the phenomenon of interest (Janesick, 1998)" (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 355).

A verification process was one of the methods used to ensure the validity of the study. The participants were consulted to check emerging abstractions (such methods having been used in other studies, see e.g., O'Neill, 1999). Participants were prompted to comment on

categories using face-to-face member checks, a method employed by other researchers such as Hill et al. (2005). The participants' involvement in the primary abstraction and the verification of categories enhanced the impact and utility of the study in a manner designed to produce end results that were likely to benefit the intended population and bring about useful insights.

The validity of a study also depends on ensuring that the researcher and the research is/are inquisitive and open to interrogation by continuously posing new and old questions about the phenomenon. The outcome of the abstraction and the conceptualisation and subsequent theory has to align with the realities of the participants.

4.3.6 Primary data collection strategy.

The use of more than one method of data collection, called triangulation, is highly recommended (Babbie & Mouton, 2010; Robson, 2002), especially if a researcher aims to develop elements to build a theoretical framework or a model. Denzin (1984) identified four types of triangulation: triangulation of theory, data, observer, and methodology. The use of multiple theories and data was critical in this highly localized study as it enhanced internal validity. A case study method was used to understand the in-depth factors affecting the academic achievement of the first-year, first-time students within the College of Humanities. According to Robson (2002, p. 178), a case study "...involves empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within the real life context using multiple sources of evidence." Triangulation is a key component of any case study; therefore, all co-researchers and data collectors should be involved in the conceptualisation and definition of the research questions. "When a team is involved it also serves to increase validity in the sense of assisting all investigators to follow the same set of procedures and rules" (Robson, 2002, p.184). Experienced data collectors were identified and trained in order to ensure that the same rules and procedures were followed during data collection.

MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified planning as one of the most important phases of data collection. In the planning phase of the current study, the researcher sought and gained permission to access participants and conduct the study at UKZN. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 1) and the gatekeeper's letter granting permission to work with UKZN students is also attached (Appendix 2). Furthermore, the researcher informed the participants about the purpose of the study; and individual consent was solicited and granted by the first-year, first time students within the College of Humanities (see Appendices 3A for 2011 the pilot study and 3B for

2012 the main study). The planning phase included training the principal researcher and the research assistants on how to conduct focus group discussions using the Participlan process (discussed in more detail below). The data collection process was outlined to the team, and the pairing of the research assistants with the researcher was finalised during the planning process.

4.3.7 Data collection method.

The Participlan focus group method (Institute for Social Development Studies [ISDS] & International Centre for Research on Women [ICRW], 2011) which is sometimes referred to as card storming was used in this study. This method involves collaborative brainstorming and sharing of problems and solutions using cards; the participants are assisted in arranging their ideas and thoughts into themes and groupings, and discuss and elaborate their ideas in a collaborative manner (ISDS & ICRW, 2011). Typically, the researcher collects individual cards from people in a box and shuffles them so that they are mixed. The rules of participation (which are discussed in more detail later in this chapter) were explained to the participants at the start of the data collection process.

All Participlan focus group discussions were conducted within university premises in medium size seminar rooms. The number of participants in each focus group varied from 9 to 20 in the main study and from 3 to 13 in the pilot study. All the focus group discussions were facilitated by the principal researcher and one of the research assistants who was responsible for capturing the themes as they emerged. The research assistant also made the group facilitator aware of outstanding items or further questions that could be posed to the group to illuminate the phenomenon.

When the participants arrived at the venue they were handed the consent forms to read. Once all the participants who had registered to participate in the allocated time slot had arrived, the researchers went through the consent form with the students before they signed both the consent form and the register. The desks were arranged in a semi-circle to allow all members to see one another during the discussion. Each member was given a disposable tag on which they wrote their names.

The Participlan focus group method is not a common method of collecting empirical data (Snyman, 2012). Therefore, it was important that all members understood how the process unfolds as this method is slightly different from the usual focus group discussions or ordinary conversation. As indicated in Ayiotis' (2008) thesis and the Business Presentation Group and Participlan Group Facilitation website, the main aim of using the Participlan

process is to direct the focus of the discussion in a non-threatening, democratic, and participatory manner. In this way, issues of power dynamics within the group are dealt with as all participants had an opportunity to express their genuine opinions and share their experiences without fear of being judged. According to Boon (2006), this method is typical of the manner in which communities within certain African groups such as the Nguni engage in discussion or what is called *umhlangano* which according to Boon (2006) could be referred to as an ‘interactive discussion forum.’ Based on the *Ubuntu* philosophy of the non-hierarchical position of community members; the Participlan process seems to be an ideal way to showcase the philosophy of *Ubuntu* in a real life setting, and should be considered as a means to improve business success as has been demonstrated by Brookdryk (2006). According to Ayiotis (2008), using the Participlan process to facilitate group discussion has a number of advantages, including:

- Participants can communicate freely and openly in a collaborative manner.
- All ideas are treated equally in that once the idea is presented on a card all the participants take ownership of that idea by unpacking or democratically rejecting the proposed idea.

The following instructions were given to students (these instructions being similar to instructions given in previous research projects where the Participlan method was used; cf., Ayiotis, 2008; Edwards, 2013; ISDS & ICRW, 2011; Snyman, 2012):

- The participants were asked to respond to a question posed by the researcher by writing a single idea on the response card.
- The participants were expected to write legibly such that other participants could read the card without any strain. The recommended font size was demonstrated and participants were shown how they could use a permanent marker to improve the visibility of their writing.
- No ‘suitcase words’ were allowed, meaning that the participants had to present the idea in a simple and concise manner.
- Participants were free to generate as many ideas as they desired, but could only put one idea on each response card.
- The ‘rule of two feet’ was adopted, which stipulates that if a person leaves the seminar room for any reason, they would accept what has been suggested by the group upon their return.
- Participants were allowed up to 30 seconds at a time to make a verbal contribution or debate a point to avoid domination of the group by certain members.

- The participants were assured that all ideas that were presented by individual group members were valuable and would be discussed, interrogated, and expanded on by the whole group, not just the individual who presented the idea.
- Once the structured ground rules were explained to the participants, they were given an opportunity to add any other important ground rules that would guide the behaviour, actions and attitude of the Participlan focus group.

The Participlan process is outlined in Figure 4.1 below.

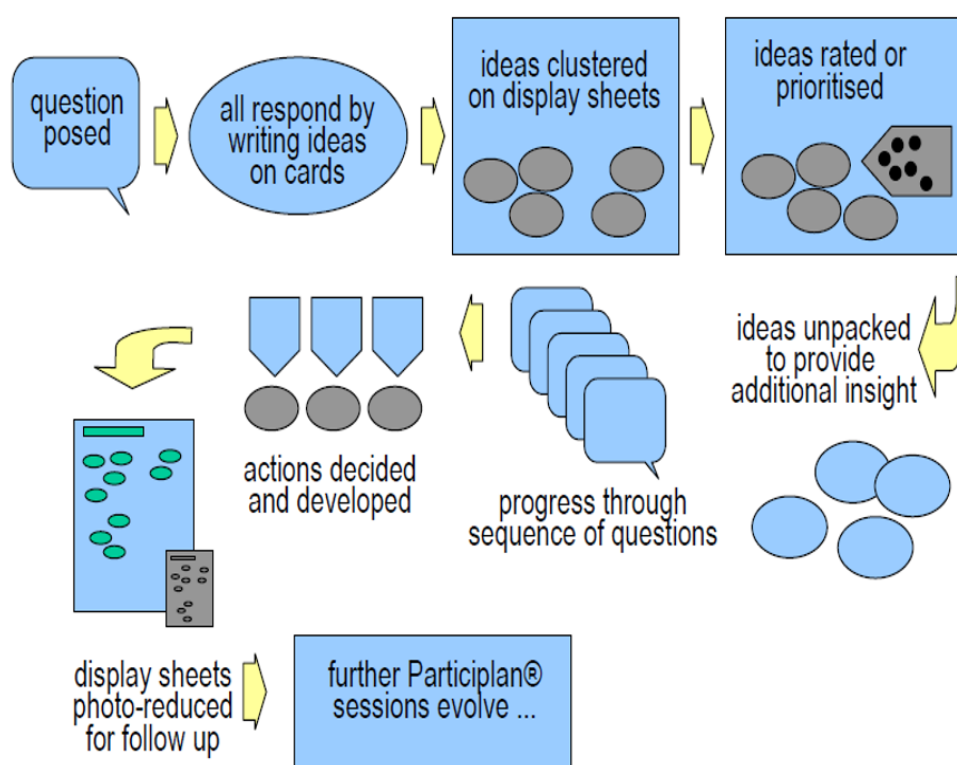


Figure 4.1. The participian process (Ayiotis, 2008, p. 24)

The method outlined in the discussion and Figure 4.1 above was used for both the pilot and the main study. The current study followed the same procedure in generating codes as that outlined by Ayiotis (2008) except that there was no emphasis on rating the responses using an anonymous voting process. The main aim of the current research project was not to reach unanimous consensus but to investigate the factors that enable and constrain students in their academic performance irrespective of whether or not the idea was considered to be of high priority. This democratic and consultative aspect of the Participlan process creates an atmosphere that promotes a deeper level of engagement and engenders values that show respect for the participants' input at an individual and collective level (Boon, 1996). The

Participlan process enabled managed debates and discussion which promoted inclusion, participation and collaboration.

4.4 Research Phases

The current study involved two phases, namely, the pilot study and the main study which are discussed in detail in this section.

4.4.1 4.4.1 The pilot study.

The rationale for the pilot study and the process followed to recruit participants is outlined below.

4.4.1.1 Rationale for the pilot study.

The pilot study was conducted to test the Participlan process as a data collection tool. The pretest of the Participlan process enabled the researcher to identify gaps in the recruitment strategy, determine the amount of time required to conduct the Participlan focus group discussions, and establish if the stimulus questions were effective in triggering discussion. Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996) affirm the importance of conducting a feasibility study and add that a pilot study helps to identify areas that require adaptation and modification of the research methods and techniques. Based on the feedback from the pilot study, the researcher reviewed the recruitment protocol and the procedures. The results of the pilot study were used to corroborate the findings of the main study in order to strengthen the credibility of the results.

4.4.1.2 Sample recruitment.

The call for participation in the pilot study was done using stratified purposeful sampling which involved categorising first-year, first-time students registered within the College of Humanities based on their first semester results. The pilot Participlan focus groups were also stratified by race group, i.e., black/other (white, Indian, coloured), the type of school the student matriculated from, i.e., advantaged (schools with more than 50% pass rate) and disadvantaged (schools with less than 50% pass rate), and risk status based on the 2012 first term examination results. High-risk students were defined as those who failed two or more modules in the first term; moderate-risk students failed one module in the term, and no risk students passed all their modules in the first term.

The pilot study was conducted on UKZN's Pietermaritzburg campus because the principal researcher is located on this campus. The pilot sample was composed of only male black first-time, first-year students who volunteered and met the criteria outlined above, i.e., no risk, moderate risk or high risk of dropping out of university. The students were recruited in lecture halls and via the University website, and posters were also displayed in one building within the College of Humanities. A register for participation was circulated after a brief presentation about the study after Psychology lectures. Students who were willing to participate provided their preferred email addresses and mobile numbers and signed the register according to their specific category. The researcher had access to the student academic records through the onsite school academic administrator and could thus confirm if the students had signed up under the correct category. Individual student performance provided an indication of the risk group they belonged to, and consequently, this was done before category specific group emails were sent to first-year, first-time students who had signed up for participation. Emails were monitored to establish which students had read the emails and which were not attended to. The date was confirmed via a group email and text messaging (SMS) using a mobile phone. Individual phone calls were made to alert students to the exact meeting place and time if they failed to respond to the emails and the SMS.

Although all the correspondence was conducted based on the specific category of academic risk, students from various categories attended sessions that were not appropriate to their category. An exception was observed in the high-risk pilot focus group which was composed of only students who had failed two or all their modules in the June examinations. Of the 35 black female and male students that signed up as potential participants, 24 black male students participated in Participlan focus group discussions. The composition of the various focus groups is indicated in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1

Demographic Information for the Participants in the Pilot Study

Pilot Focus Group (PFG) Number	Group 1 No risk Black male students	Group 2 Moderate Risk Black male students	Group 3 High Risk Black male students	Risk group unknown	Total
Focus group 1 (PFG1)	6	3	1	3	13
Focus group 2 (PFG2)	5	3	0	0	8
Focus group 3 (PFG3)	0	0	3	0	3
Total	11	6	4	3	24

It seems that grouping students based on their academic performance was not accepted by the students. Three of the students preferred to withhold their academic risk profiles. In consultation with the research supervisor and the research assistant, the principal researcher decided to ignore the risk level of the students as they had already turned up for the focus group discussions at the specified times. The Participlan focus groups were conducted at 09h30 and at 12h30 to accommodate potential clashes when most of the study population attended classes. It seems that the students valued attending classes and most first-year students did not want to miss the revision sessions which were taking place simultaneously with data collection for the study.

The initial recruitment involved all students, but as the students indicated their interest in participating, black male students outnumbered the other racial groups and categories. Hence, the researcher focused on attending to the black male students that had signed up to form the pilot group participants.

Due to the low number of students in the various groups of black female students, and Indian, Coloured and white male and female students, as well as time constraints, the Participlan focus groups for these racial groups were suspended. About 30 Indian, Coloured and white male and female students signed up as potential participants, but there were not enough to form sufficient groups for each category. As the semester progressed, students became more withdrawn and unwilling to come to university just to participate in group

discussions. It was evident that the timing of the group discussions was not suitable as some students relied on shared transport and if this was not available, they were unwilling to use public transport. Furthermore, students' accommodation arrangements seemed to determine their availability. The timing of the study was aligned to the varied needs of the students. The timing of the focus group discussions in the academic calendar seemed to favour students who resided closer to the campus or in university residences or had independent means of transport to access the university.

The initial plan was to conduct focus group discussions in the second week before the exams. However, the students were still submitting assessment tasks. Hence they failed to attend the focus group discussion sessions they had initially signed up for. Due to the low response rate recruitment was extended by another week.

The focus group discussion for students who were categorised as the high-risk group was postponed at least twice to allow students who had confirmed attendance a chance to participate. It seemed that the students who had confirmed attendance but did not attend the discussion were reluctant to participate in a group. When confirmations were conducted telephonically, students seemed willing to participate, but they failed to present themselves during the actual data collection process. It seems that categorizing and engaging at-risk students in a focus group discussion was not an appropriate way to conduct the study. Students might have been more comfortable if they were approached individually; this requires further exploration. The group of three students who eventually participated in the study consistently presented for the group discussion on three occasions and the researcher decided to conduct the focus group discussions despite the small number of participants. The researcher was concerned about the ethical implications and the psychological wellbeing of the students who had signed up as participants in the study. She brought to their attention support systems available to students who were not coping with the academic demands at the University. It, therefore became very important to explain the purpose of the research project and clearly delimit the scope of the study. Some students, especially those that were categorised as at risk of failing their programme, believed that the research project was meant to provide support for those who were not coping with their studies. The researcher had to point out where students could get support from the institution. The expectations and the purpose of the study was again read to the students (see Appendix 3) before the focus group discussions commenced.

4.4.2 The main study.

The process used to recruit the participants in the main study and the demographic information on the participants is presented below.

4.4.2.1 Main study sample recruitment.

The experience gained during the pilot phase prompted the research team to adjust the subsequent sampling frames to recruit participants, and review the manner in which they were recruited. The process and logistics of data collection, such as the timing and the number of research assistants, was altered to accommodate what MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) refer to as the setting and other sources of information that emerged during the pilot phase of data collection. Data collection resumed with a different set of first-time, first-year students the following year. After the pilot phase, stratified sampling was modified to first-year, first-time students registered within the College of Humanities with a South African bar-coded identity document.

The recruitment process resumed in August the following year, almost two months before the start of the end-of-year examinations. The main study involved a different cohort of first-year, first time students. Although the idea of categorizing students based on their academic performance was discarded in the sampling frames, the researcher acknowledged the importance of experiential learning that comes from having passed or failed module(s) in higher education. The timing of the study was aligned to the beginning of a new semester when all students had received their academic results for the first semester.

The university website was again used as one of the means to recruit students from the Howard College and Pietermaritzburg (PMB) campuses. An information letter was attached to the general email indicating the details of the study. Students were asked to email their student number, name, gender, campus, degree registered for and their contact number. Participating students in the pilot study were given an incentive of R80 on completion of each session and those that participated in the main study received an incentive of R100. Unlike the first advert which stipulated the dates and times of the study, the advert for the main study in 2012 indicated that students would be recruited on a first come basis and that only 100 students would be accepted. The research team estimated that about 50 participants per campus would participate. One of the main recruitment methods was for students to sign up for participation in person by filling in a register. This proved to be a more popular method. Posters about the study were also placed in strategic positions on the two campuses. Word of mouth also contributed to the success of the recruitment process. Students were

given an opportunity to choose convenient time slots. Once students had signed up for participation the principal researcher and research assistant verified that they were registered within the College of Humanities and allocated students to different time slots. Group emails were sent to candidates who met the study criteria and different time slots were assigned to students based on the availability of the researchers, venues and the needs of the majority of the students on the two campuses. Further correspondence was conducted through individual emails and SMS messages to confirm the dates and times for different focus groups.

Due to time and financial constraints, 111 students participated in the study. The breakdown of the research participants is indicated in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2

Demographic Information for the Participants in the Main Study

Focus Group (FG) Number	Number of students in each Focus Group	Female & Race	Male & Race
Group 1 PMB (FG1)	09	09 Black	0
Group 2 PMB (FG2)	18	0	14 Black 04 White
Group 3 PMB (FG3)	09	09 Black	0
Group 4 Howard College (FG4)	20	14 Black 02 Indian	03 Black 01 Indian
Group 5 Howard College (FG5)	18	08 Black 01 Coloured	09 Black
Group 6 Howard College (FG6)	17	12 Black 1 Indian	04 Black
Group 7 Howard College	20	12 Black 01 Indian 01 White	05 Black 01 White
TOTAL	111	70	41

There were more female (63.06%) than male (39.64%) participants. Of the 111 students who participated, 36 were located on the Pietermaritzburg campus. The initial number of students recruited before the stipulated guidelines on the Pietermaritzburg campus was 54. However, the number of participants was limited to 36 despite a high number of requests to participate in the study.

4.4.2.2 Data collection procedure for the pilot and the main study.

The Participlan focus groups were facilitated by the principal researcher and co-researchers during the pilot and the main study. The research assistant in the pilot and main study on the Pietermaritzburg campus was a final year undergraduate student at the same institution who was familiar with the strategic places where students could be recruited. The researcher on the Howard College campus was the principal researcher's research supervisor. The participants were given an opportunity to introduce themselves which helped to break the ice, and the researcher established rapport by indicating that she was also a learner and that none of the people in the room were experts. Each participant was given a permanent marker, and a set of about 50 (10cm x15 cm) light green cards bound together with glue at the edge. The researcher spent about 10 minutes at the start of each session negotiating ground rules and explaining how the Participlan group discussion would be conducted. In qualitative research, the researcher is an active actor and collaborator; however, Ayiotis (2008) has a different view of the facilitator as someone that should "...act as an impartial emotional shock absorber in instances of conflict" (p. 22).

The facilitator, in this instance the researcher, used repositionable adhesive notes to explain the rules of participating in the Participlan process. It was explained that the participants should respond to two questions that were posted on the wall. Only two questions were displayed on the A3 paper in bold writing so that all participants could read and respond to them sequentially (see Appendix 4). The first question was "what helps you and other student to successfully cope with academic demands?", and the second was "what makes it difficult for you and other students to cope with academic demands?" These questions were deemed appropriate in that they did not focus on specific aspects of the students' experience, but gave them an opportunity to identify what they thought was important for their academic performance and for that of other students in the university. The participants had the opportunity to brainstorm and share their individual experiences without being restricted to validating what already exists in the literature. The two predetermined questions were also presented to the PhD advisory team to establish if they were sufficiently explicit and

adequately captured the study's objectives. The role of the facilitators was to skilfully focus the group towards the goal of the Participan focus group process and promote shared responsibility.

Facilitation of Participan focus group discussions was conducted in English. However, there were instances where code-switching to IsiZulu was done to illuminate a point or to provide a context specific concept or example. The pairing of the researcher and the research assistant who were competent in both IsiZulu and English, created a non-threatening atmosphere for some students who struggled to communicate in English which is their second language. Although English is the medium of instruction at UKZN, there is evidence in the literature (Boughey, 2012; Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014; Ndimande-Hlongwa et al., 2010) that students in South African HEIs struggle to express themselves at an appropriate level in English, which creates a barrier in engaging in meaningful academic activities. Hence, English/IsiZulu bilingualism was critical in this study, as these are the languages spoken by the majority of students at this institution (Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2014; Ndimande-Hlongwa et al., 2010). This not only made the students feel included but eliminated potential challenges that could hinder participation and bias the responses due to a lack of competence in the English language.

The first question was presented to the participants and they took about five minutes to generate the first set of responses on their individual cards. A set of about 7 to 12 response cards was generated. These cards were collected and shuffled by the facilitator to ensure the participants' anonymity. Anonymity created a buffer for participants who could easily be dominated by more vocal participants (Ayiotis, 2008) and allowed all the participants to share their perceptions or experiences in a more communal manner. The first set of cards was positioned on an A1 adhesive piece of white paper that allowed the response cards to be repositioned without falling. The positioning of the response card on each piece of paper was facilitated by the researcher, but at times the participants, guided by the group, also briefly co-facilitated the Participan proceedings when necessary. As the response cards were generated, they were continuously positioned in clusters. Ayiotis (2008) provides a concise summary of how the clusters are generated during the Participan process:

“Similar anonymous ideas or opinions generated through this technique are clustered on the sheets... Through a sequence of follow up questions more ideas are generated, unpacked, explained and displayed. The participants decide how similar ideas are clustered and are free to challenge an idea cluster, or seek clarification, but they do not attack or criticise any other participant, (p.23).”

The end product was information collated into clusters that incorporated the perspectives of all the group members instead of just one researcher. The Participan focus group discussions were facilitated to saturation point (when no new themes emerged), and helped to illuminate and define the boundaries and the relevance of categories (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012; Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010).

All the clusters and the codes generated from each data unit were typed out and were kept intact for each data unit. The typing of each data unit required ongoing collaboration between the researcher and the research team as each data set had to be separated to avoid mixing data sets as well as codes and clusters. Where the response cards became loose, the research team had to glue them back on to the adhesive sheets. Once the cluster had been typed and verified for accuracy, the response cards for each Participan focus group were placed together in plastic sleeves labelled according to the cluster name or the tentative code. This allowed for ease of storage as the adhesive became weaker over time, resulting in cards falling off the adhesive chart.

4.4.3 Data reduction strategy.

The processes used to analyse data are explained below.

4.4.3.1 The phases of data analysis.

The process of data collection followed some of the phases outlined by MacMillan and Schumacher (2010). In phase one, the planning phase, the researcher sought and gained permission to access participants and to conduct the study within UKZN. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee. Furthermore, individual consent was solicited and granted by the first-year, first time students within the College of Humanities (refer to Appendix 3). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), realists should aim to identify mechanisms within the localised context of complex networks in order to explore underlying variables and processes.

The second phase was data collection which was initiated during the pilot phase. Due to the amount of data collected and the diversity of codes and categories, it became critical to synthesis the data into accessible categories and codes for ease of reporting. Data go beyond just what the participants say (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010) and includes what they do not say and involves the following:

- The participants' responses
- Different forms of data context

- Behaviour, action and differences in relation to one another and the research
- How taken-for-granted actions, methods and other preconceived ideas shape the research process
- How the context shapes the content and how the content shapes the context

Glaser (1992) asserts that ‘all is data’ but Bryant and Charmaz (2012) counteract this argument by stating that ‘data is not all.’ Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between a data item, data corpus, data unit, and data extract. A data *item* refers to each piece of data collected, which together make up the data set or corpus. The data corpus is all the data for the specific research project, and the data set is all the data that is derived from the data corpus that is used for a particular analysis. The data corpus for the current study included observations and the researcher’s experiential learning process during data collection, and data analysis as well as the data collected during the Participlan focus group discussions. The different data units collected from different Participlan focus group discussions were analysed as a single data unit even though the data sets were composed of students across two campuses. The reason for analysing data sets as one unit is that the participants had to respond to the same question irrespective of gender, campus, or academic performance. The research project focused on identifying any probable factors that could enable or constrain students’ academic performance at the University.

According to Bryant and Charmaz (2012, p.45), the paradigm and ideologies are the starting point in grounded theory but “...*should not determine how they view and code data*”. These authors also emphasise the constructive and constitutive role of all actors in defining the social context of the research. Bryant and Charmaz (2012) further assert that the actors in social research must embody the balance between experience and analysis, and view the emic and the etic perspective as alternatives to each other rather than as competing aspects of the phenomenon. The etic and emic perspectives of data analysis are converse sides of the phenomenon and should be used in an integrated and reiterative manner to enhance social understanding of the phenomenon. Glaser and Strauss (1967) acknowledge that reiterative use of the emic and the etic perspective in data collection and analysis can serve as co-informants in that it can develop social understandings. Bryant and Charmaz (2012) support this view by stating that data collection and analysis is a linked and simultaneous process that should embrace and maintain the balance by integrating both reason and relativism.

The closing of data collection (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010) marks the end of this process. During this phase, the last interview(s) are conducted with key informants to interpret and verify the emergent findings. In the current study, verification of the emergent

findings was conducted with a few selected participants (based on their availability) who were part of the focus group discussions. The purpose was to verify the primary codes that were captured in different focus groups on the two campuses. The students cross checked if all the collected data had captured their experiences and those of other students on the factors that enable and constrain their academic performance. No new codes emerged from this consultative process, but the students were able to provide additional data that fitted the existing codes. The final phase of data collection and analysis highlighted by MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) is the completion of data collection. The synthesis of the data in the current research project was an iterative process that sought to create a seamless transition from primary induction, to secondary induction up to the last phase of data presentation as indicated in Figure 4.2.

Grounded theory directs subsequent data collection and analysis. Hence, in the current study, all Participlan focus group discussions in the study drew on previous discussions and on experience gained during the pilot study. The initial Participlan focus group discussions informed the nature and composition of subsequent Participlan focus groups. However, the research questions remained unchanged. Figure 4.2 below provides a summary of how the data collection and analysis were integrated and the manner in which they built on each other in the current study.

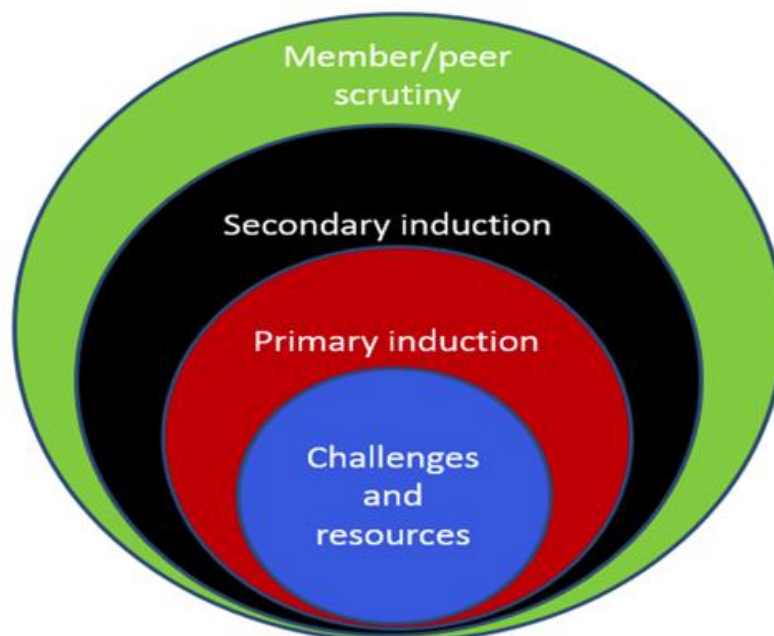


Figure 4.2. Data collection and data analysis strategy

The analysis of data while data collection was in progress required theoretical sensitivity. According to Kelle (2007), theoretical sensitivity can be achieved by abstaining from forcing preconceived concepts. In the current study, the primary induction of the data analysis was conducted in collaboration with the students during the Participan focus group discussions. The researcher tapped into the participants' conceptual understanding of the phenomenon which was captured in the clusters and the tentative codes that were generated during the Participan focus group process. The researcher also relied on theoretical knowledge to refine, adjust, and further develop the codes derived from the raw data generated from the empirical work. The first phase in which data was generated and clusters were developed and tentatively coded, is represented by the blue and red circles in Figure 4.2. In thematic data analysis, the researcher moves beyond just what they hear and see. The researcher tries to "...mentally process ideas and facts while collecting data. Initial descriptions [of the tentative data analysis] are summarised and identified for later corroboration" (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 353). To derive and develop second level categories during data analysis as represented by the black circle in Figure 4.2, the researcher was again guided by theory and the descriptive codes and clusters that were generated during the Participan focus group discussions. The green outer circle in Figure 4.2 captures the process of verification which involved peer scrutiny by participants.

Another level of verification was conducted during the consultative process that involved the presentation of the primary and secondary codes at a Teaching and Learning (T & L) conference. This annual conference at UKZN is aligned with the focus of the study, in that the conference presentations deal mainly with issues around academic performance in higher education. The codes and themes that emerged from the iterative consultation with the students and the PhD research team were subjected to peer scrutiny during the T & L conference presentation. The conference presentation was done in order to enhance understanding of the research topic and to obtain further data that could have been overlooked or missed during the initial data collection. Although no new themes emerged from this process, the one-on-one consultative process with other researchers who are actively involved in a similar field of study provided useful information on how the secondary inductive process of data collection could be enhanced. MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) captured the importance of a disinterested colleague who can serve as a peer debriefer. According to these authors, such a colleague can help the researcher to interrogate their tacit knowledge and to explicitly state their preconceived assumptions and

direction of enquiry. Although the colleagues that were consulted were not entirely disinterested in the study field, they had no vested interest in the current study.

The authenticity of the results obtained when grounded theory is used as the research method must meet certain criteria. The first criterion is credibility which means there should be clear evidence of associations between the empirical data and the abstraction (i.e., the conceptualisation that transforms the raw data). Secondly, the data in grounded theory should make a meaningful contribution and enhance understanding of the phenomenon. The third criterion for grounded theory is resonance which refers to the depth at which the phenomenon is studied. The final criterion is usefulness which highlights the importance of an alignment between participants' observations and reality and the outcomes of the researcher's analysis. A research project based on grounded theory should also be meaningful in that other researchers should be able to build on it. Bryant and Charmaz (2012) note, that, these four elements of an authentically grounded theory which can also be applied in other qualitative research studies are referred to by many names in the literature. For example Lincon and Guba refer to these qualities as trustworthiness and others capture them as dependability, transferability or conformability.

4.4.3.2 Data processing.

The majority of the clusters and some of the tentative codes were developed during the Participlan focus group process in order to enhance what Bryant and Charmaz (2006) refer to as the credibility and usefulness of the research project. However, these codes were extended by the researcher by including other codes, categories, and concepts based on “... *specialist knowledge, something that is seen by some as helping to develop theoretical sensitivity*” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p.53). Bryant and Charmaz (2012) seek to dispel the confusion between codes, categories, and concepts. They define “...*codes as the most numerous and lowest levels of analysis, with categories as intermediate levels of abstraction and concepts at still higher [order] levels*” (pp. 50-51).

Thematic analysis was used to develop themes from the codes, categories, and concepts that were collaboratively generated by the participants and those codes and categories that were informed by theory. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a tool and method to identify and analyse data and serve as a means to report patterns or themes. Thus, thematic analysis can be used to describe and organise a dataset. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline how thematic analysis is conceptualised in the literature. According to these authors, thematic analysis is a generic tool that can be successfully used in analysing

qualitative data, whilst at the same time, it can be viewed as a fully-fledged research method. This ability to serve both as a tool and as a method, renders thematic analysis flexible to analyse a data set across different theories. It can also be used in studies driven by a certain paradigm or epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is often associated with other research methods such as grounded theory (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). However, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that it can be successfully employed as an independent method that balances the essentialist and constructionist paradigms in order to generate rich data. *“Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the realities of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society”* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9).

Given the diverse ways in which thematic analysis is used in qualitative studies, it is critical for researchers who employ such analysis to explicitly state the process followed. It is also important to clearly state the assumptions that inform the codes and themes formulated from the data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) warn against the tendency of some researchers to assume that themes emerge from data or that they are discovered by the researcher as if the process of data analysis is devoid of theory. According to these authors, data analysis is not independent of the assumptions, values, and predetermined questions that shape this process. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that researchers should be transparent about their theoretical positions and acknowledge their values when conducting qualitative research. Many researchers have argued that the research process is not a passive or neutral endeavour; the researcher is a proactive agent and collaborator in data collection and analysis. Therefore, themes do not reside in data but *“...they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them”* (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 205-6). Themes, therefore, respond to the research questions and capture the patterns of meanings that are derived from the data set.

The data analysis process used in the current study involved the six phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012, 2006). These are: familiarising oneself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing potential themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the research report. In collaboration with the research assistant and the participants, the researcher began the process of familiarisation with the data during data collection. The initial codes generated during the Participlan focus group discussions involved the participants. The participants contributed their views on which response cards should be clustered together. As more response cards were generated and

positioned on the glued paper, the participants, with the principal researcher as the facilitator decided on the clusters and generated the initial codes. The tentative codes and clusters displayed in repositionable charts on the wall represented the views of the participants as a group. It was therefore, important for the facilitator to provide guidance and support during the process of generating clusters using prior theoretical knowledge of the nature of the factors that enable or constrain students' academic progress in higher education. "*Involvement in the participative group process allowed participants to explore and express their own cognitive construct of the specific aspect [of the phenomenon under discussion] ...*" (Snyman, 2012, p.28). To enable the participants to explore the deeper meanings of the phenomenon under study, the facilitator had to exhibit certain qualities such as encouraging mutual respect and understanding amongst the participants (Snyman, 2012).

Once the preliminary coding of data during the Participian focus group process was complete, the researcher began reading through all the individual Participian focus group tentative codes and clusters in more detail. The aim was to immerse the researcher in the data sets and become familiar with the content (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This required taking note of discrepancies and alignments between the clusters and the tentative codes as well as the content under each.

The process of reviewing the codes that were generated by each data unit from each Participian focus group highlighted gaps in some of the initial codes and some clusters were too broad or too narrow to yield meaningful themes. Some of the response cards that were generated during the focus group discussion did not fit into any particular code and were referred to as 'other'. Therefore new codes were generated based on the content of the response cards. A few response cards only had one or two words which made it difficult for the researcher to decide which cluster or themes the card belonged to. As a result, about 10 response cards were kept aside and later presented to the post-data collection follow-up focus group to unpack. The researcher was able to locate the categories and codes for some of the response cards that had phrases but had not been included in any specific cluster or code.

As highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2012, 2006), the researcher acknowledges that the codes and subsequent themes generated from the data set are interpretations of the data set and not verbatim representations of the participants. While the researcher took into consideration the meanings and shared experiences of the participants, she had to provide in-depth conceptual interpretations. Therefore, the codes and themes moved beyond the descriptive and semantic codes generated by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2012). However, Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 61) qualify this statement by observing that, "*some*

codes mirror participants' language and concepts; others invoke the researcher's conceptual and theoretical frameworks." The codes were refined and generated by reading through each data unit in a systematic manner. Researchers using thematic analysis are not prescriptive about the number of codes, but emphasise that they should adequately reflect the diversity and patterns across different data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2006).

The content of the different clusters and codes had to be further analysed into themes. Although the participants mainly used constructs or conceptual phrases to capture their lived experiences on paper, these clusters revealed the patterns of responses that relate to the research questions. Due to similarities, variations and overlaps within different data sets, the researcher collapsed some of the categories and codes to align them with themes generated during data analysis. Themes provide a meaningful, unifying framework for reporting a coherent and comprehensive story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Some themes were generated from the extensive data collected in the different Participlan focus groups.

Once the distinctive themes were developed and some codes or clusters were collapsed or adjusted, the researcher went back to the data set to review if each theme adequately reflected associated codes and clusters. Braun and Clarke (2012) advise researchers to use the following questions to align themes to the data set:

- Is this a theme (it could be just a code)?
- If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme (does it tell me something useful about the data set and my research question)?
- What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include or exclude)?
- Are there enough (meaningful) data to support this theme (is the theme *thin* or *thick*)?
- Are the data too diverse and wide-ranging (does the theme lacks coherence)? (p. 65)

As a consequence of these questions, and experiential learning in the process of data analysis, the researcher discarded some themes and developed others while attempting to remain true to the participants' original contributions. Data analysis involved a data reduction process which resulted in coding categories at different levels, followed by summaries of codes. The summaries were presented in checklist matrices and networks. These summaries were continuously cross-checked and reviewed with the research project team and the participants in order to enhance the validity of the themes derived from the data.

From the above discussion, it would seem that each theme should present something distinct and meaningful about the phenomenon. While themes have a singular focus, they relate to the other themes of the study (without undue overlaps) and to responses to the

research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It is thus possible to collect a data set that does not directly focus on the research topic and questions. This could create significant problems when analysing the data. Braun and Clarke (2012) state that themes should have clear goals, focus, and scope; they should be relevant, logical and meaningful as well as coherent, and should build on each other to answer the research questions.

4.5 Critical Reflections on the Research Process

There is evidence in the literature that indigenous communities have been marginalised; hence, the call for an appreciation of indigenous ways of knowing (Romm, 2015) that seek to include previously marginalised groups and demystify research by using paradigms and ontological positions that are cognate to such communities. Mkabela and Castiano (2012) assert that "*indigenous communities have their own indigenous paradigms and these paradigms perceive and understand knowledge and power fundamentally differently than western alternative paradigms. They have their own philosophies, theories of knowledge, methodologies and methods*" (p.vii). Based on Mkabela and Castiano (2012) and Romm's (2015) arguments, an African-centred paradigm was introduced as the framework to guide the current study. The African-centred perspective and the triangulation of the qualitative design provided the platform to disrupt the taken-for-granted methods and methodologies (Romm, 2015) that dominate mainstream research.

The African-centred perspective provided the parameters for the researcher to engage in what MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) refer to as "*...rigorous examination of one's personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve as resources for selecting a qualitative approach, framing the research problem, generating particular data, relating to participants and developing specific interpretations*" (p.356). The African-centred paradigm provides a framework to move beyond qualitative research in general and focus on the particular characteristics, worldview, and values that are representative of the majority of people of African origin within an African country. While current qualitative research designs are relevant in investigating marginalised communities because they promote collaborative, participatory methods, and acknowledge the centrality of the research participants - they tend to be applied to all communities and the epistemological positions they adopt could apply to any context. Such generalisation could limit our understanding of the authentic lived experiences of people within the African context. In the same manner that there has been a move to establish feminist perspectives within the critical paradigm (Denzin & Lincon, 2011), the African-centred perspective serves to express unheard voices that have

been misrepresented in the mainstream literature (Asante, 1990). It is acknowledged that the African worldview(s) has been marginalised and their cultures and ways of knowing have been disregarded for centuries. The African-centred perspective informed the reflexive process throughout the current study in that it acknowledged the background and limitations of the researcher, the participants, and the audience (see MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p.357). The following reflexive questions were the focus of debate in this study:

Participants: what shaped or has shaped the worldview of the participants? How do they know what they know? How can this study give due recognition to the diversity of culture, age, gender, class, social status, education, family, political praxis, and language values? How do they perceive the researchers? Why? How do we know? How do the researchers perceive them?

The researcher(s): what shaped or has shaped the worldview of the researcher in this study? What does the principal researcher know? With what voice do the researchers share their perspective? What do the researchers do with what they find? How can the researchers in this study give due recognition to the diversity of culture, age, gender, class, social status, education, family, political praxis, language, and values? How do they perceive the participants?

Audience: What perspective does the audience bring to the findings of the current study? How does the principal researcher perceive the audience of the current study? How does the audience perceive the principal researcher? (p. 357).

This relational reflexive approach in a qualitative design is highly valued especially when dealing with marginalised and indigenous communities (Romm, 2015) of African descent. The researcher is required to authentically reconstruct the participants' lived experiences and perceptions; therefore grounded theory was used as the framework to enhance the emergence of the research participants' authentic narratives.

MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) identified the design components that enable extension of the findings. Amongst other components they highlight the role and positioning of the researcher in relation to the participants; they also pay due attention to the social context of data collection as well as the theoretical and socio-political factors that ground the research. The components identified by MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) encapsulate some of the core principles of the Africentric approach in that within the Africentric paradigm the individual cannot be viewed in isolation from the context and from significant others. The role of the researcher within the Africentric paradigm is that of a co-constructor and facilitator of meaningful discourses during the process of knowledge generation. Schiele

(1994) affirms this view by stating that “*within an Afrocentric framework, however, learning [by implication the research as a learning experience] is viewed as interdependent and bidirectional rather than as independent and unidirectional*” (p. 157). The data are therefore socially generated, and each contribution is embedded in the network of dynamic discourses.

According to Gray, Williamson, Karp and Dalphin (2007, p. 362) “*perhaps the most important benefit of focus groups is that the give-and-take among participants fosters reflection on other people's ideas*”, demonstrating that “*knowledge is seen as partial and perspectival*” (Kamberelis & Dimitiadis, 2011, p. 546). The integration and expansion of each group member’s ideas in Participatory focus group discussions take advantage of this communal sharing and what Wibeck (2007) refers to as ‘collective sense-making’ or co-operative enquiry which is nested within communal practice (Reasons, 2002) that is typical of indigenous African communities. One of the sayings in isiZulu is *induku enhle ithungelwa ebandla* which can be loosely translated as ‘the best solutions come when they have been discussed in the public arena.’ It seems that research which involves indigenous communities is gravitating towards inclusive and participatory methods of enquiry (Room, 2015) that seeks to create open dialogue and promote what Ndimande (2012) refers to as ‘cultural epistemologies.’ According to Reason and Heron (2000), the evolution of what Denzin and Lincoln (2011) call an alternative enquiry paradigm has been inspired by the *Ubuntu* philosophy within the African context. The *Ubuntu* philosophy emphasises morality that promotes the communal good (Nkondo, 2007). The manner in which the research questions were presented to the research participants (what are some of the factors that have contributed to your success and the success of other students?) invited the participants to think beyond themselves and acknowledge the other for their contribution.

4.5.1 Considerations on the recruitment strategy.

The initial call for participation that was heavily framed by the existing stereotypical and segregating discourse was rejected by the first-year students in the College of Humanities during the pilot phase. The sampling frames involved categorisation of students using three levels of risk: (1) at risk, (2) low risk and (3) no risk. These were regarded as negative labels, which reduced the number of students who participated in the study. The researchers initially failed to attract sufficient participation of students’ despite promising monetary incentives.

The modes and timing of recruitment processes in higher education require thinking beyond the norms and conventional methods of enquiry. There was an obvious disconnect

between the researcher and the participants, and a discrepancy between the intended design and the practice. Data collection had to be suspended for about 12 months to collect data with a new group of first-year, first-time students. The recruitment process was significantly revised to respond to the experiences of the researchers and the input of students who participated in the pilot phase. The main requirements for participation were limited to the following criteria: permanent South African citizenship; registered for a degree in the College of Humanities; and first-year, first-time student at the University. The incentive was increased by 20%, and the participation rate improved significantly (by 120%). The call for participation was framed in a non-discriminatory manner that labelled students but saw them as a collective (not separating friends who underperformed from those who were not at risk of failing). The differences in student participation over time (2011-2012) indicated that cultural and social capital changes continuously. The study also reinforced the importance of a dynamic and transformative data collection process when investigating student experiences within the African context.

The study was cognisant of an anti-discriminatory approach to understanding the sources and impact of different kinds of practices that promote oppression and inequalities during the research process. The researcher made a conscious decision to acknowledge the discriminatory practices that create barriers to opportunities that are entrenched in wider societal structures and in the university structure. Varied methods that are student-centred require the bracketing of what Graham (1991) and Schiele (1994) regard as personal biases, attitudes, and stereotypes that the current researcher had about the student recruitment process. This called for recognition of various methods of recruiting students so that those who had not been exposed to computers, and those that were still developing their skills in accessing web-based information, could also participate in the study. The researcher used word of mouth, posters, peer advertising, as well as web-based means to recruit participants. This proactive stance of challenging taken-for-granted practices and ideals when dealing with African people is a critical component of African-centred knowledge, engineering, and consumption. It calls for a certain level of creativity and transformation (Graham, 1999) that can be achieved through authentic connection with the culture and lived experiences of those the researcher seeks to engage in the research exercise.

The various recruitment processes allowed for affirmation of the dominant collective whilst authenticating the critical role of the minority group of students in the research project. The focus of the research process should move beyond ethnic groups and seek to understand the multicultural views of students within the broader base that encompasses a diverse

student body. Asante (1991), Graham (1999) and Young (1990) warn against using a particular ethnic group, culture, and practice as the norm to judge other cultures. Young (1990) calls this cultural oppression in that it universalises the experience of the dominant group and establishes the idea that such experiences are normative.

4.5.2 Modes of access to information.

Contrary to the assumption that all students in their second semester of their first year of study will be able to navigate and access commonly used modes of communication and instruction, the students' narratives and the researchers and research assistants' experience indicated otherwise. Some students lacked knowledge and resources such as computers and cellular phones that could make information accessible. Thus, oral communication was more effective for some students. How the student community views the criteria for access was embedded in their values, beliefs, norms, and culture at the time. The research process had the potential to affirm the underrepresented voices within higher education research and validate their lived experiences. The study also highlighted the importance of helping students to understand its purpose and their contribution; the time frames involved; and when they would receive the incentive. Clarity of what is written down is of the essence in any research project, especially in communities that embrace oral modes of communications.

The principal researcher in the current study acknowledges the interplay of other factors such as the modes of recruitment, the dynamics of the relationship between the students and the researchers, and the accessibility and visibility of recruitment information. First-year students' participation in higher education is a delicate process which requires the researcher to function at the grassroots level and approach students in a manner that demonstrates respect for their time, needs, and self-determination. Amongst other things that led to low numbers during the initial recruitment was the method of recruitment that failed to take the underlying forces that shape students' interrelations into account and acknowledge unequal access to information. Even though the information was sent to students via the university notice system and could be easily downloaded, some students indicated that they failed to access such information.

It was also interesting to note that the best place for student recruitment on one of the campuses was close to the 'pigeonhole' where they dropped their assignments. After students had submitted their assignments, they were more willing to engage with the research assistants and sign up as participants. Identifying a mutually convenient time for data collection, allowing students the autonomy to choose time slot options, the fact that students

had to come and sign in person, and follow-up communication through SMS and emails were among the strategies adopted to ensure that participants could attend the sessions. It is important to ensure that the process of data collection does not pathologise students if the researcher fails to attract a sufficient sample.

4.5.3 Dynamics of relationships in the research.

The principal researcher's choice of research assistants on one of the campuses was a valuable asset as the assistant could identify some of the challenges which he had experienced, and continued to experience, as an undergraduate student. The choice of the research assistants (i.e., their proximity to the participants and their ability to identify with participants lived experiences) demonstrate the importance of interconnectedness. On the other campus, the high level of respect accorded the co-principal researcher by students could account for the large number that were willing to participate in the study. Campus differences in the manner in which students responded to the various recruitment strategies affirmed the need to employ context-specific recruitment modes. Within the same institution, the inclination and level of participation of first-year College of Humanities' students were different.

Campus differences in the recruitment of students indicate that the distribution and legitimisation of students' knowledge is a collaborative effort that is embedded in sociocultural, political, economic, and locality hegemony. A recruitment method that fails to take the underlying forces that shape students' interrelations into account and acknowledge unequal access to information is most likely to produce biased results. The pairing of experiences and established research assistants and co-researchers creates a safety net for the researchers and enhances their understanding of tacit cultural information that is transmitted orally in meaningful engagement (Papoutsaki, 2007).

4.5.4 Consultative consent to information and participation.

Seeking permission to conduct research is not restricted to institutional ethical committees but requires the researcher to respectfully seek further access which is not necessarily documented on the information sheet and consent forms. How the student community views the criteria for access is embedded in their values, beliefs, norms and culture at the time. Decision-making processes during the data collection phase are negotiated, and the consultative process that seeks to grant permission to be incorporated in the culture of students is not governed by the ethics committee but by the participants

themselves. The current study sought to create an opportunity for students to generate moral consensus and engineer the community interconnected relations of students' experiences (Giroux, 1988).

4.5.5 Acknowledging the limitations of the researcher.

There is a gap in the training of researchers regarding the importance of relational and context specific methods and the need to understand participants' cultures. It is therefore, imperative not to undermine the experience of undergraduate students as research assistants and the participants themselves as experts regarding their lived experiences. The transition of first-year students to university makes it difficult to make assumptions about their culture and access to information. University assets such as the computer LAN, with access to the internet, do not necessarily reflect access to the means of consumption and production of knowledge. While acknowledging the contribution of Western and mainstream theories, there is a need for conceptualisation of a research design that reflects students' 'Africanness' and does not ignore the subtle legacies of apartheid which can account for inequitable access to resources within the institution. The researcher also needs to respect students' preferences for varied perspectives and knowledge systems. Furthermore, the researcher should acknowledge that students are not a homogeneous group of people, but embrace multiple worldviews. The researcher is the learner, not the expert.

4.5.6 Critical reflexivity of the researcher.

The researcher must be mindful of power relations that are always at play and how these can be managed as these socio-political factors to a large extent determine the outcomes of the research process. Critical awareness of the challenges of ontological (modes of existence) and epistemological (nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired) slippage cannot be separated from the actual research process. This requires critical reflexivity of oneself as a researcher (one's assumptions and preconceptions), and the research relationship; and acknowledgement that a top-down approach could limit the usefulness of data. Students are able to identify with a fellow student who shares the same experiences and understands the student culture.

When the researcher approached students to participate in the study during lectures, this caused confusion and resistance among some students. However, when the assistant researcher's recruited students (prior to a lectures given by the principal researcher) students appeared to be more at ease, as they could identify with another student. Younger and other

senior members of staff were involved in recruitment, as the recruitment strategy aimed to appeal to specific groups of the student population. Recruitment strategies involved students at various levels, a junior member of staff who is isiZulu/English speaking, a white male, and a senior member of staff who provided information to the students about the study. This indicates that researchers are learners, not experts in the research project, and as researchers they learn by doing and adjusting as they go along in collaborative data production.

One of the strategies used to prepare for data collection was to train the principal researchers and the research assistants using the research questions in order to allow them to make necessary adjustments in terms of time and the approach that would ensure maximum results. This provided the impetus to counterbalance the power relations between the research assistants and the principal researchers as they shared similar experiences during training.

4.5.7 Collaborative data collection.

The Participan focus group method helped to manage the dominance of key informants during group discussions which could have stifled less confident participants. The individual presentation of the ideas using brainstorming cards created an opportunity for all participants to engage in focus group discussions. The Participan method of brainstorming cards for the presentation of ideas and allocating shared 'air time' at the beginning of the data collection process provided a fair chance for all participants to contribute equitably to the discussion. The use of pen and paper to reflect on individual ideas provided common ground. The focus groups were not limited to the usual 4-6 members; the size of the groups ranged from 6 to 20, without any adverse effects on the data collection process. The researchers did not rely on laboratories and audio-visual aids but focused on collectively generated themes. Data were collected to saturation point in various contexts within the same institution. Collective decisions were made on how to formulate the primary codes and organise them into themes. The collective brainstorming process of unpacking the key concepts and organising them into themes provided the opportunity to reach consensus, and to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts. The research assistant served as a valuable human resource in capturing the codes and themes as they emerged and provided support for the researcher as data was being collected or when there was an impasse. This provided a scaffold for the junior researcher and helped to manage the process.

4.5.8 Member check.

The researchers presented the key findings at the Teaching and Learning Conference to solicit contributions. This was the least helpful means to solicit feedback and promote deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Conference attendance was high, but the positioning of the paper presentation in the programme somehow indicated the level of importance according to the programme organisers, resulting in poor attendance. The member scrutiny of the iterative data collection process was less helpful. However, the individual consultations with colleagues and participants at the conference provided better insight. Alternative knowledge dissemination that facilitated effective knowledge production was more intimate, acknowledged individual autonomy, and was structured according to their personal circumstances. Individual academics with an interest in the field were approached, and more meaningful feedback was received and incorporated into the study. Attending the conference was beneficial and provided a chance for alternative ways to understand the phenomenon.

4.5.9 Lessons learnt.

Situated research methodology should be driven by purpose, context, and audience to bridge the gap between theory and practice. There are pre-requisites for conducting research that is informed by student experiences, assets, and capital. The pre-requisites of data collection that were identified in this study were: (a) the best possible time and place to recruit students; (b) the use of appropriate research assistants (who most students could relate to); (c) the manner in which the message is communicated; (d) how students' identities are affirmed or disempowered by the call for participation; (e) Afrocentric principles, e.g., interconnectedness, participative production, and sharing of knowledge are critical in understanding African students; (e) a need for critical reflective practice; (f) a need for the researcher learns in action. It is essential for the researcher to consider how the continuous interplay between data collection and analysis should be facilitated when using grounded theory.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter explored a qualitative research design using the African-centred paradigm to engage higher education students in a research project. The rationale for the methodological decisions was discussed and ethical considerations were discussed with

reference to the contextual and cultural conditions of the student within an African context. The following chapter presents the study's findings.

CHAPTER 5

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS PART 1

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study's findings on constraining factors that impede or facilitate first-year students' academic performance in the College of Humanities at UKZN. It highlights the themes emphasised by the students and provides a summary of the findings emanating from the focus group discussions during different phases of data collection and analysis. The two stimulus questions for data collection in both the pilot and main study were: 'What makes it difficult for you and other students to cope at the University?' and 'What makes it possible for you and other students to cope successfully at the University?' The students identified a broad range of themes and their responses varied from personal attributes and factors to institutional and other external factors. This chapter presents an overview of the meta-themes identified by the researchers as well as confirmation of the semantic validity of these themes by the group of students that participated in the main study. It discusses some of the academic support structures instituted by the university as well as the institution's infrastructure that represents risk or protective factors for students in their first year of study. The chapter also highlights the effect of socioeconomic status on access to the resources that are essential for academic success. It identifies weaknesses and strengths within the university system and presents findings from the various focus group participants on their experience of the university culture, norms, and processes. The chapter also outlines a variety of internal and external coping mechanisms located at various levels of the ecological system which protect and enhance university students' ability to deal with the challenges they experience while pursuing their studies. Finally, it highlights the key themes that emerged from the findings and presents an in-depth discussion of each theme.

5.2 Constraining Factors

The main themes in relation to the constraining factors that are discussed in this chapter are presented in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1

Main Themes of Factor Constraining First-Year Students' Success at University

Themes	Key Subthemes
Perceptions of academic deficits and Pre-university background limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers • Student academic background limitations
Transitional challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting to university social and learning spaces • Poor orientation to university structures • High school versus university teaching and learning practices • Challenges of student diversity
Psychological risk factors and limiting habitus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intrinsic barriers • Perceived negative attributes of first-year students • Self-destructive academic patterns
Academic stressors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy workload • Lack of expertise to deal with academic pressure
Career Guidance	
Financial capital limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adverse socioeconomic experiences
Perceived social and cultural capital limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sources of destruction and the burden of temptations • Lifestyle challenges in higher education •
Institutional habitus as a source of distraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The effects of racism in higher education • Interpersonal conflicts amongst students •
Limiting teaching and learning practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to students' classroom participation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear, disruption • Challenges relating to tutorial sessions

Themes	Key Subthemes
Family and community demands	
Institutional structures and resource limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access, condition, safety, and security of the university facilities • Challenges confronting non-residential students

5.2.1 Perceptions of academic deficits and pre-university background limitations.

The results of the study indicate that students experience challenges in various domains. While some are within their control, others are a consequence of previous schooling background, and yet others are transitional in nature. First-year students face uncertainty in some areas as they engage with the higher education learning environment. The students' responses show that the university environment sometimes fails to provide adequate support which threatens the possibility of completing their studies on time. The barriers identified included learning in a second language, the nature of teaching and learning practices and student-related academic inadequacies as leading risk factors. The following sections provide more detail on particular academic deficits, schooling background factors, and linguistic limitations.

5.2.1.1 Language barriers.

The results of the study indicate that language barriers prevent students from participating meaningfully in the learning and teaching environment. These include the pronounced accent of some lecturers that the students find hard to understand as indicated in the following FG2 extracts, "cannot understand lecturer's accent,"; "bad accent"; and "they [lecturers] pronounce words differently." The students also noted that lecturers' choice of words made it hard to understand the meaning. One argued that "lecturers use big words which are hard to understand for some of our fellow students [and it is] difficult to understand lecturer when he talks" (FG2). Another stated that, "the words are difficult like bomberstick words, and it might be your first time hearing them on the textbook" (FG1). While the students who participated in the study acknowledged that their language difficulties were mainly associated with being second language English speakers, they were also concerned about the lack of access to the course content due to difficulty in understanding the concepts used during lectures. The FG2 participants seemed to feel disadvantaged by the medium of

instruction within the university: “language barrier - it is difficult to express yourself in another language”; “it is hard to understand some foreign lecturers.” Participants also recognised that they suffer deprivation because they are not taught in their home language: “we are not taught in our mother tongue language” (FG2). A compounding factor is that some students were mainly taught in their home language at school, despite the fact that English is supposed to be the medium of instruction. A participant in FG4 stated that, “it is difficult to be taught in English when your school you come from taught in IsiZulu.” It seems that the language barriers that students experience are structural and go beyond the university’s language policies. The results point to a lack of synergy between the language of instruction in some students’ high schools and that at the university.

The language issues raised by the students point to a lack of epistemological access. They argued that, “language difficulties [become more prominent] when you have to answer deep questions” (FG2). As indicated by FG4 participants, learning using the second language constrains self-expression: “language that is used makes you not to be able to express yourself.” However, it seems that the students are referring to difficulties in conceptualisation when they say that they find it hard “...to answer deep questions” because of language difficulties. The language barrier appears to limit students’ ability to relate to the content taught in class, and an appropriation of academic language goes beyond the general difficulties of second language speakers to incorporate the cultural and contextual aspects embedded in the language of instruction. For example, FG2 students indicated that “ancient [English] readings are hard to understand.” A FG1 participant argued that “*the language in the modules and how they are, not in simple English*” which seems to indicate that students are aware that simply being fluent in the language is not sufficient to access and understand academic language. It is evident that students require a deeper understanding of the sociocultural nuances that ground text, especially in what FG2 participants called “*ancient [English] readings...*”

Study findings also indicate that students are aware of the discrepancies between their cultural habitus and university expectations. Some argued that the ancient books read at the university are “hard to understand” (FG1). Difficulties experienced by students, particularly in relation to classical English literature, seem to resonate with arguments that these works portray a culture and lifestyle that is different from that of students who are second language English speakers.

Most of the second language English speakers in the focus groups were of the view that it is easier for first language English language speakers to understand the concepts

presented. The students in FG3 indicated that “if you are not entirely fluent in English you are disadvantaged.” Some participants in the same focus group asserted that they are “not familiar with the medium language being used (English),” and expressed discomfort at “being exposed to a new communication language.” Inadequate proficiency in English compounds the problem of understanding the concepts taught in class if students believe that certain aspects of the course are only accessible to English first-language speakers. It seems that such opinions hold students back as they fail to put in the necessary effort to acquire course appropriate academic language which could be unfamiliar to all students. However, as indicated in the following excerpt, the participants acknowledged that students need to be proficient in English while being able to speak their home language “... multi-skill/black skill” (FG5). FG4 participants also suggested that first-year students become voiceless in higher education because the “language that is used makes you not be able to express yourself.” Moreover, the students expressed concern that there is little or no regard for other official languages in the university as indicated in the following FG4 extract “they do not use all languages.” Such statements suggest expectations of code switching and the use of other languages in the same context.

The study’s results also show that poor English language proficiency limits students’ opportunities to engage with other students. Furthermore, it hampers access to information on how to study and improve their academic language. A participant in FG2 stated that, “communicating with other students on how to approach studies [poses a challenge]” due to, as another participant in FG6 put it, “difficulty in understanding English”. Moreover, students that lack proficiency in the language of instruction tend to stick together because they feel safe and secure in that space, limiting opportunities to learn from the diverse student body. The FG4 respondents expressed concern that “in the university, English is the language that is used for interacting”. They found this practice unusual: “something that we did not do at our previous schools.” The following extract suggests that students who are not proficient in English tend to shy away from participating in academic activities: “no participation in lectures because you are afraid you may use bad grammar” (FG4). The participants acknowledged the discrepancy between the level of English proficiency required for university students and students’ level of proficiency. FG2 participants asserted that, “English used at university [is] of very high level and it is difficult to catch up to the standard that is expected,” while those in FG4 said that “the vocabulary [that is used at the university] is not the same as school.”

It would appear that foreign lecturers in one discipline exacerbated students' language difficulties. The following extract from FG4 suggests that particular challenges are associated with foreign lecturers' accents: "lecturers who are foreign speak difficult English that makes you not grasp all information." Some of the participants complained that there are "too many foreign lecturers concentrated in one course e.g. politics" and that students find it "difficult to understand foreign language (lecturers)" (FG5). Participants in the same focus group highlighted that "some accent [are] difficult to understand" and "lecturers do not speak well (accent)." It thus seems that first-year students tend to associate foreign lecturers with foreign languages, and feel they speak different English with a foreign accent that is not accessible to local students.

The linguistic barriers confronting the study participants go beyond a weak grasp of the English language; the speaker's pace and tone exacerbate these problems. For instance, FG2 participants claimed that lecturers are "boring, monotonous," in the manner in which they present lectures. On the other hand, the same participants observed that some students feel that the pace of teaching is too fast: "other people talk much faster, so it is hard to understand them" (FG2). According to FG5 participants, when students "[are] struggling to understand lectures," this often leads to poor participation. Poor competency in English discourages students from asking questions or requesting support: "the use of English as the language of instruction" (PFG1) makes it difficult for some students to cope at university.

5.2.1.2 Student academic background limitations.

Some of the study methods at university differ from students' previous modes of learning. A participant in PFG3 observed: "first years [first-year students are] not used to studying too much chapters from the books." This suggests that the institution does not take sufficient account of the fundamental challenges and transition difficulties that are typical of first-year students as they try to adapt to the university environment.

Attending historically disadvantaged schools makes it difficult for students to grasp academic language: "poor background – many of us come from disadvantaged schools. It takes the time to become accustomed to the language (English)" (PFG3). Students' perceptions of "...conflict in [the pre-university] background[s]" (PFG3) result in low self-esteem and make socialisation more difficult. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds also have to acquire new study methods. A participant in PFG3 cited "changing of study style from own study method to university" as a challenge. The participants also identified the

areas in which they feel underprepared in light of their schooling environment: “Some come from disadvantaged schools where they finish matric without using a computer” (FG7).

The uncertainty associated with university procedures and expectations seems to compound the challenges students face when they try to align their academic habitus with what they view as desired academic skills. Some blamed their disadvantaged background for not having “...appropriate facilities for studying” (PFG3) and asserted that their schooling environment compromised the quality of education. This poor background includes the home environment. The same participants noted that, “poor background gives others daily stress as the students always think about home”, affecting their ability to concentrate.

Students also cited a lack of career guidance as a consequence of a disadvantaged schooling environment. Such schools tend to offer limited subject choices. A participant in PFG3 noted that this prevented them from “choosing the right subject in high school which was not allowed.” Furthermore, when students enrol at university, their disadvantaged background determines their career choices; students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often compelled to “...take an affordable degree” (PFG3). The lack of appropriate career guidance results in poor academic performance: “first years choose module due to peer pressure” (PFG3). PFG3 participants noted that inappropriate subject choices at high school and at university resulted in “no love for [the] subject”, leading to low motivation to persevere in the face of difficulties. Passion for a particular field of study is the main driving force to succeed and enhances coping skills.

Students also expressed concerns that they would not be able to break the cycle of disadvantage, as “poor background may shape one's future.” PFG3 participants went on to state that “[the] standard of living at university is too high so students coming from a poor background cannot cope.” Consequently, such students “... think of dropping out and seek for a job”. It is of concern that these participants did not seem to explore the possibility of obtaining a part-time job in order to complete their studies. It is evident that, the hardships that some students face may exceed their coping resources. They may consider quitting university due to the multiple negative effects associated with their background circumstances.

5.2.2 Transitional challenges.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds confront concrete restrictions in making the transition from high school to university. While the study participants acknowledged the

importance of adapting to university processes and procedures, the paradigm shift from high school to university requires academic, lifestyle, social and self-management adaptation.

5.2.2.1 Adapting to university social and learning spaces.

Participants in FG4 made a significant observation when they stated that the “shift from high school to varsity [needs to be expedited because] the longer it takes the poor[er] your academic performance.” While they advocated for “adapting to a new environment quickly as time is going”, at the same time they acknowledged the significant differences between the university and home lifestyle: “varsity lifestyle is different from the home lifestyle.” Students who participated in the study stated that they observed racial segregation within higher education and felt intimidated by their learning environment: “the [university] environment itself. It is very hot and intimidating”; “adjusting to the new environment” (FG7). Some of the factors that contribute to such feelings are that “the environment is overpopulated” and students feel “overcrowded”. The students also expressed “... fear of being laughed at by 100... people [as] compared to just 30 at school” (FG5).

Students also cited overcrowded classrooms as one of the barriers to learning that delays the transition of first-year students. The size of the university population seems to be a source of discomfort for these students. “Some classes are full sometimes you have to sit down, as a result, being unable to take lecture notes. A lot of notes” (FG7). FG2 participants cited social factors within the teaching and learning environment that affect students’ ability to engage fully in the learning process such as “big noisy classes”; and “students talking during lectures.” This is compounded by the fact that “new total module requirement are stuff you have not done” (FG6).

Some students find student diversity a challenge. FG4 participants highlighted this phenomenon: “it’s hard to adapt to the new environment” because “students are confronted with other students from different backgrounds” and “meeting different kinds of people with their different way of doing things”; “meeting people with different behaviour.” “Too much independence, not enough structure in some places [such as] classes, etc. work, etc.” (FG4) leads to a situation where “... first-year students ... misuse the freedom that ... [they] have in varsity [university]”. The participants acknowledged that although the university environment gives them freedom, it also presents them with many responsibilities.

5.2.2.2 Poor orientation to university structures.

The students expressed dissatisfaction with the university's campus information, stating that it is inadequate, and that the signage is not sufficiently clear for first-year students to make sense of the university environment. FG7 participants stated that it is "easy to get lost [because] there is no logic to some of the buildings"; while those in FG2 noted that "it is unclear what all the buildings on this campus are for." FG7 participants added that students lack "...information on how things operate around the campus." Another challenge is locating tutorial venues. FG6 participants suggested that "if they [university staff] had a facility where tutors are [located], and it is easy to find them anytime, [it will make life easy for students]." They added that, "small tut rooms [lead to] first come first serve." It thus appears that first-year students waste valuable time locating their lecture and tutorial venues due to poor orientation.

5.2.2.3 High school versus university teaching and learning practices.

FG4 participants observed that, "it is difficult to adapt to this kind of learning which is different from high school". Those in FG7 noted the difference between university and high school teaching and learning practice: "the teaching skill [at the university] is different from school." Some students seem to blame their schooling environment in that teachers failed to prepare them for the challenge of adapting to university life:

"We were not even prepared by teachers about what challenges or what is nice about university" (FG7).

"The school did not put pressure on us to be independent because now we are struggling" (FG7).

"It is difficult to adapt because at high school we are used to being pushed, and now we must be responsible," (FG7).

From the extracts cited above it is evident that students are not taking responsibility for the adaptation required. Some feel that their school teachers should have prepared them better for the higher education experience. Their lack of proactive behaviour could be due to over-reliance on educators as the primary source of information or poor access to information on the lifestyle changes and adaptations required to survive at university.

One of the important indicators for success in higher education and adaptation to a new environment is the alignment between perceived and actual life experiences in the new environment. There is a marked difference between the students' expectations of the university environment and how they experience it. The more cognate the perceived and the

actual experience, the better the adjustment process because students feel more prepared to deal with challenges. Study findings indicate that students are confused by the curriculum offered at the university and by the style of teaching employed by university faculty. FG4 participants reported that “it is difficult to adapt to this kind of learning which is different to high school subjects.” According to the participants, these differences lie in the method of teaching, the language used to access academic content, and the learning environment and the manner in which learning material is used:

“We are not used to studying the load of work; we were spoon fed by our teachers” (FG7).

“Being ... [taught] in [a] different system” (FG5).

“You have lot of notes to study unlike in high school” (FG7).

“Not having anyone to push us to do our work and submit on time” (FG7).

“English used at university of very high level, and it is difficult to catch up to the standard that is expected; Do not have computer skills” (FG7).

“In high school, we study a textbook over a longer period; here we have completely different work every semester” (FG7).

“Being used to a smaller class and having to adjust to a full lecture room” (FG7).

5.2.2.4 Challenges of student diversity.

Some students feel that the university is less nurturing than high school and are of the view that “[the] university is more of a business than a development [al] environment.” The findings reveal that the respondents experienced the university environment as distant, unfriendly and difficult to comprehend. This results in a sense of isolation and exclusion and students feel invisible within the university environment:

“Not as easy as high school; no one cares if you pass or fail” (FG6).

“Not feeling part of the class, like it used to be in high school” (FG7).

“Exclude yourself from others because of the fear you have with the new environment” (FG7).

“Not having high school friends with you” (FG7).

“No one really cares in university comparing to high school. Teachers are there to guide us” (FG7).

“I am not given [attention] compared to high school” (FG7).

It seems that students lack the structure and individual coping mechanisms required to deal with the demands of a new learning environment. The students also stated that they felt isolated as they were unable to form social networks that could help them adapt to the complex higher education environment: “You are all one. There is no group participation”; it is “harder to form bonds with people - making friends is harder” (FG7).

Furthermore, the university environment subscribes to a different set of norms which are at times confusing and seem to contradict what the students know about being a student. For instance, FG7 participants noted that “... [they do not have] enough information about being a student” and “no one is willing to help.” FG5 participants affirmed the difficulties first-year students experience in forming social relationships by stating that some do not “have... peers or friend to attend with”; and that the university environment is populated by “lots of people you do not know; A lot of people that I am not used to.” It is evident that even when a student makes a friend, it is hard to distinguish between a reliable one and one with dishonourable intentions: “finding true friends who will support you [is difficult]” and “lack of socialism [sic] (wrong friends of the group).”

The participants also identified other unique challenges resulting from their disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those that come from rural areas. While they stated that they were eager to engage in a meaningful way in the new university environment, they seemed to be “scared of becoming urbanised” (FG4). Such students face the dilemma of maintaining their sense of identity while adapting their lifestyle to meet the demands of the university culture.

5.2.3 Psychological risk factors and limiting habitus.

The results of the study show that students have low Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and a limiting habitus which compromises their wellbeing and undermine their resilience. The intrinsic barriers and destructive habitus that students experience at university are discussed below.

5.2.3.1 Intrinsic barriers.

The students are aware that certain intrinsic barriers prevent them from realising their goals and potential within the university. These include but are not limited to restraining habits, negative perceptions, and limiting psychological dispositions. Some of the challenges emanate from inherent characteristics and poor intrapersonal skills while others are the consequence of dysfunctional interpersonal relationships as well as socialisation patterns that

are not aligned towards academic success. Participants highlighted risk factors that limited meaningful participation in educational activities. The study's results demonstrate that some first-year students have negative perceptions of self and often worry about how others perceive them. In addition, participants acknowledged their limiting personal attributes.

Furthermore, students who participated in the study identified symptoms of distress which tend to limit meaningful participation in academic activities. For example, students experience stress which affects their ability to attend to academic tasks: "stress level rise ... lose concentration"; "lower concentration level" (FG2).

The participants also noted that low self-esteem is a barrier to their learning and development at the university. FG1 participants defined low self-esteem as "lack of personal confidence and belief in yourself." This causes students to be "more prone to failure and discouragement" (FG4). The following extracts identify some of the conditions that contribute to low self-esteem and the consequences thereof:

"Low self-esteem because you are not like other students" (FG2).

"Makes you feel less superior than others" (FG2).

"Makes one feel like they are not fit (inadequate) to be in university" (FG4).

"You feel you are less fortunate..." (FG4).

"The most intelligent are considered to be superior, so they are kind of better than another student" (FG5).

"If you do not have status you lose confidence; you feel ashamed of yourself" (FG5).

"Lack of confidence occurs after failing a test or not grasping lecture information" (FG5).

This suggests that first-year students' negative perceptions of their social status within the university contribute to low self-esteem. Students who regard themselves as inferior to their peers due to socioeconomic and cultural status, as well as intellectual capacity, tend to have negative self-perceptions. The university environment promotes feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt among students who feel ill-equipped to deal with the academic and adjustment pressures of being a university student. Poor academic performance and failure to grasp course content exacerbates the situation.

Low self-esteem also accounts for high stress levels. Stress and loss of confidence in one's ability interconnect in a vicious cycle of multiple elements that reinforce one another. For instance, students who experience low self-esteem could also find it stressful to cope with "being lonely"; such students might end up "not attending [classes]"; "failing or not

doing well”, and “no[t] participating in class discussion” (FG7). Students who do not attend classes will not “...understand work” (FG7). Low self-esteem could be the cause of poor engagement in academic activities which results in stress because students fail to adjust to the university environment. Poor academic performance could further lower self-esteem because of “non-participation, lack of understanding, failure to rectify [the] situation, [which can result in an] endless cycle of repetition [and] ends in failure” (FG7 participants).

The participants also identified some of the limiting habits and attributes which FG1 participants called “character defects” and those in FG5 referred to as “your personality”, that undermine academic progression:

“lack of responsibility” (FG2).

“lack of dedication [and] self-discipline” (FG2)

“passivity” and “laziness” (FG1).

“procrastination” (FG5).

“lack of maturity” (FG1).

“more prone to failure and discouragement” (FG4).

“not hungry for education” and “fear of failure” (FG4).

“not having the guts to say no and thinking for yourself” (FG4).

“the inability to sacrifice between your priorities and pleasure” (FG4).

“forgetting your main reasons for why you are at university” (FG4).

“no drive and passion” (FG4).

“confusion of who you are and what you want” (FG5).

“loss of individual identity; less personal attention” (FG7).

“not having enough discipline” (FG7).

“identifying yourself” (FG5).

The attributes identified by the participants suggest that some students have poor goal orientation, experience confused identity and lack hunger for education. Other dispositional factors that students labelled as character defects include “lack of ability to withstand negative classification” for example when “students [are] ridiculing you because you are different” (FG5). The students highlighted self-determination, internal locus of control and self-discipline as positive factors, while the inability to resist and overcome negative perceptions of self were cited as negative characteristics. The students’ narratives indicated expectations of high levels of resilience and PsyCap.

The study’s findings suggest that students experience high levels of anxiety and fear. Some participants feared people in general, described by FG7 participants as “fear of people”

which limits them from gaining access to the support they need. FG4 participants affirmed the idea of “being scared of approaching people for help,” and FG5 respondents stated that some students tend to be “afraid of asking for help when it is needed.” Others developed this fear through vicarious learning i.e., when they observed others experiencing prejudice or being judged harshly. Hence, some students develop “fear due to discrimination” (FG5). FG5 participants highlighted that students could develop a fear of participating “because you will be judged.” This highlights that fear is a most common form of emotional distress experienced by students at the university. Consequently, FG4 participants warned that fear can lead to “loneliness at times.” Furthermore, “after a heated argument, one feels depressed and alone” (FG4) which can impede debate on issues without instigating an argument as is expected in a university environment. Many factors pose barriers to meaningful participation inside and outside lecture theatres. Some students have a fear of what they see as ‘crowds’ of people at the university. FG7 participants noted that, “some people suffer from anxiety - lot of people around you.”

The participants noted that some of the psychological stressors are a consequence of underpreparedness for lifestyle changes at the university. For example, FG5 participants cited “inadequate life skills,” and those in FG4 identified “perception[s] that students embrace when coming to varsity” as factors that cause inadequate coping skills. The results also show that some students expect intense life experiences and lack direction. Stories and myths about the university lifestyle create false expectations. These include “hearing that you will change at varsity, [and] do things you normally do not do” (FG5). For others, the challenge lies in knowing that they have to be accountable to themselves: “responsibility of being on your own, knowing that everything you do will only have effects on you” (FG4). Other students have a negative attitude towards their studies: “it is boring to study on Saturday” (FG2).

5.2.3.2 Perceived negative attributes of first-year students.

The nature of students and their inherent attributes was one of the main themes identified by all focus groups. The negative images and frustration were underscored by the participants’ use of exclamations marks and emoticons. For example, they recorded “HELP!!!!” “Shy!!!!” and “Crying out loud” (PFG1) to compensate for their limited ability to vocalise their feelings.

The university environment makes students question their identity and how they perceive themselves in relation to others. Some experience feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy as a result of their different cultural backgrounds. Such negative perceptions

contribute to poor self-esteem and difficulties in reaching out to others for assistance. Evidence of this lack of confidence is displayed inside and outside the classroom. Students have negative perceptions of themselves and/or transfer racial prejudices to the learning environment; the opposite could also be true in that negative racial identities are transferred to learning environments, thus producing perceptions of deficits among the targets of racial stereotypes. Participants mentioned that they suffered from what they called “comparism [comparison]” (PFG1) which means that they continuously compare themselves with other students. PFG1 participants captured the negative results of comparing oneself to other races by stating that “your confidence [is] being suppressed by seeing other races.” The tendency to measure one's worth in relation to others who are accorded superior status gives rise to a sense of inadequacy and inferiority. Negative beliefs and attitudes about one's ability to hold one's own in an unfamiliar environment could also be accounted for by “lack of trust” (PFG1) and the absence of supportive relationships when students have “no friends” (PFG1). These difficulties seem to increase stress levels through “feeling inferior to other races”; “not feeling welcome” (PFG1). In addition, students' narratives showed that poor self-esteem and shyness, as well as negative beliefs and attitudes, impede first-year students' development and participation in social and academic activities.

Another limiting factor for first-year students is poor time-management and a failure to live a purposeful life. Students also cited poor goal orientation and an inability to set realistic goals as factors that lead to poor academic outcomes. Failure to engage in goal-directed behaviour is evident in areas such as poor time-management, which had negative effects on students' academic performance. PFG1 participants associated poor time management with “last minute mindset”, “idleness” and “procrastination”. Students acknowledged that poor time-management also affects the ability to meet submission deadlines or leads to late preparation for tests. Some of the participants also cited “sleeping too much” (PFG1) as an example of poor time-management. Poor self-management skills affect one's ability to discern how much time is needed to perform tasks as well as sleep regulation; resulting in fatigue and a “lower concentration level” (FG1).

The sources of the pressure to succeed at university include personal expectations and those of significant others. Some of the participants expressed anxiety about failing and the need to succeed in their academic work to avoid embarrassing themselves and their families. Group norms and peer pressure have a significant effect on how students present themselves and behave in front of their peers. PFG1 participants stated that students that “have no belief in yourself” and show “no self-respect” are most likely to conform to group

norms to the detriment of their well-being and functioning. The same focus group stated that, “wanting to be seen in high status (A Class)” is one of the factors that exert pressure on students in higher education. Moreover, the desire for higher social status limits support systems and fosters emotional distress: “A Class student receive... [less support] from other students who are perceived to be of the lower class” and this can lead to “exhaustion.”(PFG1)

Other sources of stress include “social problems such as fight or breakup with a loved one” (PFG1) which can often lead to an emotional breakdown. Some students cited health issues as a factor contributing to high levels of stress.

5.2.3.3 Self-destructive academic patterns.

The study’s results show that students display certain destructive behaviours which undermine their efforts to complete their studies. Some lack motivation, often “bunk classes” and seem to be “over relaxed” and “lacking direction” (PFG3). Lack of interest in engaging in fundamental academic activities such as attending lectures and limited use of university resources such as libraries, the LAN, and mentors by first-year students often exacerbated maladaptation and compromised academic progress. Some students attributed failure to use university resources to unfamiliarity and claimed that they had inadequate knowledge of how the university systems work: “not [being] used to the system”; “not used to higher education learning methods” (PFG3). The participants also cited “too much workload” as one of the reasons why some students fail to perform as expected.

In contrast, some participants stated that university students have much time at their disposal. They attributed the imbalance between social and academic commitments to the phenomenon of “over relaxation” (PFG1). “Not balancing social and academic” results in failure to meet deadlines and “no submission of assignments” (PFG1). Some narratives demonstrated that certain students lack direction on why they are at university. Others expect the institution to provide more monitoring mechanisms to help them adopt positive behaviour. PFG1 participants cited “no registers taken in some lectures” as a problem. The need for more guidance and control by university staff was a theme across all the focus groups.

Participants also acknowledged that the lack of self-seeking behaviour when help is required is a challenge for some university students. PFG1 participants stated that “not asking if you have a problem” limits the support students receive from others. They added that “ego” is the reason for not asking questions when they need to. They noted that seeking assistance “... broadens mindset”.

5.2.4 Academic stressors.

Students' failure to respond to the demands of an academic environment is evident in many areas, such as the ability to manage their own pace, and time and the workload. Students feel that the long lecture periods are not used efficiently and seem to blame the institution for not ensuring that contact sessions follow a defined sequence. Their lack of insight on timetabling issues confirms students' assertions that they are confused by the university systems.

5.2.4.1 Heavy workload.

The participants in all focus groups cited "large workload" or "too much work" as one of the academic demands that confront students in higher education. However, FG2 participants acknowledged that first-year students have many "free periods [which] make ... [them] bunk lectures" and that the "big gap ... [between] lectures make us [student] lazy". It seems that one of the challenges confronting first-year students is the ability to "balance ... your life efficiently" and to cope with "too much workload: assignments, tests." FG7 participants noted that first-year students tend to "underestimate... [their] workload", with detrimental effects on their ability to cope with academic demands and minimise stress. The findings of the study highlight the various way students operationalise what they called "too much workload". Examples of what they considered as an overwhelming workload are:

"...all work is due at close date to each other"; "writing plus two or more tests on one day"; "all the work is for week (pile)" (FG2).

"Too much material to study" and "too many assignments ... in a short amount of time" (FG1).

"...two test in one day and an assignment the next day" (FG4).

"having to attend lectures, write an assignment, tutorials, and exercises as well as prepare for lectures and do homework makes it difficult to cope" (FG4).

There would appear to be a discrepancy between the practices that students engage in at university and what they think they should be doing. Some students fail to bridge the gap between what is expected and what they do. Stress results from pressure to perform and an inability to meet demands. PFG1 participants noted that some students have "less [fewer] expectations of ... [themselves] and low self-esteem; some students claim that they have no useful methods to manage stress". Some felt that the "university workload overlaps the given time" (PFG2). Others noted that some students find it hard to understand the work when the pace of teaching and learning is too fast. PFG1 participants complained that there are "too

many slide notes in less time” and large classes prevent students from understanding what is taught during lectures. Most of the tasks cited by the students are basic academic tasks; nonetheless, they seem to find them overwhelming when they enter the university environment.

It is evident that some first-year students have unrealistic expectations of the university’s academic demands. Students felt that work pressure is higher during certain periods of the year and stated that students “... [get] a lot of work to do at once”. FG4 participants added that “...students often fail to perform well academically,” due to heavy workloads. They argued that “workload can sometimes jeopardise your marks because you have a lot of work and end up neglecting some of your other work.” Furthermore, FG4 participants were of the view that “[a heavy] workload is affecting students because they might be overwhelmed and fear that they might not make it or complete the course”. Students’ perceptions of the amount of work affect their emotional state and ability to apply appropriate coping mechanisms. Adjustment to the university workload influences their ability to cope and submit work on time. Failure to meet academic demands could have dire consequences, including “late submission of work due to having [a heavy] workload” (FG2).

Too many academic demands such as attending classes or writing exams and tests on Saturdays increase students’ stress levels. This leads to feelings of discontent: “people are relaxed; want to spend some time with friends and families” (FG2). Furthermore, “[as students they] do have other responsibilities” (FG2). The participants perceived university demands as a threat to other aspects of their lives such as spending quality time with their families and leisure time. FG2 participants noted that they find it difficult to cope with “tests on Saturdays.” The students’ narratives have an undertone of irritation and resentment for relentless demands on their time; i.e., they reject the assumption that they have no other responsibilities.

5.2.4.2 Lack of expertise to deal with academic demands.

The challenges experienced by students in managing their workload are compounded by inadequate access to essential resources, and a lack of expertise required to access and use such resources. According to some participants, the basic learning tools that students need are computers and printing facilities. However, “some people don’t have their own PCs and printers,” (FG1) and “typing takes a lot of time,” especially for those students who lack essential computer skills. Students’ lack of readiness to engage in the mode of teaching and learning at the university places them at a disadvantage. For example, “not being computer

literate and having to do all your work on the PC” (FG6) is a challenge for many first-year students. Moreover, some do not have computers to practice their newly acquired skills in their spare time.

Competency and efficiency in higher education are not limited to computers and typing skills but extend to the study skills that students employ. FG2 participants asserted that “[the] modules come with a lot of self-reading” and “they demand a lot of work.” Students appear to lack essential academic skills such as referencing skills and have limited knowledge on how to source information; FG2 participants cited “... [lack of access to] valid sources to write your essays” and “...referencing...your work.” Thus, using the required format is a problem for some students. However, FG1 students noted “having to do well even the module is very hard.” Again, there seems to be a discrepancy between what the students can do and what they are expected to do. Students are aware of the skills required to cope with academic demands, with FG7 participants referring to these as “...essential skills”. Amongst other skills cited by these participants were:

“Language skills”; “communication skills”;

“Academic skills” [i.e.] “varsity academic level of writing” and “... [how] to write essays that are at a varsity level”;

“Participation skills; in university you sometimes need to participate e.g. be part of the group”;

“Referencing academic writing, bibliography settings” [are complicated and change per module];

“Library skills” which the students referred to as “...knowledge of using the library like finding books”; “...knowing how to get the resources for an assignment”;

“...reading and absorbing long text [and] studying...” “Exam preparation”;

“Time management skills”.

FG7 participants also highlighted other technical skills which are barriers to their learning such as “how to send emails and view them” and “submission of assignments through emails or turn it in [Turnitin].” The taken-for-granted academic skills that the university expects from students in higher education are a mystery to some of the first-year students. The university environment is perceived as overwhelming by some and their previous schooling is not aligned with university academic demands.

5.2.4.3 Failure to deal with academic pressure.

The study's findings reveal that students feel that university academic demands are stressful. The participants conceded that poor time management, and inability to cope with the workload could also contribute to burnout. Participants in FG4 noted that the factors that contribute to elevated stress levels include "ineffective time management," "...not being able to balance school work and leisure"; "they [students] cannot meet the requirements"; and "lack of time ... to find information". However, they laid the blame for some of their difficulties on poor administration in certain departments. FG4 participants argued that as a consequence of inefficiency in some university departments, "students cannot submit work on time, and this leads to marks being deducted." They also identified students' poor management of their workload, and poor time management as well as "loss of concentration [due to] low mark average," "students are stressed by deadlines..." and "stressful, one becomes burned out." Other students worry about meeting the minimum academic requirements: "scared of whether you will get your DP." (FG5). Failure to meet academic demands is exacerbated by "procrastinating when you need to complete an assignment" (FG4). Inability to cope with the workload may prompt students to drop out: "they [students] find the work difficult and too much [which] cause them to leave school" (FG4).

5.2.5 Career guidance.

The findings of the study indicate that some of the challenges confronting students are a consequence of inadequate career guidance and counselling. Some first-year students lack sufficient knowledge about the courses offered at the university and the career opportunities associated with their chosen study programmes. Others "[are] not sure of our [their] future career paths and job opportunities" (FG2). Furthermore, some students have made "wrong choices [of modules] in degree structures" (FG2). The students reflected on their career decisions in a personal manner: "Is this the right career for me? Will I find a job?" (FG5). Another participant in the same focus group worried about "not getting a job after my degree." There is a disconnection between the degree some students are pursuing and their future career plans. Lack of synergy between career choices and the studies a student is pursuing fosters self-doubt and demotivates students. Some first-year students are also uncertain about modules to select in their chosen degrees and have limited knowledge of how to structure a degree: "[lack of clear] guidelines [on] how you must major your degree subjects [meaning which subjects should be included as majors]" (FG2). This results in "unclear decisions."

FG6 participants also asserted that “[there is] not enough information on the modules we choose”, resulting in “registration [of] wrong modules.” The choices students make at the beginning of their studies have consequences not only for their performance throughout the year but in their future workplace. FG3 participants affirmed this view: “boring subjects or modules... [have implications] in term of the work you suppose to do”.

In addition, the participants complained that students are “expected [by some of their family members] to do better than what ... [other family members have] achieved” (FG5) or “being expected to do as well as your siblings that have been at university.” On the other hand, other students are “...expected to fail by other members of ... [their] family”. Despite this, some apply themselves to their work: “[we are] waiting to make them proud” (FG5). Family values and norms also impact students’ career plans. FG5 participants observed that some family members force “[you to do] ...what they want you to do ..., if you do not, you get no support on what you chose”. Family support can ease stress levels and improve students’ motivation to pursue their studies. To illustrate the point, FG5 participants stated that, “what you are studying is not good enough to the family” which tends to “affect our wellbeing [and render the students’] emotions ...unstable.”

The participants highlighted the negative consequences of a lack of family support for their career aspirations: “coming from a family that does not care about [the student’s] career choices might lead ...[the student] to not caring about school work” and “lack of interest in ...[their] choice of study demotivate ...[them] from trying to do ...[their] best” (FG5). Some FG3 participants noted that, “parents...do not encourage their children to study” and that this demotivates them. Students who choose careers that their family does not accept leads to “one [feeling] ... like they are disappointing their parents because of their studies”, while, on the other hand, at times “the family force...you to do a degree that you do not enjoy, might lead you to do badly” (FG5).

5.2.6 Financial capital limitations.

The results of the study indicate that the financial hardships experienced by students are not limited to accessing learning aids and paying tuition fees, but infiltrate different aspects of their lives. Financial difficulties also affect food security and the ability to engage with other students on campus. FG1 participants asserted that, “it is not easy to get financial assistance,” whether from the institution or at home, as some parents “...have no money to give because they are unemployed.” Those parents that are employed “...cannot afford to pay all... [essential university] fees...” (FG1). The majority of the participants stated that

they could not meet all the expenses associated with university. Feelings of financial despair emerge at pre-entry stage: “registration - you cannot study without fees” (FG4). Some attend despite being unregistered in the hopes that they will obtain money at a later stage: “they are stressed by financial aid; some of them are not registered” (FG4). The participants in FG4 stated that, “studying without financial aid” “cause stressful experiences”, while those in FG5 noted that, “Not getting financial aid sponsor” is the “source of stressful economic experiences.” Some students miss class because they don’t have money to travel to university. Even when they attend classes, they lack essential resources such as textbooks and money for photocopying and stationary. The data also indicate that many students cannot afford nutritious food, which affects their energy and concentration. The consequences of limited financial capital are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

5.2.6.1 Primary financial needs of first-year students.

Students’ financial needs include paying university fees, accessing financial aid, transport to attend classes, as well as access to basic needs such as food. The financial needs of first-year students are highlighted in the following extracts:

“Transport money for taxi” (FG2).

“Cannot afford to buy textbooks”; “Cannot afford to eat or pay books”; “Travelling monies; it’s expensive” (FG2).

“Unable to get what you want when you want it, e.g., textbooks, laptop” (FG4).

“Not having a laptop; work always must be typed” (FG5).

“Having no money ... [to buy the] required textbooks” (FG7).

“Being broke makes it hard to study!” “Hungry students everywhere” (FG2).

The study’s results thus show that inadequate economic resources and poor nutrition have a direct effect on students’ ability to learn and engage meaningfully in their studies. It also impacts students’ ability to focus on their studies:

“It hard to study while thinking of plans to get money”; “[you] cannot think on an empty stomach” (FG2).

“Cannot focus if you are hungry”; “No energy to concentrate during lectures” (FG2).

“No lunch, difficult to study/ concentrate” (FG2).

“Hunger that causes yawning in lecture” (FG2).

As a result of inadequate financial resources, some students “miss essential lectures and tutorials [because they have] no money to travel” (FG4). They then “...fail to cope with

what was done [during lectures]" (FG7). Furthermore, "[they] can't afford some of the things... [they] need for studying" (FG2). Some students are "unable to buy academic resources such as books required for all modules" (FG4). FG4 participants highlighted that, due to financial constraints, "you won't be able to buy printing credits or pay library fines." Those in FG5 noted that, "the issue of printing credits can lead to late submission of work."

In addition, limited financial resources prevent students from fulfilling their basic needs such as buying food, paying for transport, and acquiring the necessary learning aids. Students identified their basic needs as follows: "...worrying about food, toiletries, etc." (FG4). "Not having money for food is a big problem!!!!"; "They do not have food that they will eat when going to the res [university residence]" (FG4). Thus, lack of financial aid compromises students' health and well-being. Many cannot afford a balanced diet and rely on affordable, less nutritious food to avoid starvation. FG2 participants asserted that students "do not get enough nutrition" because of the "expensive food at café."

Many students that have the means to buy basic food supplies struggle to sustain themselves for the whole month: "by the end of the month your food is finished" (FG1). Sound financial planning is one of the challenges first-year students face when they first enter the higher education environment. Many lack budgeting skills to manage the meagre resources at their disposal. A shortage of funds also restricts their lifestyle: "Cigarette prices [are] too much" (FG4).

Moreover, lack of financial support triggers distress when students' results are withheld because of outstanding fees. According to FG4 participants, "one stresses about where they are going to get the money to pay fees or if they will afford it." FG2 participants also highlighted the "stress of outstanding fees", while those in FG1 pointed to the "stress of not knowing whether you will be able to see your result." If students do not receive their results, they are unable to identify gaps in their performance: "can't get your result, therefore, can't improve" (FG1).

Financial challenges affect students' state of mind. At basic education institutions, parents are legally responsible for school fees and accounts are marked for their attention. Moreover, the law prohibits schools from withholding the results of primary and secondary school learners. First-year students find it distressing to receive account statements and reminders about outstanding fees. FG4 participants noted that, "it makes it difficult because when your fees are not paid you keep getting letters and emails reminding you to pay, and that stresses you, and you may end up lacking [in] your academic work" and be "less focused... on school work". Inadequate funding and fear of not being able to complete their

studies compromise students' ability to focus on their studies. The FG4 participants affirmed that they experienced constant worries about "academic exclusions because of unpaid tuition fees" and were conscious of the negative effect of such stress. Financial difficulties have an adverse effect on students' career planning and progression, especially when they are not able to forecast if they will be able to pay their fees the following semester or in the coming year. FG1 participants stated that students are "unable to pay tuition so you cannot get your results or register for the following year." They noted that, the "student is often preoccupied with whether or not they will be able to complete their studies." "Many people [university students] worry about ... [being able to] afford to come back to school the following year" ; "not having a finance worries student about how are they going to register for following years if they still owing previous year" (FG4).

Some students are forced to find alternative means to raise money for fees and basic necessities. This could result in missed lectures and prevent them from participating in developmental activities on campus. FG2 participants indicated that such students "have to miss lectures to keep jobs." Moreover, "working outside of school to make money [takes up your time to study]" (FG4).

5.2.6.2 Adverse socioeconomic experiences.

Participants used a variety of concepts to label adverse socioeconomic experiences within the university environment. These included poverty; poor background, being broke, and financial inability, and financially disadvantaged:

"Being poverty; not being able to study on an empty stomach" (FG2).

"Being broke makes it hard to study!" "Hungry students everywhere" (FG2).

"When you come from poor background you have no clothes and money for printing credits" (FG2).

"Poor family background make your life difficult because cannot pay institution fees" (FG3).

"Financial inabilities" (FG5).

"Being financially disadvantaged" (FG5).

Hunger becomes visible to other students; FG2 participants stated that there are "...hungry students everywhere [on campus]". While students acknowledged that the "lack of resources becomes stressful" they also noted that, "too much money makes some student materialistic [they do less academic work]" (FG4).

5.2.6.3 Students' financial background challenges.

Participants linked some of their financial difficulties to their family background. Some claimed that they were “not getting enough financial support from family or whatsoever” (PFG1) to pay for accommodation. Others did not indicate how they expected to receive financial support. Students who live off campus and lack funds fail to attend lectures due to “high travelling costs” (PFG2). Other participants blamed their low socioeconomic status on “having a single parent who has to pay your tuition” (FG4). Residing far from the university is associated with fatigue and constant worry about being absent or late for lectures. Students also indicate that “residing far from campus means that you are spending time walking or travelling home instead of studying” (PFG3). Public transport is unreliable and costly.

Students' financial status also influences the social status accorded them by other students and how they view themselves in relation to others. The results suggest that students experience feelings of discrimination and exclusion due to a lack of finance: “without money, you are somewhat discriminated against” and “unable to buy things such as designer clothing for self” (PFG3). The need to fit in to the university lifestyle and “following attire norms for the campus” seems to affect students' sense of belonging. Financial constraints contribute to negative perceptions of their assets such as clothing and social standing. Student identities are connected to material possessions. It seems that students feel that money defines their position in the community: “finances determine one's for social status; hence without money you are practically nothing” (PFG3) This linear view of the self is of concern as it suggests that students do not acknowledge other important internal and external factors that shape their identities.

Inadequate financial resources also affect students' plans for academic activities and their ability to control their environment such as “... affording stationery at the right time” (PFG3). Furthermore, they cannot enjoy a balanced diet “when you have not enough food... you eat too much cereals e.g., Morvite” (PFG3). Financial difficulties also affect students' ability to form and maintain intimate relationships; participants stated that they cannot afford to take their “...friend and girlfriend out” or “buy Energade and fruit just like everyone else” (PFG3).

In as much as there is a preoccupation with material possessions, students acknowledged the negative impacts of comparing themselves to other students. Their discourse confirms that the view of self from a deficit perspective fosters alienation: “if you are unlike the rich kids you will feel left out...that could [be] you[r] downfall”. Assimilation

and copying other people's behaviour without a realistic view of one's circumstances was problematized. Nonetheless, students acknowledged the importance of external factors as a source of motivation to cope with university demands: "money in the pocket motivates everyone" (PFG3). It is clear that they have an exaggerated perceptions of how financial resources shape them and their life experiences. Envy and discontent were evident among students who lacked financial resources. The university environment has the power to transform students' social class and as a result, students feel inadequately prepared for the identity change when they enter this environment. The results of the study affirm that there are other consequences such as altered identity and feelings of exclusion which stem from perceived low socioeconomic status. Some of the students who participated in the study had negative perceptions of their identity and self-worth as a result of comparing their socioeconomic status with other university students who were perceived to be more financially secure. For example, FG4 participants affirmed that "too little finances make one feel excluded socially (unable to go out with friends)."

While different compounding factors increase the risk profile of students within higher education, some of these factors are directly linked to behaviours, perceptions, and attitudes of individual students and of the student body as a collective. The student body is a cosmic reflection of societal norms and beliefs which tends to be perpetuated by higher education institutions' expectations. The study participants cited many instances of how they as individuals, and as a collective, inform the university culture by confirming or rejecting the imposed way of life within the institution.

5.2.6.4 Students' definition of socioeconomic status.

The results of the study show that the students' place high value on social status. Most (some more reluctantly than others) subscribe to the norms and culture that determine the measure of social class within the university. FG5 participants captured different definitions of how students understand the concept of "status" and its role. They noted that "status is defined by aesthetics"; and "class defines status." They thus used class and status interchangeably. Furthermore, FG5 participants asserted that status serves as a means of "discrimination... based on the language, you [the student] speaks". These participants affirmed that status is symbolic and is entrenched in the language which is accorded high status by the university community, (i.e., English). This is encapsulated in the statement: "status is an ancient language, merely English."

5.2.6.5 Social status imposition.

The status afforded to university students or a particular behaviour regulates social perceptions and interactions, students' clothing brands, and access to resources. It is common practice for community members to follow social norms. However, the social norms and culture that confront students at the university differ in some significant ways from their communities of origin. Hence, the manner in which students accentuate sociocultural status demonstrates the level of distress they experience, and feelings of entrapment engendered, by imposed rules, confusing norms, and procedures which deviate from those of their previous background. Students are overwhelmed by what FG5 participants called "diversity, different people, and their culture."

The extracts below reflect the impact of the university culture, social class, and socioeconomic status:

"Whether you are poor or rich determines the kind of people around you and the kind of access you have to resource materials" (FG5).

"Judged by the brand of the clothes you wear" (FG5).

"Status is ranked by how you dress and look" (FG5).

"Status in what you have other people do not have"(FG5).

"Status could be your clothes, friends, home, the way you talk and walk. It is the way you carry yourself" (FG5).

"What is status? Status is defined as swag or swag" (FG5).

"...school status" (FG6).

The social class accorded to students, proficiency in the English language, and material possessions are closely intertwined and prioritised by the university student community. Not only does social class regulate how students should interact but it also determines who they should talk, how they should talk and how they should behave and even walk in social spaces. The university environment pressurises students to conform to the dress code on campus. For instance, FG4 participants stated that "other students pay too much attention to what others wear which makes it difficult" while those in FG5 pointed out that it is hard "keeping up with glamour [on the] Howard [College campus]."

It is evident that there are various ways students can acquire a desirable status within the university. Obtaining social class status is not just achieved through financial capital but also via various proxies. For instance, students can gain status by displaying desirable posture, adopting a particular style of walking, and general grooming. Social status could also be acquired by association with another student who is afforded higher social status.

The findings also reveal that some students gain social status by virtue of having attended a particular high school: “people [are] stuck in [high] school status which limits interaction.” In addition, some students tend to socialise according to their home location and previous schooling environment, which serve as another form of social status. Participants asserted that socialising according to previous schooling environment and hometown limits social networks as it “...causes exclusion between students leading to... [some students] not finding study mates ...” (FG6).

The findings of the study reveal a dual view of social status; either a student has it or not. This is a distressing experience for those not accorded status: “...if you do not have [status, you] may end up alone and miserable”; “if you do not have status you lose confidence, you feel ashamed of yourself”; “status differentiates you from other students” (FG6). These participants added that “you [students] become labelled” based on perceived social status. Isolation and negative labelling by other students “... creates a deep desire to conform to certain standard and engage in activities that are regarded as cool by group” (FG5). FG4 participants asserted that “because of financial issues one may end up in a bad space (stressed).”

5.2.6.6 Students’ response to social status demands.

The results of the study reveal that students use certain strategies to overcome the negative emotions associated with perceived deficits in social status. Some invest time in finding students whom they believe belong to the same social class. For instance, some first-year students who feel “...excluded” “focus more on finding [a] crew or friends of your social status than focusing on school work” (FG5). Others “join... other difficult people of different places” (FG5) by linking up with those that feel they do not meet the standard of the perceived high social class. Yet others conform to university norms even if they are aware of the negative consequences of doing so. FG5 participants affirmed that, “some [students] try so hard to afford things they really do not value for the sake of being noticed.”

The drive to belong and conform to the valued social class category not only regulates the individual student’s perception of other students but also informs how students view themselves. Depending on the perceived social status, the accorded status can empower or reduce personal self-regard. FG6 participants observed that “it [low social status] makes you feel like you are nobody, for example, when you [as a student] observe popular [students], as well [as] dressed people you tend to feel like you do not exist, and so you try to fit in that category...” They added that this negative view of oneself can easily “create low self-

esteem.” Sociocultural class and associated negative emotions related to low social class “limits us [students] to create alliances” (FG5). The manner in which students use social status symbols creates boundaries instead of building bridges for students to feel a sense of belonging. When students feel excluded from the university environment, this can result in tension and violence as indicated in the following FG5 extracts: “cold wars, or tensions that exist amongst students”; “status fight”; “fighting between students caused by prejudice and discrimination.” The participants’ narratives demonstrate that they reject the labelling of students according to sociocultural and economic values. They described those that categorise other students harshly as “judgemental and ignorant people”; “homophobes [because of] ... their remarks” and “fake people” (FG5).

5.2.7 Perceived social and cultural capital limitations.

The study’s results show that other social and cultural factors undermine first-year students’ social and academic integration. Various forces which are the result of the diversity of the student body shape the student culture and identity formation. Extracurricular and social-academic integration strategies support students to cope with social and academic demands. Academic support mechanisms also contribute to social integration by improving students’ competence in their subject areas, enhancing their desire to engage in classroom activities. As a result of their improved confidence, students can explore wider social networks, and improve their communication skills as well as increase their sense of belonging. The results of the study also reveal that domestic challenges increase stress levels among first-year students at the university. Psychosocial and family risk factors are discussed in the following sections.

5.2.7.1 Socio-cultural risk factors associated with transition to university.

The study’s results show that students perceive the university to be less nurturing and more alienating than their high schools. FG6 participants stated that, “[the] university is more of a business than a development [al] environment.” The respondents experienced the university environment as distant, unfriendly, and difficult to comprehend. This brings about a sense of isolation and exclusion. As illustrated by the following extracts, students feel invisible within the university environment:

“Not as easy as high school; no one cares if you pass or fail” (FG6).

“Not feeling part of the class, like it used to be in high school” (FG7).

“Exclude yourself from others because of the fear you have with the new environment,”(FG7).

“Not having high school friends with you” (FG7).

“No one really cares in university comparing to high school. Teachers are there to guide us” (FG7).

“I am not given [attention] compared to high school” (FG7).

Furthermore, the participants stated that the university subscribes to a different set of norms which are sometimes confusing and contradictory to what students know about being a student. For instance, FG7 participants noted that “... [they do not have] enough information about being a student” and that “no one is willing to help.” It is evident that some students lack structure and coping mechanisms to deal with the demands of the new learning environment:

“No parental guidance, so we do what we will do” (FG2).

“More peer pressure and temptations since you are away from your parents’ care” (FG7).

“The freedom at university can make it hard to focus on your studies” (FG2).

“For first-year students, we turn to misuse the freedom that we have in varsity” (FG6).

“Lots of free time” (FG1).

“Having too much fun” (FG1).

“Too many distractions [sic]” (FG2).

“Alcohol and women” (FG2).

“Beautiful women destruct [sic] us” (FG2).

These excerpts show that first-year students are vulnerable to many influences, partly because the transitional phase demands the maturity to self-regulate and self-manage. The transitional psychosocial challenges confronting first-year students are due to minimal guidance on how they should utilise their time at university. The university environment is different from high school in that there is minimal adult supervision. Students lack constant authority figures that impose rules and regulations. The results of the study show that some students are overwhelmed by this sense of freedom and self-determination. Moreover, they are concerned about the lack of guidance and nurturing at the university. For example, FG4 participants observed that, “at varsity, we are independent there is no parental guidance” and that they are expected to adjust to a “new lifestyle [which includes] clubbing [and] too much freedom.” FG7 participants indicated that “they [students] do not commit themselves enough to their work” and tend to “... see res life as an opportunity for fun”. As a result of this

limited view of their existence at the university, students struggle to overcome temptations and the constant pressure they find themselves under.

Students also stated that they felt isolated as they were unable to form social networks that could help them to adapt to the complex higher education environment: “you are all alone. There is no group participation”; it is “harder to form bonds with people - making friends is harder” (FG7). FG5 participants affirmed the difficulties first-year students experience in forming social relationships by stating that some first-year students do not “have... peers or friend to attend with”; and that the university is populated by “lots of people you do not know; A lot of people that I am not used to.” When a student finds a friend, it is hard to distinguish a reliable friend from those with questionable intentions: “finding true friends who will support you [is difficult]” and “lack of socialism (wrong friends).”

Furthermore, while keen to engage in the new university environment, students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly rural areas, seem to be “scared of becoming urbanised” (FG4). They appear to face the dilemma of maintaining their sense of identity while simultaneously adapting their lifestyle to meet the demands of the university culture.

5.2.7.2 Lifestyle challenges in higher education.

Students feel the need to immerse themselves in the university environment, but find it difficult to understand how the university functions: “not being able to adopt university environment”; “for first years the transition from high school to varsity is too different.” (PGF2). When students struggle to comprehend how they fit into the system and how it works, this disorients their patterns of behaviour. They fear that they might appear ‘different’ and their desire to belong could drive them to do things that they would not do were they in a more familiar environment. Students lack clarity on the social norms and rules that should guide their behaviour. Participants asserted that they “cannot follow university procedures” (PFG2); with this statement applying not only to the academic aspects of the university but also to the social systems within it.

The results of the study also indicate that students fail to deal with daily temptations at university. “*Ukuba sezintweni*” (PFG3) (an isiZulu slang expression that can be translated as being fashionable and keep up with trends, in short being relevant), was one of the difficulties identified. PFG1 participants stated that “temptations are the fundamental and most challenging to a student life.” Students, especially male students who participated in the study said that they found it hard to resist proposing love to beautiful girls on campus. Lack

of self-control is driven by the need to prove their manhood by acquiring "...a girlfriend before the year lapse" (PFG3). Some students felt that some friends took advantage of their good nature and controlled them, negatively influencing their behaviour in some instances. Others wanted to present themselves as cool people whom others will want to befriend and not be seen as what the PFG3 participants called "...Mr Serious".

The results show that the participants blamed the lifestyles that students adopt when they enrol at university for some of their challenges. The perspectives of the young men who participated in the pilot phase of the study indicate that students struggle to control their sexual urges, and find themselves "chasing girls" (PFG1). Some students are preoccupied with pursuing members of the opposite sex in the hopes of finding a mate. Excessive partying and "weekend after weekend drinking [of alcohol]" (PFG1) is one way of creating social networks, but when done in excess, it stimulates negative emotions and has destructive consequences. PFG1 participants highlighted the negative consequences of partying as being "too lazy to study ...after party outings"; alcohol abuse may lead to alcohol dependency and sleep deprivation as these drinking sprees do not stop until "late nights" (PFG1). Students blamed easy access to some substances on campus; PFG3 participants noted the "selling of drugs and alcohol on campus e.g., space muffins".

Poor self-control and an inability to resist temptation deplete the meagre financial resources at students' disposal. Participants listed the main temptations as a limitless desire for pleasurable activities, substance abuse, intimate relationships, and a preoccupation with "material wealth" (FG5). The heterosexual male students who participated in the study expressed concern about girls making unreasonable demands on their partners to entertain them despite limited financial resources. It is evident from the students' narratives that some have acquired learned helplessness as they showed no insight into how their behaviour contributes to the 'temptation' problem. Expressions of powerlessness against temptations include: "there are many good girls and too much opportunity to use for having sex with them." It is evident from this narrative that some first-year male students regard female students as people who can be used and discarded for male sexual pleasure. Acquiring girlfriends is seen as an acceptable practice in some male student circles: "if you have a girl now you have to have two or more"(PFG3).

'Temptations' go beyond social pleasure and affect academic activities: They include "being tempted to copy someone work when having hard times with it" (PFG3). Some students fail to see themselves as people with agency and believe that others, including the people in their ethno-racial group, should guide them on how they should live their lives.

Others display diminished self-worth and a limited ability to make informed decisions. Pressure to ‘fit in’ and acquire friends, especially in the residences, causes students to engage in activities that could be destructive and unpleasant. Besides the failure to resist temptation, which can be attributed to the collective and individual PsyCap; there is evidence of the co-influence of this form of PsyCap in other areas.

Students also expressed concerns about the level of noise and other forms of interference in the university environment. This is highlighted in the following PFG3 extracts: “too much noise in school parties”; “writing tomorrow while today is Friday and there is good melody at the Big Chill.” Loud noise often disturbs students when they try to study, and the university ethos that promotes relaxation undermines their ability to control their urges and engage in activities related to core academic activities. PFG3 participants complained about early morning lectures which students usually refers to as ‘dons’ (roughly meaning early dawn). These lectures are often at 7:45am. PFG3 participants noted that “challenges will include attending ‘don’ lecturers which are extremely difficult” which often leads to “bunking classes.” These extracts display the constant process of negotiation between appropriation and disregard for certain practices at the university to meet the needs of the students as an individual or a collective.

5.2.7.3 Indicators of negative peer pressure.

Study participants identified undesirable “peer pressure” (FG2) that often has illegal and socially unacceptable outcomes:

“You get involved in with bad peer pressure; they will give you drugs” (FG2).

“You are forced to do things which you do not normally agree with” (FG2).

“Peer pressure [forces you to] - joining wrong company” (FG4).

“Your friends could give you drugs and [you can] get in crime” (FG2).

“Pressure into doing bad things” (FG2).

“Bad influence leading to substance abuse” (FG2).

“Makes you do wrong stuff just to fit in” (FG2).

“Influence students to go to party every week” (FG1)

“Wanting to be popular makes you do unacceptable stuff that can get you expelled from university” (FG6).

Participants highlighted the consequences of substance abuse involving alcohol, drugs, and smoking dagga, which they warned could lead to illegal activities. They spoke of “drugs,” and “exposure to harmful substances,” (FG2) and “drinking too much [alcohol]”

FG1). It seems that substance abuse is accompanied by partying. Moreover, male students exert pressure on one another to drink alcohol which students claim is easily accessible: “drinking bars near the campus somehow do tempt students to drink”; “students have the temptation of having anything they want which leads to lack of financial and money” (PFG3). It would seem that students have an attitude of entitlement even in circumstances that do not favour them, and that they tend to live beyond their means regardless of the consequences. The pressure to fit in overwhelms first-year students to the point where they engage in activities that they are aware could lead to imprisonment or being expelled from university. In succumbing to peer pressure, they lose valuable time that could be dedicated to academic activities. Study findings reveal that students sometimes miss lectures because they have a hangover. The following extracts indicate the difficulties that students face when they surrender to peer pressure and drink during weekdays: “Do bad stuff. Miss lectures” (FG2); “You are at risk of missing out on your work if you get a hangover” (FG1).

The results of the study suggest that adhering to university norms and student culture heavily influence students’ behaviour when they first enter university. Other contributing factors are poor self-regulation which often leads students to spend valuable time on non-academic activities such as watching movies and going to shopping malls at inappropriate times. The unbalanced manner in which student spend their time is indicated in the following extracts: “[other students] influence you to going to movies instead of studying when needed” (FG4); “watching a movie the night before the exam” (FG4); “going to the mall or town instead of studying” (FG4). FG2 participants acknowledged the lack of regard for academic work and affirmed that they sometimes devalue their reasons for being at the university, “[as a student you] don’t care about your work.” It is evident from the students’ narratives that some first-year students demonstrate patterns of self-sabotage, fail to prioritise their education, and allow non-educational social activities and the university social environment to determine their priorities.

Failure to define boundaries between students and others seems to result in feelings of loss of control and poor self-preservation tendencies. For example, FG2 participants expressed their displeasure at “non-stop visitors.” Students fail to assert themselves when faced with demands from peers and experience social pressure as stressful and undesirable: “it always causes depression and stress”; “[it] gives you a sense of crowdedness” (FG2). Gender-related pressures compound the effect of negative peer influences. The results of the study reveal that some female students compromise their integrity and bodies to gain access

to intoxicating substances. FG2 participants stated that, “women sell their bodies for drugs and drink.” They were of the opinion that this is due to the fact that, “women don’t stand together.”

5.2.8 Institutional habitus as a source of distraction.

Students highlighted activities that distract their attention from their studies. “Destructions”, as the FG2 participants dubbed them, include those directly initiated by students and those fostered by the university ethos.

5.2.8.1 Social media challenges.

Some students admitted to “spending too much time on Facebook, Mixit, and BBM” (PFG1). They acknowledged that the use of social media should be contributing to their social integration but that it was a distraction. Examples included: “Chatting on texting takes too much of our time,” and “BBming during lecture” (PG2). The majority of what the participants labelled as distractions are interwoven with the relationship amongst students. Some students cited “spending time watching movies” as a negative social factor which is associated with “too much relaxation.” Again, a lack of authority figures seems to be a major challenge for the students who participated in the study. PFG1 participants noted that, “no one tells you what to do”.

5.2.8.2 Partying and parties as sources of distraction.

What students call distractions are further driven by an overpowering need for “entertainment (*ubumnandi*) [an isiZulu word for a pleasurable activity]” (FG4). According to all the focus groups, “partying” and “parties” are the main source of fun ‘*ubumnandi*’. There are also other opportunities to take part in group entertainment; FG1 participants noted that there are “too many social functions.” According to FG3 participants, students’ on-going pursuit of fun has dire consequences: “sometimes there might be a party then you go to the party and say you will do the work later.” Students acknowledged that social commitments have a detrimental effect on academic performance. Even when there are no social functions, they waste time by “chilling in the cafeteria” (FG6). Other activities include loitering around the areas that sell food and alcohol: “The good food at Hex makes you want to go there all the time” (PG2); “Crowded House and Stagecoach” (PG2). It is possible that some students do not themselves drink alcohol, but find entertainment in observing those who use the facilities. The behaviour of the first-year students resembles that of many teenagers and

young adults that the media portrays loitering around places of entertainment or those where they can easily spot desirable persons of the opposite sex.

The students acknowledged that “[distractions] makes you lose focus on your goal (degree)”; “you deviate from your goals of coming to university.” Some use the time they could be relaxing or pursuing productive extra-curricular activities in “going out with friends at night on Fridays until Sunday”(FG1).

The results of the study reveal that partying and drinking go together, and these parties can carry on for days and nights. Some students “go to too many parties even during the week then come to school exhausted and hangover.” Alcohol, partying, and loud music often go together. Students who are not familiar with this kind of lifestyle are influenced by peers to join them. FG1 participants asserted that, “your peers motivate you to go by telling you the things that you like (DJs).” Besides visiting venues outside the university, students noted that parties and drinking take place on the university premises: “parties taking place around where you live” (FG1). This weakens students’ resolve to resist partying.

In the participants’ view, conforming to peer pressure is an indicator of lack of self-control: “peer pressure [indicates] lack of discipline...” (FG2). Some students acknowledged the negative effects of peer pressure while others claimed that they were immune to it: “no peer pressure!! Left it in high school”(FG2). It is probable that when a student fails to acknowledge negative peer influence, they will not have the inclination or the drive to overcome it, which could retard their development and sense of autonomy at the university.

5.2.8.3 Interpersonal conflicts amongst students.

The study participants identified various sources of conflict amongst first-year students. These take place at a personal level (described as “personal clashes” by FG5 participants) and at a group level (referred to as a “conspiracy fight” by the same participants). Other forms of conflict take place at an interpersonal level and are instigated by “aggressive contradiction of opinions amongst friends” (FG5). Furthermore, “conflict [occurs with] the university residence management” (FG5). Other social and university initiated protests such as “strikes” (FG2) also cause violent encounters.

The study participants provided various explanations as to why students get involved in conflict at the university. FG5 participants cited “personality conflicts [and] stereotyping against other students.” Some of these conflicts involve “emotional [and not just] physical fight[s]” (FG5). The FG5 participants identified gender-based conflicts such as “girls emotionally blackmailing each other for boys, clothes, reputation.” They also noted that

students have to contend with “race discrimination”. These participants added that “there are classes among races ... white hangs out with whites only. It creates a very bad learning environment” and indicates “disrespect among students.” Students declared that tension and “negative energies towards others [students]” as well as dysfunctional social interactions are counterproductive to a conducive learning environment.

The findings show that the participants were concerned about perceptions of “[the] social acceptance [of campus] fights” (FG5), while others fear that they might also be victims of conflict, prejudice, and discrimination. FG5 participants stated that campus violence “makes [you feel] that you are next”; and that such conflicts “disturb academically.” Moreover, students end up “absorbing those negative energies” because of “cliques” amongst particular groups of students (FG5). Divisions amongst students can lead to unhealthy competition, with some striving to score “high[er] marks than others.”

5.2.8.4 The effects of racism in higher education.

Racism was one of the main themes that emerged from the study. The participants experienced racism from different sources, and it affected them at different levels. The participants in PFG1 described the UKZN environment as “still holding that whites are superior” and labelled some teaching staff as “racist lecturers.” These participants asserted that some “lecture[r]s mark[ed] according to race” and give “...[information] that is effective to the ones on [sic] your race”. Perceptions of being discriminated against on the basis of being black enhance feelings of inferiority in relation to other race groups. This causes some students to be “scared of white lecturers” (PFG1). The PFG1 participants also stated that they experienced “discrimination” and were “uncomfortable” because “you are treated badly if you with other races.” This led to fear and being “scared!!” (PFG1), as well as alienation, and feeling undermined and unwelcome by racist lecturers and students from other race groups. Perceptions of being discriminated against and excluded could result in “...getting homesick” and being unable to participate meaningfully in learning activities and multicultural activities for fear of being ridiculed and “laughed at” (PFG1). Students noted that “division of races, [is] showing no respect towards one another.” Some PFG1 participants described it as “...continuous abuse” and associated “xenophobia” with racism. However, limited information was forthcoming on the links between racism and xenophobia.

5.2.8.5 Difficulties in selecting appropriate mates.

The study's results suggest that some first-year students are aware of the pressures that emanate from choosing friends who do not share the same vision as them. They pursue these relationships despite their adverse effects on their ability to cope with the demands of university. The differences amongst students in terms of academic goals, motivation, and socialisation are highlighted in the following FG1 extracts: "The fact that we differ in goals"; "The type of people you socialise with"; "Peers may be anti-school therefore not school motivated"; "If the peers are lazy and never attend lectures you might end up doing the same". This is clear evidence that students acknowledge that not all peer influence is good. The participants conceded that some of their peers have ulterior motives to destroy other students and that some engage in self-destructive behaviour. FG1 participants noted that, "some will let you down because they are jealous."

The participants noted that some of their peers are more mature and experienced, and tend to intimidate less experienced students into complying with their demands. For instance, FG1 participants argued that, "[some of the first-year students are] way more mature and advanced." Some students give in to peer pressure to negate negative images about themselves. This is an attempt to prove that they are carefree and not "...too serious" (FG1).

5.2.8.6 Effects of intimate relationships on well-being and academic progress.

The study's results reveal that students engage in close relationships which are time-consuming. Furthermore, heartbreak can follow when the partner wants to opt out of the relationship or is unfaithful. Various focus group participants highlighted the challenges of what FG7 participants referred to as "relationship issues - [involving] boyfriend or girlfriend":

"They [boyfriends or girlfriends] require time to attend to spend with so you give away academic time on them" (FG4).

"Emotional stress that comes with being in a relationship can cause you to be distracted in your studies" (FG4).

"The pressure of spending time with your partner and having to compromise the more important things" (FG5).

"Boys keep on chasing girls and lose focus in their studies" (FG5).

"Stressing because the chick cheated and end [up] performing poorly academically" (FG4).

"Makes it hard for others to thrive academically due to social relationships" (FG4).

These narratives show that maintaining an intimate relationship requires a high level of commitment and time which often leads to distress when a student is not able to balance social and academic demands. Moreover, sexual relationships could divert the student's attention from academic-related tasks. Therefore, a student's love life can compromise their academic success. FG4 participants noted that, "[as a student you] put much of your time for school work on them (boyfriend)." FG7 participants observed that some students get involved in "... unsupportive difficult relationship[s] [where they experience] sexual pressure [and] emotional manipulation...etc." It is evident from the data that some sexual relationships make life difficult for students, with some relationships leading unplanned "pregnancy" (FG7). [Note: none of the focus groups discussed same-sex intimate relationships.

Furthermore, some intimate relationships are characterised by physical abuse. FG4 participants noted that "some people are absent from school [they avoid attending classes] because they are afraid of what people might say when they see they are beaten." Other challenges include spreading malicious rumours. FG7 participants argued that "some students have abusive boyfriends who want to control their lives" and that "boys plus girls both spread rumours" about each other. Some first-year female students accuse each other of 'stealing boyfriends.' The same group of participants conceded that male students tend to cheat and lie. At the same time, female students feel pressured to engage in sexual relationships with newly acquired boyfriends: "boys put pressure on girls to have sex; you feel sad not to have a boyfriend, so you consider it" (FG4).

The study results also reveal that abusive intimate relationships not only compromise students' safety and security and undermine their dignity, but prevent them from integrating and adjusting well to the university environment. FG4 participants summed up the challenges of intimate interpersonal relationships at the university: "love life is a challenge for many students." FG5 participants raised the issue of gender without providing any concrete examples. However, it seems that both female and male students are dissatisfied with the demands they make on each other: "girls asking for so much from a boyfriend in university" (FG5).

The socio-cultural risk factors and various attractions that distract students from academic activities are embedded in the social networks and lifestyle that students adopt when they enter the university space. Their sincere desire to conform and to fit in tends to compromise their goals, principles, beliefs, and sound decision-making as well as their moral judgment.

5.2.9 Limiting teaching and learning practices.

The study uncovered particular challenges relating to teaching and learning practices and the teacher-student relationship within the classroom context. Some students find the method of teaching used in the university “boring [and] monotonous” (FG2). FG2 participants noted that, “they cause sleepiness”. However, the same group of students felt that “other people [lecturers and students] talk much faster, so it is hard to understand them” and that lecturers tend to move “fast in slide notes.” In addition, they stated that some “lecturers [do] not really explain well but expect the students to source information on their own”, and others “do not want to explain notes... [but indicate that] it is your responsibility [as a student] to research this”.

Some students found teacher-student interactions tense. For example, FG2 participants stated that some lecturers are “too ...serious no jokes”. The distancing techniques used by university staff such as being aloof and shifting the responsibility to students, excludes first-year students who already feel alienated and excluded from the academic environment. Students were of the opinion that lecturers deliberately “use ... strong vocabulary or big words” (FG2) and that “lecturers who do not speak clearly mislead student[s].” FG2 participants added that some lecturers fail to state their expectations explicitly and tend to provide “unclear guidelines.” FG3 participants felt that lecturers “give children [students] less information when they explain, which make life difficult.” Furthermore, FG2 participants argued that “at times”, some departments or lecturers “do not post notes online” which makes it “difficult [for students] to know what is coming out in the test.”

First-year students who participated in the study described some lecturers as difficult and unapproachable: They noted that they “encounter difficulty during lectures” due to lecturers who are “unapproachable and rude” and fail to provide “...individual help...” Other problems cited by the FG2 participants were lecturers “coming to class unprepared” while those in FG3 noted that, “the assignment might be boring.” Some lecturers were accused of “handing out irrelevant notes” and it was claimed that they “do not really care ... if you understand.” According to FG2 participants some lecturers “...do not give students enough consultation times” and some “are too serious [which makes it] difficult to consult [them].” They added that some of the lecturers “makes you feel unimportant”. Of concern is that some participants alleged that they “fear [some lecturers] due to discrimination” and that “some lecturers are very scary” (FG3). This makes students reluctant to ask questions.

5.2.9.1 Fear as a barrier to learning and classroom participation.

Students noted barriers that hinder their participation during lectures. These include but are not limited to fear, a noisy environment, and disruptions within the university environment. Besides the difficulties associated with submission of assignments and meeting deadlines, some first-year students linked their lack of ability to grasp work to fear of being perceived as inadequate. FG7 participants noted that the “effect of being scared” is linked to being “scared of asking a question on something you do not understand” or “not asking questions which you do not understand and those questions come out in the test, and then we fail.” Students were aware of these self-defeating tendencies. Besides not seeking clarity during lectures, first-year students suffered as a result of “no consultation with other students” (FG2). Peer education is an important aspect of learning, but some students allow their fears to override their need for learning and development. Furthermore, some students did not attend classes because they feared being ridiculed by other students: “the fear of being laughed at adds to you not asking a question and keeping up until you give up attending lectures” (FG7). Others attend classes even when they do not fully grasp the course content; FG6 participants reported “attending lectures but not understanding much.”

At times the students experience a sense of helplessness which poses a barrier to learning. While they might be present in lectures, some are unable to engage in meaningful participation. The participants in FG7 stated that “the fear affects me academically” and “the fear decrease myself self-esteem” due to poor performance “...on assignments because of lack of understanding.” They added that some students are worried about “getting low marks even failing” and that “fear leads to lack of confidence, undermines self-esteem and may [lead students] to make poor choices as a result”. “Having questions that are not answered” has adverse psychological effects (FG7). Some students experience feelings of being outsiders: “we think we do not fit in.” Failure to ask questions during lectures deprives students of remedial interventions and sets them up for failure as “when the test comes, you fail to answer the question that ... [you were] scared to ask in class.” Moreover, “[lecturers] ... do not show respect, where you try to ask question” and students seem “scared that when you answer in class, the lecturer keeps asking you to explain” (FG3 participants).

The findings also reveal that students feel intimidated by fellow students in the class. FG2 participants indicated that they “...fear what others think about answers ... [they] give” and the fact that they are “studying with different students including international” exacerbates such fears. Participants in FG3 asserted that “it is intimidating to talk in front of

the class, you feel self-conscious.” Some students “[do] not [ask] ... a question in lectures because ... [they] are scared of being laugh[ed] at” and “... [we] are scared our question could be seen [as] silly”. The problem is further compounded by the fact that “it is difficult to ask questions ... [during] lectures because there are so many of us, approximately 300, and we are not used to that”(FG3). First-year students who participated in the study seemed aware of the vicious cycle associated with non-participation during lectures: “no participation [and] lack of understanding, failure to rectify the situation, the endless cycle of repletion [repetition] ends in failure.” These participants added that failure to participate meaningfully in classroom based activities “inhibits the ability to learn, makes failure more likely as pressure increases” and students tend to “... give up and then fail exams”.

5.2.9.2 Disruptions as a barrier to learning.

The results also indicate that many disruptions that impair teaching and learning emanate from students. Students in FG7 stated that “noise can be very disruptive because in some cases it delays the lecture and it starts 20 minutes late[r] than what it is supposed to”. Other disturbances are caused by “constant disruptions caused by people moving in and out of the lecture theatre” (FG7). These participants also stated that “some people make noise [during]...lectures and [students] end up not hearing the lecture.” They noted that not all students have intentions to learn when they enter the university space: “people have different ideas; some come to class just to chat with their mates.” There is a perceived lack of respect amongst students, and some do not appreciate the efforts made by lecturers. FG7 participants indicated that “there are students who do not listen”. They added that “another student is not caring about others, talking during lecture, leaving early or coming in late.” The desire to be acknowledged and regarded as an important person within the institution perpetuates problematic behaviour among some students. The following comments by FG7 participants suggest that first-year students lack affirmation of their identity and their unique characteristics: “less personal attention - [as a student you are] just a number.” “A face in the crowd. No individual identity”. Some complained about the lack of individual attention: “I do not get individual attention” and unfortunately “some people are here for attention.”

Other barriers could prevent students from hearing what is said during lectures. Some students in FG7 stated that “it[s] hard to hear [listen to] the lecturer with over 100 people in one venue”. Various factors such as undiagnosed hearing impairment could account for an inability to hear during lectures as well as poor use of the audio equipment in the venue and noise pollution from outside lecture theatres.

5.2.9.3 Tutorial session challenges.

Other teaching and learning challenges are located in the roles and functions of tutors as well as the nature of the relationship between tutors and students. According to FG6 participants, “tutorials are not helpful, [primarily because] tutors are sometimes uninformed”; and “tutor[s] tend to argue with learners rather than assist [them].” These participants also asserted that tutors do not treat them in a fair and consistent manner: “[tutors] act as if they do not have time... [even when] they do, but use it on more important people”. They affirmed first-year students’ negative perceptions of tutors: “some of the tutors hired are too critical /harsh.” Sometimes students “... have to wait long hours just to talk to them [tutors]”. The students also observed that there is a lack of communication amongst tutors. Departments sometimes fail to pay tutors, which affects the quality and availability of the services tutors render to students: “not paying tutor which might lead to them not willing to teach” (FG6).

5.2.9.4 Dysfunctional departments and poor university support structures.

The study participants indicated that some university departments are not well coordinated. For example, FG6 participants indicated that “[the] management department is not run well because they are disorganised and this one time ...[students]... had to write a test, they ran [out] of question papers and some [students] did not write.” They regarded this as evidence that “some departments are not run well.” FG6 participants cited the following to support their allegations of incompetence in the administration of academic affairs:

“departments tend not to communicate with students effectively”;

Some departments “[do] not give enough guidance about requirements for the assignment.”

“giving course packs late to students”;

“some department gives us assignment every week ending up a student having imbalance studying”;

“some departments do not provide course outline, so you forget your test date and tuts task”.

Other administrative problems cited by FG6 participants included “late return of scripts while you need those scripts to prepare for a test for example”; and departments “losing assignments.” Students in this focus group also expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which some departments treat students. For instance, they asserted that some

departments do not provide prompt feedback which affects students' academic performance: "lack of feedback, never give scripts back or withhold marks till DP release date." Some lecturers compound the problem when they cancel tests which affects students' ability to balance academic demands: "cancelling test[s] ...puts pressure when writing it because you have other tasks [that are due] on that date." (FG6). These participants emphasised that "not releasing test marks in time" puts unnecessary pressure on first-year students.

The results of the study reveal that other administrative barriers impede first-year students' academic performance. Examples of incompetent administration at the university include but are not limited to, "registration [of] wrong modules [for students]"; and "not giving student proper information regarding module that they [departments] offer." Furthermore, FG6 participants alleged that "they [lecturers and administrators]...make students wait for hours just to get a signature" and that "the receptionist[s] are ...rude" to students; "...when you come for help they just ignore you." FG6 participants were of the view that, "some administrators are racist." It is evident from these narratives that some students perceive administrative personnel and lecturers to be incompetent, racist or rude, and as such, often fail to avail themselves when needed. FG6 participants insisted that "when you want to meet someone from individual department most of the time they are not available." Those in FG7 said that they were frustrated by "administrative red tape, loss of records, too many things to process, the inefficiency of administration, long queues, delays, etc." The students also felt that the system is not fair and transparent, especially when they need financial and residential support. FG6 participants indicated that it is difficult to get help if you not connected to people in high places: "[you have] ...to know someone in high places in the campus so that you get res and funding."

The study participants added that some departmental officials within the university lack motivation and the drive to provide the kind of support that students require. FG6 participants noted "not enough drive within management, people in charge of module"; and "not being able to get the kind of help you want when you get to that department." The results of the study reveal that some members of the teaching staff do not honour their lecture times: "at times tutor[s] and lecturers do not pitch up." Moreover, some students are not aware of what they should expect from the departments as they do "not ... [know] the resource[s] available to us." These tends to foster suspicion and doubt.

5.2.10 Family and community demands.

The results of the study indicate that students not only experience pressure within the university environment but also from their families and community. Some of the challenges that students face are due to high expectations on the part of their family and community.

“The pressure to do well and if not parents become upset” (FG1).

“Expectations from parents and family” (FG5).

“Parents pressurising us” (FG7).

“Over protective parents expect you to be home on time, so you end up with having [less] time at school” (FG7).

“Parents are overprotective; they do not allow us to come on campus on Saturdays, lack of trust” (FG7).

“Over protective parents make independence hard” (FG7).

“Over protective parents: not allowed to come back even if you want to stay back and do work” (FG7).

Although family members seem to have high expectations of first-year students and demand good academic performance, students feel that there are instances where they fail to appreciate the need to balance the time required to achieve academic success and the demands of the household. The study’s results reveal that some of the barriers to learning are located in the relationship between students and their parents. Excessive demands for compliance with family rules and lack of regard for quality time for on-campus academic activities is a source of conflict for some non-residential students. Parents who are overprotective and do not trust their children tend to stifle students’ ability to function independently. The findings confirm that being a first generation student exerts additional pressure on first-year students in various ways. FGI participants noted “being under pressure if you are the only one who got to university in your family.” Participants also complained about the amount of time they spend on household tasks. As an exclusively female group, FG1 participants listed the typical roles associated with women in traditional households such as “cooking and cleaning”; “babysitting” and “...doing washing etc. for your family”. The same concerns were raised by mixed gender and race focus groups. FG4 participants added other duties such as “...buying... groceries, paying bills”. While students are attending university, they still have to fulfil the normative roles according to gender and birth position: “if you are the only girl at home you in trouble!”; “being the eldest having to cook, clean, do the washing, etc. for your family”; and “having to take care of your siblings.”

Household responsibilities are not confined to non-residential students. For instance, FG1 participants indicated that “being away from home having to take care of everything” creates additional stress and diverts attention from their studies. Students indicated that it is challenging to have “...many commitments at once,” (FG1) because running a household has its own demands. The main problem confronting first-year female students who are responsible for running their households is “focusing and worrying about a lot of things at once” (FG1). Some of the sources of worry include “high food prices” (FG4). Other concerns that preoccupy first-year students are:

“Sickness within the family causes stress” (FG5).

“You know your grandma is getting a pension and your thinking, how is she going to pay the tuition fees and therefore, you tend to be disturbed” (FG5).

“A sick parent result[s] in having to do more at home; takes away from studying” (FG7).

“Being there for rituals, weddings, etc.” (FG1).

Thus, the study participants find some family commitments stressful as they interfere with their academic work. Striking a balance between household demands, family expectations, and academic demands requires a certain level of maturity and commitment to set goals. Maintaining this balance requires cooperation and understanding on the part of family members. At times students find their families’ expectations unrealistic, especially those that commute to and from campus. The participants pointed out that some students are unable “...to balance school work and the work at home, etc.” Expecting students to perform multiple roles can affect their health and wellbeing. FG7 participants argued that “[if] your family depends on you for everything [it] adds too much pressure, which can lead to a breakdown.” Over and above household responsibilities, domestic problems make it difficult for students to cope at university. According to FG4 participants “family problems” include an unstable financial status and heading a household without parents. Some students not only have responsibilities for their siblings but also provide primary care for their children. FG7 participants indicated that “having a child cause stress for you.”

Besides taking charge of household chores, students are also directly involved in resolving financial difficulties in their households. One of the financial household stressors cited by FG3 participants was “coming from a home that is not stable financially.” They added, “[when at] home they do not give you enough pocket money; at school we print all the time, you need money.”

FG4 participants identified the following financial issues confronting students:

“if your financial status at home is not stable, at the university you feel isolated because students wear expensive clothes, having Blackberries, and that makes you miss home”;

“looking after your young siblings especially if you no longer have parents and making sure that there is bread on the table depending on your NSFAS loan.”

The results of the study highlight the adverse financial experiences of students within higher education institutions. While some expect that their families will provide, others use the funds that they receive from the university to support their families. The literature notes that due to social ills and the HIV pandemic, some households are headed by older siblings. Therefore, being an older sibling comes with additional responsibilities that are not limited to performing household chores and managing “household chaos” (FG4). Some students have to source funding to support their family. Others are forced to work while studying, for instance, finding a “weekend job” (FG4).

Students whose families lack sufficient resources are more at risk of dropping out and have to fight harder to remain at university for their family’s survival than those with adequate resources. FG5 participants stated that, “family ... issues lead to one leaving school and having to find other alternative [means] of survival e.g., crime [or] stealing”. They stressed the importance of striving to complete the degree for the benefit of the family: “coming from a family that is not rich, one stresses and get pressure to achieve so they could change family [life].”

Some of the problems relate to the nature of interpersonal relationships between family members. Dysfunctional family relationships where there is abuse, lack of support, and care tend to have an adverse effect on students’ academic performance. FG5 participants indicated that “coming from an abusive background where you were physically abused might affect you emotionally. Thus you won’t cope.” They highlighted the effect of domestic violence on students’ emotional state: “being abused at home [as a student you] lose your self-esteem and it affects your work.” It is of concern to note the fact that some students experience physical abuse within their home environment. FG7 participants noted cases of “parents using physical abuse.” Some of the challenges are emotional and emanate from conflict between parents: “having parents who fight all the time”; “divorcing parents who are always in a never ending war end up dragging you into it” (FG7). Some students experience discord in family relationships which might result in emotional distress. Some of the family conflicts that first-year students have to contend with are cited below:

“Having separate parents you want different stuff to result from you” (FG5).

“Family crisis, divorce having to cope with the breakdown of your family, trying to balance all the areas of your life” (FG7).

“Being abused at home by parents” (FG7).

“Fighting, tension at home” (FG7).

According to the FG5 participants, some students “lack support emotionally when they [their family members] do not call and ask how ... [students] are coping [with life at the university]”. They added that some families are disconnected in that “family not aware of what one is already going through [as a student at the university].” Being far from home “... creates stress because you are far from home, so you miss your siblings” (FG3).

The emotional distress that students experience takes different forms such as fear of disappointing family members. Families sometimes “[fill] you with the feelings of future failure” (FG5). Students feel aggrieved when the “family [fails to] ... respect... the student’s academic choice”. Moreover, participants were of the view that the family is not in a position to make a valid judgement about their chosen courses because “[they have] no knowledge of a course or module...” the “...negativity” (FG5). Participants asserted that the views that families express about first-year students’ choice of modules or courses are often not supported by sound knowledge.

It is also evident that the pressure that students experience extends beyond individual households to other community members. For example, FG4 participants stated that “[as a student you have] responsibility to look after yourself and be a role model to your younger sisters and the communities. It is hard”. Due to numerous responsibilities that can cause burnout, FG4 participants acknowledged the importance of “looking after your health.”

5.2.11 Institutional structures and resource limitations.

The results of the study indicate that students are dissatisfied with the university’s facilities for different reasons. Among these are inaccessible facilities due to overcrowding, while some students regard such facilities as inappropriate. Other participants stated that some facilities were of a lower standard than they expected. They also argued that university facilities are not well maintained and that it takes a long time to repair damage. The participants also expressed concern about their safety in university residences and the surrounding environment. It was noted that the facilities offered by the university are not able to satisfy the needs of all students. These include computers and e-learning as well as buildings and workspaces. The major limitations of the university facilities are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

5.2.11.1 Limitations with regard to access to university facilities.

The various focus groups agreed that university facilities do not cater to the needs of all students. FG2 participants maintained that “[the university] facilities cannot cope with a number of students.” They added that there are “too many students,” and “overcrowded lecture room[s]” and that “some classrooms are full - no seats” meaning that not all students can find a chair or desk during lectures. FG6 participants observed that the “lecture venues are small and lead to students sitting on the floor and not hearing a thing.” FG4 participants highlighted that there were “lots of students in the LAN so you cannot do your work easily.” As a result of overcrowding “... [students] end up having to fight and struggle to use facilities” (FG2). In summary, first-year students consider the university environment to be “overcrowded...” (FG2 and FG7).

The participants also cited shortages of facilities other than space. FG5 participants stated “... that other study materials are not available on campus”. Other comments included: “LANs are too scarce” and “LANs are full/broken,” (FG2); “sometimes the LANs are full”(FG1); and “Not enough computers” (FG1, FG4, and FG6). FG6 participants noted a “lack of facilities e.g. LANs” and FG5 pointed to “lack of enough resource[s] to help the student”. FG7 expanded on these inadequacies by stating that “limited resources, LANs, textbooks, etc. cannot meet student demand”. In addition, students complained about the lack of printing services, indicating that there are “few printing stations” (FG2). Students acknowledge the risks associated with limited access to resources: “[students] end up not submitting ... [their] work because there is a lot ... [of students who use] ... a small [limited] number of computers” (FG7). The participants also expressed their discontent with students who misuse the limited time available to access the computer LAN, noting that this compounds the problem: “[some students] use computers for the social network while others want to do school work” (FG7).

Other challenges associated with the computer LAN include poor the internet connection, which prevents students from accessing information. FG6 participants observed that “sometimes wireless [internet access] becomes an issue (not being able to connect).” Moreover, access to the computer LAN facilities is limited during the afternoons and not available at certain times because of scheduled academic programmes. Inaccessible and limited facilities are a challenge for both residential and non-residential students. The participants also noted that some university facilities are closed at night, including the “closing of NAB LAN at night”(FG2) Students also cited delays in repairing damaged

facilities: “Computers which are broken not fixed fast enough”; “Printers almost every day was broken”; “Printers are not working,” (FG2). The students’ narratives represent a plea for more efficient service delivery: “... if they had more working computers, it would be nice” (FG6). The poor condition of some university facilities impacts on students’ daily functioning.

The results of the study show that off-campus students who reside on satellite UKZN campuses experience unique logistical difficulties associated with the means of transport to commute between their residence and university. The participants stated that the buses that are contracted to transport students are often late, delayed, or unavailable. PFG1 participants observed that there are “not enough buses” and that they are usually “[over]crowded and [students are] getting squeezed” even when the bus is full. They also expressed concern at the speed at which the busses travel, warning that “speed kills.” In their opinion, the university is failing to monitor the logistical arrangements for the transport service. It is likely that students who reside in the satellite residences have exceeded the capacity of the residence because of illegal sharing of rooms. The challenges of overcrowding should be examined in future studies on university resources.

Other factors that threaten students’ academic performance are limited access to an internet connection which PFG1 participants referred to as a “network issue.” Again, the participants underscored overcrowding in the computer LANs. However, they conceded that limited computer skills hinder access. For example, PFG1 noted, that, “being computer illiterate”; and lack of “basic Microsoft skills” hamper students’ progress. The students also acknowledged the role of background knowledge in building capacity to access university resources. PFG2 participants stated that that, “students from disadvantaged schools do not know how to use computers and photocopying” and that “students from rural backgrounds are not used to study at libraries.” The historical, socio-political context of inequity in South Africa thus prevents effective use of available resources due to a lack of epistemological access.

The results of the study indicate that students experience network problems and regard the facilities as user-unfriendly. PFG1 participants noted “no response from emails” and “not receiving emails on time” (PFG1) via the Group-wise network system. This system has been upgraded since the data for this study was collected. The failure of university systems and first-year students’ limited technological expertise prevent them from gaining the necessary academic skills.

Another source of discontent for first-year students is inaccessible recreational facilities. PFG2 participants cited “being prohibited from certain sports facilities, if you’re not a member” (PFG2) and “paying for the gym as a challenge”. Frustration at not being able to access university resources and failure to understand how the system works is cause for concern. The participants felt excluded and disadvantaged by such lack of access that they had not experienced before coming to university. As the PFG2 participants noted, this results in them “not being able to adapt [to the] university environment.”

Perceptions of exclusion of some students and the university’s inability to accommodate all students prevail in other areas such as common study areas. The PFG2 participants stated that the “discussion room can only be utilised for one hour, this should be extended☹.” It was alleged that sports facilities prioritise race groups who can afford to pay user fees. PFG2 participants observed: “[we] can’t use the tennis court but another racial group can (to play soccer)☹.” However, the students also acknowledged that there are legitimate reasons why some facilities are not accessible, including practicals being conducted at certain times. For example, PFG3 participants stated that “we are unable to use G-20 LAN due to ‘pracs’ even when no one is in there”. Students are also sometimes unable to use the LAN when it is available due to study commitments. However, the difficulties associated with access, especially to computer facilities and the library, is a source of frustration. Some also struggle to deal with the competitive university environment: “books at the library are not enough you must get there first or else, too bad” (PFG2). Furthermore, some university resources are considered unreliable: “the use of academic systems e.g. Turnitin – that are not reliable” (PFG2). The students also felt that the level of noise in the library could be managed better.

Other institutional challenges include “cruel lecturers ... [who] lack ... motivation” (PFG3). These participants added that, “most lecturers are unfriendly during consultation.” Some were described as impatient and unwilling to help and when they do, they do not meet students’ academic needs.

5.2.11.2 Condition of university facilities.

The results of the study reveal that students are disgruntled not only with the inadequacy of university facilities but also with the condition of some of these facilities. The following extracts from FG6 express such dissatisfaction:

“some lecture venues are too small for the amount of learning.”

“lecture rooms like 14 last semester ...freezing [is too cold] even if you had your snow jacket on and it lead students no longer attending.”

Faulty equipment is another issue: “[the] technology in the lecture theatres is faulty/ often does not work at all.” The results of the study show that students compare facilities on their campus with those on other campuses: “when compared to the [rest of the] UKZN Institution, [the] Howard [College campus] is [has] poor ...places of study”.

Students also raised the issues of shortages of study material in the library. For example, FG2 participants stated that “some books are not available at libraries.” FG4 expanded on the challenges relating to library services: stating that there are “few prescribed textbooks in reserve section/floor.” Moreover, FG2 participants noted “[the] restricted times to borrow textbooks/reserve especially prescribed ones.” Most of the students that participated in the study rely on university resources to access essential learning aids.

The results of the study also indicate that students are concerned about the shortage of workspaces to study. FG6 participants stated that there are “not enough study areas” on campus, and labelled this “the study-workplace challenges.” Students have to wait their turn for the limited space: “there is few of them [study areas] which makes it time-consuming ’cause there is always a queue.”

Some of the students expressed disappointment at the quality of some university facilities. Others asserted that the university has “out-dated resources” (FG2). Students that have high expectations of the kind of equipment they will find at university are disappointed when they have to use “old computers” (FG2). According to the FG2 participants, “lack of proper facilities cause students to toyi toyi [engage in protest action]. Thus no lectures”.

5.2.11.3 Facilities for residential students.

The results of the study indicate who students that live in university residences face numerous challenges, ranging from infrastructural defects to challenges with regard to social integration. The diversity of the student body accounts for some of the challenges faced by first-year students. Overall, the participants were not satisfied with what FG2 described as “Res [residential] conditions”. They raised various issues, including “cold water in the morning at res” and “cold showers in winter”. Health and safety issues were also raised, such as “rats in residence” and “poor ... maintenance and security” (FG2). FG6 participants noted that, “...electricity cut-off while studying, cold water and lots of disturbances” contributed to the poor quality of life in university residences. The participants in this focus group also noted that, “shuttle times are too few” for those who reside on satellite campuses.

Particular challenges were cited in relation to students' behaviour and culture within residential facilities. FG1 participants observed that, "noise at res makes it difficult to study", and affects students' sleeping patterns. Some students hold parties and play loud music without considering the needs of fellow residents: "...noise around res when having parties [one] can't study" (FG6) while FG7 observed that, "living at res you may want to study, but people who are staying next door to you are playing loud music."

One of the challenges cited by FG7 participants was "sharing accommodation with people who do not like schooling who are always boozing [drinking] in a house while you want to study". Disorderly "roommates at the residence" (FG1) make it difficult for students to concentrate on their work: "[you] can't study; [you] can't focus on schoolwork." (FG1). Some felt that the university is responsible for this dilemma as there are "no campus pubs where students can relax and drink safely" (FG2). While the university offers many opportunities for students to engage in extra-curricular activities, some find it hard to use sports and other opportunities to integrate meaningfully. Instead, they engage in illegal and sometimes destructive means to keep themselves busy during their free time.

5.2.11.4 Safety and security challenges at the university.

The results of the study show that students are concerned about their safety on campus. The various focus groups that participated in the study stated that the university is failing them by not tightening security. Inadequate security increases their "vulnerability" (FG4). The following extracts highlight this issue:

"Not enough security!! for protection"; "Security systems are not proper... "; "Poor residence maintenance and security" (FG2).

"Lack of security facilities; some students cannot come to campus at nights because of lack of safety like alarms everywhere" (FG6).

5.2.12 Challenges confronting non-residential students.

The results of the study indicate that non-residential students confront particular challenges that pose a barrier to their academic success. These include commuting between their residences and the university campuses and the inconvenience of living far from the campus.

5.2.12.1 *Lack of access to facilities for non-residential university students.*

Distance poses a challenge not only in terms of time, but in other areas. For instance, FG2 participants noted that “if you forget a book or project [it is] hard to get it.” Furthermore, non-residential students lack essential learning material to complete their projects at home or in off-campus residences. The study’s results reveal that some students’ experience exclusion due to a shortage of residential facilities. “Lack of residence for students,” (FG2) was cited as a problem by members of all focus groups. FG5 participants stated that one of the challenges they faced as first-year students was “having problems with accommodation when we arrive in university for those who were not granted the accommodation.” FG6 participants recommended that students “need more res buildings.” FG1 participants highlighted that non-residential students “are not close to library and LANs”; and “when you are far you do not have access to a computer.”

Access to these university amenities is further limited by lack of resources: “you need bus fare.” FG4 participants stated that “[some] students don’t come to campus because they don’t have travelling money”; some students have “too little money can’t afford to travel [and such students] end up quitting.” They added that such challenges “hinder students from actualizing their potentials academically” and often “cause stressful experiences.” This suggests that non-residential students have to find ways to overcome the odds and manage their time. The results of the study show that off-campus students are more appreciative of university facilities which are only accessible within a particular time frame. FG5 participants highlighted that “... [as a non-residential student] you have to leave on time and come on time”. To some extent, non-residential students require additional life skills, which might be regarded as a disadvantage while they are at university, but could prove useful in the real world of work. Time management, planning and efficient use of resources would appear to be necessary for non-residential students’ survival.

5.2.12.2 *Transport and logistical difficulties.*

One of the major concerns among all the focus group participants in this study related to transport difficulties for commuting students: FG5 highlighted the need for “transport for students that are not on campus”. Challenges associated with transport include “having... to take taxis to campus”(FG2); “traffic on the way to school and being late for classes” (FG4); “transport to get to the university may not be available” and “transport on Saturday” (FG1). Students who do not reside on campus are more disadvantaged than those that live in campus

residences. When students “have to take a taxi to campus” (FG2) they cannot guarantee their timely arrival. Attending classes or writing scheduled exams or tests on Saturdays is difficult because the means of transport used by students have no fixed schedule and are often scarce on weekends. FG4 participants underscored this point by stating that “when using public transport, it is difficult to be punctual.”

The participants cited other disadvantages associated with off-campus residence. FG1 participants highlighted some of the consequences of “staying far from school” such as “having to wake up early when you sleep late [you] may get you restless” Despite “waking up early !!!”, “it ... takes long to get to school. Therefore, you may arrive late for lectures”; “...miss lectures” and sometimes end up “...coming late to class, test, exams.” Furthermore, “sometimes you have to attend till late, by the time you arrived at home you will be tired.” The participants stated that commuting, mainly using public transport, is exhausting and a huge inconvenience which affects their education. FG4 participants emphasised that daily commuting “...is exhausting, time lost could contribute to a lot of work” because “we have to travel long distances to school [university].” Students are aware of the disparities between on-campus residential students and non-residential students: “no transport for students who do not live at res (off campus)” (FG2). Another disadvantage is that non-residential students cannot use the mornings to study. The following FG1 extracts captures some of the daily challenges facing non-residential students: “less time to study in the morning because you have to get taxi” and being forced “...to sleep early to wake up early in ... [to attend] class.” Other disadvantages are that “[non-residential students] ... can’t study till late on campus”; “[non-residential] students cannot attend evening classes/lectures”; and they “can’t afford to stay late at school and study at library” because of a shortage of reliable transport from the university campus.

The results of the study also indicate that students are affected by external environmental factors that are not directly related to the university. FG4 participants mentioned factors such as “taxi strikes”; “traffic congestion”; and “[coming] late due to road accidents/taxi strikes and violence.” Such factors not only impede their studies, but pose a danger to their safety. All these challenges make “it difficult for a student to cope because it brings about stress and bad decision in the end.” Some non-residential students are overwhelmed by the diversity of the challenges they have to overcome on a daily basis.

5.3

Conclusion

Based on the study's results, students' academic success depends on various factors which represent the diversity of the student body and different student needs. Students' expectations of the university environment are not always fulfilled and they feel unsupported and frustrated as they try to adjust to a confusing and demanding environment. While residential and non-residential students share common concerns, commuting poses additional challenges to the academic success of non-residential students. The study revealed three main sources of constraints that affect students' ability to cope. These are located at the student, in interactions between the student and the environment, and at the institutional level.

The perceptions of others largely inform the views of students who present with a poor self-image. Such students rely on external forces to direct their actions and behaviour. While it is acknowledged that there are inherent limiting attributes such as poor self-control, laziness, and poor time management (amongst other factors); students underestimate their inherent qualities. They expressed the need for more control and are concerned that "*no one is available to tell them what to do.*" First-year students are not comfortable with freedom without supervision and authority. Moreover, they complain about the heavy workload and the fact that the volume of work increases disproportionately. Some do not display insight that the lifestyle they adopt at university compounds the problem of a heavy workload. As a result, some submit assignments late and sometimes miss classes, which affects their academic record.

Some students lack constructive relaxation and recreation activities. Socialisation and relaxation seem to be largely limited to partying, drinking alcohol and pursuing women. Campus norms appear to determine how male students should behave. Students often allow their peers to pressurise them into doing things that they would not normally do in order to attract friends and not appear as '*Mr Serious*'. The recreational facilities on offer such as those in the sports union require a joining fee that many participants could not afford.

The results of the study indicate that the participants face common challenges ranging from limited access to university resources (including computer LANs, rude lecturers, and inability to understand academic language and course content because of a lack of competency in English which is a second language for most of the students who participated in the study). Some students expressed concern about racist attitudes and claimed that some (white) lecturers cited examples that favour their race and are not welcoming to students when they attempt to initiate individual consultations. Students challenged the notion that

whites are superior and felt that the dominant attitude and behaviour of some students from other race groups is disrespectful and inhumane. It is evident from the results of the study that students experience feelings of discrimination and alienation which lead to homesickness and at times despair.

Many factors, including a lack of synergy between their previous life-worlds and the university environment as well as lack of understanding of university procedures compound the adjustment difficulties the students face at the university. They experience feelings of discrimination and exclusion at many levels which shape their identities. Race, poor family background, social class, a disadvantaged schooling environment, and rural schooling, as well as competency in the English language, inform the various student identities. How students view the significance of a particular identity, shapes their perception of their chances of overcoming the cycle of disadvantage. Based on the study's results, students believe that a poor family background has lasting negative effects that can affect their future beyond the university environment. However, it is worth noting that the pilot focus groups did not express negative views about some university systems such as tutorials and mentoring and the orientation programme. The following section presents the study's results on the enabling factors that help students to cope at the university.

CHAPTER 6

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS PART 2

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the second part of the study's findings. It focuses on the enabling factors that enhance students' ability to cope with university demands and provides a framework for the superordinate elements that influence first-year students' experiences.

6.2 Enabling Factors

The analysis of the data emanating from the FGDs shows, that, a range of factors had a positive impact on students' academic success at the university. These range from intrapersonal factors through to supportive university mechanisms such as tutors and mentors. Moreover, some of the institutional facilities seem to contribute positively to first-year students' perceptions of the university environment. The students' culture, and the unique characteristics that they bring to the university's shared spaces, also emerged as important protective factors. Other factors that contribute to students' well-being and academic success include support from peers and senior students as well from significant others such as families and community members. The students' responses on what enables them to succeed at the university are arranged in the themes presented in Table 6.1 below; direct citations are also captured in the different sections of this chapter.

Table 6.1

Main Themes of Factors Enabling First-Year Students' Success at University

Main themes	Sub-themes
Spirituality	
Previous schooling background	
Individual psychological capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Characteristics• Social and personal assets and resources• Identity• Social integration strategies

Main themes	Sub-themes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-care as an essential element of learning in higher education
Coping with academic demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essential academic skills • Student initiated learning strategies
Institutionally engineered socio-cultural capital.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First year students' orientation programme • Academic support from teaching personnel - lecturers • Social learning in higher education • Technical academic support • Extra-mural activities • External support structures
Positive effect of kinship ties	
Financial capital	
Institutional infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilities • The state of university resources according to first-year students • Benefits for residential students

6.2.1 Spirituality.

One of the study's key findings is the importance of spirituality in first-year students' life at the university. Participants underscored spiritual connectedness with a higher-being such as "God" cited by FG4, FG5 and FG7 participants. FG7 participants expanded on the interaction between "believing in God..." [and] "... prayer!!!" They described prayer as "putting faith in yourself" and acknowledged that the emotional support and contentment they experience depends on the nature of the relationship each person has with God. The following extract captures perceptions of the relationship between the students and God as a higher being, "well with God it depends on how your relationship with him, to me he is like a support system" (FG7). The participants highlighted their need for a trusted and reliable connection with a significant being such as God. FG7 participants contributed concrete

images of how the relationship with a higher being enriches the lived experiences of university students:

“God is that friend and parent who never lets you down”; “He is the source of being alive every day, so he is there for us”; “He is the source of our strength, he is always there for us”; “God does not give you hope only, but he plays a role of being a parent and comforter”; “He understands you more than anyone even yourself, so he’s the person you can trust and rely on”; “He’s my protector”; “He is a source of comfort”; “[God] represents hope and peace”.

The findings show that faith in God is a source of escape and defence against hardship and offers solace to some students. An FG7 participant stated that, “by believing in God, I see myself escaping a life of misery and pain”. Other participants in this group affirmed that the presence of God offers “[a] sense of hope and guidance”, and that “God can be seen as someone who is always there when things are going well or bad”. FG3 participants concurred: “praying give us hope”. Strong faith in God also serves as a buffer against negativity and can be a source of positive attribution for student success: “involving God in your life, everything becomes possible!” “He renews your faith, helps you believe that nothing is impossible” (FG7). These citations show that spirituality and faith in God had a resounding effect on the life experiences of some university students.

It is evident that faith and spirituality do not only function at an abstract level but shape students’ everyday experiences and choices. The following FG7 citations affirm the guidance instilled through spiritual connectedness: “being spiritually true makes one avoid bad behaviour. Therefore, one gets more time for their studies”; “the Bible becomes a guideline on how to cope with life”. These participants added that, God serves as an *in loco parentis* in the absence of biological parents and as a moral compass for students who lack guidance: “... [God] acts as a guardian to some of us live far from home”; “God can be seen as a source of guidance for having so much freedom”; “He keeps me grounded from all the bad things.”

The FG7 participants described their experience of God as warm and enduring:

“[God] gives encouragement that nothing is impossible, gives guidance love and support”; “He is always there”; “He understands whatever you are going through and will see you through it”; “Having God and believing in him everything would seem possible [it is] just a matter of time”; “God will help you if you are in problems as the Bible says we must inform God about our problems”.

These narratives show that the presence of God/faith in the participants' lives strengthens and sustains them; with such sustenance having multidimensional benefits, including protection, motivation and positive human virtues as indicated in the following FG7 citations:

“Make one not to lose hope”; “By believing in God, it helps one to keep on and preserve”; “God can represent hope, courage, discipline and guidance to many students”; “He is our source of strength whenever we are facing challenges.”

Furthermore, God plays a pivotal role in academia and strengthens students' resolve to succeed despite formidable challenges. The students' relationship with God is a source of willpower and motivation to overcome the odds:

“He's a comforter in terms of stress e.g. Test and exams”; “He symbolises hope that everything is possible Even if one is ill-prepared for exams”; “God is always there to push one into thinking one will pass and eventually does”; “gives strength and motivation to study harder and get better marks”; “God gives strength and power for us to keep on studying no matter how hard it is”; “He gives hope that anything is possible. I will get my degree” (FG7).

Participants highlighted the role of the church and prayer in fostering spiritual resilience and ability to overcome life's challenges. FG7 participants' stated that the church plays a meaningful role in strengthening their connection with God: “being encouraged spiritually at church. You get the strength to move on with your life”. Moreover, prayer strengthened their faith. FG3 participants noted the centrality of prayer in remaining connected to God:

“Prayer helps you to have faith that God is with you every step you take”; “prayer helps me to be positive in everything I do”; “building confident knowing someone is there for you”; “gives strength to overcome whatever challenge knowing that I have someone on my side”; “praying is like inviting God to be with you in studying”; “praying helps you feel that your workload is [not] taking its toll on you”.

These participants thus affirmed the interconnectedness of faith in God, religiosity, prayer, and reading the Bible. Reading the Bible builds their resolve to live by its principles. For instance, FG3 participants asserted that, “reading a Bible help me to make sure I don't engage myself in wrongdoing”. Study findings reveal that prayer enhances self-esteem, motivation and self-awareness. The following FG3 extracts provide concrete images of how prayer boosts students' psychological well-being: “prayer boosts my confidence!!!! That I am able”; “prayer helps you to be motivated all the time”; “by praying I feel secure and

watched by God”; “being grateful to God for the opportunity to study helps me to want to do my best.”

Thus, connection with a higher being at a deep spiritual level creates harmony and validates students’ experiences by providing a purpose that supersedes the challenges and tribulations confronting them at university. FG3 participants affirmed the importance of spiritual connectedness: “prayer gives me the feeling of knowing that I am connected to God.” Religion and spirituality play a critical role in many first-year students’ lived experiences at the university; with a number of students embracing the multiple dimensions of human life including biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects. Participants attested that spiritual connectedness and religiosity foster psychosocial wellbeing and mental wellbeing.

6.2.2 Influence of previous schooling background.

Participants also acknowledged the contribution of their previous schooling environment to their higher education experiences. They linked their level of preparedness to engage in higher education scholarship to academic literacy competencies acquired in high school. According to the FG5 participants, high schools “prepare students for university or higher education” using a variety of strategies and focussing on diverse aspects of university life. High school teachers contribute to first-year university students’ ability to cope with university demands by helping them to anticipate the transitional changes: “they stop spoon feeding you and remind you that high school teachers won’t be present in university” (FG5). The strategies include, but are not limited to, fostering a good work ethics and encouraging hard work and independence. Teachers also develop learners’ higher order cognitive skills through the manner in which they set questions. Moreover, high school teachers anticipate some of the challenges that students will face at university and foster adaptation skills to improve social integration. The following FG5 extracts highlight the role of high school teachers in preparing students for the transition to a university environment:

“they prepare you for varsity”; “high schools encourage us to work hard on our own, not to depend on them”; “time management e.g. no late submission even in the test no added minutes”; “test setting e.g. multiple choice it was trick as the one I write in the university”; “high school teaches you to socialise and adapt to a new environment”; “road trips to varsity”.

Study findings show that the high school environment can enable students to embrace positive practices. The participants’ narratives demonstrate that the previous schooling

environment enhanced their self-confidence and strengthened positive identities. FG5 participants share some of the positive experiences with their high school teachers in the following extracts:

“high school teachers boost our self-confidence”; “prepare for your life”; “they shape your life”; “set many rules to form principle to guide you in university where there are very few rules”; “give lots of work to me so that I will be responsible”.

Moreover, participants affirmed that their previous high school environment created opportunities to learn from experienced university students. This was a source of motivation: “in my high school, they invited those individuals from university to address us of what exactly is going on at the university level. (FG5)” Educators also “[hosted] various workshops”, which covered “[the] University system”; and “organisations inside the campus” (FG5 participants). FG5 participants said that high schools “provide foundation [al] knowledge/information”, which “helps to relate to others in university.” Furthermore, high school students receive career counselling, enabling them to “[choose] the relevant subject for a suitable career”; “my high school used to organise so that ... [high school learners are informed about] many careers and choose that you like”.

Not only does the previous school environment foster positive learning practices and boost students’ self-confidence; it also promotes “life skills” and leadership. FG5 participants identified such skills as “self- control”; “life skill of being confident”; “self-confidence”; “discipline is instilled”; “time management”; “dealing with pressure”; “adaptation”; “encourage to work hard and always be on top.” High schools also emphasised that, “actions have consequences”; and offered “a chance of being responsible” such as “being a leader” (FG5). The study’s findings thus show that some first-year students attribute their level of preparedness to participate in higher education to the basic education curriculum that fosters adaptive life skills. According to the participants, Life Orientation as a learning area inculcated positive attributes. FG5 participants stated that Life Orientation, which is assessed using a portfolio of evidence rather than examinations, supported students in the following ways:

“in Life Orientation, we were encouraged to make up our own study timetables and time management”; “being aware that they are a diversity of people and respect their values”; “they taught us to be expressive, to ask if there is misunderstanding”.

Responsible citizenship and social integration through respect for diversity is a critical skill fostered by Life Orientation in high school. Furthermore, some high schools are aware of the basic requirements for participating in academic activities in higher education.

For instance, the participants acquired some computer and research skills at high school: “learning how to use a computer in high school”; “they taught us how to use libraries and basic computer skills”; “not being spoon fed; encouraged to take research beforehand” (FG5).

An educational setting that priorities students’ needs and is orientated to future demands would appear to foster positive attributes. The previous school environment would thus appear to have a resounding effect on how students adapt to a new learning environment.

6.2.3 Individual psychological capital.

Study findings suggest that students also exercise agency. An individual’s psychological capital is a dynamic interaction influenced by the intrinsic traits that shape their character and identity. The following section focuses on characteristics, identity, and social integration strategies used by students as well as self-care practices that enhance their ability to cope at university.

6.2.3.1 Characteristics.

Findings from the present study indicate that the habitus of successful first-year university students displays self-motivation, discipline, and willingness to be guided by those with more experience. FG2 participants cited “self-motivation plus mentor”. Discipline seems to be one of the key features of successful students as indicated by the following extracts, “disciplining myself to study at library”; “separates drinking time and study time, etc.”, (FG2), “self-discipline,” (FG1 and FG4). Other key traits of successful students included the ambition to succeed, patience to persevere and a clear vision and purpose to achieve set goals. The following FG4 extracts reflect some of these traits:

“ambitions”; “stay focus”; “confidence”; “having a clear career goal”; “having a vision for your future is also the key to success”; “patience”; “hard working”; “purpose and aim ... is a way to succeed in varsity”; “achievements, want to be self-sufficient”.

However, the results reveal that students require more than just a positive attitude and vision but should act on these virtues through appropriate action. Students achieve commitment to their work by being “diligent,” and acquiring “good study skills,” (FG1). Other participants highlighted the power of mental peace and freeing oneself from distractions: “being quiet, so as to focus and concentrate on my books” (FG3). FG5, FG1 and FG7 participants emphasised “hard work” as part of holistic academic development. In

addition, FG5 participants highlighted “maturity” as an important characteristic of successful students. Moreover, participants emphasised the effect of age in motivating students who perceive themselves as older students to succeed at university: “most first years have 18; I am 23 so [I] feel pressure in that sense” (FG5).

Besides the characteristics cited above, participants stressed the importance of “positive attitude towards studies” and the need to “sacrifice his/her time to do work at all times” (FG3). The same participants asserted that dedicated students exhibit certain behaviours:

“being dedicated means being able to push yourself to study”; “dedicated students sacrifice leisure time to study”; “a dedicated student is a person who is willing to do more/excel”; “being dedicated means going to the library to get books”; “studying and always focus every time”; “every work is always due on time”; “is to be always concerned with your studies”.

However, FG1 participants warned against a linear focus on studies and called for balanced lives. FG3 participants supported this notion and noted the need for “our ability to take things not too seriously.”

The findings also reveal that the students regard their life experiences and home background as important individual capital that shapes their aspirations. The “type of background that the students come from” was cited as one form of psychological capital (FG1). For instance, FG1 noted that, “not having everything you may want” keeps students motivated as it makes them strive harder for success. The following FG1 extracts affirm this view “not having everything you want helps by making you want to work hard, so you end up having all you want”; “it helps by making you fight for it, making you want to reach that goal”; “wanting to have a good life”. Other forms of “personal input” to achieve academic success include, “studying” and “punctuality” (FG5). Participants thus acknowledged that a good life comes at a cost and requires sweat equity.

Participants had concrete ideas of what they perceived to be indicators of a good life. These included, “... you get things you always have wanted in life e.g. a car” (FG1); and “having a goal to be somebody one day” (FG7). Thus, they do not rely on positive self-talk but construct positive images of their future to achieve their goals. FG7 offered examples: “one day having your own house ... job, business, etc.”; “having a goal to be somebody one day”; “seeing yourself working at a well-paying job and making yourself and parents proud.” They also identified essential steps for academic success:

“knowing what my dreams and goals are and pushing to achieve them”; “having set goals. Knowing what you want and how you are going to get it”; “being patient”; “knowing why you came to the university”; “being confident in yourself; “working hard every day”; “familiarise yourself with the computer because it is something that most humans use daily”; “being able to separate work and play” (FG7).

The participants affirmed the role of significant others: “wanting to make yourself and your parent proud”; “knowing who you are and what you want to achieve” (FG1); “helping other people live their dreams. (Your help can be financial, motivational, etc.)” (FG7). Successful university students exhibit resilience against negative forces and adverse life experiences. The participants highlighted the importance of a positive attitude when faced with difficult situations: “not allow circumstances to let you down” (FG1) Successful students set their sights on the rewards of academic achievement. These could be concrete such as completing a degree, or abstract such as improved human capital: “reward at the end of degree period,” (FG1); “the hunger for knowledge to be a better person” (FG5).

The study’s results demonstrate that positive self-talk is an important component of success at university. Students use encouraging thoughts to help them remain focused and cope with academic demands. FG7 participants cited the following:

“always believing in yourself and not waiting on others to encourage you”; “being committed to do your work and working hard”; “knowing that you are not alone in the situation”; “motivating yourself, being positive and doing your best, no matter what”; “proving negative comments made by others wrong; “consistently reminding yourself that nothing comes easy in life” and that “others are still coping”.

This shows that students position themselves in relation to others as a source of motivation, as a benchmark, and as a means to contain anxiety when circumstances become overwhelming. The narratives show that a consistent backward and forward outlook is critical for academic success. Other students’ experiences serve to gauge the depth of the challenges that others face and are a source of reference for successful practices at university. It is thus evident that students regard the institution as a community of practice that can provide individual and collective psychological capital.

6.2.3.2 Social and personal assets and resources.

The results of the study indicate that certain inherent personal qualities strengthen students’ ability to cope with challenges at university. These are illustrated in the following extracts: “[the ability to] dedicate oneself to school work; “being driven by destiny” (PFG2)

and “passion” (PFG1); “[being] goal-oriented and motivated” (FG1). The participants cited hard work combined with a sense of responsibility as measures of maturity and success. Furthermore, the results show that successful students hold certain beliefs about themselves and their learning environment. These include: “[they] ... have reached the level of maturity”; “we cope because we are adults (PFG2).” While the participants were not able to clearly define a ‘mature adult’, they provided a comprehensive description of what they see as the role of a ‘responsible student’ within the university environment. One could therefore assume that, for them, these are the characteristics of a ‘mature adult’.

Furthermore, the focus group participants did not focus on their inherent attributes, but rather defined themselves in relation to what they are able to do. Most participants used minimal descriptions to demonstrate the individual characteristics that enhance their ability to cope at university and appeared reluctant to lay claims to cognitive competence. However, they draw on a variety of sources for inspiration and motivation. The participants identified the following factors that contribute to their success at university: “support from family” and “support from parents” as well as motivation to succeed (PFG 1 and 2). They are also inspired by “... graduation ceremonies” (PFG1).

6.2.3.3 Identity.

The findings reveal consistent themes of “identity” and the desire for a “sense of belonging” (FG4). Some participants added that family connections sustain students by “telling me to know where I am from”. FG5 participants affirmed that the family “gives a sense of belonging from the different cultures.” These narratives show that students’ multiple identities are embedded in the relationship with significant others. A solid identity enhances their ability to navigate the diverse and complex university environment, thus facilitating positive adaptation. The participants added that they foster a collective distinctiveness, and thus adaptive ability, by identifying with people of the same gender and ethnic group. This highlights self-knowledge, integrity, and belief in oneself as core features of successful student life:

“Gender sticking to you originality.” “Managing adjustment”, “learning to adapt”; “being positive in life”; “understanding yourself and your environment”; “being myself and also being truthful to what I do”; “personal confidence” (FG4).

Furthermore, the students emphasised help-seeking behaviour when confronted with difficulties: “expressing yourself when faced with a problem” (FG7). Coping mechanisms are drawn from a wide variety of sources which incorporate self as an agent of change,

relational connections with significant, others and awareness of the internal and external resources available.

6.2.3.4 Social integration strategies.

The study participants acknowledged the importance of active participation in socio-academic activities that promote academic success and integration. These include tutorials and student networks. This helps them to keep up with their peers and remain informed on developments at the university. FG2 participants identified “lectures, sports (hockey), tutorials, practical,” and “associate myself in study groups” as some of the methods students use to form social networks. Furthermore, participation in career-related and social learning platforms helps students to gain in-depth knowledge on particular subject matter: “involvement in school activities helped you gain more information”, “participate in work/career related activity”, “gain experience” (FG2). Socio-academic integration takes various forms, including “involvement in school activities like counselling, make use of the library, make some consultation time” (FG2).

Moreover, the participants maintained that meaningful participation involves accessing background knowledge on the course content by attending lectures and maintaining an inquisitive frame of mind. Hence, FG2 participants highlighted that “attending lectures at all time”, “asking questions to the tutors and lectures”, and “asking a useful question to others” are prerequisites for sharing knowledge. The participants also underscored proactive seeking of knowledge in order to keep up with other students: “being on the ball knowing what is happening” (FG2); “seeking information to understand better varsity life that assists in eliminating possible struggles” (FG6). Appropriate friendships were also regarded as being important: “having friends that are dedicated to school as you”; “allow people to help you gets you even more dedicated” (FG1); “having study mates for every module” (FG2). Thus, the relationships students form serve multiple purposes, which include but are not limited to motivation, knowledge sharing, and peer mentoring.

6.2.3.5 Self-care as an essential element of learning in higher education institutions.

Students should be able to care for themselves. Self-care encompasses different aspects such as “getting good nutrients to prevent getting sleep [falling asleep] when studying e.g. morvite”. Other important traits of successful students are that they are aware of potential risks that could compromise their goals and dreams. Thus, they participate in programmes that enhance their understanding of such factors. FG2 participants noted that students

familiarise themselves with health issues related to “HIV/AIDS awareness programmes” offered at the university and use “student counselling service whenever necessary.” The results show that building psychological capital requires a holistic approach and acknowledgement of the other as a source to sustain one's strength and resolve one's to succeed.

6.2.4 Coping with academic demands.

The previous chapter highlighted discrepancies in students' study habits, learning styles, and career goals. However, the results show that some students adopt study habits and learning styles that seek to prevent poor academic performance. Essential academic skills, learning strategies, and study skills help students to cope with academic demands.

6.2.4.1 Essential academic skills.

The participants acknowledged the academic skills that are essential for successful transition to university, including academic literacy (e.g., understanding academic language and appropriate writing skills). It is evident from the narratives that they define academic literacy in terms of English language competency, which is the language of instruction. The following extracts highlight some of the essential academic skills and the manner in which first-year students operationalise what FG4 participants consider to be “good English literacy”:

“English literacy is a centre of communication, for easy understanding and it's less time-consuming”; “putting good words together”; “being fluent when answering a question in class”; “a better understanding of what is taught to us”; “to be able to write essays successfully”; “to be able to understand questions in tests and exams.”

The participants also cited the inherent disadvantages of failing to conceptualise and use language correctly. For instance, poor proficiency in the language of instruction can lead to poor conceptualisation of the course content and a lack of depth in the subject area, resulting in overreliance on the work of established scholars, which often leads to plagiarism. The benefits of adequate academic skills are captured in the following FG4 extracts: “it helps you to be able to grasp good information and makes you to be able to write using your own words and avoid plagiarism” thus “improve our writing skills.” It is evident that good command of English is regarded by many students as being linked to sound academic literacy:

“English... [language enhances] understanding of concepts”; “if one can understand English then they can understand what is being taught” “...and to relate to each example”; “[competency in the English language] helps improve academics as one can understand instructions to be carried out in tasks.”

English language competency also affects other areas of their academic life such as time management, socialisation, and integration. FG4 participants asserted that, “it helps the workload to be easier because you will grasp the concept fast”; “[it is] quicker to understand ideas and concepts”; “saves me time if I know a wider range of words vocabulary”. They added that, “the mode of communication is English and our work is written in English,” Therefore, “having the ability to speak and write English contributes to one’s academic life and career in various ways.” A good command of English overcomes barriers within and outside of the classroom and fosters integration. The results reveal the various ways in which this breaks down communication and racial barriers: “useful for communication - prevent communication barriers”; “improve our vocabulary making it easier to make conversation and communicate with lecturers and tutors”; “makes communication with other student and lecturers from different races easier”; “in a diverse university English helps us to understand one another” (FG4).

The participants highlighted the need for a common language of communication and the inherent disadvantages for students who are less proficient in the language of instruction.

6.2.4.2 Student initiated learning strategies.

To overcome structural challenges such as learning in a second or third home language, first-year students consult other members of the university community, conduct independent research on their field of study, and use effective time management and study strategies.

6.2.2.1.1 Core obligations of university students towards their academic success.

According to the participants, committed students attend lectures, regularly and on time; prepare for them and have a positive attitude towards their work. FG2 participants stated that a responsible student demonstrates the following attributes: “lecture attendance”; “taking notes [during lectures]”; “using a textbook in conjunction with slides to study,” “doing your work regularly”. FG1 participants highlighted “attending all the lectures”, and those in FG5 identified “attending lectures and tutorials.” Furthermore, the participants emphasised the importance of comprehending the study material: “study to understand”;

“prepare yourself for the lecture, study before attending” (FG1). Those in FG3 highlighted that effective study habits require “effective time management” as well as unwavering commitment and “determination and more effort on your school work”. FG2 participants noted that “extended reading” and doing “extra reading” are essential practices in academia. Other important study habits cited by FG7 participants included, “putting in extra effort, going that extra mile”; “studying at any time, don’t wait for exams”; and “visiting campus on Saturday.”

Other proactive measures identified included an effective study schedule and note taking and seeking clarity:

“time table making,” “self-study”; “extra readings”; “reviewing your work” “revision”; “making your own notes” (FG2).

“doing work on time so I can get clarity where I don’t understand” (FG6).

“having an effective study schedule”; “asking questions directly to one lecturer after one lecture” (FG5).

“consulting lecturers regarding reading topics ... [they are] struggling to understand”; “ask questions during lectures”; “making sure that you go to your tuts [tutorials]” and “be a friend of the library” (PFG1).

The participants also acknowledged the need to concentrate during lectures and tutorials: “concentration in class” as well as “consistency in ... [their] studies” (PFG1). Consistency includes availing oneself for group assignments, attending tutorials, and “doing tutorial assignments” as well as regular consultations with lecturers. According to PFG1 participants, students should take ownership of their learning process by “getting the prescribed textbook” and “doing extra readings about the modules.” One of the qualities of successful university students is the ability to maintain a “positive attitude towards... [their] lecturers and studies” (PFG1). This demonstrates that students understand that they can influence the environment in terms of the manner in which they appropriate its values and principles, despite being in the minority position in relation to the lecturer-student relationship. Some students also focused on non-human elements of their studies. PFG1 participants cited “respect for school work” as one of the personal sources of motivation.

A more comprehensive discussion of these core skills and other learning strategies that students adopt is presented in the following sections.

6.2.2.1.2 *Consultation with knowledgeable others.*

The study's findings show that the participants take the initiative to enhance their knowledge of the subject they are dealing with and acknowledge the benefits of cooperative learning and seeking support. For instance, PFG1 participants cited the importance of "cooperation", seeking extra assistance from "postgrad students of similar degrees", participating in interactive group discussions, which they referred to as "interactiveness in group discussion" and "asking questions in lectures when confused or struggling with a term or definition." It is worth noting that the participants often referred to tutors as "...my tutor...", and to lecturers as "...my lecturers..." (PFG1, PFG2, PFG3, FG2, FG4, FG6 and FG7). The use of the possessive pronoun indicates the close relationship students have with their tutors and lecturers. However, the relationship with tutors is possibly closer than with lecturers because tutorials are more participative and students able to ask more questions as the classes are smaller than in lectures.

Not only do participants regard others as an important human resource, but they also feel that university students must be receptive to their support: "student consultation - [implies] willingness to learn from others" (PFG1). Students who do not perceive themselves as self-sufficient have a positive state of mind and can foresee their role in education. They are thus aware of the need to consult "lecturers regarding reading topics I'm struggling to understand" (PFG1). Amongst other things, this calls for students to "[attend] all lectures"; recognise the "importance of tutorials"; and "attend tutorials" (all FGDs). Furthermore, PFG1 participants stressed the importance of submitting high-quality assignments within the deadline. They asserted that students should be "submitting every assignment on time."

Students also value "learning in groups" and some "organise study groups" (PFG1). This is an integrated learning strategy, which demands that each student prepares individually so that discussions are meaningful and beneficial for all group members. In summary, the participants prioritise the information that they gain from other knowledgeable students and lecturers.

6.2.2.1.3 *Independent learning and student-led research practices.*

The results show that students' ability to utilise available resources is important in developing appropriate study strategies. The participants emphasised the need to consult additional reading material and foster independent learning through conducting research using the web and other relevant resources. Knowledge enhancement strategies may include but are not limited to "using electronic resources to search for better definitions for hard to

understand terms”; “using the available resources e.g. libraries, Lans etc.” (PFG1). These participants highlighted other strategies to enhance and integrate new knowledge: “use other relevant books of the same module like the one you doing” and “doing an external research on a section or chapter being learned.” However, they also raised the need for “unlimited internet access” (PFG1) to access information.

The students’ conceptualisation of extra assistance is not limited to material resources but involves their active participation to link their previous knowledge with newly acquired information. PFG1 participants stated that students try to “pin real life examples in relation to what is being studied.” Examples include “... [linking] what is learned in a particular module with other learnings from other modules that... [students] do”; “involving what is being learnt in class in your daily conversations”; “linking chapters when studying and find the relationships [in various modules]” (PFG1). This shows that students are aware that to gain deeper understanding of course material, it is critical to form associations and draw on multiple learning experiences. Students affirmed the importance of establishing a relationship between sections of a module and linking what they learn in one module to another: “use other relevant books of the same module like the one you are doing” (PFG1). Furthermore, the results show that university students also rely on previous tests and examination papers to test their readiness: “using past question papers helps a lot” (PFG1).

6.2.2.1.4 Time management.

The study’s findings show that university students boost their academic performance by effectively managing their time and monitoring the amount they spend on related academic activities. According to all focus groups who participated in the study, “time management” is one of the strategies used by students to cope with academic demands. Apart from taking the time to focus on their studies outside the lecture session, students value the importance of attending lectures on time: “come early to classes” (PFG1). The participants also understood the importance of consistent engagement in academic activities: “studying in advance for tests/ exams” and “work on your assignments on time” (PFG2); “study the chapter after it has been presented in class to familiarise myself with the chapter” (PFG1). PFG1 participants linked time management to anticipation and prompt responses to assignment deadlines: “[time management] has to do with doing assignments as they come” so that “[the] workload... is manageable and does not put students under further pressure”. The same participants argued that completing academic work in advance is a quality

assurance tool: “do assignments in time so that you can edit it before [the] submission time” (PFG1). PFG2 participants highlighted that timeous use of consultation times contributes to academic success: “use consultation times for uncleared tasks.” Judicious use of time is an opportunity to address knowledge deficiencies before submission deadlines; with the ability to meet deadlines being regarded as one of the signs of effective study strategies.

PFG2 participants emphasised “using time logically” and “sacrificing”. Participants in this focus group asserted that students can “relax a lot but study in recommended time.” At the same time, they acknowledged, that, students need “to have some time to relax.” They argued that to “reduce workload” first-year university students should “do work at instant [promptly]” and “... [revise] lecture notes every day”. FG1 participants suggested a more proactive approach to studying such as reading the work in advance before it is presented in class: “prepare yourself for the lecture, study before attending”. The participants suggested other concrete strategies to balance academic demands: “[developing] own study time”; “maintaining [a study] timetable”; and “reduced workload – preventing the accumulation of assignments” (PFG2). It is worth noting that students regard time management as an integral component of goal setting. According to PFG1 participants, “goal setting can help one to stay organised.” Allocation of the time and human resources at the disposal of the student is aligned with their goals, aspirations and insight on the purpose of being at university and their perceived coping ability.

6.2.2.1.5 Appropriating effective study habits.

The results of the study reveal different opinions on how often and how much time students should dedicate to their studies and to preparing for assessments like examinations or tests. One study habit is to commit to “study hard from the 1st day” and “study in groups” (PFG1). PFG2 participants asserted that students should at least “study two weeks before the test”, while those in PFG1 stated that “the learning days before exam [should be] +/- 5 days”. Lack of consensus within the same focus group is noted in the following PFG2 extracts: “study at least 6 hours a day”; “studying 30 min each day.” However, there was consensus that university students are expected to consistently dedicate time to studying. While the participants advocated for what they called “excessive learning” or “overlearning” (PFG1), how they operationalise overlearning differs according to perceived individual need.

The results show that some students wait for the ‘right mood’ to study, which could be detrimental to their academic performance. For example, a PFG2 participant reported,

“studying at the right timing (when I feel so).” Others attempt to induce a positive frame of mind by making studying an enjoyable activity: “try and enjoy studying” (PFG2). Some argued that students should not be driven by their mood but should use systematic and consistent study methods. Suggested strategies included “study with the chapter after it has been presented in class to familiarise myself with the chapter”; and “study at least 4 – 5 pages every day before sleeping” (PFG2). However, all the participants agreed that successful students study consistently. PFG1 participants recommended “everyday studying” and “... study effectively.” Others sets their sights lower: “to cram what is to study” (PFG1). This method could be counterproductive as most fields of study at university require the application of knowledge rather than regurgitation of slides and book content.

It is evident that in order to cope with university demands, students need to make studying part of their daily activity and differentiate between leisure time and study time. However, the participants’ responses regarding the amount of time they need to spend on each module indicate a lack of guidance and insight on how they should be structuring their timetable. It is of concern that, while such information is available in module templates some students use ad-hoc methods to plan their timetable. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate that successful students tend to adopt study habits that show independent thinking, and that such students are willing to sacrifice their time and plan their academic and social life around academic achievement. Furthermore, the responses indicate that students take responsibility for their achievements.

6.2.5 Institutionally engineered socio-cultural capital.

The students’ responses indicate that university-led academic coping mechanisms , promote access to socio-cultural and collective capital and help university students succeed in their studies. As first-year students, their main concern is understanding the university environment and the course content and terms.

The findings reveal that students’ integration in academic life depends on the social and academic support they receive from tutors, mentors, and other students. The concept of socio-academic support is appropriate as it captures not only the structured and university initiated support mechanisms but also students’ embedded informal social support networks. There was consensus amongst the participants that additional social and academic benefits are associated with learning from other registered students who share similar experiences.

The participants highlighted university initiatives that contribute to their ability to cope with adversity in the university environment. Based on the study’s findings, the

university has adopted support mechanisms for first-year students. The various forms of institutionalised social capital are discussed in the following section.

6.2.5.1 First-year student orientation programme.

The participants reported the positive benefits of the first-year university orientation programme. They noted that it serves many purposes, such as orientating students to the physical infrastructure of the university and to discipline specific knowledge. All the focus groups held positive views of the “orientation programme” which other groups referred to as “opening week”, “op week” and “Oupa” (PFG1). They indicated that the programme helps students “[to] understand directions at the university” (PFG1). Other benefits include making students aware of the facilities and accessing them. The following PFG1 extracts affirm the usefulness of the orientation programme:

“familiarising yourself with facilities available for students e.g. Lans, libraries and student counselling”; “provide guiding information” to the “venues [so that] you don’t get lost.”

“[helps the students to] be informed of the whereabouts of helpful sources to be successful as a student.”

Ability to locate and utilise resources seems to be a positive indicator of success at the university. The orientation programme provides essential information by directing students “to know where to get help” (PFG1). The results also indicate that the orientation period helps students to gain access to discipline specific knowledge and “guidance” on how students could structure their degree by “providing a clear understanding of degree.” It enhances students’ “broader knowledge of campus” and provides essential “info on where to go for different categories of assistance.” The university orientation programme thus “eases the pressure one might have for going to university.”

It is evident from these narratives that some students have no prior knowledge of how the university systems works. The orientation week is thus a preview of what they should expect in higher education. The participants indicated that orientation “gives a glimpse of what to expect [at the university]” and “introduces students to what is to be expected from [them] in higher education” (PFG1). Student expectations move beyond knowledge of the location of university resources to encompass social and attitudinal elements of being a university student. For example, students appreciated that the orientation programme promotes “motivation” and offers “clear understanding of degree” (PFG1) They also noted that “[the] orientation week is a self-motivating programme” that enhances their chances of

developing new friendships: “we get friends.” Furthermore, students are able to address some of the challenges and unresolved questions about university life and systems. Mentoring opportunities are available for students to raise concerns relating to their chosen field of study: “[as a student you get the chance to] discuss your problems with your mentors and figure out solutions” (PFG1). Acknowledgement that problems can be resolved in collaboration with others is a key to success for students in higher education.

PFG1 participants affirmed that students received “guidance” and “advice” during the orientation period in different areas: “[how] to pick related modules”; mentors “give tips for modules”; “it [the opening week] tells you how to manage time” and “reduce stress”. FG1 added, “boosting of self- esteem.”

6.2.5.2 Academic support from teaching personnel – lecturers.

The participants noted that teaching staff, including lecturers and tutors, are a key to their success. They also acknowledged students that are part of university academic support systems such as mentors and older students as well as support staff. The participants highlighted classroom based support systems that enhance their academic performance. Academic support includes dedicated and knowledgeable teaching personnel such as lecturers and tutors, and mentors who orientate first-year students to the university environment. Technical support and modes such as online learning and Moodle enhance teaching and learning. The participants provided specific examples of how different kinds of teaching enhanced their academic success. They also identified certain qualities and functions of teaching personnel that enhance their ability to cope with their academic work; these are discussed in the following sections.

The study’s results indicate that some of the lecturers have characteristics and work ethics that meet first-year university students’ expectations. The key characteristics of good lecturers identified by the participants included but are not limited to conscientious, dedicated, supportive, friendly, passionate, and willing to sacrifice their time and resources to support students. The following FG2 extracts highlight the characteristics of dedicated lecturers in a more concrete manner:

“dedicated lecturers [lecturers who] makes sure you really understand”; [such lecturers] “give clear information”; “come to class prepared always”; “cope with challenges of subject”; “give extra support”; “makes you motivated to pass their module”; “they always arrive on time at the lecture theatre”; “offer consultation times for those who do not understand”; “giving clear guidelines for students”; and “even loan books to students”.

The key traits of lecturers that help student to succeed are illustrated in the following extracts:

those who] “help you outside varsity hours”; “lecturer who post notes online and offer help”; “friendly plus helpful in class”; “lecturers passionate about their work, e.g. takes her time to explain difficult subjects”; “skills to lecturing”; “they provide simple lecture slide and good explanation of notes!!” and “...makes learning more fun”.

It is evident that university students have a yardstick to measure the competency of the teaching personnel and have explicit ideas of what they expect from lecturers. Overall, they value the ability to skilfully impart knowledge in a student-friendly manner. FG1 participants noted that first-year students appreciate “[the] study tips from lecturers and tutors.” As a result, “we aspire to be intellectuals like our lecturers” (FG2). Lecturers also offer direction to first-year students: “they remind us as to why we are in university and to keep us focused on the goal of getting our degree” (FG2).

However, the results also reveal that the participants had different perceptions of commendable traits in lecturers. FG4 participants mainly focused on their core duties and responsibilities: They identified “lecturer assistance”, which consists of:

“giving an overall idea of what the lecture will cover”; “they ensure that we know what is expected of us students”; “help to teach with understanding the work that we as student must do”; “help us to understand the work”; “they explain ideas, as to what the theory means”; “provide lecture notes”.

Besides providing clarity on the course content effective lecturer support includes preparation and presentation of information in an easily accessible form. This could involve links that connect students to additional readings for the module, focusing lectures on key aspects of the module and minimising peripheral course content. Moreover, students appreciate receiving lecture notes beforehand. The following excerpts show that being a lecturer requires willingness to be supportive and an awareness that students have diverse learning needs:

“giving student the permission to ask questions if they do not understand”; “they help us to focus more on certain topics which help to minimize the amount of work we have to read on our work”; “by explaining every chapter and then tell us to come to them for consultation time for more if information we did not understand in class”; “by also referencing us to the link of the books we internet for that particular course”; “summarizing notes making studying easier”; “give out their emails for those who do not understand”; “avail them and assist in preparation for exam example scope for the paper”; “sending us slides before we go to class in order to have noted in advanced and be able to grasp everything in lecture or class”.

The results show that students derive numerous benefits from consulting lecturers. However, on the FG4 response cards, some participants declared, “[they] never had to approach a lecturer for assistance” which is unfortunate considering the benefits cited by other students when they did so.

The findings also reveal that besides dedicated lecturers and assistance, first-year university students desire approachable and accessible lecturers. According to FG7, “Approachable lecturers” “... make [it] easy for students to ask what they don’t understand”; “approachable lecturer encourage you to ask questions and gain knowledge not only for yourself but on behalf of others”; “less fear, [absence of] intimidation by lecturers”; “approachable lecturers make it interesting to attend because you will be able to ask questions where you don’t understand.”

Another benefit is that approachable lecturers create feelings of trust: “[approachable lecturers are a] reliable source of information” (FG7). Furthermore, they alleviate students’ anxiety and create a sense of belonging: “creates a warm environment in the lectures” (FG7). When the student-lecturer relationship is respectful and shows understanding of students’ developmental needs, it enhances opportunities for active engagement with the course material.

PFG2 participants added some positive attributes of lecturers who are considered part of “institutional soft services.” They believed that “[lecturers] ... are professionally trained staff to provide help” and “...have the capacity to teach, not [just people] who are certificated.” Students in the same focus group also expressed that the lecturers at the university are “dedicated lecturers... [who] understand that student is not at the same level.” They value lecturers who demonstrate commitment to comprehensive support rather than simply fulfilling their teaching obligations. PFG2 participants extended this argument, stating that, “through their passion for their work, lecturers are able to give out the required

[support]” and “... [have] love for teaching besides money.” They had positive perceptions of some of the lecturers at the university and described “competent lecturers” as people who are versatile and “... use all resources e.g. projectors, mic systems” and are “working in their best to give more clarity.” According to PFG2 participants, lecturers who support students’ education “give more general examples” to add clarity to the subject matter and “they provide... [students] with relevant information.” According to the same focus group, such lecturers “... are willing to assist during consultation” and “...give students extra classes.”

The participants value lecturers who “...show commitment and [are] ...fair to students”. According to PFG2 participants, such lecturers demonstrate this commitment in various ways. For example, “they pitch for lecture time,” and they are “non-arrogant lecturers,” “hardworking lecturers” who ensure that they prepare notes before a lecture and “they make ... [students] understand a difficult concept.” First-year students in higher education monitor the services they receive from lecturers. Some of their expectations are met by what they called hard working, and competent lecturers “...that are always helping” (PFG2). Students stated that such lecturers help students to listen to them when they teach.

Based on the extracts from the main contributors, namely, FG2, PFG2, FG4, and FG7, the key qualities of good lecturers include, inter alia, the amongst others, ability to deliver the subject matter in a manner that is appropriate to the students’ level of knowledge while enhancing their understanding of key concepts. They facilitate this process using a variety of strategies such as competency in presenting lectures, attending to students’ needs, and even anticipating the difficulties confronting first-year students. Lecturers’ work ethic and teaching style enhance students’ confidence and trust. It is clear from the participants’ narratives that they see lecturers as positive and intelligent role models. Good university lecturers also contribute to a positive learning environment by making themselves available to students, and demonstrating passion in the way they perform their duties. Furthermore, they have a warm disposition, which enhances feelings of inclusion amongst students.

The participants also noted that slides or notes are important during lectures. PFG3 participants said that “slides help ... [students] to understand more about the course” and “...assist ... student[s] to understand the content of the module.” They are useful in different contexts such as when students are preparing for tests and examinations. PFG3 participants indicated that “slides are helpful when studying for test and exams” and “... [slides] helps while you are writing your assignments”. However, it is of concern that some students mainly rely on slides to prepare for assignments, tests, and examinations as indicated in the

following extracts: “some of us don’t have study material such as textbooks, etc. thus the slides assist in understanding” (PFG2) and “[slides] are useful ’cause [because] many students do not have the textbook” (PFG3). However, the participants agreed that slides enhance students’ understanding of the course material even for those with textbooks: “[slides] makes you understand what you have [been] taught by [the] lecturers” (PFG3).

6.2.5.3 Social learning in higher education.

According to participants, one of the qualities of a student who is likely to cope successfully at the university is acknowledging the contributions of peers and senior students. Students in PFG1 cited “asking questions in lectures” and that “the tutorials do help a lot.” Furthermore, they saw value in “getting help from [a] pupil who has passed the course.” The results show that the participants triangulate sources of information to enhance their understanding of the course content. They do so by “consulting lecturers” (PFG1) and tutors as well as other students (such as mentors) and those who have been part of the institution for a long time. In addition, they recognised that the university system has multiple sources of information, including “getting help from a pupil who has passed the course” and “consulting my tutor” and “working together in terms of study groups create study mates” (PFG1). Such learning practices affirm their commitment to the “use of university services” (PFG1). The following section discusses some of the social learning strategies that students use to cope with academic demands.

6.2.2.1.6 Mentorship.

The findings of the study reveal that during the orientation period, first-year students are introduced to mentors who are regarded as a valuable source of knowledge and wisdom. Although the participants did not provide details on how these mentors interface with students, they place high value on these relationships: “fantastic mentoring by a senior student, postgrad, etc.” (PGFG2). This group added that, “mentors help students to know what is required from them by the university” and “they guide students”, without identifying the ways in which this is achieved. According to PFG2 participants, “students who have been at a university for a while” contribute positively to student success. FG2 participants defined “mentors [as] those students who are postgraduates and also tutors”. They include undergraduate students: “get help from 2nd or 3rd-year students who did the same module”;

“mentorship from 2nd-year students who know the stuff we are learning as 1st years.” FG1 noted “help of the other students (2nd year).”

Some participants did not make a clear distinction between mentors and tutors: “tutors can be recognised as mentors” (FG1). The broad definitions offered by the participants suggest that mentor and tutor functions at the university are integrated. In addition, some responses show that certain participants had not experienced mentoring at the university. Asked to unpack what they meant by mentoring, one of the response cards in FG1 stated that: “some students do not have mentors.” Other students defined mentorship in relation to the workplace: “mentorship could be companies that offer job shadowing opportunities” (FG2). While there was consensus on the value of mentoring, the results show poor conceptualisation of the role of the mentor, with some students having no access to this social learning strategy.

However, there was consensus on the core qualities of mentors, which may include sharing experience of being at the university, knowledge of university processes, and the attitudes and values associated with being a university student. According to FG2 participants, mentors are “...older students”; who “gives you guidance from their experience”. They are sources of reference because of their success and experience; FG5 participants stated that they are, “role models, people who have achieved” and “they supply important information [to] other students”); and “gives you guidance from their experience.” They also offer practical support: “having someone showing you how to use resources like a computer, the library”; “teaching time management skills”; “they show the ropes (how basically handle everything you will face)” (FG1). Another role associated with mentors is curriculum structuring: “[mentors] help in choosing your modules” (FG1). PFG1 participants added that “fantastic mentoring by senior students, post grad, etc.” contributes positively to students’ academic success and enhance their ability to socialise in a more meaningful way. The results show that mentors guide students on how to select their study programme and help them to maintain appropriate habitus to cope with academic demands at the university in a collegial manner.

6.2.2.1.7 *Tutors.*

Tutorials are another service available to students. The results indicate that there are direct benefits in participating in the tutorial programme offered for first-year students at the university. According to the participants, “attending tutorials for progress” ensures that students have “...information that is accurate ... [relating to their] studies”. PFG3

participants claimed that “when... [students] miss lectures you can refer to them [tutors]” and “the tutor can provide you with a clear description of the subject.” Tutorials provide useful information and are particularly helpful “... when you are doing assignments, research”; they “...make much better clarity on notes” (PFG3).

“[Tutors] serve as a communication between a lecturer and students” (FG2). Similar to mentors and lecturers, tutors suggest useful study techniques; first-year students receive “study tips from lecturers and tutors” (FG3). The results show that the tutor-student relationship is a reciprocal one “when the student is dedicated to work and so is the lecturer and tutors” (FG1). The participants’ narratives show that the effort students put into their work reflects the level of commitment and dedication of tutors and lecturers.

First-year university students described the benefits of the tutorial programme in terms of its structure and function. Smaller tutorial classes enhance student participation and promote a more individual approach to the subject matter. The FG2 participants affirmed that tutorial sessions are composed of “smaller class groups”; and that classes are held in “smaller classrooms”; which makes it “easier to interact with tutors.” According to these participants, tutorials fulfil the following functions:

“[tutorials] cover work in lectures; “tutors answer questions”; give everyone a chance to partake in class”; “...conduct good group discussions and getting more clarity on that particular course”; “tutorials give more clarity and help break down big ideas discussed in lectures like essay writing”; “tuts breakdown the course content”.

The tutorial process involves dynamic interaction amongst students and between students and tutors that enhance effective learning. Additional advantages are that students receive “personal help” from tutors who “irons out any problems students have.” The participants affirmed that the tutorials enhance their personal development: “they inspire you too”; “giving us feedback to our studies” (FG2). Furthermore, the participants stated that tutors build students’ confidence by facilitating experiential learning: “learn with trial and error [during tutorial session]” (FG2).

The participants also argued that students advance their social support networks by “making use of tutorial gatherings which deals with a person to person problems and issues” (PFG1). Based on the above extracts, students do not regard tutorials as merely an opportunity to learn, but use these gatherings to share personal issues. The results also indicate that the role of the tutor moves beyond offering academic support to providing counselling and problem-solving skills for first-year students.

Other sources of mentorship include peers who the participants regarded as a source of useful information. For instance, FG2 affirmed peer support as follows: “we as students mentor each other and help each other to get along with studies”; “dedicated friends, mentors, guide us towards the right path to succeed.” “Group discussions” and “study groups” were also identified as valuable support systems. Participants stated that students who cope successfully at university are able “to share what... [they] have learnt” and “share ideas” (PFG1 and PFG2, respectively). Not only do they help other students to grow, but they also acknowledge their limitations in that they ask people to help them when they need support. Participants in PFG1 stated that it is the student’s responsibility to “... ask people around you who have done it” and “getting help from a pupil who has passed the course.”

In addition, FG1 participants affirm that “participation in group discussions during lectures” and “discussing difficulties with friends” enhance first-year students’ understanding of the course content. Group study also promotes positive associations amongst students: “working together in terms of study groups create study mates” (PFG1) who can be a source of support. The participants regarded group work as a critical component of classroom-based learning and socialisation in that “the formation of the study groups” enhances learning (PFG2).

Furthermore, peer mentoring offers an opportunity to benchmark first-year students’ learning practices and understanding of module content by “comparing notes with fellow students” (FG1). “Competition between dedicated friends drives both parties to succeed” (FG1). Healthy competition is fostered when students are challenged by “being with other students who know better than you.”

Study mates promote academic success. PFG1 participants noted that the ideal mate or peer provides “outstanding support...” and is someone one can “share ideas” with and is “ambitious” (PFG3). Students are aware that they should “avoid peer pressure” (PFG1) and of the responsibilities of accessing and sustaining peer support. It is worth noting that peer education is the preferred method of learning beyond institutional social learning programmes.

6.2.5.4 Student counselling services.

The results of the study show that seeking support is not limited to tutors and other university students, but also involves peers in the same programme and officials in the student counselling unit. The participants stated that students make use of “student

counselling” (PFG1) as well as other services when necessary. PFG1 participants appreciated “[the] social support from counselling [services]” offered by the university. They felt that the ability to listen to other people’s points of view and accept help from others are critical components of success in higher education. The following quotation from PFG1 captures this view: “taking advice from counsellors.” One can assume that in order to put advice into practice, a student should have the capacity to listen and to absorb information, as well as accord appropriate respect to the person offering advice. The student also needs to trust the person giving the advice.

6.2.5.5 Technical academic support.

The results of the study also reveal that first-year students acknowledge the positive contribution of various learning and teaching modes. The participants expressed appreciation for Moodle (an e-learning tool) and the academic writing skills conducted at the “Writing Place” (FG2). According to the participants, many benefits are associated with online e-learning, including:

“makes studying easier (post notes on the web)”; “get notes if you sick/absent”; “keep students updated on university work”; “helps update with notes and class discussions”; “easy access to course”; “we get notes and extra readings on Moodle, an effective way of getting school work to students” (FG2).

However, some participants did not share these sentiments. FG2 participants stated that “[e-learning methods are] not helpful to me for now.”

The results also indicate that “the structure of [the] curriculum” (FG1) places first-years students at an advantage. FG4 participants acknowledged the “flexibility of modules,” while those in FG6 recognised that the structure of degrees allows for a choice of degree and modules to suit students’ needs: “doing a degree that you’re passionate about.” Furthermore, FG1 participants noted “lots of free periods” which helps them balance their study and leisure time as indicated in the following extracts: “not have to focus on many things (fewer modules)”; “... catch up on previous lectures”; “you have more time to revise and study”; “[more] consultation time”; “more time to relax your mind.”

6.2.5.6 Extra-curricular activities.

The results also show that there are a range of extracurricular activities at the university, including physical and team sports such as “soccer,” “tennis,” “rugby,” “swimming, rowing.” “...athletics!”, “basketball” and “gymnasium” (FG2). Other non-

contact team activities are “debating” and “tennis” (FG2); while FG4 cited “religious organisations” such as “...churches” as one of “many recreational programmes” offered at the university. FG2 participants noted that physical activities “helps [to reduce] stress levels”:

“going to gym free your mind and keeps you mentally active”; You come out of university healthy and have big muscles”; “sports open you mind allows you to think well”; “keeps students healthier”; “keeping us active and energetic,” “set your mind aside from being academically committed (sport).”

Furthermore, the participants acknowledged other indirect benefits of engaging in sports. For example, FG3 participants highlighted that, “some skills needed in sport could also be applied to managing your work”; “assist the student to teamwork, interpersonal skills.” They added that “netball helps with communication and de-stressing”.

Sport also helps to connect students:

“playing sport help us to interact with others, ‘teamwork’”; “sport helps to socialise with other people”; “help to learn to be a team”; “to communicate with different people”; “sport helps you to get to know people and be able to communicate”; “sport boosts confidence, your self-esteem, and physical abilities” (FG3).

The participants added that sport “creates social life” (FG2). Thus, students are aware of the positive effects of physical activity on their psychological wellbeing and social connectedness.

On a less positive note, the findings show that some first-year students who participated in the study regard alcohol consumption as a form of extra-mural activity that produces a similar effect to sports. FG2 participants asserted that alcohol consumption: “relieves stress (alcohol)”; “drinking booze de-stresses you!!!” the same way as “gym helps you de-stress”. These participants added that alcohol “drowns your sorrows!” and promotes socialisation: “meets friends drunken ones”; “fun time with friends getting drunk”; and “to cope with the stress of being a student.” However, they were also aware of the negative consequences; FG2 participants highlighted that the effect of alcohol is temporary and could result in negative consequences: It “temporarily takes away stress”; “drinking could cost you money and even involve you in illegal action”; and it “keeps you awake.” Hence they concluded that, “drinking does not help us (alcohol).”

6.2.6 Positive effect of kinship ties.

First-year students rely on diverse social capital to cope with university life. The study's findings reveal that familial support structures play a major role in supporting students in higher education. The participants listed some of the ways in which their families helped them to cope. In response to the question, "what helps you and other students to cope at the university," they stated: "Parents help us"; "parental support"; "support from home"; "friends' support and family" (FG2). FG1 participants affirmed, "the support from the family" as a coping mechanism. FG5 cited "[the] family as external support," and FG7 pointed to "supportive family members" while FG6 and FG3 participants highlighted "family support" as a coping strategy.

The way in which the participants experienced support overlapped in many ways and they gave different examples to share their experiences and perceptions. For instance, FG1 participants perceived mentorship as a source of support inside and outside the family: "my mentors are my family"; "family and friends and relative [are] also mentor"; "high school and educators." "Parental support" was described as "encouragement."

"your family motivates or encourages you to study for a better life"; "calls" and "provide emotional support when UKZN's work is too much"; "support you financially during emotionally stressful times"; "don't need to worry about financing your studies"; "gives you the idea that what you doing is acknowledged"; "parent motivation to do well"; "moral support"; "support in term of being able to achieve varsity studies"; "support in terms of finance"; "financial motivation"; "motivation from parents"; "to focus"; "they support by their motivation on how to approach studies" (FG2).

It is evident that financial support has multiple effects on students' ability to cope at the university. Not only does it show that the student's family recognises and appreciates their hard work, but financial support alleviates students' stress levels and enhances their ability to focus on core academic activities.

In addition, the results show that students also expect more from their parents, such as direct involvement with their academic work. Moreover, parents are perceived as role models; FG2 participants cited "looking up somebody (father)." Other forms of "family assistance" include essential academic resources such as books and opportunities. The following FG1 extracts show the nature of support provided: "being able to get books for you"; "giving you the motivation to study"; "[the] support [you] get from the family is giving you time to study." The overall theme that emerged from FG1 is "your family dedicating themselves to

supporting you in your studies.” First-year students experienced familial support at different levels such as emotional, financial, and moral. Such support enhances their resolve to do better; it “makes you become a greater goal-getter” (FG2).

Beyond family support, students identified other benefits associated with being members of diverse family structures. For example, FG1 participants cited some “influential factors” from “family background” which they conceptualised as “the support from the family.” Amongst other things, they mentioned that being the first generation to attend university is considered a positive influence: “the idea that some students are the first in their families to go to university and that keeps them motivated to keep going.” Success and family upliftment are linked to this notion. The participants asserted that hailing from a disadvantaged background compels students to work harder: “a person from a poorer background will work harder”; “so a person can become better than their background”; “...to become more successful” and “wanting to change the background of your family” (FG1). FG6 participants affirmed that a student’s family background motivates them to strive for success: “knowing my situation at home that motivates me to strive against the struggles and cope against the odds.”

Students from educated families face the different challenge of maintaining the family status. FG1 participants noted that “students with successful family members will want to be like them...” and this might involve “...sharing of ideas that concern the module.” They added that, if the family is supportive, “they [family members] assist you with your work.”

The results of the study thus reveal that the family is rich in social capital that fosters student resilience in higher education. The participants underscored the role of the family in influencing first-year university students’ academic success. They also noted that students tend to appropriate the values and practices in their immediate environment such as their family. FG7 participants highlighted the positive influence of the academic background of family members: “having one of your family members, who have graduated” is a “source of hope.” They added that, “having both parents alive” is an important aspect of family background and highlighted students’ responsibilities to their families: “helping our families financially and being there for their needs.” Based on these findings, the results reveal that first-year students have a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship with their families.

Furthermore, the participants stressed that the family guides students:

“guiding you in every step you take even small things like passing tutorial assignment or scan also motivates you”; “emotional encouragement”; “acknowledge the amount of effort you put into surviving tertiary and studies”; “support-encouragement-understanding my weaknesses and not blame me for failing”; “understanding the time constraints of university life” (FG6).

According to the participants, the core features of a supportive family include, but are not limited to the following traits or practices: trusting the student to succeed, motivating and encouraging him/her to persevere despite the challenges, and respecting their career choices. These are cited in the following PG6 extracts:

“trusting you to achieve highly”; emotional support when they call and check up on you on a daily basis”; “encourage you”; “having someone always to talk to”; “during exam times, before going to the OMSH [the examination hall] they must call you, text you and telling you that you can make it”; “encouragement even in tough times like failing”; “give and comfort when needed”; “loving you no matter what happens”; “always willing to listen”; “respecting the student’s time”; “support, they must not take up your time.”

These extracts suggest that the participants expect unconditional support and regard from members of their family who are expected to sacrifice their time, manage their uncertainties, and offer consistent support. The participants described the behaviour of an ideal family of a university student as people who not only offer material resources but psychosocial support through guidance and counselling. Moreover, families are expected to listen and advise students. The narratives of FG6 participants below show that students have explicit ideas on how they want their families to support them:

“[The family should ensure that as a student you have] ...24 hour access to computers and being able to do your work anytime”; “giving valued advice about school, friends and priorities”; “knowing that even when you fail there is someone to encourage you”; “listening to your academic problems”; “getting Financial Aid”; “[opening a] trust fund.”

In addition, the participants expect their families to respect their career choices as well as conduct research in order to gain more in-depth understanding about these choices:

“supporting my choice of study”; “support: Your parents should find people to speak to you about your career”; “[respect] the choice of study that you would like to embark on!”; “if your family has no knowledge of what you study they should find out about it” (FG6).

The responsibilities of family members thus include mentorship, counselling, career guidance, and sponsorship. As stated by FG6, “support should come in the form of putting our needs [as students] first.”

Similarly, FG5 participants highlighted the need for family support and cited several ways in which families enhance the coping skills of first-year students. Families should ensure “good accommodation and financial support”; “family should support by providing food for you”; “family should give you money for books if you do not have financial aid/bursary!” and “providing for [other] needs.” These participants also stressed that families could demonstrate support by setting high expectations and pushing students to achieve their goals:

“Knowing that your family has got high expectations of you”; “drive me”; “force me”; “encourage me to push for my future”; “family supplies pressure to do well to compensate for school fees they pay”; “parents put pressure on us so we are forced to work hard”; “they are the ones paying your school fees, so you do not want to waste their money...knowing exactly the kind of sacrifices they make for you to be here”.

However, family support is also a gentle, affirming experience that “give a warm feeling of comfort”; “give peace no pressure to do work”; “they believe you are passionate therefore leave you to do the best” (FG5).

Furthermore, family support nurtures students’ spiritual wellbeing and prevents mental illness and psychological distress:

“support emotionally”; “praying”; “they contribute or must contribute by frequently visiting you”; “texting me with funny messages”; “a boost of your esteem”; “they call to check up on me and my progress”; “encourage us when facing depression as we will be far away from home”; “family believes in you even when you have stopped believing in yourself”; “family supports you and motivates you to keep pushing in your studies” (FG5).

Family support thus anticipates potential adaptation challenges. Families should provide guidance on how to cope with change. Being a member of a family also strengthens students’ ability to cope with diverse and competing university cultures because the family

serves as a source of reference and encouragement. FG5 participants noted that, “[the] family gives a sense of belonging from the different cultures”.

The results of the study demonstrate that family support involves sacrifices by certain family members and that studying at the university is a collaborative family effort. FG3 participants acknowledged the sacrifices made by various family members:

“Mom’s sacrificing everything so I can be here have shown that she believes in me, that makes me want to do well”; “my siblings wake me up in the morning to go and attend lectures”; “my family sacrifice for my behalf to be in university”; “my successful siblings and friends encourage me”; “make sure all the time when I ask for money they give me financial support”.

FG6 participants also confirmed familial support: “my brothers support both financially and emotionally”. Besides sacrificing resources and time, families provide incentives for students to succeed and help first-year students to link their studies to prospects: “they promise to reward me so I can stay motivated”; “my family rewards my achievement”; “they put positive pressure to you, by giving you a reward when you did well”; “always tell me to do my best at present so that I will have bright future” (FG3). They also inspire students to succeed: “family tell you to be positive and make sure you pass”; “telling me to know where I am from” (FG3).

Families thus make a fundamental contribution to students’ well-being by providing emotional, physiological, financial, spiritual and psychological support. They sustain first-year students as they adapt to the university environment and serve as constant reminder of who they are. Moreover, the family gives students a sense of belonging and purpose and connects them to their origins. Students are not only driven by their immediate needs but see themselves in relation to their family and their prospects. Their conditions, and those of their families, can either improve or deteriorate depending on their progress.

6.2.7 Financial aid.

Other sources of financial support besides the family are the university financial aid scheme and NSFAS. According to FG5 participants, the “financial aid system helps students focus on their studies knowing that the finances are taken care of.” Financial stability is essential for students’ academic success: “being able to get the resources you need” helps students to cope (FG1). Financial assistance enables students to acquire “study materials” such as “textbooks,” and other “resources that you need to write an essay” (FG1). There was

a consensus amongst the various focus group members that access to study material is a critical success factor.

6.2.8 Institutional infrastructure.

The findings of the study indicate that the “[the] availability of [institutional] resources” is a positive indicator of success at the university (FG4 and most other participants).

6.2.8.1 Facilities.

Various focus groups provided examples of resources offered at the university such as “sport at UKZN...” and “recreational organisations...” (FG5); while FG2 participants highlighted “24-hour LAN and after-hour library”. Furthermore, students highlighted the benefits associated with the availability of resources:

“Sport at UKZN helps student to have healthy body on a healthy mind” (FG5);

“Recreational organisations help students keep fit and healthy which helps them cope with their studies” (FG5);

“Lans and libraries. It won’t force you to buy a laptop you cannot afford - it won’t force you to buy textbooks you cannot afford” (FG5);

“The resources that we have (library, the Lans) (FG7).

“The libraries help because we get textbooks, books and time to study alone” (FG1).

“Quiet places to study” (FG3).

There was consensus on what students consider as essential resources to fulfil academic tasks. FG1 participants asserted that “resources that you need to write an essay” include but are not limited to “study materials such as textbooks” which students can obtain at the “library.” Other resources include “internet access...” and “...the sources provided in the library...” such as the “library catalogues” (PFG1). The university’s library services provide support in various ways: “the libraries help because we get textbooks, books and time to study alone” (FG1). Other resources that facilitate learning include “access to the internet; access to computers”; “...past exams...”

The participants recognised the supportive role played by university facilities, which offer resources that some students cannot acquire such as textbooks and computers. The university also promotes positive health and well-being by providing recreational facilities. The participants appreciated that they could access the library after hours and other facilities for individual study.

6.2.8.2 The state of university resources according to first-year students.

PFG2 participants indicated that, “[the students] have reasonable facilities” and that “the available facilities are to some extent efficient.” PFG1 concurred and appreciated the “availability of unlimited internet access” which enhanced their ability to use “... electronic resources to search for better definitions for hard to understand terms”. The participants also felt that the university provides a conducive learning environment: “getting a proper study environment” (PFG1). In addition, the participants observed that some classes are not overcrowded: “less packed students in a certain class” (PFG1). They appreciated “having more space at the library to do ... [their] work”. PFG2 participants praised the “good libraries [at the university]” and “good facilities provide the best information [and] relevant information” which “...enable students to pursue their desired goals.”

The availability of study material was noted as another indicator of reasonable facilities. According to PFG3 participants, study material includes “textbooks,” “the study material in the library,” “slides we receive during lectures,” and “having previous question papers of your module.” They were also of the view that there were “...sufficient computer Lans” that help students to perform the practical components of their work: “they [students] have to get computers for their practical” and “when you have missed a lecture, you can always refer to the module at computer Lans” (PFG5). According to PFG3, “[the] computers at Lan help us with finding information and reading our emails” and enable access to “sources like Wikipedia [which] are available at computer Lan to assist students.” The participants stated that unrestricted access to resources motivated them and enhanced their ability to cope: “[when] you have all the study material like books perhaps laptops, etc.” it “...helps to make you stay motivated” and “you can cope well when you have things you need” (PFG3).

6.2.8.3 Benefits for residential students.

The results of the study reveal that specific opportunities and advantages are associated with residential students. These range from savings costs and time to enhanced adaptation and socialisation skills. The following FG3 extracts highlight some of these benefits:

“you get access to library, Lan at any time when you feel to be”; “lecture rooms are very quiet at night”; “getting to lecture early every day”; “computers for entertainment and research for free”; “do not spend a long time travelling to and from school”; “staying on campus help us to save money and budget because we get to do things on our own”; “it helps me to be positive about myself because I get to see people who are positive”; “living close to school makes participating in social clubs/school events better”; “I use to spend my time at Lan trying to use Google and Facebook to relax”; “education broadens way of thinking”.

Other advantages include “[the university] residence is closer to the university facility” in that “while students are staying at the residence, they have easy access to school libraries, Lans etc.” (PGF2). However, some expressed dissatisfaction with the state of the residences. PFG2 participants noted that, “residence have to be [in] good conditions” and that “residence have to be conducive e.g. be accommodating to the student and their needs” and “must be safe.” However, they added that “res [university residence] is more like a home away from home” and that they “are clean houses for people in need.” PFG2 members expressed concern that some students could not access residences and that “some students can’t afford to stay at their home.” Different students attached different values to residential facilities and had various expectations.

According to PFG2 participants, university residences help students “save money if staying far from the university,”; “enables time keeping of one studies” and “gives less stress than home.” The participants felt that students residing on campus are more advantaged than non-residential students. For example, PFG2 participants stated that “the atmosphere is good – there are many students who can help”. They added that, students who live on campus have access to “...wireless internet” and therefore “[residential] students can finish assignments even at night” if they reside in “less noisy residences.” These participants added that, “... [university residences] help us in managing our time properly”. The residences provide a network of support for first-year students: “res [residence] is good for socialising (making new friends) and “it gives students a sense of belonging” (PFG2). The students also valued the recreational facilities within the University: “by facilities that students need we mean Lans and other recreational facilities, e.g., big chill” (PFG2). Based on these responses, it is apparent that “[a] decent and well-secured residence may impact on the success of failure of students” (PFG2).

In summary, residential students spend less time commuting and do not experience the stress associated with daily travelling expenses. In addition, the narratives show that

residential students save money by accessing free internet services even after hours instead of buying data bundles. They also have access to positive role models and opportunities to socialise. Students also highlighted independent living as an additional benefit.

6.3 Conclusion

The study results indicate that the factors that enable students' success at the university are personal, interpersonal and structural in nature. Holding religious beliefs and positive beliefs about life and one's life circumstances serve as a buffer against adversities. The findings highlight, among other things, that active participation in learning and teaching, being motivated, showing commitment to meet academic demands, and maintaining functional habitus promote success for first-year university students. Social and academic support initiatives engineered by the institution, and the institution and students' positive sociocultural capital offer fertile ground for student success. The participants made positive comments on the competence, resourcefulness, and commitment of academic staff such as lecturers, tutors, and mentors. Furthermore, their narratives acknowledge the contribution and developmental role of their peers and senior students in helping them gain an appropriate habitus to foster success at the university. Family and community members also offer financial and emotional support. Meaningful family connections guide students' behaviour and serve as a moral compass.

The student culture and the overall student population serve as role models and a source of friendship, and provide much-needed guidance. Students used *Ubuntu* values and principles as a barometer to evaluate the acceptability of student cultures. It is also evident that stable financial resources enhance access to socio-cultural and individual PsyCap capital by increasing a student's opportunity to participate in socio-academic activities. Adequate financial capital also enhances their social status. Moreover, university resources such as facilities, teaching and learning practices, financial aid schemes (particularly NSFAS) and responsive student support services contribute positively to student success.

The following chapter provides an integrated analysis of the positive and negative factors that facilitate or hinder university students' success

CHAPTER 7

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS: PART THREE

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter on the study's findings presents the cross-cutting factors that influence student success at UKZN using a contextually relevant conceptual framework that emerged from the data. The framework highlights that factors that enable or constrain student success are located at the personal, interpersonal and structural levels. It also underlines the integration and multidimensional influences of these factors to produce positive or negative experiences for university students.

7.2 The Elements of a Contextually Relevant Conceptual Framework that Influence Student Success at UKZN

The elements of a contextually relevant conceptual framework that influence student success at UKZN in figure 7.1 below demonstrate the reciprocal influences of the enabling and constraining factors. However, it is important to note that spirituality and religiosity enhance students' ability to cope at university and are therefore not regarded as constraining factors. A positive sign next to a factor denotes that these elements enable students to succeed whereas negative signs indicate that the factors constrain academic success. A positive and a negative sign convey that both an enabling and a constraining factor impact students' academic success. The enabling and constraining factors facilitate or hinder first-year students' success and ultimately good academic performance.

Figure 7.1 demonstrates that the superordinate elements contributing to first-year university students' academic experiences are located in the nature of the relationship between the integrated systems at three levels of spheres of influence. These are located at a (1) personal level (represented by yellow circles), (2) interpersonal level (represented by green circles), and (3) structural level (represented by red circles). The proximity of the circles highlights the relational patterns between and amongst the elements. The relative size of the circle indicates the prominence of the factor within the spheres of influence at interpersonal, interpersonal and structural levels.

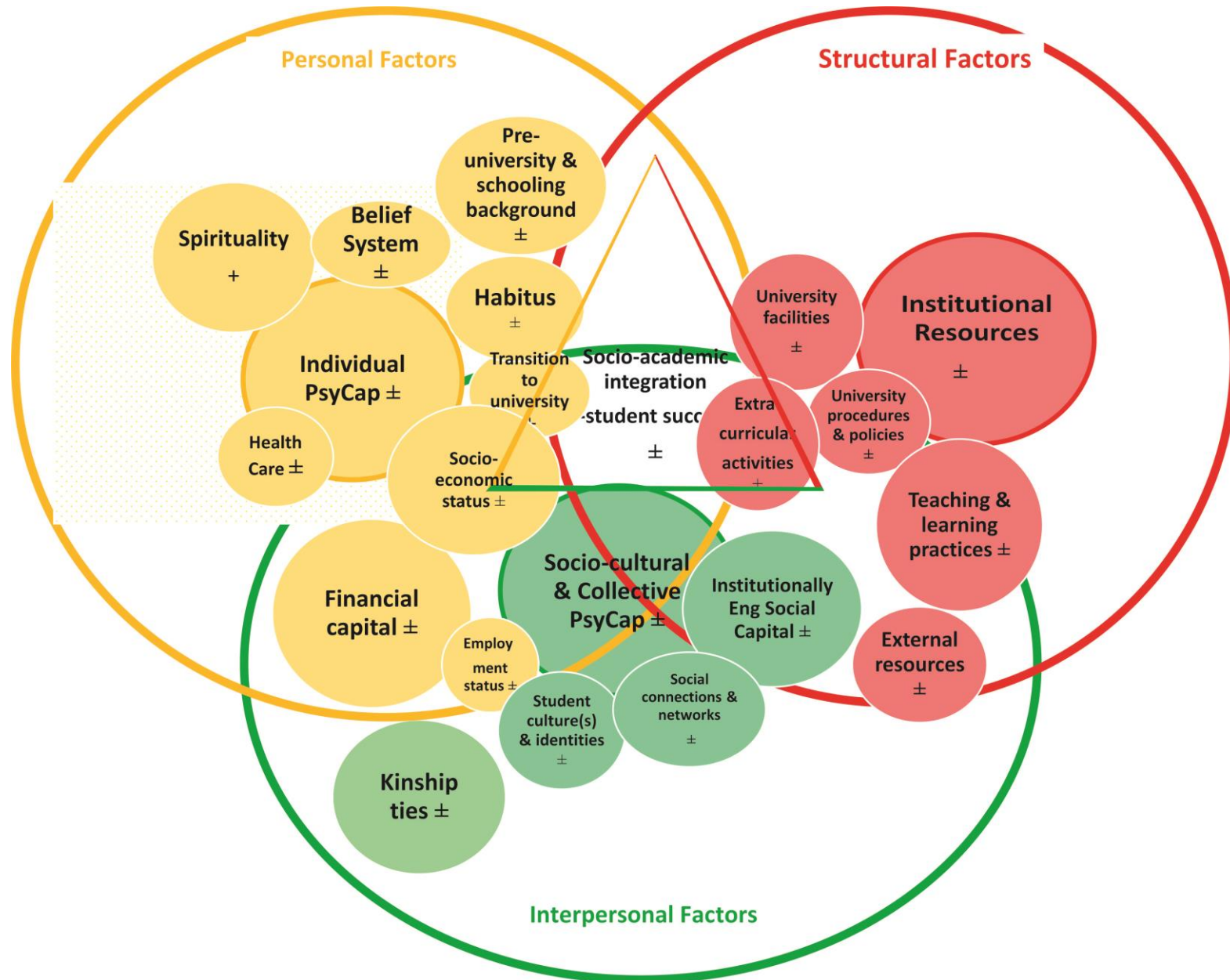


Figure 7. 1: Framework for Superordinate Elements Contributing Towards First-Year University Students' Academic Experiences

The overarching factor at a personal level is the Individual PsyCap which draws from various influences that are indicated in Figure 7.1. Financial resources are another critical factor which influences many aspects of the individual at personal and social level. Hence, financial capital and associated factors such as socioeconomic status and class are located at the interface of both the personal and interpersonal spheres.

The sociocultural and individual PsyCap is located in the middle of the diagram to demonstrate the multiplicity of influences from/to all spheres of student functioning. The size of the circle of the sociocultural and individual PsyCap highlights its relative dominance of other interpersonal factors such as institutional engineered social capital and students' kinship ties. However, it worth noting that circle of the institutionally engineered social capital between the personal and the interpersonal spheres highlights the centrality of the institution in shaping the sociocultural and individual PsyCap available and accessible to students.

The size of the circle of the institutional resources points to its perceived dominance amongst the structural factors that influence student academic success. Teaching and learning practices featured prominently in the participants' narratives, and the results show that the implementation of teaching and learning practices shapes the quality and utility of social capital. The overlap between institutional and personal factors emphasises that students draw on personal factors to access and maintain effective utilisation of institutional factors. The triangle placed in the middle of the three spheres of influence indicates that social and academic (conceptualised as socio-academic) integration of students is an outcome of all three domains. The location of the socio-academic or success factors also shows the complementarity and multidimensionality of the relationships amongst the three spheres of influence, resulting in a contextually defined student. Furthermore, the triangle represents socio-academic integration as a strong indicator of student success or lack thereof. Quantification of the relationships amongst the various factors is beyond the scope of this study. The following sections discuss the three spheres of influence in more detail.

7.2.1 Personal factors.

Figure 7.1 above illustrates the various key personal factors that impact on the student's experiences at the university. As noted above, the elements of the framework can constrain or enable students to succeed at the university, except for spirituality and religiosity, which only promote successful outcomes. The core elements in the personal sphere are the individual PsyCap and financial capital. The individual PsyCap encompasses

the following key elements: (1) Spirituality as a belief system; (2) pre-university and schooling experiences which are embedded in the socioeconomic and political influences shaping students' belief systems; (3) accrued habitus that impacts on the student's transition at a higher education institution. Students appropriate dysfunctional or functional habitus patterns as evidence of negative and positive individual PsyCap. Furthermore, individual PsyCap impacts how students manage the challenges and contradictions associated with low socioeconomic status and inadequate financial resources.

The financial capital element includes the following interrelated factors: the student's socioeconomic status, health care and employment status. Socioeconomic status influences personal and social perceptions of self in relation to other university students. It also impacts on the difficulty or ease of transition to university and the level of socio-academic integration of the first year student. Furthermore, student financial resources have an impact on the level of self-care; however, self-care habits also depend on the student's individual PsyCap. The availability of financial resources influences the student to seek or not seek employment, which has advantages and disadvantages.

The co-influence and multiple dimension of each aspect of the personal factors that is highlighted in Figure 7.1 is complex. Nevertheless, the relationships of the key themes presented at the personal sphere indicate that the student's transition and integration in the university community are embedded in their personal and socioeconomic history which shapes their lived here-and-now experiences. A student's socioeconomic history (home and school background) and perceptions (internalised or externalised) influence their habitus and wellbeing. These key personal factors are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

7.2.1.1 Individual psychological capital.

The individual PsyCap includes and is embedded in the following main aspects: the habitus that students practice or adapt at the university, their competencies and skills, their locus of control and/or control mechanisms to deal with expectations and contradictions, and the level of resilience to overcome challenges and pressure. Some factors such as ideologies and belief systems mediate and feed into PsyCap. Moreover, strong spirituality serves as an enabling factor. Besides a religious belief system, students hold other beliefs or ideologies which constrain or enable their success at the university. Some adopt a deficit perspective while others see inadequacy as an opportunity to improve their disadvantaged background. The internalised image of self and personal beliefs (which can be received or inherent) shapes

the student's perception of self in relation to others. The outcome of this personal analysis could result in an evaluation of self as either adequate/inadequate or advantaged/disadvantaged. The diversity of the student body and diverse student cultures, compound the challenge of developing identities that can facilitate first-year students' functional adaptation. As a result, some students adopt the dominant culture to feel a sense of belonging while others form divergent cultures to express agency and disregard for dominant social norms. It is evident that some university students have a low fund of positive PsyCap which constrains their academic success.

However, it is evident from the results of the study that some first-year students have the necessary individual PsyCap and understand the importance of making an effort to progress at the university. The critical elements that demonstrate positive individual PsyCap are varied and encompass psychological wellbeing, independent learning strategies, goal-oriented behaviour and striking an effective balance between social and academic demands.

The elements of the conceptual framework show that university students also adopt *Ubuntu* values to evaluate the university community. At the same time, they draw on individual traits to cope with feelings of isolation and alienation.

It is evident that students who manage to overcome transitional challenges have sound coping mechanisms, which emanate from their families, previous schooling background and a stable sense of identity. Such students understand the importance of self-care and exercise to cope with competing social, academic and family demands.

7.2.1.2 Spirituality.

Spirituality and religiosity involve belief in a higher being and humane and respectful appropriation of these beliefs. The participants asserted that faith in God serves as a protective factor, a moral compass and invisible support system that are accessed through spiritual connectedness with a higher being/God, appropriation of religious belief systems, praying, and reading and understanding the Bible. Spirituality is a commitment that students make through support structures such as the church and reading the Bible to remain loyal and faithful to the guiding principles and moral values it advocates. The participants underscored the holistic presence of God in their lives as indicated in the following FG7 extract: "God is that friend and parent who never lets you down."

The study results reveal that the spirituality and religious belief systems that students appropriate in their daily life experiences only enhance their success and do not compromise

their positive experience of being a university student. The participants identified faith and religiosity combined with hard work as a recommended way of life for university students as indicated in the following extract: “having faith in God and working hard” (FG7). It is evident from the students’ narratives that faith protects them against visible and invisible forces, gives them hope and guides them when they face challenging times. Having a religious belief system gives students purpose, guidance and moral values that allow them to overcome the diverse challenges they face at the university.

7.2.1.3 Pre-university background.

The pre-university background encompasses a range of academic, technical and life skills that enable or constrain students’ academic success when they enroll at the university. Perceptions that one possesses or does not possess a relevant skill trigger an emotional response of empowerment or disempowerment. The pre-university background is shaped by socioeconomic, political and cultural factors and influences how students view themselves in relation to others within the university environment. The level of preparedness to enter university and perceptions of being accepted in this environment depend on students’ home language, and cultural and schooling background. Students whose culture and belief systems differ significantly from the university culture find the environment alienating in that no caring adults are available to monitor their behaviour and actions. Students from poorly resourced schools find the transition particularly challenging as they sometimes lack the skills and knowledge to access available resources.

Coming from a disadvantaged school and/or home background deprives the student of the essential habitus that is cognate with university norms and expectations. Moreover, students asserted that a disadvantaged schooling background causes a breakdown in learning because of the inherent academic deficits of under-resourced schools. Academic deficits are also linked to learning in the second language, which tends to deprive students of conceptual thinking skills and thus delays the acquisition of academic skills. In addition, disadvantaged schooling interfaces with a disadvantaged home background. Similar to a disadvantaged school background, a disadvantaged home background fosters perceptions of inherent disadvantage and an inferiority complex and magnifies perceptions of a superiority complex amongst students. As a consequence, students may experience a sense of entitlement, which, combined with self-destructive behaviour undermines their efficacy. The appropriation of

limiting belief systems, poor time management, and unsustainable lifestyle patterns, further reduce students' ability to cope with university academic demands.

However, the belief that students are disadvantaged pre-university is also an advantage in that they strive to uplift themselves and their family from poor social conditions through academic excellence. Acknowledgement of disadvantage helps some students to benchmark the extent to which they need to upgrade themselves and acquire technical and academic skills appropriate to the institution. The unfortunate consequences of adapting to university norms are also evident in other domains such as appropriation of sexual relationships, dress codes and socialisation patterns that seem contrary to students' belief systems and norms.

Some students noted that their school background adequately prepared them to meet the demands of the university and life beyond high school. These participants highlighted that their high school environment promoted independence in many areas which fostered positive adaptation when they enrolled at the university. They underscored practices and the work ethos promoted by high school teachers in the following extracts:

“High schools encourage us to work hard on our own, not to depend on them”; “time management e.g. no late submission even in the test no added minutes”; “set many rules to form principle to guide you in university where there are very few rules”; “they taught us how to use libraries and basic computer skills”; “not being spoon fed; encouraged to take research beforehand; dealing with pressure”; “adaptation”; “self-control”; “life skill of being confident”; “self-confidence”; “discipline is instilled” (FG5).

It is evident that some schooling environments inculcate the range of life and technical skills required by students in higher education institutions. A school that teaches learners computer skills, referencing, and how to access the library, gives students an advantage in meeting the academic demands of the university. As noted by the participants, ‘good schools’ also take into cognisance the emotional, psychological and social demands of being at higher educational institutions. They develop a positive image and confidence by providing opportunities for independent learning, research skills, and good time management. An empowering school background also fosters emotional and psychological well-being by preparing students to deal with peer and work pressures as well as promoting self-discipline and encouraging leadership and good self-management skills. Such schools also promote responsibility, integrity and hard work, all of which feed into self-positive regard.

Participants also emphasised the importance of understanding cause and effect - “actions have consequences” (FG5) while in high school which helps them to navigate the university environment which, according to them, has minimal rules and regulations. It is evident from the study that most of the fundamental life skills that students need at the university are embedded in the Life Orientation learning area which aims to promote respectful and responsible citizens, described by participants “being aware that they are a diversity of people and respect their values” (FG5).

The study results also show that proactive schools offer learners a range of subjects and arrange talks on career choices.

7.2.1.4 Habitus.

Low individual PsyCap is also evident in the habitus of students at the university. Students with poor habitus are characterised by a lack of vision and goal orientation, poor self-control, poor study habits, destructive habits such as excessive drinking, partying, absenteeism from class, and a lack of commitment, amongst other things. A low fund of PsyCap makes it more difficult to resolve academic problems and acquire adaptive skills to deal with the challenges of being at the university. Students who acquire dysfunctional habitus fail to appropriate behaviours, attitudes, and skills that promote success and positive adaptation at the university.

However, the study found that some students see themselves as agents of change and do not simply rely on others for support. They identified personal human capital as a factor that contributes to their success at university. The participants recognised the multiple relationships that shape their experiences at university while identifying the unique contribution that each student makes in achieving the desired goal, succeeding at university. Various focus group participants highlighted the characteristics of successful first-year university students; captured the study habits of such students and highlighted some of the social integration strategies they use to gain maximum benefit from the university environment. Furthermore, the participants indicated how successful students appropriate available resources to deal with challenges and fulfil their needs.

Participants made key recommendations on the appropriate habitus of university students in the following FG7 extracts:

“Hard work”; “perseverance lead to success”; “self-motivation”; “dedication to your work, time management. Ask for help if you are facing problem”; “consulting with lecturers,

sometimes tutors don't know other things"; "time management and self-encouragement"; "self-commitment by working hard and dedicating yourself to studies"; "having a good studying timetable. Make sure every day you revise what you have learn in class that day".

These quotations show that being a university student requires a balanced and diverse outlook on life to negotiate the multiple demands made by the higher education learning environment. The students highlighted good time management, goal-oriented planning, and commitment and sacrifice as critical components of success at university. They also have a sense of agency which they exercise to balance academic and social demands. The results of the study indicate that students acknowledge their positive traits and work ethics that enhance their academic performance.

7.2.1.5 Financial capital.

Financial support or lack thereof also affects students' resilience. Financial capital has a cross-cutting effect as it affects students whose parents are employed and unemployed across all racial groups. It also determines their socioeconomic status, influences social, and personal perceptions of being disadvantaged. Moreover, financial resources aggravate or address transitional difficulties. When students lack access to resources such as computers, the internet, and textbooks, they cannot access education. The nature of communication amongst students and staff requires internet access and e-learning; hence, students who lack access to the basic modes of communication in the university environment are denied the epistemological access advocated by Morrow (2009). Moreover, working while studying increases the risk of dropping out due to competing academic and workplace demands. Unfortunately, some students are forced to seek employment to fund their education, while others engage in unhealthy sexual relations with older and more affluent partners, mainly men, to maintain their lifestyle at the university.

Students agreed that the availability of secure and stable financial resources reduces stress and anxiety. It enables them to pay attention to their studies and focus on achieving their career goals without being distracted by employment demands, amongst other things. Financial resources support learning by funding essential necessities such as printing credits for assignments, textbooks and data to access the internet. In addition, it is easier for students who have a stable source of finances to maintain a circle of friends and socialise with other students. It appears that the ability to frequent the 'Big Chill', the student cafeteria, is a source

of envy amongst those that cannot afford to buy food during breaks or lunch. Moreover, adequate financial resources also foster socialisation because students with resources can afford to go to the movies and/or parties, impress their mates and maintain intimate relationships. The university environment is punitive to students that fail to meet the expected norms and standards. Hence, adequate financial resources serve as a buffer to social exclusion and discrimination on the basis of socioeconomic status. However, they might not adequately protect students from being accorded an unfavourable social class because the implied rules also depend on other implied cultural and social norms.

7.2.2 Interpersonal factors.

The cluster of interpersonal factors highlighted under the interpersonal sphere in Figure 7.1 reinforces the integrated nature of the elements that enable or constrain student success at the university. The study results reveal that the sociocultural and collective PsyCap of university students is embedded in the interrelationships amongst various key stakeholders, including the student body, the university and students' families. However, the participants' narratives and the dynamic manner in which students access and integrate various forms of sociocultural and collective PsyCap prompted a distinct emphasis on sources of collective sociocultural capital. The major themes that inform the interpersonal sphere of the socio-cultural collective PsyCap are the nature of kinship ties, social capital engineered by the institution and social capital located in social connections (outside the student's family) and networks.

Moreover, the collective PsyCap fosters certain kinds of student culture(s) and identities which enable or constrain students' socio-academic integration and success at the university. In addition, the nature and strength of the students' kinship ties with significant others (in their families and communities) buffer or weaken the student's propensity to adopt dominant student culture(s). The student also draws on prevailing (especially dominant) student cultures to benchmark their perceived assets, strengths and weaknesses. It is worth noting the prominent role played by the institution in engineering, promoting and maintaining access to positive socio-cultural and collective PsyCap. Moreover, the state of institutional facilities (especially extracurricular amenities and activities) influences the perceived collective image of advantage or disadvantage which feeds into the quality of shared PsyCap.

Furthermore, the nature of student social connections and networks, institutional engineered social capital, and students' kinship ties shapes student identities and culture. However, it is important to note that all the elements of the individual PsyCap directly and indirectly influence how students collectively and individually experience and appropriate various student cultures, and assume particular student identities.

7.2.2.1 Sociocultural and collective psychological capital

As indicated above, students' sociocultural capital and collective PsyCap combine interconnected social network systems located in kinship ties amongst the student body, and institutional socialisation and academic support systems. The social connections amongst university students and virtual social interactions (which are facilitated and maintained through social networks) also influence student culture(s) and identities. The institutionally engineered practices emanating from teaching and learning also enhance or retard the quality of the sociocultural and collective PsyCap, and promote or hinder access to it.

7.2.2.2 Social connections and student culture.

The findings of the study indicate that first-year students benefit from various social connections within and outside the university. University students' social connections can be a source of support or distraction. Thus, the kind of social connections that students possess influence their social status, and access to other forms of sociocultural and collective psychological capital within the university. Again, the ease with which a student adapts and integrates within the university community is influenced by their historical and socioeconomic background.

The study results reveal that students' kinship ties are not limited to their families but encompass community members in their neighborhood, and their previous school community. Their historical relationships can engender feelings of inclusion or exclusion as indicated in the following FG6 extract: "people [are] stuck in [high] school status which limits interaction." Others identify with people who reside in the same town or township. Moreover, some students use the rural/urban divide to locate themselves, and define their identities and position in relation to other university students. Rurality is also associated with the disadvantage/advantage dichotomy as indicated in the following PFG2 extracts: "students from disadvantaged schools do not know how to use computers and photocopying" and "students from rural backgrounds are not used to study at libraries." Although the label

of 'rural background' is associated with disadvantage, some students consider it as an asset in that it frees them from dogmatically following the dominant student cultures that mainly draw their values and principles from western values and principles. Some students use the 'rurality' label to identify like mates and socialise with people who understand them better. The participants' narratives highlight that students draw socio-cultural capital from different sources; the nature of these sources either limits or increases their access to the socio-cultural capital available at the university.

The participants' narratives reveal that the student body serves as a positive and negative role model. Participants underscored the negative and positive influence of their peers and the impact of dominant student cultures in shaping their day-to-day lived experiences as university students. Dominant student culture(s) combined with negative peer pressure foster conformity and uncritical embodiment of (dysfunctional and bizarre) rules, norms and values of the university community. Moreover, the participants expressed displeasure at the manner in which the student culture rejects, alienates and harshly judges those who deviate from perceived collective university norms and standards. It is evident that peers accord or withhold social status based on implied (rather than explicit) rules and regulations. The dominant university student culture dictates, amongst other things, how students should dress, which hairstyles are acceptable, how a student should walk and talk, whom the student can emulate, and what is considered to be desirable and undesirable behaviour. The following extracts show how first-year students view the impact of the oppressive student culture on their lives:

“Status is ranked by how you dress and look” (FG5).

“Status could be your clothes, friends, home, the way you talk and walk. It is the way you carry yourself” (FG5).

“Status is defined by aesthetics”; and “class defines status” (FG5).

“Discrimination... based on the language, you [the student] speaks” (FG5).

Students acknowledged that socioeconomic status drives the social status accorded in the following FG5 extract: “Whether you are poor or rich determines the kind of people around you and the kind of access you have to resource materials” (FG5). Consequently, some students assume a false identity/identities to obtain or maintain a particular social status to the detriment of their financial resources and psychological wellbeing. In addition, participants argued that conflicts amongst them are motivated by unfair labels which tend to foster divisions: “fighting between students caused by prejudice and discrimination” (FG5).

Moreover, students highlighted that racial discrimination, ethnicity and dysfunctional intimate relationships aggravate tension. Experiences of racial discrimination, gender-based violence, harsh judgments and even xenophobia make the university experience an unpleasant and lonely one for some students. Such practices promote student identities and student culture that are devoid of *Ubuntu* values, thus alienating and excluding students from benefiting from collective PsyCap.

It is evident that multi-reciprocal elements mediate culture, gender relations, and ethnic and racial identity. These elements interface with the student's previous schooling environment, family background, and the norms and rules governing behaviour and patterns of communication at the university. Social media and the overwhelming desire to be seen as someone who is current and relevant ('osezintweni') push the student to imitate and subdue their true identities, and even devalue their core beliefs. Such multidimensional interactions tend to foster internal psychosocial divisions and retard the development of positive student identities. Overreliance on the received view of self, combined with an imitative culture, results in the adoption of false student identities that hinder positive adaptation and integration. Such distorted student identities also influence the quality and level at which the student can access and appropriate the available sociocultural and collective psychological capital.

Students' failure at an individual and collective level to critically judge and discern between progressive and oppressive student cultures is counterproductive, and limits access to quality sociocultural and psychological capital at the university. The study results also reveal that the norms, values, and practices that some students adopt at the university conflict with their family and community values. One can conclude that student identities are shaped by contesting ideologies, needs, desires, and demands. To a large extent, student behaviour is driven by factors such as avoidance of shame, fear of rejection, a need to distinguish oneself, and the need to feel a sense of belonging.

However, the student body can also be a source of strength in that the relationships formed at the university provide a sense of belonging and are a reliable source of social learning. Students can also use their peers to benchmark their academic standards and judge their competency level, amongst other things.

7.2.2.3 Institutionally engineered social capital.

The study findings highlight that institutionally engineered social capital can either facilitate or hinder students' access to collective sociocultural and psychological capital. It

is evident that institutionally engineered social capital is dynamic and is drawn from the following sources: high school teachers, university lecturers, mentors, tutors and senior students, peers, and student counselling services. The study's findings indicate that students could experience institutional engineered capital as either enabling or constraining. Their perceptions of the utility and access or lack thereof to institutionally engineered social capital are mediated by their previous experiences, and teaching facilitators (mainly teachers) from cognate educational settings such as previous high schools. Furthermore, availability of and access to social capital is mediated by the student's core beliefs and habitus and how he or she positions him- or herself as either disadvantaged or advantaged, and/or able or unable. A student's inclination to adopt a proactive or passive approach when faced with university demands determines the efficiency with which he/she accesses and utilises available sociocultural capital to meet his/her needs.

The study results reveal that students' experiences and the relationships they had with previous school teachers influence how they engage with their lecturers at the university. The participants asserted that some high schools failed to adequately prepare them for the transition to the university which fostered negative expectations and dysfunctional adaptation. They highlighted various domains in which previous school environments failed students:

“We were not even prepared by teachers about what challenges or what is nice about university” (FG7).

“The school did not put pressure on us to be independent because now we are struggling” (FG7).

“It is difficult to adapt because at high school we are used to being pushed, and now we must be responsible” (FG7).

Participants asserted that their teachers failed to prepare them adequately for the demands of the university and argued that their previous schools should have done more to ease the transition to university. Instead, some high school teachers threatened learners about the challenges of being university students, and administered punitive measures to foster discipline. Hence, some university students have an unrealistic outlook on the role of university lecturers, and expect them to mentor them and take personal responsibility for their success. Some students who lack exposure to a multicultural environment, and received inadequate career guidance, blame these inadequacies on their previous school environment.

They are of the opinion that previous school teaching and learning practices contributed to high stress levels among some first-year students.

Moreover, the quality and nature of previous school teacher-student relationships shape students' relationships with university staff and other students in a positive or negative manner. Students' ability to engage with the university community in the language of instruction shapes their relationship with staff and other students who use English as a means of communication. Participants also noted that the academic language used in class made the course material inaccessible to some students. They expressed displeasure at interacting with lecturers who are rude, incompetent, and discriminate on the grounds of race.

The participants located lecturers as part of the "institutional soft services" (PFG2). Despite previously cited negative comments about lecturers, they asserted that some are competent and accessible. The participants conceded that some lecturers are progressive, nurturing, and acknowledge the need to promote equitable access to information for students. Such lecturers enhance epistemological access by using multiple modes of learning and the assessment methods they use are generally fair and transparent.

The teaching and learning practices adopted and applied by university lecturers are core drivers that facilitate students' academic and social integration. Thus, participants viewed lecturers as "...professionally trained staff...employed ...to provide help" and "...have the capacity to teach, not [just people] who are certificated" (PFG2). Students underscored the reciprocal nature of the student-teacher relationship and expected lecturers to respond appropriately to student needs in a humane, fair, equitable, respectful, and proactive manner. The participants argue that students should reciprocate by showing interest in accessing resources, and participating in lectures and tutorials.

The study findings reveal that mentors, tutors and senior students, as well as student counselling services, are only protective factors if students make an effort to access them. Some of the participants' experiences of tutoring and mentoring were not particularly empowering or affirming. Participants also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of service delivery of some departments and observed that some are inefficient and dysfunctional and thus fail to adequately support students. Furthermore, inadequate orientation to the university's structures for first-year students hinders access to resources and adaptation.

However, the first-year student orientation programme mitigates disorientation and familiarises students with university structures, facilities, and processes. Moreover, the university allocates mentors and other senior students to ease the transition. University mentors and tutors not only serve as a source of discipline-specific knowledge, and facilitate the acquisition of appropriate university habitus, but also help students resolve personal and/or academic problems (“irons out any problems students have,” FG2). The participants affirmed that, “older students” provide “...guidance from their experience” (FG5). They share information on university procedures, and guide first-year students on how to select modules and courses so that they are able to make informed career decisions. Moreover, small tutorial class sizes facilitate learning, meaningful discussion and critical engagement with the course material. Tutors also serve as a bridge between students and the lecturers as indicated in the following extracts: “[tutors] serve as a communication between a lecturer and students” (FG2); “... when you are doing assignments, research”; they “...make much better clarity on notes” (PFG3).

The study findings indicate that peer relationships also foster positive adaptation at the university. Both residential and non-residential students underscored the positive effect of social learning and appreciated the support they received from other students. Group projects and open discussions on module content build confidence. Moreover, involvement in extra-curricular activities helps students to build friendships and develop habitus that enhances other life skills. In addition, university departments that respond promptly to student needs enhance student success.

7.2.2.4 Kinship ties.

The study results underscore the fundamental role of the family in shaping first-year student experiences pre-and post-registration at the university. The influence of the university is both positive and negative and can thus constrain or enable success. Participants asserted that some families exert constant, negative pressure in various ways. Familial demands for time, attention, or financial resources aggravate students’ stress levels and can be a source of distraction. Primary caregivers who are emotionally unavailable, but focus on their financial commitment to the university, reduce students’ perceptions of support. In addition, a lack of adequate financial support from the family limits access to essential academic resources and may even contribute to students’ absenteeism when they lack transport fees. Consequently, the family’s financial resources serve as a proxy for social class

and as the basis on which the student and the university community accord socioeconomic status. Although the type of school environment influences the nature of social capital, access to available sociocultural capital at the university is largely dependent on the individual student's background and their family's financial means.

Although students cited some advantages of being the first in their family to attend university, the study's findings reveal negative impacts. For instance, when families of first-generation students lack understanding of academic demands such as time, resources, and university procedures, they add to the stressors that impede success, especially when students' demands exceed family resources. Furthermore, some families fail to understand the demands of being a university student and rely on secondary information to predict the needs of the student. In other instances, they fail to adjust family rules and regulations as indicated in the following citation, "parents are overprotective; they do not allow us to come on campus on Saturdays, lack of trust" (FG7). Hence, students have to deal with the added pressure of negotiating resources and explaining how the university system works to access resources and support from their family.

Participants stated that birth position, the students' status in the family, and gender limit the available time for students to complete their academic tasks. Mixed gender and female-only focus group members affirmed that responsibilities such as "cooking and cleaning"; "babysitting"; "...doing washing etc. for your family"(FG1) and "...buying... groceries, paying bills" (FG4) by and large remain gender defined. FG4 participants added: "if you are the only girl at home you in trouble!"; "being the eldest having to cook, clean, do the washing, etc. for your family; and "having to take care of your siblings." The study results indicate that families have high expectations of students and that balancing household and academic demands are a constant source of stress.

However, the participants acknowledged that being the first person in the family or community to attend university has benefits in that it creates positive pressure for students to succeed. Similarly, students from low-income families that are the first generation to attend university work harder to improve the family status. However, first-year university students cited some of the expectations they had of their families such as unconditional support and trust that they will not abuse their newfound independence at the university. Other expectations included constant messages of support, inquiries about their well-being, and emotional, psychological and financial support. It is evident that familial support can positively influence students' everyday experiences. The family's commitment to provide

financial and other non-quantifiable resources adds value to the students' experience of being at the university.

7.2.3 Structural factors.

The factors at the structural level provide an overview of the students' perceptions of how institutional resources such as university facilities, extracurricular activities, the university system, the curriculum and systemic teaching and learning practices enable or hinder students' success at the university. This level also involves external resources outside the control of the university and the availability of funding, particularly from government. The participants underscored both the advantages and the disadvantages of the elements at the structural level. They offered recommendations on how the institution, the student body, and individual students can facilitate a learning environment that enhances successful adaptation and fosters positive coping skills.

Figure 7.1 shows that institutional elements have a positive or negative impact on other spheres of student functioning. For instance, teaching and learning practices, and curriculum delivery methods that promote tutorial, group, and individual participation, engineer social capital that can either foster or hinder socio-academic integration. Equitable access to facilities that promote students' participation in extracurricular activities contributes positively or negatively to socio-cultural and collective PsyCap within the university. Pre-university background and individual PsyCap shape the student habitus and the propensity to efficiently and consistently access available university resources. External structural factors (such as a shortage of transport) and socio-political factors (such as strikes and community unrest) can also facilitate or hinder a student from receiving consistent quality education. Perceived and real disadvantages or advantages influence students' socio-academic integration and success at the university. None of the factors work independently; all elements show multidimensional influence. The strength of the relationships amongst these factors is beyond the scope of this study.

7.2.3.1 Institutional resources.

The study results reveal that the participants' audit of university resources is unfavourable and favourable. University facilities and the governance systems that

determine who has access and when students can access these facilities had a bearing on how the participants perceived the university.

7.2.3.1.1 University facilities.

The student-initiated audit of university facilities shows that students have positive and negative perceptions of the university. Basic learning material such as computer LANs, internet access, and libraries are highly valued resources. Even though the university residences enhance access, promote socialisation and improve socio-academic integration, they are poorly maintained and are regarded as noisy, insecure and unsafe. Nonetheless, the participants' narratives show that the advantages of staying in a university residence outweigh the disadvantages. Participants expressed explicit yet opposing opinions on the quality, access, and level of safety of the facilities (such as buildings, extracurricular activities, teaching and learning venues, computer LANs, and the library). Institutional facilities found wanting included lecture theatres, the structure of the curriculum and teaching practices. Participants express their dissatisfaction with the size and quality of the lecture venues as indicated in the following citation: "lectures are grouped together, no big spaces" (FG7).

7.2.3.2 Teaching and learning practices.

Furthermore, the participants scrutinised the availability and effectiveness of the teaching and learning material and practices. They based their views on their lived experiences on how web-based learning systems such as Moodle hinder or promote their learning and development. Participants also analysed the perceived level of competence and commitment of the teaching personnel, the assessment methods they use, and academic support methods. They acknowledged that some of the lecturers, mentors, and tutors promote access to knowledge and essential academic skills, while others lack competence, the will, and the social skills to adequately meet the needs of university students.

The following FG7 extracts provide a concise summary of recommended areas for improvement in teaching and learning practices:

"I think there should be a lecture or tutorial before an exam or test..."

"Lecturers must be approachable";

"Spread workload out (essays, test)";

“Revision in lecture rooms and tutorials would play a huge role in helping those who were not taking work serious/those with problems.”

The students’ narratives highlight the need for a higher level of support and guidance. It is evident that they felt that the university lack adequate measures to regulate students’ behaviour, and fails to foster appropriate university habitus. The above excerpts also reveal that students care and worry about other students who are less goal-oriented or are experiencing learning difficulties. Although some students expressed dismay at the poor service delivery of some departments and university personnel, others applauded the commitment and effort made by some academics and support staff to render high-quality services to students without discrimination.

Students highlighted institutional procedures and policies that enable or constrain student success. The packaging of the university curriculum and the ease with which students can make curriculum changes have both negative and positive impacts on the level of satisfaction in the chosen field of study. The study results reveal that students have conflicting views on the level of support received from specific departments and the wider university community. They hence proposed institutional adjustments and transformation initiatives that orientate and support students:

“Knowing who and where to go whenever one needs help be it personal or academic 24/7” (FG7).

Others called for a more accommodating timetable that minimises early morning lectures: “a flexible timetable”; “not a lot of dawnies” (FG2).

In addition, the participants assessed the manner in which university systems facilitate fair and equitable access to university facilities. They regarded paying for access to sports facilities as strange and unfair as this excludes those that are not aware of user fees as well as students that cannot afford them. A student-oriented approach underpinned their critical analysis of the university system, and the narratives demonstrate dissatisfaction in some instances. However, others were satisfied with the university’s attempts to provide clients (students) with needs-driven service delivery. The study results reveal discrepancies between the university and the students’ understanding of what is defined as adequate resources, how to share information and resources fairly and what is considered as acceptable service delivery. Things that some students assume to be the norm (e.g., free access to all the

institution's recreational facilities) are challenged and invalidated by systems based on assumptions and norms that deviate from their pre-university experiences.

7.2.3.3 External resources.

The participants also assessed external resources, which are outside the sphere of influence of the university but influence student success. They asserted that ease of access to a reliable public transport system hinders or facilitates student success. For instance, public transport poses a barrier for students, especially when they have to attend early morning ('dawnies') lectures or write tests on Saturdays. For students who live far from the university campus, public transport is scarce and unpredictable. Those that have dependable transport such as lift clubs, struggle to find reliable public transport to campus on Saturdays. Hence, some students miss lectures and tests (especially on Saturdays), while others arrive late and struggle to concentrate because of fatigue and stress. Students expressed concern that there is no organised transport system for non-residential students. Moreover, there is a shortage of suitable and affordable student accommodation within reasonable proximity of campus. Hence, the participants underscored the need for "proper accommodation for students and funding for students" (FG7).

All the focus groups shared concerns about the inadequacy of university funding which is driven by government and higher education policies. The major concern was delayed feedback on the outcome of funding applications and the inadequacies of NSFAS. Students acknowledged that the availability of student funding within the institution reduces the glaring disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Student funding also reduces stress levels and help some students to balance academic and familial demands. For instance, some students disclosed that they share some of the financial resources received from the university with their families to mitigate poverty. Participants highlighted that NSFAS serves as a buffer against abject poverty for some students whose home backgrounds are the source of multiple stressors. The following excerpt illustrates the participants' sentiments: "looking after your young siblings especially if you no longer have parents and making sure that there is bread on the table depending on your NSFAS loan" (FG4). In addition, students use funding from the university to fulfil both academic and social needs in order gain access to socio-cultural and collective PsyCap.

7.3

Conclusion

The superordinate elements that shape university students' experiences are interconnected and have multiple influences on the three levels, namely personal, interpersonal and institutional. The study's findings show that the framework of the superordinate elements that influence first-year university students' academic experiences contains both enabling and constraining factors. Hence, Figure 7.1 shows that social and academic integration has both negative and positive symbols.

The participants also emphasised personal traits, familial support and faith in God as sources of strength. The social and human capital within the university offers fertile ground for students to cope with the academic and social demands associated with being a university student. It is evident that students' socio-academic integration depends on a healthy identity, which is influenced by access to and the quality of socio-cultural capital, and constant efforts to overcome contradictions and balance the expectations of self, family, and peers. The study findings highlight that students who lack deep connections and a moral compass that transcends the university environment, struggle to cope with negative pressure, especially if they rely on the external locus of control.

The perceived competence and availability of the teaching staff and the quality of the individual PsyCap (which includes habitus) of each student has an impact on student success at the university. Furthermore, access to healthy and developmental extracurricular activities such as sport and affiliation to religious group activities as opposed to clubbing, binge drinking and pursuing love relationships promote social integration and students' wellbeing. Students' socioeconomic status also has a bearing on their socio-academic integration.

Although some aspects of the university infrastructure do not meet students' expectations, the university has provided essential resources to facilitate learning and teaching. Teaching and learning practices are critical in facilitating access to field-specific knowledge and the mode of delivery of the course content promotes or hinders social learning, socio-academic integration and student success at the university. It is evident that teaching and learning practices that seek to include students and acknowledge the limitations of external resources enhance academic support. For instance, some students feel that the university timetable is flexible and considerate of students' needs, while others that live far from campus rely on public transport and sometimes bear the brunt of taxi strikes find the timetable inflexible and Saturday classes a huge inconvenience.

The following chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to the relevant literature.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

8.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the study's findings in relation to the literature. The discussion is organized around the following research questions:

- i. What constrains first-year students' success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?
- ii. What enables first-year students' success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?
- iii. What are the elements of a conceptual framework to understand student success in the College of Humanities at UKZN that can inform policies and support strategies in South African tertiary institutions?

8.2 What constrains first-year students' success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?

The findings in relation to this research question are discussed under the following sections:

8.2.1 Deficit ideologies and beliefs.

This is an umbrella heading to capture all the discourses of deficiency presented by the study participants, which are systems related and which draw attention to the limitations they experience at a personal level and are a consequence of poor education outcomes and language barriers. They include:

“incompetent in the language, learning difficulties, numeracy, deprived conceptual/critical thinking skills, self-directed learning, not knowing how to learn or what is expected.”

The participants also cited limitations such as ‘not knowing how to: take notes, write an essay, be critical, review literature, formulate an argument, plan, set goals.’

These limitations and the academic barriers that result are discussed in detail in relation to the literature.

8.2.2 Linguistic and academic deficits faced by underprepared students.

The majority of the first-year university students' responses show that they felt underprepared for university and experienced academic disadvantages before they enrolled.

Lack of competence in the language of learning was top of the list. This has significant spillover effects in other areas such as conceptual thinking, participation in learning and teaching activities, and appropriation and integration of course content in daily life activities. In addition, the participants highlighted structural characteristics that are not only barriers to learning but are perceived as unjust consequences of the unequal distribution of resources in the national education system. This finding is consistent with Scott et al.'s (2007, p. 44) observation that a "disadvantaged educational background often involves complex factors such as barriers to conceptual development, academic language proficiency, and approach to learning, as well as subject knowledge." Many scholars have examined under-preparedness and disadvantaged schooling backgrounds (Chetty, 2014; Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Snowball & Boughey, 2012; Pretorius et al., 2009). Some cite socio-economic disparities as the main contributing factor (Cross et al., 2009; Dukhan et al., 2012, Pearce & Down, 2011; Stephens et al., 2012). Others (Boughey, 2002, 2005; Morrow, 2009) argue that under-preparedness of a large section of the student body in higher education is the consequence of insufficient epistemological access. Furthermore, as revealed by the participants, students in higher education fail to engage in self-directed learning; this could be a consequence of poor education at high school level (Scott et al., 2007) and poor university-school partnership (see Mutemeri & Chetty, 2011).

The participants identified some of the academic deficits inherited from the unequal education system. The basic education system seems to promote rote learning and 'spoon-feeding' which has dire consequences for students pursuing educational programmes that require critical reflection and other higher-order functioning. The study's findings in this regard resonate with other studies on disadvantaged students in South Africa (Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Jama et al., 2008; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Prinsloo, 2009) and on African American students (Utsey et al. 2009); and students studying abroad (see Mathews, 2007). The characteristics of first-generation students highlighted in Cunningham's (2016) study and the findings of studies on students from working class backgrounds whose parents are unemployed (Smyth & Hannon, 2000; Stephens et al., 2012) portray similar deficits. Social learning theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) offer well-grounded frameworks of how learning is mediated to achieve successful self-directed learning. The academic deficit that students present within higher education is thus a product of the interplay between endogenous and exogenous factors.

The language of instruction also seems to have a significant negative influence on the learning and development of students in higher education. As noted, the South African

education system, especially in HEIs, is linguistically, culturally and socially alienating for so-called ‘underprepared’ students (Bradbury & Miller, 2011; Morrow, 2009; Snowball & Boughey, 2012). As a result, the university under study has championed progressive language policies and student academic support programmes to address these historical deficits. At national level, the CHE (2000) has recognised the role of language in education. While there are concerted efforts to address structural injustices and their effects in higher education, it seems that this has yet to be experienced by many first-year university students.

The study participants highlighted the cumulative effects of poverty, rural schooling, and a disadvantaged, and dysfunctional schooling background, as well as the disconnect between higher education and the basic education system as constraining factors in their higher education experience. Dysfunctional schooling and attending a disadvantaged school seem to have a ripple effect as they not only produce underprepared students that lack conceptual tools to access the curriculum, but those that are unable to sufficiently integrate with other students due to fear of being judged inadequate. In addition, the study participants identified incorrect teaching and learning practices such as rote learning and the fact that the disadvantaged high schools most of them came from limit the range of subjects offered. Corroborating these findings, Cliff and Hanslo, (2009) argue that when students fail to make meaning and extrapolate from text and experience difficulties in reading, they are likely to struggle to meet academic demands. Paulo Freire (1972) deplored the ‘banking method’ and called for systemic change in the teaching and learning environment. Rote learning in HEIs could lead to the acquisition of meaningless information that is not well appropriated by students in their daily activities or applied to improve the circumstances of their families and communities. The findings of the present study are also consistent with those reported by Boughey (2008a) who emphasised that lack of exposure to other forms of literacies limits students’ understanding and application of conventions of visual and multimodal literacies. Similarly, Freire (1972) has written extensively against disempowering pedagogical practices, which undermine the ability of students, such as those that took part in the present study, to develop critical and analytic thinking tools.

8.2.3 Disadvantaged schooling systems.

Another important point raised by the student participants is the challenge of disadvantaged schooling systems. In this regard, it would seem that first-year students are aware of the inconsistencies in South Africa’s basic education system in fulfilling its avowed transformative role to prepare students for the demands of higher education. It is evident that

academic disadvantages are associated with a specific population group (Boughey, 2005; Morrow, 2009), black students from families with low socio-economic status. The participants, most of them black, affirmed that disadvantaged schooling and learning in one's second language compound the difficulties confronting first-year students. Morrow (2009) affirms that epistemological access in higher education affects both academic and educational achievement especially among students from 'disadvantaged' schooling and home backgrounds. Learning in a second language and the poorly resourced educational institutions are also associated with poor educational outcomes (Boughey, 2012; Bradbury & Miller, 2011, Jama et al., 2008).

These findings suggest that gross socioeconomic inequalities characterise the South African student population. Furthermore, some university students assume a minority status within the university in their country of origin. Millar, Canavan and Byrne's (2004) study of college students in an Irish community found that social-economic inequalities manifest in the third level. Lynch and O'Riordan (1998) add that it is the cultural and the educational more than the economic factors that pose as barriers for working-class students at a university. This speaks directly to the results of the current study and suggests that it is critical to go beyond the attributes, abilities, and deficiencies of first-year university students in search of the factors responsible for their poor performance and throughput. In developing student-centred programmes, it is imperative to understand who students are in terms of their past, present and future experiences.

8.2.4 Distorted ideologies and negative belief systems and their consequences.

This refers to perceptions of inequity and feelings of dissonance among students at many levels of their university education and encompasses knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Some study participants reflected on the inadequacies of mainstream basic education in preparing them for the demands and expectations of higher education. Thus, some of the first-year students appear to lack what Massé, Perez and Posselt (2010) call "perceived entitlement to quality and emancipatory education" that would maximise their human capital development. The embodiment of students as the product of substandard education (Cunningham, 2016) is magnified at entry level when they realise that some students are better prepared than others to engage in academic discourse. The academic deficits identified by the participants in the current study resonate with global calls for social justice, equity, and ethics and moral justice (Cunningham, 2016). Their narratives are a plea to renegotiate the role and outcomes of education in preparing students for the future.

8.2.5 Transitional challenges.

Transitional challenges were also highlighted by the study participants. The results suggest that when university students become aware of the discrepancy between their entry-level academic skills and high-level demands for academic skills at the university, they feel overwhelmed and lack the language to express their emotions. Some participants simply stated “HELP!!!!”; while others used “Crying out loud” to voice out their frustration. Prinsloo (2009) proposes that HEIs should endeavour to create a positive learning experience for students. Indeed, the current study seems to affirm that the voiceless are silenced (Morrow, 1999). Consequently, they are excluded from collective decision-making even though their academic destiny is on the line. Morrow (1999) warns that the pressure of the oppressed group has the power to destroy the oppressive social class system.

Transition to higher education is a challenge when first-year students lack basic knowledge of what to expect from HEIs. This is not surprising given that HEIs are by nature communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), and when an individual enters this space without the appropriate tools to participate meaningfully, they can easily become alienated and marginalised. The tendency to categorise students as disadvantaged is, therefore, a misnomer. Rather, one can argue that the schooling environment itself is ‘disadvantaged’ which then produces disadvantaged students. Therefore, the processes that facilitate the reproduction of social, cultural and class dynamics in HEIs cannot be taken for granted, especially within the South African context against the backdrop of apartheid policies and practices.

At the same time, it would seem that despite being bewildered by university life and its challenges, students have the opportunity to reflect and benchmark their level of knowledge. The study found that reflexivity is an integral element of learning. The first-year students in the sample expressed their knowledge dislocation and misfit in the HE environment and tended to view their previous school environment unfavourably. Construction of knowledge in HE is mediated by a critical consideration of previous experiences and the demands and expectations of the new environment (Marsick & Watkins, 2001; Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 1997; Sedumedi, 2002). The pre-university knowledge background is thus relevant (Cabrera et al., 1993; Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Mutemeri & Chetty, 2011; Prinsloo, 2009; Sedumedi, 2002; Scott et al., 2007). Moreover, it is clear from the students’ discourse that engaging students is not just about extracting knowledge acquired previously and expecting them to reproduce or demonstrate what Waghid (2010) refers to as performance mastery. The participants stated that education should help students

reflect critically on their knowledge rather than being mechanical and passive listeners. Freire (1972) argues for emancipatory education; this is consistent with the students' call for critical pedagogy in this study. Mechanical learning produces students that are unable to interrogate the ideological assumptions and impact of education on their experiences (Giroux, 1988). The result of the present study, therefore, suggest that, in engaging students, lecturers should pay attention to epistemological and ontological assumptions that remain unchallenged, yet powerful, in knowledge production.

The participants also stated that they found academic demands and the workload stressful. They noted that difficulties in managing their academic programmes and negative perceptions of their ability to cope limited their determination to succeed. These results concur with those of Cunningham (2016) and Theron (2012) who concluded that the availability of adaptive resources not only assists students to improve their performance but also enhances their emotional wellbeing (Lin & Chen, 2009; Struthers et al., 2000). Goodman (1993) draws attention back to the institution by emphasising the need to transform HEIs to meet the needs and personal goals of students in all their practices. Ozga and Sukhnadan's (1998) explanatory model highlights the interrelationship between students' levels of preparedness for university life and compatibility of institutional course and choice.

8.2.6 Limited psychological capital.

The results of the study demonstrate that first-year students have limited and unfavourable psychological capital that compromises their psychological wellbeing. For example, many participants highlighted dispositional factors that seem to increase the psychological risk profile of first-year students. Amongst the internal risk factors are self-doubt, negative self-beliefs and a lack of control of one's environment as well as poor goal orientation. These dispositional factors seem to be an extension of the belief that students are unworthy and that the assets they possess are of inferior quality. These issues are further clarified below.

8.2.6.1 Negative and distorted images of the self in relation to others.

As noted in the two previous chapters, this is one of the many challenges confronting first-year students, many of whom have negative and distorted beliefs about themselves. The range of such beliefs seems contradictory and discordant at times. The consistent use by the majority of the participants of terms like "*disadvantaged schooling environment; poor background*" (FG3); "*students from disadvantaged schools; students from rural*

backgrounds” (FG2 & 7) appears to have a symbolic meaning which goes beyond environmental effects and undermines their psychological wellbeing. The students in the study sample tended to associate a disadvantaged background with “learning in the second language,” perceptions of “not fitting in” and “deficits in maintaining a normative lifestyle within the university,” including not being able to meet basic needs such as food, clothing and safe accommodation. Consistent with this finding, Cross et al. (2009) affirm that the concept of disadvantage encompasses issues relating to socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The students’ responses suggest that their socio-political history and socialisation within the wider society had a direct and indirect effect on perceptions of self in relation to others. It is, therefore, expected that their psychological capital would reflect the social context. The participants’ narratives reflect familiar responses of black African students, especially within the South African context (Boughey, 2008; Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Morrow, 2009) that are characterised by perceptions of collective marginalisation and an internalised inferiority complex. This is due to the hostile social environment that perpetuates internalised oppression. Tatum (1997) asserts that black deficiency is perpetuated through social interaction.

The students that participated in this study indicated that they are inherently disadvantaged and thus experience feelings of entitlement. African people’s internalization of feelings of inherent disadvantage has been the subject of debate in many parts of the world. People of African descent have been labelled as inferior and subhuman and some scholars argue that such dehumanising misrepresentations should be challenged and deconstructed in order to recover and reassert their dignity (Asante, 1991; Meko; Housessou-Adin, 1995; Nwoye, 2015a). Negative, false beliefs about oneself and stereotypes that foster damaging perceptions and emotions about individual and group identity have adverse consequences. Negative branding of people from Africa is partly the result of the long-term effects of slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination (Davis III & Simmons, 2009). In South Africa in particular, subjugation through colonisation, apartheid, and racial segregation and stereotyping has resulted in impoverished socio-economic status for the majority of the black population.

Furthermore, university students’ dissatisfaction emanates from their perception that some students demonstrate a superiority complex associated with the appropriation of a white mentality that reinforces feelings of inferiority among those that perceive themselves as the minority. The study showed that, racial and ethnic identity place students at risk of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is a social-psychological threat which affects the way

one's group is perceived in various situations or when performing activities (Steel, 1997; 1999; Steel & Aronmson, 1995). In effect, "stereotype threat manifests prevailing societal (mis)perceptions of intellectual inferiority, which impede how underrepresented students respond to academic environments" (Masse, 2010, p.284). According to Davis III and Simmons (2009), the stigmatised group may experience stereotype threat beyond test performance. Feelings of oppression and induced self-hatred are characteristic of formally colonised communities (Mungai, 2012). Sifunda (2015, p. 95) observes that, "black learners are aware of the hybrid identities that are a result of the meeting of the African lifeworld and the school Western lifeworld" which often call for the transformation of one's identity to meet the demands of the context. The psychological distress of the university students who try to circumvent negative experiences of poverty is evident in this study and these narratives affirm the findings of a study of poverty in South African higher education (Firfirey & Carolissen (2010).

Some students are accused of not representing their cultural background but often choose to change their image or withdraw from meaningful participation. This suggests that, a certain level of *disidentification* (McFarland et al., 2003) is necessary to overcome the threat associated with identifying with the stigmatised group or even to disidentify with academic activities for self-preservation. Whether or not this perceived stereotype threat that is evident in the students' responses has a detrimental effect on their actual performance is beyond the scope of this study and requires further research. However, the literature indicates that, "...an individual's perceptions or expectations of being stereotyped play an important role in academic outcome" (Davis III & Simmons, 2000, p. 219). Thus, more often than not, it is not perceptions of being stereotyped that result in low self-confidence in ones' ability, but low levels of motivation, which can lead to poor academic performance (Strangor, Carr & Kiang, 1998).

Joët, Bressoux and Usher (2011) assert that social persuasion can reinforce negative stereotypes and damage students' self-efficacy (Usher & Pajeres, 2009). Hence, efforts by African scholars such as Nwoye (2015a), Dei (2004) and other scholars in diaspora (Asante, 1999; Grills, 2004; Mazama, 2003) to rehabilitate images of Africa are very relevant for African university students. Indeed, the Afrocentric perspective that provides a frame of reference for this study aims to cleanse African people of the harmful attitudes and prejudices and negative representations of the African found in Western literature.

8.2.6.2 Confused identity.

This is another important revelation of this study. The results suggest that many students in HE in South Africa experience confused identity and assume unhelpful minority identities. The students noted that, they experience self-blame, insecurity, and disorientation in their efforts to respond to the university environment. They attributed this to a poor concept of identity, which they referred to as “failure to accept differences”. In this regard, it would seem that the students have mixed emotions about who they are and who they are supposed to be; a phenomenon which Du Bois (1903) refers to as double consciousness in his book entitled *The Soul of Black Folks*. The juxtaposition of helpless students who lack agency and the self-blaming student who is critical of ‘imposed identities’ that was revealed in this study appears to be the outcome of an environment-person interaction that demonstrates the multiplicity of students’ identities. Therefore, it might be more appropriate to refer to a multifocal consciousness that seems to be essential to moderate the multiplicity of identities. Myers (2009) asserts that the identities of people of African descent are characterised by assimilation and bicultural reform, which resonates with the current study’s findings. Furthermore, scholars such as Nwoye (2015a) and Dei (1994) are of the view that Africans have embraced a dual identity from European/American and African influences that gives rise to an identity of hybridity in some people. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems theory offers a useful tool to understand the nature of the relationship between the individual and other influential persons within the micro-environment as well as macro-level influences. One would assume that the historical, socio-economic and political context of South African students could account for some of the unfavourable dispositional characteristics cited by the study participants. Buthelezi’s (2007) study of high school learners in KwaZulu-Natal affirms that learners seek to assimilate the culture and lifestyle of learners in ex-Model C schools. The study found that, high school learners take pride in the fact that their school uniform resembles that of an ex-Model C school. This suggests that the influence of others is critical in shaping people’s perceptions and standards. The African-centred perspective undergirding the current study stresses that a person can only be understood within the context in which s/he was born and raised (Mkhize, 2006).

However, it is encouraging to note that the university students that participated in this study are aware that difficulty in maintaining intact positive psychological capital partly results from the “failure to accept differences”. It appears that the first-year students who took part in the study acknowledge that they have low-level psychological capital and can identify the interdependence of individual-context risk factors. In this respect, Theron (2012)

argues that a holistic understanding of resilience should incorporate its bidirectional nature and focus on the transitional resilience-promoting factors embedded in both individual youth and social ecologies. The results of this study affirm the importance of psychological capital (PsycCap) and resilience-promoting factors such as stable self-knowledge and a positive self-image and suggest that low levels have dire consequences on students' well-being (Garmezy, 1993; Luthar & Zelazo, 2003; Masten, 2014; Mpofu et al, 2015; see Theron, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015; Theron, Theron, & Malindi, 2012; Theron & Theron, 2010, Theron & Reed, 2002; Unger, 2011;). According to Liu, Chang, Fu Wang, and Wang (2012), low levels of PsycCap can lead to depressive symptoms whereas a well-grounded ethnic identity could lead to an integrated PsycCap in a non-threatening environment. The extent to which this applies to the university student population is beyond the scope of this research. However, Stangor, Carr and Kiang (1998) affirm that the perception and even the expectation of being stereotyped could reduce one's self-confidence and motivation, leading to underperformance. Nonetheless, it is evident that the cost of being resilient differs according to the context of origin. Internalisation of inherent disadvantage from endogenous and exogenous sources presents a threat and could have detrimental effects on the student's ability to cope successfully at the university. Overall, it is evident that multiple influences can enhance individual and context resilience.

8.2.6.3 Negative habitus.

The study's results reveal that inadequate or a lack of successful outcomes at university derive from various levels of students' habitus. These include self-destructive academic patterns, poor time management, and failure to adapt to the demands of university life, as well as students' perceptions of deficiencies in curriculum design. A major revelation arising from the present study is the issue of poor self-efficacy on the part of students, exacerbated by poor self-regulation patterns such as failure to prioritise academic activities, remain focused on such activities, and/or maintain the motivation to achieve set goals. According to Bandura (1997, p. 2) "perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments. ..." It is evident from the study's results that poor self-efficacy combined with dysfunctional adaptation patterns, and imbalanced responses to academic and social demands, further compromise the success of university students in HE. The first-year students that participated in the study tended to avoid contexts that affirmed their perceived deficiencies by failing to engage in class discussions and avoiding individual consultations

with their lecturers. Consequently, while some expressed negative perceptions of the module or course, it is not clear whether this is due to distancing behaviours on the students' part, or other causes. Such attribution patterns seem to intertwine internal and external factors in a reciprocal manner. Indeed, it is evident from the study that some first-year students regard academic demands as a threat rather than a challenge. The challenge-threat evaluation has been found to influence self-efficacy and perceptions of tasks (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001; Joet et al., 2011). In support of this finding, Chemers et al. (2001) state that there is a direct and indirect relationship between academic performance and personal adjustment during the first year of study at university.

Some of the student participants tended to lack both the effort and the inner strength to overcome the challenges they face at the university (Wheatley, 2013). Bandura's (2001) Social Cognitive Theory can be used to account for low levels of self-efficacy at the academic and emotional levels. It emphasises the co-influence of a person's behaviour, cognition, and the environment. The results of the present study confirm that, students' actions, beliefs, and attitudes towards themselves and the internal university environment as well as their macro-levels perceptions of African students have a substantial negative influence on their perceptions of self- and academic-efficacy. Bandura (1997) asserted that positive beliefs in self-efficacy positively impact self-regulation. Given the study participants' experiences, one can conclude that the opposite is also true.

Similarly, some of the study participants appear to have adopted learned pessimism, which is characterised by a lack of active agency. According to Synder et al. (1996), the term 'agency' refers to goal-directed energy. The university students that participated in the study demonstrated that they sustain internalised, negative perceptions of the nature of studentship by procrastinating, and lacking self-regulation and willingness to sacrifice and prioritise. They also appear to lack drive or passion for their studies; thereby, lacking hunger for education. The study's results thus suggest that the university students under study have deficits in optimism and lack pathways to acquire the desired results. A lack of agency, motivation and goal-directed behaviour could be an indication of poor individual psychological capital (Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu, & Hirst, 2014) or slow development of resilience (Masten & Reed, 2002).

The university students who took part in the study also seem to lack the will to assert themselves and could associate with the wrong group of peers within the university. The participants thus exhibited both internal and external factors that influence their psychological stress and feelings of disempowerment. Part of the problem that contributes

to poor psychological capital is students' failure to identify appropriate self-regulation practices that could serve as a buffer against negative media influence and assist them in overcoming temptation. This is also highlighted in the literature (Newman et al., 2014; Theron, 2010). Similarly, it seems that these university students present with low self-efficacy that re-engineers other insecurities and feelings of incompetence, negatively affecting their self-esteem. It is of concern that the students' stress levels tend to compromise their well-being and that they express feelings of helplessness in finding effective strategies to deal with adversity. The attitudes and behaviour of some of the students reverse the gains of being at university. There seems to be a lack of agency and a low level of PsyCap mediating factors. At an individual level, Newman et al. (2014) cite empowerment, social media, goal-setting, positive affect/passion and organisation-based self-esteem as mediators of PsyCap that affects outcomes. The study's results reveal deficits in the mediating PsyCap advocated by Newman et al. (2014).

The results also suggest that the university environment lacks the affirmation, positive role models and appropriate socio-academic behaviour that promote success at university. It was found that, in order to fit in and gain acceptance in the social networks deemed to be socially desirable, the first-year students succumb to peer pressure and adopt dysfunctional social integration patterns. The literature affirms that vicarious learning could be reinforced through role modelling (Bandura, 1995). Role models come in different forms such as peers, the media, and social networks. Failure by the in-group to succeed at university appears to impact on students' relative perceptions of their potential, especially when such in-groups are perceived negatively.

Again, poor problem-solving skills, inability to moderate multiple socio-academic demands and poor time management account for some of the academic difficulties students face at the university. Other studies (Cole & Espinoza, 2008; Edwards, Ngcobo & Edwards, 2014) corroborate these findings and affirm that imbalance in social and academic demands have negative consequences on the academic performance of university students. Furthermore, students experience distress due to failure to balance and cope with academic demands. In line with the present research, Cole and Espinoza's (2008) study of low-income first-generation students confirms that, pre-college ability, student-university cultural incongruity, poor time management, and failure to meet academic standards are some of the challenges confronting students in HEIs.

Similarly, some of the study participants acknowledged the inadequacy of their cognitive tools to construct new knowledge based on previously acquired SKAVs. A poor

knowledge base poses a barrier in competently dealing with the terms of reference of the university space. Thus, these students lack what Zambo and Zambo (2013, p.2) refer to as "...multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions." The authors acknowledge that a 'signature pedagogy' educational programme should move beyond the context and engender systemic integration of theory and practice, including systematic inquiry and endeavour to make that which is implicit explicit in preparing students for their future roles. Wheatley (2013) adds that, individual perceptions of the resources required to accomplish tasks can strengthen or weaken the challenge-threat evaluation. Hence, one can conclude that it is probable that when students perceive an academic activity as a threat, they tend to manage it by procrastinating, not attending lectures, being unwilling to prioritise academic activities and failing to sacrifice pleasurable but destructive engagements. These self-sabotaging tendencies that reveal a lack of agency are sometimes referred to as 'learned helplessness' in line with Bandura's attribution theory (2001). They can have dire consequences for student success. Perceptions of helplessness are characterised by withdrawal from the task, discouragement, self-condemnation and pessimism, which are all elements that negate what Wheatley (2013) describes as resilience qualities. Failure to persist despite adversity suggests a lack of motivation and reduces resilience. Foxcroft and Stumpf (2005) thus call on HEIs to conduct a proper audit of students' entry-level competencies.

The study participants' perceptions of the course or module and the level at which they make informed decisions about their career choices also appear to impact negatively on their success. They expressed dissatisfaction with both the process of career selection and the module or programme they eventually chose at the university. This is a consequence of the interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors. Problems relating to career guidance and counselling in HEIs and South Africa in general, are well documented (Stead & Watson, 2006). The literature shows that a pre-determined career field guided by a flexible curriculum at pre-university level can positively influence success during the first year of university study (Nel et al., 2009). Some of the study participants stated that they experienced difficulties during their secondary school years because available resources limit subject choices. This might explain why some first-year university students enrol for modules and programmes that do not align with their vision and career goals. In such instances, students require reorientation and refocusing guided by a knowledgeable person who can provide support and redirect them to alternative career options. The burden of curriculum demands such as heavy workloads and failure to understand the university system exacerbates the problem. There is minimal evidence that students effectively utilise the Career Guidance

services available at the university. This result is consistent with the findings of other studies which showed that students lack motivation and interest to access available services and that some are ignorant about the services rendered in HEIs (Boughey, 2008, Snowball & Boughey, 2012).

Some of the student participants reported feeling neglected and felt that they received insufficient support. They also complained about the lack of visible adult leadership and authority in the day-to-day life of the university, which was in sharp contrast to their high school experience. It also appears that students are overwhelmed and lack the essential capital to navigate their way to harness resources to overcome challenges. In particular, poor attachment to significant authority figures, which is evident in the student's narratives, is a potential risk factor. Theron and Donald (2012) cite attachment, meaning making and mastery as important protective factors that promote resilience among the youth. Furthermore, the thought-action repertoires of some students seem to be narrow in scope and produce ineffective results.

The first-year students that participated in the study tended to adopt an individualistic stance as a defense mechanism against an environment that is perceived as alienating and uncaring. Low levels of relational psychological capital are a risk factor in students' interpersonal relations. Furthermore, it is important to note that pre-occupation with internal traits without acknowledging core influences is not characteristic of the African-centred approach. It seems that the students subscribe to an individualistic view of self and express their discontent through low levels of relational psychological capital. Newman et al. (2014, p.132) argue that, "PsyCap might be expected to have a stronger influence in more individualistic cultures such as the USA where cultural values ascribe individual rights over collective responsibilities." It is of concern that students within a South African university exhibit similar individualistic tendencies. A decontextualised perception of self is atypical within the African-centred perspective, as is evident in the broad range of multiple identities and diverse images of African people. Forster (2010) emphasises that even the self is contextual. The isiZulu saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, translated as 'I am because we are, you are because I am' (Gade, 2011) and the notion of the communal or shared view of self (Akbar, 1976) or communal identities (Noble, 1980) affirm that the individualist perspective is untenable.

Some of the students who participated in the study have endorsed an internal locus of control in defining what constrains their success at the university. However, the same students seem to lack insight on how their day-to-day actions affect their success. Other

studies have found that, first-generation students are more prone to an internal locus of control (Pascarella, Pierson, Wilniak & Terenzini, 2004). Padgett, Mathew and Conte, (2012) highlight deficit of the traditional and first-generation university students in managing intercultural diversity and willingness to embrace diversity which can compromise their psychological well-being. The Jonah Complex Syndrome proposed by Abraham Maslow is relevant in accounting for this self-sabotaging phenomenon.

8.2.7 Poor financial capital.

Financial constraints were revealed as one of the major challenges facing first-year university students. Insufficient financial capital creates barriers such as lack of access to resources that are essential for studying, including books, internet access, and other essential equipment to complete academic projects. Lack of funds to pay for transport and source accommodation closer to the university has unintended consequences such as not being able to participate in extra-mural activities which limits students' social networks. Financial resources also determine students' ability to meet their nutritional requirements. Low financial capital has a negative effect on students' health, psychological well-being, daily living, and social status. Constant reminders about outstanding fees increase stress levels. It is apparent that the rules and regulations that inform student funding models exclude some students who fail to meet the requirements of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Financial distress causes a sense of despair and high levels of frustration.

Numerous studies have cited socioeconomic factors as one of the main determinants of first-year student retention, persistence and/or drop out (Moagi-Jama, 2009; Lehmann et al., 2008; Legotlo, Maaga, & Sebego, 2002; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Scotts et al., 2007). Jama's (2009) study of students in a South African university noted that there was no significant difference in the manner in which financial issues affected undergraduate medical students who failed and passed. The financial difficulties confronting university students seem to be a crosscutting issue. A lack of autonomy and self-determination due to unmet financial needs has a negative influence on perceptions of self (Power, 2005) and affects the overall wellness of the individual and communities (Prilleltensky, 2003). Firfirey and Corolissen (2010) affirm that a lack of financial determination and control often leads to "...fear and anxiety..." and can foster "...perceptions of powerlessness and voicelessness..." (p. 989). Such constraints are associated with students from oppressed and disempowered communities. Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed resonates with the emotional state expressed by the study participants. Prilleltensky (2003) asserts that poverty should be

understood at both micro and macro levels. Consequently, one cannot overlook the political and economic factors that perpetuate power differentials that foster alienation and exclusion of students in the very institution that seeks to integrate them.

The interrelationship among socioeconomic, political, and historical factors within the South African context makes it difficult to pinpoint financial capital's influence on university students' success. It is against this background that the #Fees Must Fall campaign should be understood and interrogated. Molefe (2016) argues that, "Privilege theory, intersectionality, and the matrix of oppression especially seem to appeal to the South African student movement and others concerned with decolonization" (p.35). Molefe (2016) asserts that the status quo continues to exclude the majority of students despite the current capitalist and liberal democracy. It seems that the student population rejects the normalisation of what Molefe and others refer to as white supremacy and subscribes to the notion of emancipation. As indicated in Morrow's (1999) essay on higher knowledge and the functions of HE, when the voiceless are silenced, they are further excluded from collective decision-making. Morrow (1999) asserts that the oppressed group has the power to destroy the oppressive social class system as seems to be the case in the recent HE student movement.

Similarly, the study's results reveal that some students are forced to seek employment or find (un)desirable alternative means to survive at the university. Some seek part-time employment which tends to compete with their academic commitments. Research indicates that being employed has a detrimental effect on the academic performance of full-time university students (Galbraith & Merril, 2015; Makola, 2016). Similarly, Galbraith and Merril's (2015) study showed that work and university-related exhaustion have a negative influence on student productivity. The current study found that financially needy students also seek partners who can offer financial support; these are often older, financially independent men that are referred to as 'sugar daddies'. Gobind and Plessis (2015) conducted an in-depth study on the 'sugar daddy' phenomenon and found that 70.5% of the students who are attracted to sugar daddies are motivated by financial benefits which include financial security and acquisition of material possessions to maintain their lifestyle. The majority of the students in Gobind and Plessis's (2015) study indicated that they met these sugar daddies off campus and were uncertain of their HIV status. This could put students at risk of contracting HIV and AIDS.

8.2.8 Poor general health.

The study also found that the participants suffer from poor general health due to poor nutrition, HIV and AIDS-related challenges, and inadequate exercise, and sleep. Dysfunctional relaxation activities compound their stress levels especially when students misuse substances. The evidence suggests that poor nutrition affects academic performance. The HIV and AIDS pandemic is not only an individual health risk due to the threat of opportunistic diseases, but could affect social integration due to stigma. University students' knowledge of the effects of HIV and AIDS could affect the trajectory of the disease. More information is required on how HIV and AIDS affect students' performance despite their strict adherence to the treatment regime. Moreover, the study participants demonstrated disregard for basic health issues such as sufficient sleep and exercise and keeping regular hours. While health concerns appear to present as the students' sole responsibility, it is critical to contextualise health risks and resultant stress within a wider context.

The participants' responses show that students are aware of the factors that compromise their health and wellbeing. As noted in the previous chapter, mainstream students in the university indicated that they have persistent financial problems. Some rely on NSFAS funding and others fail to access accommodation on campus (Moagi-Jama, 2009). Such students often struggle to pay for food and money and the financial aid scheme does not have the capacity to adequately cater for all the needs of higher education students (see Maree, 2015). High levels of noise were cited as a problem by those that live on campus; this makes it hard for them to get sufficient sleep. Moreover, inaccessible recreational facilities cause some students to engage in other easily accessible but dysfunctional relaxation activities such as intimate relationships, clubbing and substance abuse. The combination of these health hazards and the amount of time spent pursuing peripheral activities has a negative effect on student success and their academic performance. It is thus not surprising that the participants complained about performance anxiety and pressure to succeed because they seem to lack adequate time to engage in core academic activities. Thus, the transition from high school to university and a lack of coping skills affect many layers of the first-year university students' functioning. These results are consistent with those in the literature (Galbraith & Merrill, 2015; Makola, 2016; Moagi-Jama, 2009; Jama et al. 2008).

8.2.9 Limited sociocultural capital.

This section reports on the study's findings on the sociocultural capital of the previous school environment, the university and the family's influence on students' perceptions of care and support in diverse contexts.

8.2.9.1 Socio-cultural limitations of previous schooling background.

The participants acknowledged the negative contributions of significant players within the education system such as teachers and the effect of dysfunctional interpersonal teacher-student relationships. While they have moved on from high school, these negative impacts persist. Some of the participants had negative perceptions of their former teachers and the teaching environment; they described these teachers as *incompetent, unhelpful, and intimidating*. Van der Berg (2007) found that many teachers in disadvantaged schools are underqualified. Matoti's (2010) study of teachers in a black South African township concluded that some educators are unprofessional and suffer from low morale. A study on discipline in South African schools found that, "some of them [teachers] resort to old punitive methods while others do things that violate the rights of learners" (Mestry & Khumalo, 2012, p.108). As a result of such toxic but influential interaction with teachers in their previous school environment, first-year students seem to devalue the socio-cultural capital of their previous schooling background and assert that it failed to prepare them for HE. In other words, the first-year students' cultural habitus is limiting and is regarded as a disadvantage in their learning and development. Massé et al. (2010) assert that, "...cultural capital ...is both a product and a reflection of one's social class" (p.282) and that the product of both social and cultural capital is habitus which is intergenerationally replicated. Hence, the study participants' discourse on their socio-cultural habitus demonstrates the contextual location of sources of disposition and influence. Indeed, the study revealed that disadvantaged socio-cultural capital is one of the major challenges as the majority of the participants are members of disadvantaged groups.

Some participants noted that they lack the practices, norms, and networks that are cognate with the expectations of the university and feel excluded from fully participating in the education system. The evidence suggests that HE systems, even in the South African context, favour certain types of socio-cultural capital (Boughey, 2002; 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2011). Bourdieu (1971) argued that the social inequalities in society emanate from people's social and cultural capital; according to Berger (2000), this includes educational credentials. The first-year students' responses validate the key principles of the status attainment and

human capital perspectives which show that educational outcomes are a consequence of the interplay between students' background, cognitive ability and achievement orientation (Spenner et al., 2005). Based on the findings of this study it can be argued that the socio-cultural capital that students bring with them to HE education are also shaped by shared support networks such as the school system. The literature shows that social capital is a context-specific and goal-oriented resource that enables the achievement of desired outcomes and adaptation (Almedom, 2005b; Coleman, 1988; Putman, 1993; Locher et al., 2005; Van Der Gaag & Snijders, 2005). The university is a social organization with certain values, norms, and resources which individual students, groups, and society can draw on to achieve desired goals; hence it is a good proxy for other forms of social capital. However, when the socio-cultural capital of the university remains rigid and uncompromising, it tends to perpetuate social injustice and negates the principles of inclusion, access, and redress enshrined in the South African Constitution.

Furthermore, the results of the study show that some teachers instill feelings of fear and anxiety in students about the university environment. This affirms the dislocation between the previous school's socio-cultural capital and university realities. It is probable that some of these teachers did not attend university as full-time students or might have had negative experiences at university. They might find it difficult to share useful information with students as they could lack the experience of being a transitional first-year, full-time student. The literature shows that some high school teachers are not qualified or were trained to teach different subjects and learners (Assan & Thomas, 2012; Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008). Furthermore, due to high teacher turnover, high attrition rates (Matoti, 2010), and continuous changes in educational policies and the curriculum (Assan & Thomas, 2012; Matoti, 2010), many teachers find themselves teaching in high schools without pedagogical knowledge of how to teach. They struggle to provide appropriate support to learners that are about to transit to university. To control for this, some schools prefer to use older, more mature teachers who can handle discipline at matric level. Unfortunately, this generation might not have the relevant knowledge to prepare students for challenges in HEIs. It is also possible that such teachers rely mainly on corporal punishment and threats about impending challenges which are unknown to them. The university thus needs to support schools in making this transition less mysterious and more meaningful.

The study's results show that low teacher morale contributes to an uncaring learning and teaching environment (Matoti, 2010; Mestry & Khumalo, 2010). Poor education outcomes and student unpreparedness are a consequence of interrelated factors, including

teachers' competence to transfer appropriate SKAVs to students who are about to transcend to HE. The level of connectedness between teachers and students can enhance or impede students' ability to adapt to the university environment (Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008). Negative past experiences with authority figures such as teachers in the previous high school seem to be a precursor of negative experiences in HE. Although this finding requires more in-depth inquiry, Ryan and Powelson (1991) affirms the importance of responsive teachers, reciprocal emotional bonds, and attachment in learning.

8.2.9.2 Social pressure to perform.

The social and cultural spaces that students inhabit add to the burdens they bring to the HEI. Social pressure to perform or indifference about their academic performance, as well as the sociocultural roles that students embody, appear to be important issues of concern among first-year students. The social context that is part of the student's pre-university background appears to reproduce dysfunctional human beings by failing to care and support them. It appears that families and communities overwhelm first-year students with unrealistic pressure to perform and make demands that they fulfill their cultural roles and expectations. The social pressures exerted on students cut across socio-economic class. Pressure to maintain certain academic standards and follow particular career paths appears to be based on the implicit and explicit rules and norms of the society and family in which students find themselves. It is evident from the study's findings that students disagree with their families on many levels and issues such as what they believe is their level of ability and what they feel the family expects of them; and what they believe is an appropriate career choice and what their families consider suitable. This tug-of-war adds undue stress. Research indicates that when students fail to internalise and find meaning in what they do, their expectations of their achievement deteriorate (Makola, 2016).

It appears that students' career choices are negotiated and approved/disapproved within the confines of tacit socio-cultural rules, norms, and values which can be frustrating if there is a breakdown in communication. Moreover, the acceptable standards appear to be dynamic and evolving depending on the career trajectory of the individual student's family. Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) affirm that cultural and social capital changes continuously. Furthermore, some students in the study sample expressed displeasure at being compared with their siblings or family members who followed what are considered to be prestigious career choices. Ozga and Sukhnadan (1998) confirm that some students select careers based

on false or limited information. Families sometimes unfairly compare first-year students to family members who are perceived to be more successful. Hence, it seems easier for students to pursue modules or programmes that are approved by their significant others. Stead and Watson (2006) suggest that career indecision should be understood in a holistic manner and should include the effect of contextual factors such as the family, work and relationships with significant others. Mkhize and Frizelle (2000) affirm that students' career choices are embedded in particular life themes which go beyond the individual and that their narratives are located in the cultural and social context. Furthermore, Arkhust and Mkhize (2006) argue that how one views reality is informed by multiple sources and perspectives of one's environment. It can, therefore, be concluded that the students in the study appear to struggle to balance various influences which makes it difficult to exercise active agency and responsibility.

8.2.9.3 Perceptions of student culture and the university ethos.

The study's findings show that the nature of the relationships among students limits their sense of autonomy and compromises their wellbeing. The participants felt that their social networks demand too much time and attention, and described peer relationships as destructive and fostering insecurity. It seems that the students feel the need to compromise their values and beliefs in order to experience a sense of belonging. Racialized social interactions and social class boundaries compound the enmeshment of students' identities. The difficulties associated with ethnic, social class and race dynamics in South African HE are well documented (Walker, 2005). Historical and socio-political factors complicate the transformation and reproduction of identities, especially in HEIs (Walker, 2005). The interplay between the macro and micro elements is evident in the manner in which the student participants framed their relationships within racialized and social class discourses.

The lack of essential habitus and acquisition thereof seems to be a major cause for concern among first-year students. Some prioritize the dress code while others prioritise academic writing. Another group values social networks and seeks to be seen as a person who is *osezintweni* (keeping up with the relevant trends). They thus focus on ensuring that they do not lag behind the rest of the student body in this competition to impress others. Assimilation takes different forms and shapes such as getting a girlfriend before year-end to prove one's manhood or being able to keep a boyfriend and not expose oneself as someone who sleeps around. Another is the tendency to present oneself as someone who has no cares and concerns. For instance, a student with limited financial resources might still purchase

alcohol to impress their friends or buy expensive weaves or clothing in order to avoid shame and social disgrace. The urge to preserve one's integrity and social standing seems to cause students to violate social norms that are not prioritised in the university environment. The previous chapter highlighted the participants' contradictory responses to experiences of feeling excluded and marginalised and their efforts to feel a sense of belonging. Close scrutiny of the extracts suggests that these students are concerned about their lack of access to social capital rather than possession of social capital within the university (Almedom, 2005b). Some feel that they will not be admitted to social circles unless they transform and adjust their values, beliefs, and attitudes to match subjective social norms and rules, which are alien to their way of life. The bonding, bridging and linking forms of social capital (Almedom, 2005b; Woolcock, 2004) appear to be fragmented. The structural aspects of social capital advocated by Almedom (2005a) in the form of social networks and the micro level cognitive elements that foster shared values and collective self-efficacy and trust amongst individuals within the university community, lack reciprocity and acceptance of diversity. Thus, in as much as students share the physical space, the bridging elements of social capital are discouraging some students' participation as there is no unifying identity. Affected students thus feel lost, lonely, and unwanted.

One can conclude from these findings that the missing link in the manner in which students engage with one another are the fundamental principles and values of *Ubuntu*. Such values, including authentic recognition and acceptance of the other, reciprocity, mutual respect, love, and consensus building are absent in the way students treat one another (Booth, 1977; Myers, 1992, 2009; Nafukho, 2006; Ramose, 1999). Indeed, based on the findings, the despondency expressed by some students about the socio-cultural ethos of the university environment lies in the fact that they are excluded from shaping the norms, rules, values and standards of socio-academic spaces. There is a general lack of consensus building and students find themselves forced to assimilate or rebel against what seem to them to be rigid rules and procedures. Nafukho (2006) asserts that consensus building in African communities is an important uniting principle because it recognises and shows respect for a diverse belief system. When people experience authentic appreciation of who they are and what they present within HEIs, their lived experiences are affirmed, and they feel liberated to pursue their goals.

Another limiting aspect of students' social interactions that emerged from the study is the demands made by partners in intimate relationships. "*Sexual pressure, [and] emotional manipulation*" (FG7) is a problem for both male and female students for different reasons.

For some male students *chasing girls* and getting involved in multiple relationships seems to be a symbol of prestige and proof of masculinity. On the other hand, for some female students, premature sexual relationships are used to hold on to their partners and protect their integrity (and fear of being perceived as a loose woman). Women's socialisation makes them believe that their social standing and future depends on a man. Awareness campaigns are required to challenge this patriarchal view of women as objects and subordinates of males. Zhou and Linda (2013) notes that "Westorhorf [who wrote *Unlucky Love*] ... proposes the need to challenge the oppressive masculinities, and to deconstruct the stereotypical construction of women in a patriarchal society; especially in relation to HIV" (p. 412). Studies show that many students are likely to have their first sexual encounter at university (Lewis et al., 2009; Maharaj & Munthre, 2007). Akintola, Ngubane and Makhaba (2011) affirm that the influence of the university culture, the presence of sexually experienced friends and pressure from male partners are among the main reasons why university students engage in sexual escapades. The risks cited by the study participants include unplanned sexual debut, unplanned pregnancy, contracting HIV and emotional distress due to the unexpected outcomes of the intimate relationship. Other studies have also cited these factors (Akintola et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2009; Pettifor, 2005). The participants highlighted the daily stressors associated with intimate relationships and expressed concern with regard to demands for quality time with the intimate partner at the expense of their academic commitments. Some students are known to suffer emotional and physical trauma in intimate relationships. Akintola et al. (2011) confirm that university students are usually unprepared for their first sexual debut and often experience feelings of guilt as well as uncertainty about how others will perceive them.

It is evident that even though students still uphold values and principles that contradict permissive sexualised behaviour, due to their desire to assimilate and follow the norms, rules, values and standards at the university, they succumb to what Ndaba (1994) refers to as oppressive communalism. While the study demonstrates the importance of what Forster (2007) calls reciprocal interconnection, the results suggest that students are dissatisfied and confused by the ambiguous feedback they receive from their environment (particularly their peers). Because of this jigsaw effect of familiar values conflicting with the university value system, many feel pressured to shift identities to placate both environments. Myers (2009, p. 42) refers to 'shifting of tactics' as "...pressure to compromise oneself to fit in..."; such tendencies according to Jones and Shorter-Goodens (2003) compromise

psychological well-being and limits authenticity in the manner in which individuals live their lives.

The lack of guidance and monitoring from authority figures such as parents and teachers adds to the students' vulnerability (Akintola et al., 2011). The socio-cultural mismatch (Boughey, 2002) between the institutional and student culture is apparent in many other facets of socio-academic integration. The fact that the university environment is impersonal and distant compounds the problem by limiting availability of and access to protective social capital, which students could use to overcome temptations and deal with adversity.

The study participants acknowledged the need to produce a functional individual identity that would allow the self to emerge in the midst of confusion and uncertainty. On a positive note, evidence emerged of some elements of agency in the communal spaces that they share, whether through omission, silence, approval or disapproval.

The African-centred perspective views relationships between a person and the community as circular. Consequently, the dichotomous distinction among university students between self and others is not in line with the African and *Ubuntu* philosophy (Mkhize, 2004b). In this regard, it would seem that one of the coping strategies that students adopt within the university is to appropriate individualistic principles. The findings show that when students appropriate individualism by portraying behaviour and attitudes that show disregard for others and prioritise self-interest, they experience the university environment as inhuman and insensitive. The need to remain meaningfully connected to others in all learning spaces and practice what Ramose (1999) calls humane values such as respect, recognition for the other and acceptance of diversity appears to be critical in learning spaces within an African university.

8.2.9.4 Pressure of sociocultural expectations.

The results of the study highlight the importance of cultural and familial social capital embedded in the nature and forms of social support (or lack thereof) and cultural norms. The sociocultural expectations that come with multiple roles such as gender, birth position, and leadership position in the home seem to exert pressure on first-year students. Moreover, both the student and their family often underestimate the hardships that come with being the first family member to attend university. Cunningham (2016) highlighted the significance of being a first-generation student and noted the importance of the family in grounding the student's identity at university. The participants' responses revealed that family social

capital, which students could draw from, is limited in relation to the university environment. Students stated that some family members who are unfamiliar with the university context sometimes fail to provide advice, and adequate emotional and financial support as well to allow students to plan their time to meet academic demands. Spenner et al. (2005, p. 188) maintain that “Status attainment ... and students’ educational outcomes are a function of their family background, cognitive abilities, and achievement orientations.” The challenges associated with the discrepancy between familial expectations and the students’ role have been identified as areas of concern in various studies (Cunningham, 2016; Galen, 2014; Nel, Troskie-de-Bruin & Bitzer, 2009; Thomas & Quinn 2007).

On another note, the traditional gender roles associated with female students within the home continue to shape the terms of reference for female students’ relationship with their families. It was noted, especially in the female-only focus group discussion, that gender and birth position inform the nature and type of responsibilities expected of female students. Household responsibilities compound the problem of time management and add to students’ anxiety. The effects of the HIV and AIDS pandemic on family and community structures (Amanda et al., 2013; Peffitor et al., 2005) and low socioeconomic status continue to challenge communal social capital (Pronyk et al., 2006). The literature shows that households headed by older siblings are a growing phenomenon in South Africa (Meintjies, Hall, Marera & Boulle, 2010). When the family perceives an older person to have failed in executing the responsibility associated with their birthright, this could diminish their status in the family (Mkhize, 2004). Moreover, the disintegration of traditional family structures has placed the burden of family care and support on young adults (Meintjies et al., 2010) who lack coping skills and maturity to balance multiple roles. The added load from the family and household and distortion of roles as heads of households and subordinates makes separation from daily familial functions impossible and overwhelming for university students. Tinto’s earlier theories emphasised that one of the important phases in student adaptation is their ability to separate from the family. Other studies (Cunningham, 2016) show that remaining integrated in the family is an important protective factor for first-generation students; this was evident in the current study. It can therefore, be concluded that poor time management is not a reflection of students’ failure when they are expected to do more with less time such as travelling, caring for their families and studying, all at the same time.

8.2.10 Inadequate and inconsistent familial and social support.

Another important finding is that non-caring families and a lack of interest among family members in students' ability to cope at university increases their stress and anxiety. Family care and support are highlighted in some of the models that seek to account for university and college students' success (Bean, 1990; Tinto, 1988). The literature also identifies sources of family-related stress for university students. Cunningham (2016) pointed to family members' ignorance about the university lifestyle, financial needs, and the demands of being a student. Furthermore, stress arises from family expectations that students will not change, which limits their ability to appropriate the knowledge acquired at university (Cunningham, 2016).

While it is acknowledged that the family and the government are primarily responsible for ensuring payment of school fees, university students also see themselves as agents in alleviating family and personal financial distress. Some students support their households using NSFAS funds that are meant for their university education. Sharing and equitable distribution of existing resources is an example of *Ubuntu* values and social capital (Newman et al., 2014; Ramose, 1999). However, appropriation of these values compromises students' education. Maslow's hierarchy of needs affirms the importance of providing for basic needs before attending to higher order ones.

8.2.10.1 Ethno-racism dynamics and prejudice.

Some student participants highlighted ethno-racism and prejudice as factors that further reduce collective socio-cultural capital at the university as well as student resilience. They perceived racist, unapproachable and unhelpful lecturers as intimidating, impatient and unfriendly. This contributed to poor adaptation to university life and hindered learning. Furthermore, the university environment is regarded as discriminatory, abusive and harsh. Unfortunately, the participants were unable to clarify what they meant in this regard. However, studies show that the treatment of black learners by white teachers is characterised by prejudice and differential treatment when compared to white learners (Dawson, 2003; Moletsane, Hemson, & Muthukrishna, 2004). Some of the students shared their emotive experiences of racism from other students, prejudice, sexism, and sexual harassment as well as xenophobia within the university. Similar findings on sexual harassment and gender related bullying is documented in literature that aims to curb the scourge of sexism and homophobia (see Meyer 2009).

The participants also noted that engagement with their peers and lecturers tends to be organised around race and social class and that discrimination takes various forms. It would seem that not only is there racism within the university context, but the image of whiteness is the standard (Sifunda, 2015). Students are aware of the superior status accorded to white upper-class students or those that have been enculturated to represent the white upper-class culture. The use of the university support services to deconstruct race prejudice through allocating tutors and mentors from different races could break down stereotypes and prejudices. Kim and Hargrove (2013) and Baker (2013) highlighted steps that could be taken to reduce the effect of negative racial representation on campus such as encouraging peer support and including same-race peer encouragement. Furthermore, family support and a strong identity with the family of origin is an asset for students confronted by racial prejudice and identity crises. The family not only provides support, but also serves as a compass and reminder to students of where they come from and where they are going.

The categorisation of students within the bounds of social class rather than as human beings is problematized in the student participants' discourse. The university's social etiquette deviates from the social rules and norms into which they have been socialized. They perceive the university as individualistic and find the institutional habitus undermining in that it tends to isolate rather than unite students. What seems to bring meaning in academic spaces is working under the guidance of a knowledgeable other such as a tutor or mentor or when they have group tasks or assignments. Even a voluntary grouping of students is influenced by racial and social class undertones.

The study's results suggest that some university students are deprived of positive emotional experiences when they engage with their lecturers and peers. A positive emotional experience is a mediating factor in building psychological resilience (Shin, Taylor & Seo, 2012). While university students can identify negative emotions such as shock and aversion to discrimination and racism and disregard by the other, which, according to White and Paula (2013), is one indicator of resilience, they demonstrate a deficit in other protective factors. Their ambiguity tolerance, which is another indicator of resilience (Hoopes, 2013) seems to be inadequate. Some find the attitudes of lecturers disempowering and incongruent with what they believe should be happening in HEIs. A lack of harmony and disregard for interdependence in human capital at the university contradict Afrocentric values (Asante, 2007; Graham, 2009; Mbiti, 1969; Schiele, 2000). Environments that promote discrimination and stereotypes could engender disempowerment, hopelessness, and fear (Broderick, 2013). Such negative collective attributes could compound the risk factors, especially for those who

feel oppressed and subordinated. It thus seems that the expected treatment that students anticipated at university is different from their actual experience.

The effect of race dynamics within the university environment is tangible and has direct and indirect effects on students, in terms of how and what they learn, and who is available and accessible to share this knowledge. For the students that participated in this study, race and racism dynamics are not a question of perception as documented by Broderick (2013), who noted that resilient people choose to evaluate a situation in an optimistic or pessimistic manner. Addressing racism is not simply a matter of changing the students' perceptions but ensuring that the university environment is seen to be nurturing and free from the negative effects of racism and discrimination. Race consciousness seems to be instituted in various life spaces, and there is insufficient evidence that attempts are being made to actively challenge oppressive practices that diminish what Zhou and Landa (2013) refer to as collective coping mechanisms. Such mechanisms could foster support and enhance collective resilience. However, one cannot overlook the importance of positive self-talk and mobilisation of positive collective affirmation (Zhou & Landa, 2013) to guide the thinking, behaviour and attitude of the student body that experiences marginalisation and exclusion at the university and are trying to manage the colonised self in the post-colonial and post-apartheid era.

8.2.11 Structural resources.

The study participants engaged in a qualitative audit of the quality of university services and found that some facilities do not meet their expectations. Their narratives highlight that availability of facilities does not mean that they are accessible. Many of the student participants expected the university to prioritise access to basic amenities, financial support, and sports facilities, but this was not their experience. This is consistent with Gbadamosi and de Jager's (2009) findings. In particular, inability to secure residence accommodation was highlighted as a barrier to socio-academic integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Gbadamosi and Jager's (2009) comparative study of two universities of technology in South Africa revealed that the students' perceived experience of service delivery was significantly lower than what they expected at recruitment.

It is evident that the broadening of access to South African HEIs, which is a transformational endeavour, has been jeopardised by the decline in resource allocation, especially government subsidies (Cloete & Moja, 2005; Mutula, 2001). Coupled with increased enrolment, this has had a negative effect on academic resources such as books,

academic consumables and general maintenance of physical facilities (Mutula, 2001; Gbadamosi & de Jager, 2009). Internet and computer access and availability of the LANS are limited by delays in maintaining these facilities, overcrowding and clashes with individual and collective student timetables.

First-year students that participated in the study highlighted the importance of safe and quiet study areas. Casser (2002) notes that, due to structural, historical and political factors many students in South African universities rely on facilities such as libraries and lack conducive study space within their home environment. At the same time, it seems that the university environment is not secure and favourable to studying due to high levels of noise on campus, even in the libraries and more so in university residences.

Furthermore, some of the participants regarded teaching practice at the university as untransformed and felt that some lecturers are incapable. The findings reveal that the curriculum and the manner in which it is delivered tend to exclude the experiences of some students who fail to connect with the course content as it is biased towards certain dominant cultures. The fact that the university curriculum has remained relatively untransformed and continued to favour and draw from Western theories and life experiences has already been noted (Nyamnjoh, 2011). The gap between the university and high school curriculum compounds transitional difficulties at university (Nel et al., 2009). Curriculum transformation and delivery that is aligned to contextual realities continues to be cause for concern in contemporary society (De Lissovoy, 2010; Nyamnjoh, 2011). Scholars in Africa have expressed the need for African-centred education (Makgoba, 1997), Afrocentric research methods (Mkabela, 2005), and decolonial pedagogy (De Lissovoy, 2010) that is embedded in local knowledge, cosmologies, and worldviews (Nyamnjoh, 2011). The recent #Fees Must Fall campaigns called for the indigenisation and transformation of the curriculum to respond to the lived experiences of many South African students (Molefe, 2016). According to De Lissovoy (2010), a decolonised pedagogy recognises "...the power relations that have shaped history, in particular, the political, cultural, economic and epistemological processes of dominance that have characterised colonialism and Eurocentrism". When students appropriate a decontextualized and disembodied curriculum (Boughey, 2002; 2016 Ellery, 2011) their identities can be suspended and their ability to create knowledge is deformed (Alvares, 2012). This can lead to knowledge starvation and depersonalisation.

Effective policy implementation depends on learning and teaching practices which are largely facilitated by teaching personnel, some of whom the participants regarded as incapable. A lack of good role models and mentors at the pre- and post-registration stages

limits the adaptation and transfer of knowledge. It is therefore, critical for university mentoring programmes to fulfil the needs of students prior to entering the university through various pre-university programmes such as Open Day and allocating mentors when students register (Frick, 2007; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). While available resources limit the extent to which these programmes can be implemented, the nature of the programme and students' diverse needs should be taken into consideration at all times (Padron, 1992; Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

8.3 What enables first-year students' success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?

The study's results in relation to this question that were highlighted in the previous chapters are discussed below.

8.3.1 Personal resources to meet socio-academic demands and adapt at the university.

Under this heading, the participants identified the following key personal resources they perceive as necessary to enable them to adapt to and meet the various demands of the university.

8.3.1.1 Ideologies and spirituality.

This was one of the first key enabling personal factors cited by the students. The findings suggest that spirituality and associated positive religious beliefs, especially in God, ground the students' outlook on life and bring hope. Spirituality and religiosity serve as a source of strength and companionship. For many, God symbolises a comforter and protector who encourages and motivates them. Edwards et al. (2014) describe this spiritual connection as being in touch with 'essential being'. Spiritual connectedness with a higher being appears to have a buffering effect in that it contains students' fears and anxieties, especially when they feel they cannot express themselves to significant others. Prayer seems to have a soothing effect and allows the students to connect with powers that cannot be altered by other mortal beings. Religiosity relates to spiritual connections with God and the ancestors who not only provide guidance but also serve as a buffer when students are faced with challenging situations. Connecting body, mind, and soul and remaining in touch with one's vulnerabilities seem to be both affirming and therapeutic. Mcunu (2004) and Dodoma (2013) argue that it is not possible to separate the body, mind, and soul and limit human existence

to the observable. Moreover, Nafukho (2006) observes that within the African-centred paradigm, religiosity and dialogue are tenants of the *Ubuntu* philosophy.

The students stated that the constant image of God is not just there to provide relief in times of need, but the Bible in which God's commandments are presented offers a moral compass and vision for the future. Appropriation of religious principles and a good grounding in Christian values thus serve as protective factors and an anchor. Utsey, Adams & Bolden (2000) affirm that spiritually-centred coping and cognitive-emotional debriefing can promote emotional wellbeing. However, students have the responsibility of activating spirituality by praying, reading the Bible, upholding values and behaving in a manner that reflects their beliefs. According to Ramose (1999), spirituality is a valued component and the metaphysical aspect of human existence in the *Ubuntu* philosophy. Adaptive resources not only help students to improve their performance but enhance their emotional wellbeing (Lin & Chen, 2009; Struthers et al., 2000).

8.3.1.2 Quality psychological capital.

The study also found that, despite the formidable challenges confronting students at various levels, some still withhold *Ubuntu* values and principles, which promote positive psychological capital and resilience. The qualities that students prioritised include but are not limited to values (respect), morality and ethical behaviour and *Ubuntu* principles. These are similar to those noted by other studies across the world (Edwards et al., 2014; Masten, 2014; Mpofu et al., 2015; see Theron et al., 2012; 2015; Theron & Theron, 2010). Mpofu et al. (2015) and Theron et al. (2012; 2015) underscore the cultural the importance of culture and the values embedded in cultural values in understanding resilience and psychological capital of youth in the contemporary African communities.

The balance between the metaphysical world and being true to oneself in the manner in which the self is explored in a multidimensional way has positive consequences for these students. While previous sections noted the images students portray of themselves and the environment that shows disrespect for politically engineered disadvantage, students demonstrate resistance and resilience to such negative perceptions. An adaptable student requires certain traits and belief systems that facilitate positive outcomes. Recognising one's strengths for personal, academic and social development is critical for university students in training (Edwards et al., 2014). Perceived inner strength is a consequence of interrelated factors, which include the ability to identify one's strengths, spirituality and religiosity and

intact peer and familial support. Strength-based perspectives have more positive and sustainable impact than deficit ones (Prinsloo, 2009).

Some of the students' narratives demonstrate an orientation towards the internal locus of control. These students believe that they control and influence their academic performance and feel motivated and prepared to complete their studies. Bean and Eaton (2001) assert that students who have an internal locus of control are most likely to transfer to another HEI if their goal commitment is high, even if they drop out from a particular institution. The positive thinking patterns embodied in the cognitive quality of internal locus of control foster perceived self-efficacy (Edwards et al., 2014).

8.3.1.3 Overcoming contradictions – disadvantages.

The study found that the ability to overcome contradictions is a critical component of coping. It revealed that the participants are in a state of instability and uncertainty about which identity to prioritise in various settings. This is consistent with the findings of studies by Grills (2004) and Horsthemke (2006) that noted that people on the African continent and particularly in South Africa are confronted with the tension between 'tradition and modernity'. Western and African forms of knowledge (Van Wyk, 2010); and the Afrocentric/Eurocentric dichotomy are still an area of contestation in the contemporary South African university context (Horsthemke, 2006). Perceived social inequalities in HE are the result of the significance attached or not attached to certain ways of being, behaviours, attitudes and what Berger (2000) refer to as symbolic resources. The study participants portrayed a diunital view of self, which demonstrates a level of authenticity, and acknowledgment and respect for their strengths and weaknesses. According to Speight et al. (1991) concur with Myers (1988) definition of diunital reasoning which refers to the ability to see "...the union of the opposite or both/and thinking," helps us to move "...beyond the reductionist thinking and see multiple realities and true complexity". The narratives of some students demonstrate attempts to move towards harmonizing the multiplicity of student identities.

The students also acknowledged their power to name and infuse their subjective understanding of self in relation to others, despite being objectified as a symbol of a failed education and social system. Their narratives indicate contrasting views. The juxtaposition of students as weak and strong, disadvantaged and advantaged, modern and traditional is evident. Furthermore, the students were able to distinguish what is within the control of the student and what is determined by other structural organs of society. Bakhtin (1981, p.292)

notes that, "...specific world views, [are] each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically".

Furthermore, some of the first-year students were able to draw on their background resources, especially family values and principles, to affirm their social status and ground their identity transformation at the university. Similarly, their ability to distinguish the self from others and achieve attitudinal, cognitive and behavioural disassociation from negative labels are essential adaptation skills.

The study found that the participants use different ways to overcome contradictions. They reconcile, accept, suspend and/or adopt critical consciousness to challenge or reflect on unhelpful narratives that come their way, contradicting individual and collective images. The critical consciousness discourse and the ability to disrupt taken for granted understandings advocated by Freire (1972) and Berkhout (2010) thus seem to be important aspects of coping and resilience for university students. Sher and Long (2015) note the intricate relations between psychology and the political discourse that can be understood within the bounds of culture. Foucault (1972) affirms that cultural discourses can be used to challenge hegemonic ones in order to achieve what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, (1986) refers to as 'decolonising the mind' and forster what Reynolds' (2001) refers to as 'cultural competence'.

Under-preparedness for racial dynamics could pose a risk to students that were not exposed to direct racial and ethnic discrimination in their school and home environments. On the one hand, students who enter university with an identity that has been positively affirmed in their home and communal environments and those who have had experiences that foster cultural and racial inferiority are fortified by psychological enablers that serve as a buffer against negative student identity. On the other hand, a lack of prior racialized identities and critical reflection on ethno-racial issues seem to limit the positive PsyCap of students in HE and delays their adaptation at the university. The lack of racial-cultural orientation seems to serve as both a protective and a risk factor (Theron, 2012; Theron & Theron, 2010). The tension of living in the uncertain and contradictory worlds of being either or both African and Western is a challenge and an asset. It is evident in the literature that successful negotiation of the received individual, and the collective negative and deficit images that are particularly associated with being a Black South African requires critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is also essential in challenging what Makgoba (2007, p. 177) refers to as "...the superiority mentality of racism and the imitative philosophy" that

seem to be prevalent amongst the university students under study. Nevertheless, the complexity implied by the study's findings suggests that all students need to undergo a transformational process to balance the expected, perceived and lived experiences of being in a culturally, ethnically, racially and linguistically diverse university. Nyamnjoh (2011) adds to this debate by noting that human nature is always in a state of flux and incompleteness, which means that multiple identities are imbued with multiple consciousnesses that would facilitate successful adaptation.

The results of the study reveal that when the first-year students perceive their pre-university background of 'disadvantage' as a challenge rather than as a threat, they could reduce cognitive dissonance by using 'disadvantage' as an asset. Disadvantaged schooling and family background have been cited in other studies as potential protective factors for students in HEIs (Cross et al., 2009). Indeed, according to Cross et al. (2009), students who experience cultural and linguistic displacement at the institutional level can compensate by taking individual responsibility, and better regulating their thoughts, belief system, and expectations. While earlier models (such as Bean, 1982, 1985 and Tinto, 1975) that sought to explain student attrition and retention minimised the importance of pre-college experiences once a student is enrolled at university, the study's results appear to disagree. Instead, they support the view put forward in other studies (Jama, 2008; Letsaka, 2008) that pre-university factors have a marked effect on student success in HEIs. Moreover, factors that promote the retention of student in higher education are embedded in the nature of the student-institutional interaction. Kerby (2005) assert "...the distinct relationship among social identities, sense of belonging, and sense of place may strengthen the grounding of predictive models of retention in higher education in future" (p.20). The current study affirms that when the students experience a sense of belonging and feel connected at socio-academic level enhance success and may contribute towards the resilience promoting as advocated by various scholars (Kember, Lee, & Li, 2001; Kerby, 2005). In addition, Prinsloo (2009) highlights that, the effect of the endogenous and exogenous factors is multidimensional. It is, therefore, essential to pay attention to context specificity (Bean, 2002). However, the HEI should ensure that teaching practices and course content are inclusive and do not marginalise students whose experiences are not cognate with that of the institution.

Another way of overcoming modern/traditional or Western/African tension, or to demonstrate the concept of "*ukubasezintweni*" (being relevant) is by assimilating the student culture. The results of the study demonstrate that while students are discontent with the way white supremacy is valorised in the university, they could be accused of complicity as they

go out of their way to acquire the perceived social image and reward that accrue to those who appropriate or possess Western/modern capital resources. They do so by buying expensive imported clothing labels, and changing the way they walk and their lifestyles to align with perceived acceptable social norms. Different studies on African students in South Africa have cited the desire for identification with the collective (Mkhize, 200a) as an important factor in what Tinto (1975) refers to as integration. The student culture and the university ethos seem to promote assimilation and dysfunctional collectivity, which is characterised by what Makgoba (2007), refers to as imitative philosophy. While acculturation is bound to happen in order to encourage integration of students from diverse cultural groups, Perception of the hegemonic position of the European way of life are not unique to South Africa but are evident in countries where Africans in the diaspora and indigenous communities are a minority (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1999; Grills, 2004; Mazama 2003). Pro-Afrocentric scholars share similar sentiments on the ethnocentric nature of the Eurocentric perspective (Asante, 1999; Grills, 2004; Mazama 2003; Makgoba, 2007).

8.3.1.4 Agency to evaluate and acquire essential skills, including time management.

Some of the students' narratives demonstrate readiness to learn and show pride in the assets they bring to the university. These students are prepared to learn progressive study habits and unlearn negative ones that lead to distractions and poor time management. They engage in positive activities that seek to enhance their self-efficacy and self-esteem (Joët et al., 2011; Usher & Pajares, 2009). The profile of successful university students shows that they can balance social and academic demands. Furthermore, most of the participants had a clear vision of why they enrolled at the university. Such students demonstrate commitment to prioritise academic goals by spending more time in the library, attempting to acquire computer skills, focusing more on their studies and sacrificing leisure time and maintaining firm discipline. They thus understand the notion of 'sweat before success' equity that is required to achieve one's goals at university. The trends that emerged from the study suggest that successful university students can achieve their goals by using positive self-talk and linking their practice with their future destiny. Such students appear to be situated agents who are not merely driven by exogenous factors but make autonomous decisions about their lives. Prinsloo (2009) maintains that students are situated and strategic agents when they are autonomous and share responsibility for their learning. Recognising one's strengths for personal, academic and social development is critical for university students in training

(Edwards et al., 2014). However, Mkhize (2004a) cautions that the view of self as autonomous and independent should not be overstated to the extent of creating a false distinction between the person and the community.

The descriptions of the habitus of successful students revealed in the present study demonstrate that such students have insight into the nature of socio-academic demands at the university. Similarly, their narratives indicate that they are not only optimistic but are attempting to strive towards success. Insight, optimism, hope, and resilience are evident in the narratives of such students. These qualities are not only indicators of high PsyCap, but are also signs of mental well-being and are linked to *Ubuntu* values of human existence (Nafuko, 2006; Newman et al. 2014; Theron & Theron, 2010).

However, as Theron (2012) notes, a person is not resilient alone. A High PsyCap work environment has been cited as having a positive effect at some levels such as positive expectations, greater belief in one's abilities, high levels of motivation, greater effort, feeling empowered and experiencing job satisfaction (Newman et al., 2014). Newman et al. (2014, p. 132) concluded that, "...PsyCap yields positive individual-level outcomes, through the enhancement of self-esteem, positive affect, goal setting and networking behaviour". These protective indicators appear to be a regular part of the habitus of some university students and demonstrate potential for resilience.

8.3.1.5 Empowered career choices.

The study's findings suggest that a comprehensive link between students' studies and future career path and opportunities serves as an impetus for academic success. In this regard, both institutional and goal commitment are essential in overcoming challenges in a HEI. A more comprehensive future plan assists students to remain focused on what they are doing. Similar results are documented in Edwards et al.'s (2014) study. The study participants asserted that family, peer and community approval for the course or module tends to enhance a student's wellbeing as they have financial and emotional support and gain respect when they enrol in a course that is perceived to be of high status. While the results do not necessarily affirm Ozga and Sukhnadan's (1998) prediction that, those that choose subjects or courses based on approval by significant others are most likely to complete the course, it appears that this does have a positive influence. This finding is contrary to Ozga and Sukhnadan's (1998) assumption that non-persisters are prone to base their subject or course choices on approval by significant others. Enrolling in a course that has been selected through consensus seems to have positive benefits because of the emotional and financial support

students receive from their family. They are then able to focus on their studies instead of worrying about peripheral issues.

8.3.2 Students' socio-cultural capital.

The university has set up support mechanisms to enhance institutional socio-cultural habitus and foster a conducive learning environment. It is evident from the findings of the study that the subjective experiencing of learning at the university involves emotional, attitudinal and cognitive domains. Thus, it would seem that shared values, striving towards a common goal and norms that promote collective affiliation promote a sense of connectedness. Life within the university is interlinked and interconnected (Nyamnjoh, 2011). This is consistent with Durkheim's theory, which emphasises the importance of moral integration to tie individuals to societal systems. Ozga and Sukhnadan (1998) warned against the biased labelling of students as a problem and the presentation of the student as the person with the deficit. This places responsibility for meeting institutional demands mainly on the shoulders of students (Scott et al., 2007). Goodman (1993) draws attention back to the institution by emphasising the need to transform HEIs to meet the needs and personal goals of students in all its practices. The person-environment influence seems to be multidimensional and circular (Graham, 1999; Tedla, 2005; Reynolds, 2001). Therefore, a successful student exists in co-constructed space that continuously influences their academic success. Prinsloo (2009) affirms that the student-institutional habitus is not linear but co-constructed in congruent and reciprocal relationships.

8.3.2.1 Reciprocity and harmony.

In coping with the demands of university, students recognise the teaching staff, mentors, and tutors as key role players. Although the relationship between the students and the academic staff was described as unfavourable and discriminatory, the participants were able to appreciate the diunital nature of this relationship. The narratives indicate that students appreciate that the majority of the lecturers are competent, knowledgeable and caring. They were of the view that most lecturers are willing to go beyond the call of duty and share their time, resources and knowledge with students in need of their support. It is evident that the student-lecturer relationship is reciprocal and guided by a common goal to help students succeed. Similarly, the results highlight the circularity of the interchange between the students and the institutional habitus. Berger's (2000) study highlights the social resources embedded in accumulative, shared norms and values, which Bourdieu referred to as social

capital. The study revealed that the type of treatment students receive from university personnel generally assures them that they are accepted and capable that seems to inspire them to succeed. The co-influence of what Prinsloo (2009) refers to as ‘inter- and intra-personal domains and dimensions of agency’ is undeniable and requires careful nurturing in HEIs. A high PsyCap work environment has been cited as having a positive effect on some levels such as positive expectations, greater belief in one's ability, high levels of motivation, greater effort, and feeling empowered and job satisfaction (Newman et al., 2014).

An optimal fit between students’ socio-cultural capital and the institutional capital and habitus promote students’ academic and social integration. The main drivers and predictors for this optimal fit are demographic factors, perceptions of self in relation to others, attitude to life issues and the nature of the support received from significant social networks. Some students in the study sample perceived their academic expectations as congruent with those of the university (Prinsloo, 2009). It was also found that when students perceive the university-student relationship as reciprocal, they are in a better position to acknowledge that they need to adjust to meet the academic demands of the university. However, the university is expected to demonstrate commitment by providing an appropriate level of support to students. The findings of the study affirm the principles embedded in the African-centred worldview, which are harmony, cooperation and connectedness (Mkhize, 2004a, 2008; Nobles, 1991).

8.3.3 Needs-driven/ institutionally engineered socio-cultural capital.

An encouraging finding is that institutionally engineered capital is perceived to provide supportive mechanisms that enhance students’ socio-academic integration. One example is the student counselling services, which provide essential guidance for students with emotional and academic problems. Engineered social capital, which takes the form of mentors and tutors, provides formal and informal spaces for students to learn course material in a non-threatening and friendly environment while learning the rules, norms and coping mechanisms. Sharing experiences with more experienced students helps first-year students to demystify and deconstruct the expectations and image of the university environment in a more realistic manner. The centrality of meaningful relations amongst students and between teaching staff and students appears to be a valuable measure of success for students in HE. Cabrera et al. (1993) established the importance of deep personal relationships. Peer education as a source of learning is in line with the interconnectedness that is characteristic of people of African descent (Nafukho, 2006).

The study's results also indicate that socio-academic integration is a critical aspect of student development and success. Students can be academically, but not necessarily socially integrated. If one equates social integration with extracurricular activities, it is not likely to contribute to persistence at the university. The study participants highlighted socio-academic integration and downplayed the importance of institutional commitment, which is advocated in Spady's (1970) sociological model of undergraduate dropout. Socio-academic integration, as opposed to social integration, creates spaces for students to appropriate course material and use this newly acquired knowledge in daily conversations. Berger (2000) asserts that access to the university's cultural capital is not automatic but should be fostered through various means. It appears that the university acknowledges its role in enhancing socio-cultural access by providing student support and mentoring programmes. *Ujamaa* principles such as human dignity, equality, solidarity and humane existence have been acknowledged as critical for African societies (Dodoma, 2013). These principles promote harmonious existence, especially in diverse communities such as a university.

The participants identified Orientation Week as one of the main highlights when they enrolled at the university. It allowed them to create networks of support, familiarise themselves with university facilities, procedures, and degree structures and introduced students to the university habitus. Orientation fast-tracks adjustment, builds confidence, promotes self-esteem and reduces stress. According to Prinsloo (2009), "the institutional habitus (like student habitus) is a collective notion consisting of physical, psychological, socio-economic and cultural traits, habits, and rituals of institutions." It is not just the student's fault that he or she cannot fully integrate, as advocated by Spady (1970); this is also a consequence of the exclusive nature of HEIs. Initial student support initiatives thus seem to be essential and are perceived favourably by first-year students as they empower and promote independence. As understood in the literature, Orientation Week and other institutionally engineered socio-academic programmes help students to gauge their level of preparedness for university life and their compatibility with their chosen course (Ozga and Sukhnadan, 1998).

8.3.3.1 Transformative teaching and learning practices.

The students' narratives indicate that the university builds capacity by allowing students to exercise choice in selecting their learning programmes and modules. Some appreciated that the teaching practice acknowledges the embeddedness of knowledge and highlighted that some lecturers attempt to "*link studies to real life experiences*". It was also

encouraging that they highlighted that some academic staff inspire students by referring them to relevant subject related content. Similarly, the participants emphasized that some lecturers give clear advice and information, and foster curriculum access in the manner in which they time and explain the assessment process. Most of the aspects highlighted by the participants relate to empowering pedagogy that seeks to include and democratise learning. Makgoba (1997) asserts that African-centred education should ensure "...equal opportunity, freedom from discrimination and plurality..." (p. 219). The need for critical consciousness in education has been a pedagogical challenge and scholars such as Paulo Freire (1972), David Rose (2005), Julius Nyerere (1968b), and Graeme Bloch (2009) have written comprehensively on this issue.

The need for a relevant curriculum that responds to the students' lived experiences is a critical discourse in this study. The participants seemed to be calling for decolonised scholarship that is authentic to its epistemological and ontological viewpoint (Makgoba, 2007). Many African scholars (Mokeo, 2006; Nwoye, 2015; Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011; Richards, 1980) argue that African-centred knowledge systems should embed their practices in the principles and cultural experiences that ground the knowledge system of the people of Africa. Makgoba (2007) argues for contextually oriented knowledge in HE and asserts that "knowledge cannot be sterile or neutral in its conception, formulation, and development," (p. 77). Boughey (2008) and Haggis (2003) add to the urgent call to engage with context and the need to understand the sociocultural process of knowledge construction within HEIs to shed light on how new relevant knowledge can be produced.

The Writing Place and other academic support programmes promote social learning and provide a conducive environment that enhances cross transfer of academic skills. The participants clearly expressed their perceived deficits in academic skills and competence in university equivalent literacy skills. Although some attempts have been made to improve some students' literacy skills, the study participants seem to draw more on their previous schooling background. Some described their schooling background as progressive in that it prepared them for academic demands at university. However, as noted previously, others were not as fortunate. The lesson to be learnt is that good high schools prepared students by teaching them research and referencing skills and gave them the opportunity to make notes. Moreover, schools with a good academic record also enhance the standing of the students at the university. Researchers such as Bradbury and Miller (2011) and Morrow (2009) noted that, academic literacy is assumed to be an automatic outcome of competency in reading and writing whilst ignoring the frame of reference or epistemic assumptions embedded in

academic literacy. These assumptions create fragmented understanding and impose a burden on the social and the cultural capital accessible to students to deal with the demands of studying in an HEI. In this regard, Nyamnjoh (2011, p. 8-9) states that HEIs should "...renegotiate taken-for-granted ideas of Africa and its social realities in favour of mobility, flexibility, fluidity, and flux." Makgoba (1997b; 1998) argues that transformation in HEIs should embrace principles such as opportunity, access, and redress and Horsthemke (2006) advocates for the democratisation of these institutions and further argues that South African higher education institutions should include African ways of knowing in the transformation agenda Horsthemke (2009). Democratic principles of equality and inclusiveness would help HEIs to fulfill their mandate to the many South Africans that still feel marginalised and excluded at university despite being legitimate, fee-paying students. It is evident that students come with varied assets and capital when they enroll at university. An HEI that understands, accepts and creates a conducive environment for students to access socio-cultural capital, could foster success.

8.3.4 Importance of adequate financial capital.

Adequate financial support, whether from home or the institution serves as a buffer for students against stress and anxiety. They do not have to worry about being excluded from the university or deal with the added pressure of finding income generating opportunities, which is detrimental to their studies. Although work experience provides the edge that students need to compete in the work environment, too many responsibilities, including family demands, undermine their ability to balance competing roles. The study found that, some students use NSFAS funding to alleviate poverty in their households. Models that seek to explain why students dropout, stopout or continue to study, fail to recognise the critical role of financial support (Cabrera et al., 1992; John et al., 2000). The current study found that, the workplace sometimes fails to give precedence to students' role, and makes additional demands and even threatens their livelihood if they fail to prioritise their employer's needs.

8.3.5 The power of kinship ties.

The results indicate that students strive to remain integrated with their family; indeed, separation seems to have counterproductive consequences. The family remains their foundational emotional, financial and moral source of support. Similar to spiritual support, family members serve as a source of hope, motivation and encouragement and are the

students' source of reference. Parents who are both alive and family members that have graduated from a tertiary institution foster the desire to succeed. Kinship ties, which are broader than the family assist in grounding students as they renegotiate their identities. They draw on their home background, assets and understandings to negotiate their identities at university. Other studies on students in HEIs affirm the importance of significant others such as parents and family (Cunningham, 2016; Theron & Theron, 2010; Theron, 2012). This result does not support Tinto's (1975) assertion that, students need to separate from their families in order to adequately integrate into the university environment. However, when the student-family relationship is characterised by unclear boundaries and the student's role is not incorporated in the family routine, this could result in stress, maladaptation, and inability to meet socio-academic demands. Stratton et al. (2008) shed light on the profile of students who are most likely to persist as compared to those that stop out or dropout. They highlight the influence of parents' level of education in this regard. Parents that have completed a college degree could provide a cultural habitus and mediating experiences to help students cope with the demands of university. A lack of familial financial support was highlighted as one of the major drivers for students to dropout of the university under study. Stratton et al. (2008) argue that the level of financial support has a direct effect on students' decision to drop out or continue. Morgan and Tam (1999) identify situational and institutional barriers and dispositional factors as leading reasons why students persist or not. Being able to relate the family's socio-economic position to a positive future image also helps students to overcome challenges.

8.4 What are the elements of a conceptual framework to inform policies and support strategies in South African tertiary institutions?

Close examination of the two groups of factors that positively or negatively influence students' performance at the university can be used to form a holistic explanatory framework. The study's results reveal that interrelated factors and forces need to be taken into account in achieving a comprehensive understanding of students' success in the College of Humanities at UKZN. Figure 7.1 presents such a conceptual framework. The results highlight how personal, social and structural factors interlink in influencing students' success or failure in the College of Humanities. The trajectories of the complex interrelationship among these factors are discussed in relation to the literature.

8.4.1 Personal factors.

The earlier discussion on the findings suggests that personal factors that influence university students' success arise from micro-level interactions with significant others and macro-level ones that incorporate socio-political, economic and structural factors. Ideological and belief systems incorporate students' perceptions of themselves, the expectations that the context has of them, and the beliefs embedded in their religiosity and spirituality. In this regard, spirituality and religiosity seem to offer a surplus of protective factors that enhance the students' well-being and inner harmony. The participants seem to have maintained *Ubuntu* principles through the practice of their spirituality, which according to Ramose (1999), is a metaphysical aspect of human existence in the *Ubuntu* worldview.

Students' perceptions of their own identity are contextualized in relation to other influential factors especially supremacy or inferiority narratives. Although the white supremacy/black inadequacy dichotomy is not explicitly stated in their account, it is implied and has an effect on their nature and level of engagement at the university. Images of disadvantage, which define individual assets, are related to rural, disadvantaged and dysfunctional schooling, which fosters low PsyCap and enhances risk factors in addition to undermining *Ubuntu* values and principles. Hay and Marais (2004) and Mji (2002) affirm the resilience of educational inequalities and other scholars predict that colonial and apartheid history will have an effect for many years to come (Akaka, 2008). However, the study participants' PsyCap demonstrates their ability to overcome the contradictions using various strategies such as disidentification from the stereotype threat; as well as the capacity to reconcile, accept, suspend and/or adopt critical consciousness to challenge or reflect on internalised deficits. Social isolation deprives students of what Mungai (2012) refers to as "...emotional rapport and communication with others," (p. 130) and limits meaningful participation in the university community.

Students' PsyCap is also imbued with active agency and awareness of protective habitus that seeks to align with the demands of the university. There is also evidence of their appropriation of humane and meaningful existence that demonstrates *Ubuntu* values. The malleability of the students' habitus makes it easy for them to learn and unlearn as well as critically reflect on their practices that fail to enhance coping strategies. The key high PsyCap indicators or resilience-promoting habitus identified by the study include academic commitment, appropriate study habits, and self-control through self-regulatory behaviours and attitudes. In addition, a visionary and meaningful existence, openness to change and recognition of one's limitations enhance the students' PsyCap. The ability to identify threats

and good problem-solving skills enhance competency to deal with temptations and challenges. Maturity, independence and the ability to withstand peer pressure seem to be crucial dispositional elements that can serve as a proxy for experience when students are unsure of how to respond to novel circumstances. The study participants demonstrated both negative self-efficacy and low self-regulative standards and found academic demands and heavy workloads stressful. Difficulties in managing academic programmes and negative perceptions of one's ability to cope at the university seem to reduce determination to succeed. Insufficient mastery could also lead to poor self-efficacy and a lack of self-regulation. Wheatly (2013) affirms that, "perceived mastery experience is a powerful source of self-efficacy across academic domains."

The desire for *yokubasezintweni* (to be relevant) determines the lifestyle that students adopt when they enter university. The need to transform and adapt to the university campus environment has both positive and negative consequences. All the study participants seemed to experience a sense of incompleteness, which can be partially addressed when they understand and fulfill the norms and rules of the university culture, and appropriate standards and norms that are perceived to be acceptable to the mainstream student body. When the rules are perceived to be biased towards a certain way of life that is in conflict with a student's experiences, and the social norms are perceived to be arbitrary, some students identify an in-group that shares similar sentiments or interests. Others isolate themselves, which could result in feelings of exclusion and alienation. It is clear that the methods used by students to adapt to the university are diverse and extend beyond assimilation or the imitative philosophy identified by Makgoba (1997).

8.4.2 Interpersonal factors.

The study participants' responses show that, they have active and passive agency in that they approve or disapprove what seem to be university practices, symbols and implicit and explicit rules that are embedded in socio-cultural capital. What seem to be lacking at times are reflexivity and critical consciousness to understand the individual and collective power within students to inform, direct and/ or change the university ethos and culture. Interaction among students largely defines what it means to be *ezintweni* (relevant). However, one cannot ignore that HEIs are communities of practice with a socio-political history and explicit and insidious agendas. Much of what students adopt, internalise, assimilate and appropriate has multiple influences (i.e., is as much a consequence of history as it is the present).

It was found that adequate financial capital protects students from the high levels of stress and anxiety associated with unpaid fees and fear of being excluded due to failure to honour university financial commitments. Finance also determines a student's experience of being a university student and their student identity. Stable financial resources ensure that the student's basic needs are met and that the student accommodation is of a reasonable standard and in close proximity to allow for practical socio-academic integration with other students. Socio-economic status serves as a proxy for social class at the university, and perceptions of cultural and social capital determine how university students view themselves in relation to other students.

The study also found that students' mental health and physical wellbeing are enhanced by stable financial capital, and by adopting an authentic lifestyle that recognises the boundaries associated with being a university student in the South African context. Inability to balance social and basic needs compromises students' food security. Lack of adequate knowledge on how to budget and failure to prioritise primary necessities over secondary needs compromise students' nutritional status. The rank order of the students' needs does not seem to align to Maslow's hierarchy of needs where food is listed as the primary basic need. When finances are minimal, some students prefer to eat cereal because it is affordable and spend more money on entertainment and cosmetics. Others seek job opportunities and some find potential sponsors in the form of older men (sugar daddies). Lack of insight on the short- and long-term effects of risk-taking behaviour and poor nutrition could have adverse effects on learning and students' development.

University students also conduct a critical genealogy of their academic career path. Students' previous and home background is accentuated when they enroll at university. The assessment of their academic career is reflective and is a comparative analysis of past and present academic habitus, processes and procedures that have led to the state of affairs at the university. Depending on the outcome of the analysis, students may adopt particular attitudes and behaviours that facilitate adaptation to university demands. Student resilience is in a state of flux and seems to fluctuate depending on perceived adversity. The cost of fostering resilience-promoting factors and *Ubuntu* values such as acquiring a sense of belonging and being connected to significant others seems very high. The multiple processes of self-transformation might go against the individual student's ideologies, beliefs, and values. Previous school and teachers and teaching and learning practices continue to influence students' ideologies of the indicators of a good or bad education system (Pretorius et al., 2009; Van Zyl et al., 2012).

Moreover, students' career paths are context driven and largely shaped by influential sources at the micro level. Macro-level factors also influence career choices by limiting the resources available to expand subject selection. The family serves as a strong mediating factor in affirming alternative career options and providing support. A strong link between programmes or modules and future plans also reinforces students' motivation to succeed at university.

Socio-cultural capital features at all levels of university students' existence. The ethno-cultural symbols, assets, and legacies that are embodied by students when they enter the university space are juxtaposed with the disembodied socio-cultural capital that students find in this space. Some of the assets students bring to the university are perceived by both students and the university context as inappropriate, inadequate and misaligned to the desired habitus. However, when students redirect their outlook to the positive aspects of their existence, they can find meaning and purpose in their existence. A sound individual-collective identity thus becomes critical to ground the students' identity in the midst of the forceful transformation associated with being a university student. When students experience low collective PsyCap at university, they sometimes turn inwards for comfort and solace. This is both a protective and risk factor. Ability to see oneself as the source of all good things protects students from experiencing discrimination, rejection, and disappointment. However, when they appropriate the individualised view of self, it seems to weaken availability and access to socio-cultural capital, lowers PsyCap and contaminates the *Ubuntu* values that bring about humane and meaningful existence. University students' identities are thus made up of a corpus of socio-cultural factors that reside in the individual student's lived experience, collective students' experiences and the entrenched university ethos.

Some aspects of the corpus of sociocultural capital are visible, and others remain insidious and thus unchallenged. For instance, the study participants appreciated the university engineered social capital that seeks to enhance socio-academic integration and familiarize students with the university environment to facilitate early adaptation. Social learning promotes access to the curriculum by creating a safe space for students to learn from their peers and demystify university images gained from other sources. However, the ingrained institutional habitus that perpetuates ethno-racism, class discrimination, ethnic prejudices and gender violence fails to promote resilience-promoting factors and to uphold the *Ubuntu* values of truth, reciprocity, and harmony. It appears that students seek a just and socially equitable university environment that is not prescriptive but dynamic and consistent in facilitating ways to bridge the gap in students' knowledge, attitude, and practices.

The socio-cultural capital that is embedded in kinship ties is loaded with protective factors that foster positive adaptation. However, in the absence of mediating factors that assist family members to understand university demands and situate the student role, students struggle to strike a balance between home and university expectations. Their multiple roles tend to be highlighted when they enroll at the university, especially among first-generation students and female students who may be older in birth position and heading households. A functional social network that supports students thus become a critical component of survival at the university.

8.4.3 Structural factors.

Institutional commitment and care for students are evident in the manner in which the university provides learning facilities, and promotes access to such facilities. The students conducted their own audit of the facilities, and for some, the expected and perceived performance of the university in this regard seems to be misaligned. It is clear that the demand for university resources exceeds supply. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of the study participants expressed appreciation for the facilities provided.

The participants perceived teaching and learning practices and curriculum design as both transformed and in need of transformation. On the one hand, they appreciated the use of technology by competent lecturers. On the other, the students expressed the need for transformation in the manner in which learning is facilitated. It is evident that disembodied and decontextualized teaching and learning practice that relies on imported knowledge marginalizes the lived experiences of these students. Attempts by some lecturers to embed the course content in students' lived experiences is a valued teaching practice.

As noted in chapters four and five, African university students carry the baggage of past perceptions of inadequacy, inferiority, and low cognitive function, which were entrenched by colonial and apartheid rule. The tendency to think in a debilitating manner and lack of commitment to challenge and reverse negative images compound the risks confronting first-year students at the university. Nevertheless, one can conclude from the elements of the conceptual framework cited above that all three of Nafukho's (2006) basic tenets of *Ubuntu* which are religiosity, consensus building, and dialogue are presented as relevant principles to enhance students' success.

Lack of value clarity, loss of life meaning, the lack of a common purpose and collective self-discipline and orientation towards the external locus of control are evident in the manner in which the students described the nature and sources of social distractions (Hoopes, 2013;

Makola, 2016). According to Wheatly (2013) and Youssef & Luthans, (2007), hope is positively associated with effective problem-solving, positive thinking, the ability to plan, and coping mechanisms that can reduce the stress levels that are evident in some of the study participants' narratives. However, there is consensus that these non-static and malleable dispositions can be altered (Bandura, 1997, 2001; Luther, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Avey, Reichard, Luthans & Mhatre, 2011; Youssef & Luthans, (2007)). Fry et al. (2012) assert that when students build a conducive learning environment, they reap the benefits. In line with the results of the current study, Fry et al. (2012) concluded that there is a "...direct and ... significant indirect relationship between perceptions of caring climate and psychological well-being." According to the philosophy of incompleteness, which is typical of the Afrocentric paradigm, experiences are transactional (Phasha, 2010) in the same way as resilience in a human being. Therefore, *Ubuntu* values, integrated care, and support can help individual students and the university community to thrive despite challenges and thus foster resilience and increase both individual and collective PsyCap. It is evident from the study's results that context shapes individuals and the collective self (Mbiti, 1969; Mkhize, 2004). Institutions of higher learning that disregard the importance of humane and dignified human existence and focus on the observable such as success rates risk losing the core (soul) of the individual student. "It [the soul] is indefinable yet identifiable amongst black people" (Samkange & Samkange, 1980, p. 30).

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the study's results in relation to the relevant literature. The discussion showed that most of the findings are consistent with the literature. They present distinct images of individual PsyCap, ideologies and beliefs and the socio-cultural capital associated with successful and less successful first-year university students. The students' narratives highlight the diunital logical manner in which constraining factors mitigated by enabling factors exacerbate the adversities that students face at university. Conceptual constructs that can be used to understand and develop intervention programmes were summarized around the notions of enabling and constraining factors, which are malleable and dynamic in nature. The following chapter presents the summary, conclusions, limitations and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER 9

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the study, conclusions and implications, and its unique contribution. Recommendations for improved policy and practice and the study's limitations, as well as recommendations for future research, are also highlighted.

9.2 Summary of the Study

The purpose of this explorative study was to investigate the factors that enable and constrain first-year university students' success in the College of Humanities at UKZN. More specifically, the study sought to understand the interrelated aspects of students' lives such as personal, academic and social life that are associated with their success or failure at the university. Three main research questions were formulated to guide the study: (1) What constrains students' success within the College of Humanities at UKZN? (2) What enables students success within the College of Humanities at UKZN? (3) What are the elements of a conceptual framework that can be used to understand students' success in the College of Humanities at UKZN and to inform policies and support strategies in South African tertiary institutions?

The first part of the literature review highlighted the process of building the theories on students in HE and focused on international and historical accounts that have been used to conceptualise and explain retention, persistence, and throughput of students in HEIs. The review of the relevant literature included local understandings of students in HEIs and how student success and constraints are conceptualised in relation to South African realities. Other relevant theories that seek to explain students' integration, attrition, stopout and dropout in HEIs were reviewed. The review also included empirical studies that explored specific aspects relating to risk and resilience in HEIs and how the politics of education interfaces with learning and the development of the institution, and its customers.

The review of the literature on historical accounts and the evolution of the conceptualisation of students in HEIs showed that although some attempts were made by earlier theorists such as Tinto (1975) and Spady (1970) to clarify the interrelations between students and the context, their conceptualisation of students tended to be individuocentric in reference and emphasis.

The second part of the literature review focused on understanding students in HE using a localised worldview. The African-centred approach incorporating the Afrocentric or Africentric paradigm was the focus of this section.

The study employed a reiterative qualitative methodology that involved the use of Participan focus group discussions. Inductive reasoning embedded in grounded theory provided a platform to arrive at idiographic explanations that are authentic to the lived experiences of first-year university students within the South African context.

The sample for the pilot and the main studies was drawn from first-year, first-time university students enrolled in the College of Humanities at UKZN. The Participan focus group discussions for the pilot study were conducted with 24 black male students in 2011, and the main study was conducted with 111 students from various groups in 2012. Integration of the racial groups and decategorisation of the students according to their academic performance was a barrier to recruiting students, which resulted in a review of the recruitment process.

Data collection for both the pilot and the main study took place during the second semester to allow the students to gain a realistic view of their academic performance at the university. Two stimulus questions were used to facilitate the Participan focus group discussions. The first was “what helps you and other students to successfully cope with academic demands?”, and the second question was “what makes it difficult for you and other students to cope with academic demands?”

A multilayer interpretive approach was used to develop themes during and after the Participan focus group discussions. The reiterative process of data analysis enhanced the reciprocity of information through accrued sharing and reinterpretation of data by sorting by themes, detecting patterns and continuously explaining data and how it applies to theory and practice within an (a South) African context. The reflexivity stance adopted in the co-construction of what enables and constrains university students allowed for an authentic and student-centred understanding of their experiences within a university in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The African-centred worldview and Afrocentric perspectives largely informed the multidimensional discourses and what Benhabib (1999) refers to as interrelated selves in narratives that shape the experiences of being a university student in the South African context. The validity and reliability of the findings was ensured by using different strategies such as subjecting the data analysis to the Participan focus groups members who were part of the initial data sorting and theme development in order to verify the secondary induction of data. Data was also subjected to peer scrutiny at a Teaching and Learning conference held

at the same institution. The results of the pilot and the main study were triangulated, and the use of Participian focus groups allowed for multiple voices to emerge in a non-dominant manner, thus improving the applicability of the results in a similar population group.

The findings showed, among other things, that three groups of interlinked factors, which operate at the personal, interpersonal and structural levels, are associated with students' experience of success or failure at the university. Among the factors within the personal category are the nature of belief systems and the strength of spirituality and religiosity; pre-university schooling and background; the status of psychological capital; the students' habitus; ability to adapt to change at the required pace to meet socio-academic demands and financial resources to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Those identified within the interpersonal dimension are the forms, availability, and access to socio-cultural capital and psychological capital; the forms and strength of university engineered social capital to facilitate socio-academic integration; the quality of socio-academic networks and the nature, quality and strength of kinship ties. The factors within the structural dimension include perceptions of the nature, quality and accessibility of facilities such as university residences; extra-curricular facilities; teaching and learning practices and the accessibility and stability of external resources such as transport and accommodation.

9.3 Conclusions/Implications of the Study

The conclusions and implications of the study are presented below according to the key research questions investigated.

9.3.1 What constrains students' success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?

In relation to this question, the results of the study show that:

First, the shared and individualised ideologies and beliefs that the students and community hold about the nature of university students have an adverse negative effect on their success. This implies that the image that some university students have of themselves is destructive and in need of rehabilitation.

Second, coming from disadvantaged homes, schools, and rural backgrounds was perceived as counterproductive to university students' success since those affected see themselves as inferior because of their perceived inherent disadvantage. These deficits are magnified when students realise that they do not possess the linguistic, conceptual and

critical skills to engage meaningfully with content knowledge. The problems of poor self-efficacy in meeting academic competencies, lack of skills to access university resources such as the internet or poor computer skills, negative perceptions in the broader society, disempowering labelling such as being designated ‘disadvantaged’ students, and negative feedback from significant others are all sources of social persuasion and negative stereotypes that endanger students’ academic success.

Third, a lack of competence in the language of instruction within the university is considered as detrimental to students’ academic success.

Fourth, lack of competence in the language of instruction or inability to access cultural capital in the context of learning reduces students’ perceived self-efficacy. Furthermore, ethno-racial and social class dynamics are a barrier to students’ learning and development in HEIs. Negative self-perceptions have an adverse effect on students’ class participation and socialisation with other students and limit social learning. Similarly, students’ discourses illustrated powerlessness to resist deficit labels and misconceptions.

Fifth, deficits in students’ protective/resiliency factors and PsyCap such as mastery (failure to meet academic demands), poor emotional self-regulation, poor academic self-regulation and what some participants referred to as failure to accept differences all present dangers to students’ success. However, there is consensus that such factors are malleable, non-static and dynamic structures which can change in a conducive environment. Given this understanding, it can therefore, be concluded that university students can be assisted to unlearn and learn new ways of being in the world if support and care are harnessed to meet their needs at an individual and group level. However, it was evident from the findings that when students have negative socio-academic experiences and hold the belief that they do not possess sufficient resources to meet the demands of the university, their self-efficacy and other forms of capital are compromised.

Sixth, the findings show that some university students compromise their core beliefs and values in order to fit in and want to be seen as people *abasezintweni* (who are relevant). Realisation of the lack of essential habitus and acquisition thereof seems to be a major cause for concern for students in their first year of study. Their compulsive desire to avoid shame and disgrace is an impetus to appropriate imposed and unreflective lifestyles.

Seventh, some first-year students seem to prioritise the dress code while others prioritise academic writing. Others value social networks and/or the idea of being seen as a person of *osezintweni* (who is keeping up with the relevant trends) and focus more on ensuring that they do not stand out from the rest of the student body. All these responses tend

to work together to compromise students' resolve to focus and do well in their university work.

Eighth, the problem of deficits in students' self-regulation and the assimilation of a philosophy that promotes dysfunctional social integration indicate poor self-concept and often lead to divisions and conflicts amongst various groups of students. The collective identity of the self and the other appears to be in conflict and lacks critical reflection. It seems that the behaviour, attitude and psychological disposition of some students is gravitating more towards oppressive interactions that show helplessness and hopelessness as well as poor goal orientation and therefore limit students' success in their university work.

Ninth, poor financial capital is presented as one of the key constraints confronting university students. Inadequate financial support affects access to university curricular and co-curricular facilities as well as students' ability to fulfill their basic nutritional needs. Low levels of financial capital also compromise students' mental well-being because of the constant anxiety and stress associated with the inability to pay university fees and remain sustainable. Others are forced to seek employment, which tends to cause further stress when they fail to balance work and university expectations. Moreover, some students compromise their health and well-being by engaging in sexual relations with 'sugar daddies' to survive or maintain their lifestyle at the university. Low socioeconomic status fosters feelings of inadequacy and alienation among some students.

Tenth, the socio-cultural capital that is available to students is at times inaccessible. Some find that university social etiquette deviates from familiar social rules and norms. Some students perceive the university as individualistic and undermining, with a tendency to isolate rather than unite students. Even a voluntary grouping of students is influenced by racial and social class undertones. The students also stated that some lecturers' practices promote racism and discrimination and pose a barrier to learning. The lack of positive role models makes it difficult for university students to draw on positive resources to bring about change (Hoopes, 2013). There seems to be a decline in the appropriation of *Ubuntu* values and norms. Hence, students rely on individual autonomy to navigate adversities at the university.

Eleventh, the lack of multidimensional intermediaries that seek to promote access and SKAVs compromise students' coping mechanisms. Lack of support and excessive demands from families also limit the socio-cultural capital that students can draw on to mitigate the multiple demands that compromise their identity, values, and mental wellbeing.

Furthermore, their career choices are limited by family career knowledge and (dis) approval as well as the career information at their disposal.

Twelfth, some of the institutional infrastructure is perceived to be inadequate and of poor quality. For example, the study participants reported that some of the residential facilities are poorly maintained and do not cater for all students who require accommodation. Those who live in university residences are dissatisfied with the quality of the services they receive and complain about the high level of noise and lack of safety. The financial support received from the university is also perceived to be inadequate.

9.3.2 What enables students' success within the College of Humanities at UKZN?

The results of the study in relation to this question revealed that the key enabling factors that promote student success within the College of Humanities at UKZN are, among others, the following:

The first is high levels of positive PsyCap, resilience-promoting factors and adherence to *Ubuntu* principles. The students' psychological capital is also infused with a behavioural, attitudinal and psychological disposition that shows mastery, self-control, self-regulation, hope and meaningful participation and existence. Through these inner resources, students are able to overcome perceptions of entitlement by appropriating habitus that shows commitment to succeed, problematize incompetency and extend themselves to learn new skills.

The second factor is the positive influence of students' religious beliefs and spiritual connectedness. Drawing on these resources enables students to overcome contradictions; this is critical to sustainable student learning and development. Some of study participants' narratives demonstrate practices that display active agency and acknowledgment that they are connected to other valuable human systems.

Third, the presence of protective factors demonstrated by students, which include but are not limited to goal orientation, ability to sacrifice, and recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses. Also included in this list, are students' practice of *Ubuntu* values such as recognition of the importance of morality in one's behaviour mutual respect for one another, and recognition of the importance of consensus building and the multiplicity of human experiences.

Fourth, evidence of satisfaction with the chosen career path among some students. In this regard, the ability to link one's studies with future career paths seem to reinforce the drive to succeed.

Fifth, students' motivation or desire to escape poverty for themselves and their families.

Sixth, the positive influence of emotional and financial familial support, which make students feel cared for and alleviate stress. Kinship ties are replete with protective factors such as care and support, encouragement, motivation and positive expectations. Family support helps students to navigate unfavourable career choices, and family members who have experience of university serve as a source of reference and support for first-year students.

Seventh, the positive impact of the socio-cultural capital of the university environment, which is accessible by various means. For instance, Orientation Week familiarises students with university facilities and provides guidance on how to select a module and a degree.

Eighth, mentorship and tutorial programmes serve as valuable institutional socially engineered capital that creates a secure space for socio-academic integration and acquisition of the university's socio-cultural capital. Interactions among students and student-lecturer relations were perceived as sometimes harmonious and reciprocal, which promotes a humane existence, learning and support for students. The study participants also perceived teaching and learning practices at the university as transformational and inclusive in that some lecturers make an attempt to link the course content to real life experiences. The lecturers are also perceived to be competent and helpful, and the manner in which they interact with students tends to demonstrate care and support.

Ninth, the manner in which the curriculum, timetable, and assessment processes are structured is perceived to be flexible and promotes student success at the university.

Tenth, financial support from the NSFAS is a source of enormous relief from the financial burden faced by many students with limited financial capital. It is evident that when students have sufficient financial support, they can focus on their studies and prioritise their role as students, which reduces stress levels.

9.3.3 What are the elements of a conceptual framework that can inform policies and support strategies in South African tertiary institutions?

In light of the study's findings, the elements of a conceptual framework that can inform policy and student support strategies are contextualised and foregrounded within three main discourses, namely, educational inequality, deconstruction, and reconstruction of unproductive individual and collective images of self, and disembodied and decultured habitus which foster alienation and exclusion. Key elements of this conceptual framework incorporate both the enabling and constraining factors in an interconnected and intertwined manner. The superordinate elements contributing to first-year university students' academic experiences are captured in Figure 7.1 in the previous chapter.

9.3.3.1 Personal factors.

The personal factors that shape university students' experiences are located at the level of individual PsyCap. They incorporate the student habitus, the presence or absence of *Ubuntu* values, students' financial and health status and internalised ideologies and beliefs. Access to and the strength of spirituality and religiosity impacts the level of student resilience. The pre-university schooling background has a significant influence on adaptation and transition to the university environment. In this regard, the results of the study show that educational inequalities in South Africa are of concern.

For many of the study participants, isolation and alienation are due to perceptions of being different and as a consequence of poor economic status and feeling disadvantaged due to their previous schooling background, which confirm the myths and perceptions that students are exposed to before joining the university. Assuming homogeneity in the student body in HE entrenches feelings of alienation among those students who perceive their assets as a misfit and inappropriate in the teaching and learning environment. Such ontological and epistemological exclusion of students in HEIs is problematic (Dall'Alba, 2005; Marrow, 2008; Prinsloo, 2009; Scott et al., 2007). The experiences shared by the study participants thus call for the Sankofa perspective, which accommodates a historical perspective while charting the way to the future (Mungai, 2012). A similar call for integration of African, Western and even Asian heritage prompted the transformation of the concept of Afrocentric to an Africentric perspective (Nwoye, 2015).

While the study participants made reference to limiting inherent belief systems, the negative narratives are an open declaration that these have been internalised and are problematic. Students feel trapped in these labels and are discouraged by such negativity.

Negative perceptions of the in-group could result in poor academic outcomes for members of the group perceived to be inferior or inadequate or who perceive themselves as victims of stereotype-threat. Davis and Simmons (2009) argue that expectations and perceptions of being stereotyped as well as the strength of racial identity play a role in academic performance. Therefore, the processes that facilitate the reproduction of social, cultural and class dynamics in HEIs cannot be taken for granted, especially within the South African context, which was riddled with apartheid policies and colonial practices for many decades.

Challenging, deconstructing and reconstructing the unproductive scripts and stories that people have internalised over time require critical reflection and openness. An important critical analytical skill essential for students is the ability to infuse sociocultural and political perspectives to justify the influence of South African history. Students have a responsibility to lead the decolonising movement and resist alienation from their culture, norms and belief systems (Wa Thiong'o, (1986). However, one should acknowledge that without the necessary intellectual tools and reflexive academic engagement within various academic spaces, decolonisation, and emancipation of students remain a dream. Therefore, it is critical to go beyond attributes, abilities, and deficiencies to understand who students are, i.e., their past, present and future experiences should be considered when developing student-centred programmes.

Deculturalisation and the dynamics of cultural in-betweenity (Bulhan, 1980) of previously oppressed communities seem to pose a significant challenge for South African youth. It fosters what Zhou and Landa (2013) refer to as disorientation, disempowerment, and dislocation. In this regard, Theron and Donald (2012, p.56) assert that, "...culture informed mastery experiences." Thus, lack of grounding and access to one's culture as a collective social capital, and failure to appropriate one's culture as a source and way of life makes it difficult for university students to make sense of how the past influences current life experiences, and navigate their way to the future. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) affirm that non-traditional, first-generation students face multifaceted difficulties related to socio-academic and cultural adaptation.

While much has been said about South Africa as the youngest democracy on the continent, it seems that university students of African descent have a lot to learn about the long-term effects of not-so-distant apartheid and colonialism. The key question in this regard is whether we should allow the continued acculturation that leaves people vulnerable or should we adopt the strategies used by other Africans and those in the diaspora to

reconscientise African people that they stand on the shoulders of giants and can reclaim their heritage? The spirit of humanity that is not simply driven by throughput thus becomes critical in students' long-term development and learning in HE. Multicultural and multiracial institutions in KwaZulu-Natal should capture the essence of interdependence and other *Ubuntu* values in their vision and mission statements. It is clear that there is demand for principles that reflect the ethos and nuances that capture the cultural heritage of South Africans and in particular the people of KwaZulu-Natal.

The results of the study reveal that resilience is not a state but a transition that is successfully negotiated with available resources depending on the socio-cultural capital and psychological capital at the disposal of the individual. It appears that the study participants are in a constant state of emerging and becoming. At no point does their resilience remain constant due to multiple demands from the environment, and sociocultural and internal expectations. Theron (2012, p.336) states that, "youths who demonstrate resilience in one domain of functioning (e.g. academic achievement at school) may demonstrate a vulnerability in another (e.g. negative social relationships within the peer group or poor mental health)". Therefore, enablers and constraints that affect student success at university are similar to risk and resilience factors in that they are two sides of the same coin, i.e., diunital in nature. Hence, it is critical to allow multiple polyphonic voices to emerge, not as resilient or non-resilient but in the process of resolving the challenges.

9.3.3.2 Interpersonal factors.

Interpersonal factors include the level of support students receive from kinship ties and other social relationships within the university. The study participants' descriptions of their patterns of communication show that there is an uncomfortable shift in the way students engage with one another. There is a distinct culture of disregard for ways of knowing and being that are perceived to deviate from implicit university norms. Furthermore, classism and subduction of those seen as having social capital that deviates from the mainstream university community are also problematized in the study. It is evident that when communities of practice are not able to depart from a common vision and principles, disorganisation prevails. While we recognise that the university has a vision and mission to become the premier university of African scholarship, the principles that ground the African worldview seem to be undermined. The fundamental values and principles that are perceived to dominate the university culture are exclusive, alienating and tend to be individualistic. However, the measures that students use to evaluate their relationships with others are

grounded on the principles of *Ubuntu*, which highlights the interconnectedness of things, human dignity, respect, compassion and care for the other. The constant themes and ‘dynamics of cultural in-betweenity’ as advocated by Bulhan (1980) and Hussein (1980) are manifested in the study. It is, therefore, evident that the dual identity and constant capitulation that the participants expressed are calls for preservation of what they believe about human nature while acknowledging the need to adapt to the changing environment. The preservation of local knowledge (Mpofu, 2001) and philosophical approaches that bind people together were highlighted by the student discourse in this study.

One of the coping strategies that students adopt is to appropriate individualistic behaviour patterns. The study showed that, when other students’ appropriate individualism by portraying behaviour and attitudes that show disregard for others and prioritise self-interest some students experience the university environment as inhuman and insensitive. While there is acknowledgment of what Forster (2007) refers to as reciprocal interconnection, the results seem to show that students are dissatisfied and confused by the ambiguous feedback they receive from their environment. The need to remain meaningfully connected to others in all learning spaces and observing what Ramose (1999) call humane values such as respect, recognition for the other and acceptance of diversity appears to be critical in learning spaces within an African university.

The study participants were robust in their agreement that others influence their individual identity. Furthermore, they show elements of agency in shaping the communal spaces that they share with others, whether through omission, silence, approval or disapproval. The African-centred perspective views the relationship between a person and the community as circular. Therefore, the dichotomous distinction between self and others that is evident in the narratives of the students is not in line with the African and *Ubuntu* philosophy. It seems that these students lack skills to understand the dialectical nature of the relationship between the self and the other.

The continuous self/other dichotomy seems to contribute to distress and confusion. It is evident from the study that students within an African context have distinct epistemological and ontological positions that they use to view the world and their relationships. Many scholars continue to advocate for this distinction and call for all knowledge production, understanding and scholarship to be embedded in the fundamental principle that knowledge is contextual and localised (Asante, 1990, 1999; Fanon, 1986; Graham, 1999; Mkhize, 2004; Nwoye, 2013, 2014, 2015; Schiele, 1997).

9.3.3.3 Structural factors.

The structural factors are located in the institutional infrastructure, teaching and learning practices and external resources. The nature of and access to extracurricular activities influence students' socio-academic integration and their health and psychological wellbeing. Other structural factors that shape university students' success are located in communal resources such as the level of stability of the community, access to reliable transport and the proximity of safe accommodation. Education policies that facilitate access and funding of tertiary educations also influence student success.

The students' expectations are that there will be synergy between what they learned at school and what they learn at the university. They experience learning, especially basic education, as devoid of self-regulation, reflection, and abstraction skills which according to Nafukhu (2006) are pre-requisites in the learning context. There is a disjuncture between what the university requires, especially in reading literature in subjects such as English and what basic education offers. Lack of exposure to the English culture despite having taken English as a home language in high school puts unexpected pressure on students at university. The students' narratives represent a call for universities to transform the curriculum in the same way basic education has done, introduce, and embed its practices in local knowledge. Bernstein (1977, 1996) and Soudien and Baxen (1997) affirm that the role of education is to preserve or advance certain sociocultural practices, while Schubert (1996) asserts that there is 'hidden curriculum within the education'.

There was some consensus amongst the study participants regarding the localisation of the curriculum, and teaching and learning practices. HEIs seemed to downplay the short- and long-term effects of an imported educational system and practices and fail to appreciate the ethical and moral implications this has for people on the African continent. The postcolonial period in education is somewhat deceptive as it gives the impression that people have achieved what they have been striving for. Received knowledge systems and the impact thereof continue to affect the way scholars and students alike prioritise insidious, internalised grand narratives without genuinely opening themselves up and creating opportunities to equally valid truths and understanding. African-centred principles which assert that there are many ways of being and the equality of all things are often violated or ignored.

The understanding of the "family moves beyond just the nuclear family and involves other kinship ties including neighbours shaped by Ubuntu and family community" (Mkhize, 2006, p.187). The quality of their social networks influences students' socio-academic integration. Socio-academic integration is affected by multilevel factors, which incorporate

Ubuntu values, which form part of both individual and collective PsyCap. The socio-cultural capital available and accessible to students influences all aspects of their existence and determines educational outcomes and the coping strategies students use to negotiate not only their social status, but also their identities and the support they receive at various levels. Institutionally engineered social capital can foster positive adaptation and create a bridge for students to gain epistemological access and understanding of university structures and systems.

Education by its nature is political and is not a neutral and value-free endeavour. It is evident that the foundation of some of the classical subjects in Humanities is informed by European scenarios and the lived experiences of people from traditional English communities, which are not only foreign, but also alienating to most students. One could argue that the dismantling of the hegemonic pedagogical structures of the South African education system is in the early phase. Based on the responses of the first-year students in the study, it seems that there is a disconnect in the curriculum, teaching practice and the lived experiences of students within the university. The students claimed that the examples used in the classroom seem to favour certain racial groups and social classes. The literature is embedded in Euro-American tradition and is perceived to be removed from students' realities. This raises the question: what context are students prepared for and for whose benefit? While the HE system understands the realities associated with a lack of epistemological access at the local and global levels, failure to prioritise education for local relevance while recognising the global context is part of the root cause of poor articulation and high unemployment rates (Pauw, et al., 2008, Progler, 2011).

9.4 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the above, the following recommendations are made to improve policy and practice in HEIs:

- i. Although the HE system in South Africa has extended access, it has failed to transform the curriculum to align with the realities of many students (Scott et al., 2007). To address this omission, transformation of the curriculum must go beyond the political agenda to include an adequate response to the need for redress and social justice. The survivors of the apartheid and colonial eras have a responsibility to create awareness and foster cultural agency along the lines advocated by Walters (1996) and Schreiber (2000).

- ii. It is recommended that HEIs critically interrogate their education practices and teaching and learning methods. For example, they should review the curriculum to respond to the needs of not only students who possess the assets and capital favoured by the institution but the needs of marginalised and disenfranchised students who are at risk of dropping out. An on-going audit of the profile of the student body is required in order to review existing offerings and develop student-centred intervention programmes.
- iii. The study participants expressed the need to learn conceptualisation, critical analysis, and some linguistic skills. It is thus recommended that the learning support programme should interrogate other innovative means to help students learn how to analyse, conceptualise and acquire linguistic skills in a conducive environment that is safe and non-threatening.
- iv. Career guidance of first-year university students should be the joint responsibility of (a) the HEI, which sets admission criteria, (b) the pre-university school system, (c) the student and (d) the student's family. To this effect, it is recommended that career intervention programmes should target all these systems and ensure that mechanisms are put in place to respond to questions that families, students, and teachers might pose about certain careers. For example, a career hotline should be established for the various stakeholders in a language and form that is accessible to students to support those that face multiple demands in enrolling for a programme and module.
- v. Cognisant of the fact that financial support impacts on the lived experiences and academic success of students, it is recommended that part of the transitional programme should pre-empt the risk and protective factors associated with employment while studying. Students also need financial education and budgeting skills to help them use the funds at their disposal in the most optimal way.
- vi. More funding is required to help students access study materials, and students' families or caregivers should be made aware of the financial expectations of being a university student. Formal and informal dissemination of such information is critical to promote access to correct information and enhance knowledge of financial expectations.
- vii. Institutional advocacy is required on how families can offer support to students. This could take the form of a letter attached to the acceptance or admission letter explaining what the university expects from caregivers and students. The university could also allow parents of some students to sleep over at the university at minimal charge and meet some university staff or mentors face-to-face. This transfer of responsibility would give students a sense that they are cared for and alleviate feelings of isolation.

- viii. South African educational institutions should give due attention to resolving local community problems and acknowledge the impact of a lack of synergy between the product and demand in the community. Institutions should promote a positive image to members of the public by providing quality education and pride in the university. A reputable educational institution is an asset for students and can enhance their social status and employability. Construction of learning experiences within the classroom should consider the local knowledge system, with the aim of embodying the lived experiences of students. Validation of these lived experiences should be prioritised and consistently enhanced to improve the relevance of HE in South Africa.
- ix. HEIs should support efforts to demystify perceptions that disadvantage is inherent. They should provide access and opportunities for interaction between students of mixed ability and celebrate the success of those that overcome the odds despite a poor schooling background, rural education and learning in the second language. There is sufficient support for some of the augmented programmes and academic activities that target at-risk students in HE (Chetty, 2014; Cross et al., 2009; Snowball & Boughey, 2012). The major concern is that the academic programme should be multifaceted and should aim to empower individual students with knowledge and skills to appreciate their diversity; transform teaching and assessment models and practices to align with students' level of development; and enhance their academic language skills to meet the demands of their work.
- x. HEIs should equip students with life skills to negotiate and manage the multiple roles and demands in their social and academic spheres. Life skills education that specifically relates to the transition between high school and HE should also form part of the curriculum in high school. The lack of synergy and students' misperceptions of the nature of HE should be seen as a challenge to both levels of education. The process of deciphering the demands and expectations of HE should target school leavers in a systematic manner and take into cognisance the unique qualities in each category of schools. Authenticity and respect for students and an audit of accessible assets are key to awareness drives that aim to prepare students to transcend to the university. The basic education system should be made aware that passing a subject is not sufficient; learner development should be holistic and encompass some critical academic life skills and technical skills, which are required at university. These include computer skills, critical and analytical skills, time and financial management, balancing internal and external

locus of control, maintaining high standards and setting clear goals. Networking and reflexivity are also important in learning and teaching at both levels of education.

As part of life skills development, health and nutrition advocacy campaigns are essential for students because it seems that some students disregard the effects of poor nutrition on their well-being.

- xi. A checklist of the habitus and PsyCap of some successful students should be developed. Such an instrument could help students to fast-track the benchmarking of their SKAVs relating to the field of study and institution. For instance, students in Humanities might have unique academic demands compared to students in other faculties. Careful consideration is, therefore, essential to align the SKAVs to one's area of study and distinguish between the unique and the common SKAVS for a student in various HE systems. Sharing such information with prospective students and high school teachers is essential as skills such as critical analysis and computer skills are required when students enter the university space.
- xii. Proactive mentoring beyond curriculum-related activities is critical for first-year, first-time university students. Students need to be assisted to gain access to the university socio-cultural habitus and to acquire appropriate university habitus. While the sheer number of students makes this difficult, were such measure to be instituted in the same manner as the tutorial programme, especially in the first year of study, they could mitigate the prevalence of the transitional challenges that affect all students.
- xiii. Respect for religious affiliation and spirituality enhances resilience and protective factors. The university should support spiritual guidance for all students without discrimination. The positive influence of students' spirituality needs to be maximised through establishing denominational chaplains and places of worship. Similarly, there is need to appropriate *Ubuntu* and the humane values embedded in the African-centred perspective that was very evident in the study participants' narratives. Therefore, both students and the university should cultivate such values and uphold the norms that demonstrate respect for human dignity and equality.
- xiv. Blind acceptance of that which is considered conventional in particular contexts and uncritical internalisation of what is considered as grand narratives can disempower and oppress students and needs to be reappraised. Culture should be used as the basis to shape and challenge unhelpful discourses and perceptions in order to rediscover authentic communal values. There is urgent need to challenge the status quo on these matters. The intervention programme should infuse the incorporation of multiple identities by creating

opportunities for individual and collective expressions of diverse socio-cultural capital and provide space to critically engage with emerging student identities.

- xv. Poverty, racism and other social ills are a reality for many African students in HEIs. As such, the principles that Mcunu (2004) and Ramose (1999) raise with regard to providing humane and dignified living conditions are a challenge in the African context. The effects of a negative living environment are well-documented in resilience theories (Masen & Chatsworth 1998). There is, therefore, an urgent need to eradicate poor living conditions and racial and social class discrimination, in general. This should form the foundation for the conceptualisation of students' experiences in HE. Support programmes that aim to enhance students' resilience should not only pay due attention to how students in the African context can be assisted to recover from the negative images that have been propagated by people of African descent (See Nwoye, 2015), but affirm positive African values (Nobles, 1980; Myers, 2009 Ramose, 1999). Such empowering programmes should help students in HEIs to incorporate positive aspects of their culture, history, and philosophies into their daily lives.
- xvi. The university should assist students to come up with a programme that promotes the coexistence and reconciliation of Western and African ways of life, which, according to Ramose (1999), are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be simultaneously pursued. Furthermore, it is essential to adopt proactive measures to alleviate and monitor incidences of ethno-racialism, and other forms of discrimination and abuse within the university environment. Ongoing surveys and discussions focusing particularly on race dynamics, discrimination and abuse are, therefore, recommended. Similarly, the effect of gender-specific violence seems to be underestimated and requires proactive intervention measures, especially for female university students who experience pressure to engage in premature sexual relations.
- xvii. Students often express their desire for assimilation and integration in materialistic ways such as a dress code, branded clothing or gadgets such as cellphones. The desire for uniformity is not representative of the Africentric paradigm. Eurocentric materialism has configured African societies' tendency to participate in the collective identity. The material things that students use to show that they conform or fit in are often gained at the expense of the family that is left without resources. Accordingly, HEIs in multicultural societies such as South Africa should guard against a monocultural perspective, as the general student body is diverse. They should provide indicators for and against what can

be called 'over-integration,' which promotes sameness, enforces exclusive cultures and rejects diversity amongst students.

- xviii. Appropriation of values, beliefs, behaviours and attitudes in favour of the collective to the detriment of the individual could be considered as dysfunctional communism. Consequently, it is important that students be enabled to realise that they have multiple selves, all of which are equally valid. In this regard, being able to discern the polyphonic voices that seem to compete and make demands on the student, is part of being a student. It is essential to normalise identity transformations and create awareness that university students should expect change. When students are equipped with the understanding that they possess unique qualities and skills to deal with situations, they could benefit from such knowledge and understanding.

9.5 Limitations of the Study

Despite the rich information produced by this study on the factors responsible for the success or failure of university students in the College of Humanities, since this was a qualitative study, its findings cannot be generalised to all students enrolled within UKZN as different schools within the province might confront unique challenges. Furthermore, the diversity of the overall student body might be different to the ones sampled in this study. The data collection process was also limited by restricted funding and the time students had at their disposal to participate in the focus groups discussions.

Given the above, the generalisability of the results is bound by context specificity. The socio-cultural capital available and accessible to the majority of the students in a university in KwaZulu-Natal might be different from that of students in a different part of the country. Moreover, even within the same university, different Colleges might have unique academic expectations and demands, which differ from the experiences of students in the College of Humanities that were the target of this study. Therefore, the findings of the present study should be understood in context and the worldview that framed the responses of the study participants at the time of data collection.

Another limitation of the study emanates from the fact that socio-political and economic factors create unexpected dynamics in HEIs, especially in the form of the on-going #Fees Must Fall campaigns. Consequently, although some of the study's findings provide insight into the rationale for these campaigns in HE, it is probable that students that might

participate in future studies could hold different sentiments and values that demonstrate shifts in thinking and expectations. This could limit the applicability of the present findings. Finally, the researcher is aware that the African-centred perspective, which formed the conceptual framework for this study is contested and evolving. Moreover, the manner in which *Ubuntu* values, which incorporate collective and individual PsyCap and resilience in the South African context, might provide a different profile of successful students, could challenge the findings of the study.

The strength of this research lies in the fact that the discourse, whether negative or positive was affirmed in the presence of diverse racial and ethnic groups of university students. The Participlan groups had an opportunity to challenge and nullify codes or themes that were not reflective of their lived experiences. Other studies would benefit from such open discussions and seminars in order, to use Zhou and Landa's (2013) concept, to 'un-silence' hegemonic discourses, challenge unhelpful ethnic and socioeconomic bound identities and promote critical consciousness of the role of equally valid multiple selves in higher education.

The researcher also acknowledges the paradigm slippage that could affect how the data is analysed and interpreted due to internalised grand narratives that seek to exclude authentic discourses of students in an African context. In analysing and discussing the data, it is critical for future researchers to bear in mind the warning expressed by some of the scholars (Mkhize, 2004a; Nwoye, 2015; Proglor, 2012) who promote African scholarship that the epistemological and ontological foundations of people from the South and those of the North are distinct.

9.6 Recommendations for Further Research

It is against the above background that the following recommendations for further research are made:

- i. The proposed second phase of the study should involve administering the survey instrument to validate or confirm the findings emerging from the focus group discussions. Data obtained from the focus groups, which should be embedded in the survey instrument can be generalised to other settings, and this would also allow possible correlations to gather information on which mechanisms are critical to student success. The survey instrument should be administered to a larger group of students using electronic and paper-based questionnaires to generate data, which can be analysed using descriptive statistics. Data from the survey instrument should be linked to the institutional student

management information system using student numbers, in order to provide a combined emic/etic perspective on factors likely to be relevant to academic throughput. Data derived from this analysis should then be compared to students' final academic performance for the academic year, in order to derive one, or probably more, clusters of predictor variables associated with first-year academic outcomes. The same process can be adopted by other studies that follow a similar research design to this study. It is important to conduct studies in various Colleges or Faculties within institutions to validate the findings and develop a conceptually sound South African model that could assist in predicting first-year student success at university.

- ii. The study used grounded theory to investigate the experiences of first-year, first-time university students in South Africa. Similar studies in other HEIs are recommended as the context, university ethos, and socio-cultural capital differs in each region. Future researchers should endeavour to understand the cognate disciplines that are often grouped as Colleges or Faculties. It is probable that some of the core skills required in the College of Humanities could be peripheral in a different College such as Engineering. The nuances that shape student success are critical in order to draw authentic conclusions.
- iii. Future studies of students in HE should also consider the interrelations of the situated agency, capital, habitus and attributes of students and HEIs (Subotzsky & Prinsloo, 2011).
- iv. Cultural norms and belief systems that help students to identify socially accepted behaviour are disorganised and disorientated by constant shifting between African and Western ways of understanding and being. Although the results of studies on the concept of shifting indicate poor psychological well-being (Myers, 2009), further research needs to be conducted to establish the extent to which shifting negatively impacts the socio-academic and emotional functioning of students in HE. Another important question that could inform future studies is the extent to which perceptions and expectations of being stereotyped influence students' academic success.
- v. Finally, it is essential that future research be conducted on how PsyCap, *Ubuntu* values, and resilience, overlap and feed each other; and to establish how these important concepts could be institutionalised to improve their availability and access in enhancing students' socio-cultural capital.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Permission to conduct research



University of KwaZulu-Natal
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4000
Tel No: +27 31 260 3587
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sshrec@ukzn.ac.za

21 JULY 2010

MS. N BUTHELEZI (27178)
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Dear Ms. Buthelezi

PROTOCOL REFERENCE NUMBER: HSS/0798/0100
PROJECT TITLE: Towards an Afro-Centric Conceptualisation of Retention and Progression Rates at South African Higher Education Institutions: Phase 1

EXPEDITED APPROVAL

I wish to inform you that your application for Phase 1 has been granted Full Approval through an expedited review process.

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 school/department for a period of 5 years.

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

Yours faithfully

Dr. Lyn Middleton
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

cc. Mr. Praveen Rajbansi
cc. Mrs. B Jacobsen

Postal Address:

Telephone:

Facsimile:

Email:

Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Founding Campuses:

■ Edgewood

■ Howard College

■ Medical School

■ Pietermaritzburg

■ Westville

Appendix 2: Gatekeeper's permission letter



16 August 2012

Ms Nontobeko Buthelezi
School of Applied Human Sciences
College of Humanities
UKZN
Email: buthelezin@ukzn.ac.za

Dear Ms Buthelezi

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH


Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. We note the title of your research is:

"Towards an Afro-Centric Conceptualisation of Retention and Progression Rates at South African Higher Education Institutions: Phase 1".

It is noticed that Ethical clearance has been obtained for this study.

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

Yours sincerely



Professor JJ Meyerowitz
REGISTRAR

Appendix 3A: Information sheet and informed consent form -2011 the pilot study



University of KwaZulu-Natal

School of Psychology

Dear Respondent

Invitation to participate in the research project titled: Towards an Afro-Centric Perspective on throughput rates in the College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

You are invited to take part in a focus group discussion that seeks to investigate factors that that impede or facilitate your ability to cope with being a university student. Each focus group will have ten participants and these focus groups will be facilitated by two trained facilitators. The criteria for participation are as follows:

- Permanent South African citizenship
- First year first time student (student number starting with 2011)
- Black African male OR White African female
- Registered for a degree in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences
- To register for participation you will need to bring your identity document and a copy of your June 2011 academic record.

What the study is about: The aim of the study is to establish educators' perceptions of the learners' and school system's needs, and understand factors that that facilitate/ impede learning and development of learners in your school.

What I will ask you to do: If you agree to be part of the focus group discussion and you will share your view with ten group members on you think are the factors that facilitate/impede your and other students ability to cope with being a university student. The group discussions will be conducted at the School of Psychology building and are expected to last for about 90 minutes to 120 minutes. Then I will then write about your experiences with reference to relevant research and policies and come up with possible recommendations.

Risks and benefits: I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study. Each participant will be paid sum of R80.00 at the end of the group discussions.

Taking part is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the project at any time without any negative consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity of your records will be maintained by the researcher however the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality of information

If you have questions: Please contact Ms. Nontobeko Buthelezi. If you have any questions, you may contact her at buthelzin@ukzn.ac.za or at 033 2605670. Registration can be done by consulting Nontobeko Buthelezi in Room 48 at the School of Psychology building before the 11th of 2011 at 12:00. Registration is on first come first serve basis and will be limited to the following categories:

Racial Group	Group 1 No risk	Group 2 Moderate risk	Group 3 High risk
Black Male student	Passed all modules in June 2011 exams	Failed one module in June 2011 exams	Failed two or more modules in June 2011 exams
White Female student	Passed all modules in June 2011 exams	Failed one module in June 2011 exams	Failed two or more modules in June 2011 exams

SCHEDULE

Racial Group	Group 1 No risk	Group 2 Moderate risk	Group 3 High risk
Black Male African	Date: 12 October Time: 14: 00 –15:30	Date: 13 October Time: 13:30 – 15: 00	Date: 14 October Time: 12:00 – 13:30
White Female African	Date: 12 October Time: 14: 00 –15:30	Date: 12 October Time: 14: 00 –15:30	Date: 12 October Time: 14: 00 –15:30

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I..... (full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project. I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

Signature of ParticipantDate.....

NOTE: Potential participants should be given time to read, understand and question the information given before giving consent. This should include time out of the presence of the investigator and time to consult friends and/or family.

University of KwaZulu-Natal

School of Psychology

Dear Respondent

Invitation to participate in the research project titled: Towards an Afro-Centric Perspective on throughput rates in the College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

You are invited to take part in a focus group discussion that seeks to investigate factors that that impede or facilitate your ability to cope with being a university student. Each focus group will have ten participants and these focus groups will be facilitated by two trained facilitators. The criteria for participation are as follows:

- Permanent South African citizenship
- **First year first time student (student number starting with 2011)**
- **Black male students OR Indian, Coloured and White female Students**
- Registered for a degree in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences
- To register for participation you will need to bring your identity document/have your identity number and a copy of your June 2011 academic record.

If you agree to be part of the focus group discussion and you will share your view on factors that facilitate/impede your and other student's ability to cope with being a university student. The group discussion will be conducted at the School of Psychology building at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus. The group discussion is expected to take about **90 minutes**. Then I will then write about your experiences with reference to relevant research and policies and come up with possible recommendations that might be of benefit to you and other students.

Each participant will be paid sum of R80.00 at the end of the group discussion.

I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study. Taking part in this project is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the project at any time without any negative consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity of your records will be maintained by the researcher, however the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality of formation discussed by the focus group members, but will rely on implied consent from participants to keep the discussions confidential.

*If you have questions: Please contact Ms. Nontobeko Buthelezi in Room 48 at the School of Psychology building to register for participation or you can indicate your interest by filling in the register outside Ms Sharon Hattingh's office, and for any questions, you may contact her at buthlezin@ukzn.ac.za or at 033 2605670. **Registration will close on the 19th of October 2011 at 16:00.** NB: registration is on first come basis and will be limited to the following categories:*

Racial Group	Group 1 No risk	Group 2 Moderate risk	Group 3 High risk
Black Male Students	Passed all modules in June 2011 exams	Failed one module in June 2011 exams	Failed two or more modules in June 2011 exams
Indian, Coloured and White Female Students	Passed all modules in June 2011 exams	Failed one module in June 2011 exams	Failed two or more modules in June 2011 exams

Please note the following scheduled dates for focus group discussions which could take about 90 minutes.

Racial Group	Group 1 No risk	Group 2 Moderate risk	Group 3 High risk
Black Male Students	Date: 24 October 2011 Time: 12:00 – 13:30	Date: 24 October 2011 Time: 14:00 – 15:30	Date: 25 October 2011 Time: 12:00 – 13:30
Indian, Coloured and White Female Students	Date: 24 October 2011 Time: 12:00 – 13:30	Date: 24 October 2011 Time: 14:00 – 15:30	Date: 25 October 2011 Time: 12:00 – 13:30

Appendix 3B: Information sheet and informed consent form -2012 the main study

University of KwaZulu-Natal

School of Applied Human Sciences



Dear Respondent

Invitation to participate in the research project titled: Towards an Afro-Centric Perspective on throughput rates in the College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

You are invited to take part in a focus group discussion that seeks to investigate factors that that impede or facilitate your ability to cope with being a university student. Each focus group will have ten participants and these focus groups will be facilitated by two trained facilitators. The criteria for participation are as follows:

- Permanent South African citizenship
- Registered for a degree in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences
- First year first time student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2012

If you agree to be part of the focus group discussion and you will share your view with ten group members on factors that facilitate/impede your and other student's ability to cope with being a university student. The group discussion will be conducted at the University KwaZulu-Natal at Howard College and Pietermaritzburg campus. The group discussion is expected to take about **90 minutes**. Then I will then write about your experiences with reference to relevant research and policies and come up with possible recommendations that might be of benefit to you and other students.

Each participant will be paid sum of R80.00 at the end of the group discussion. I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the project at any time without any negative consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity of your records will be maintained by the researcher, however the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality of formation discussed by the focus group members, but will rely on implied consent from participants to keep the discussions confidential.

If you have questions: Please contact Ms. Nontobeko Buthelezi for any questions at buthelzin@ukzn.ac.za or at 033 2605670.

NB: registration is on first come basis.

Statement of Consent: I.....Student No..... (full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project. I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

Signature of ParticipantDate.....

PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

WHO CAN APPLY?

In order to participate:

1. You need to have registered at UKZN for the first time in 2012 (i.e., your student number needs to start with 212...)
2. You need to be registered for a degree in the College of Humanities (i.e., an Arts or Social Science degree).
3. You need to be based on the Howard College Campus or the Pietermaritzburg Campus (this unfortunately excludes students registered on the Edgewood Campus)

WHAT WILL YOU BE EXPECTED TO DO?

You will be expected to participate in a focus group that will last about 90 minutes. Each focus group will contain 10-15 students and will be run by two trained facilitators. During the focus group you will be asked to talk about things that you think make it easy or hard for students to succeed in their studies at UKZN.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING CONDUCTED?

I am conducting the research as part of my PhD, with the aim of the research being to try and understand issues that impact on academic performance among first year Humanities and Social Science students at UKZN.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF PARTICIPATING?

There is minimal risk to your participation. If you choose to participate, anything you say will be treated in the strictest of confidence by researchers, and all focus group participants will be required to sign a letter of confidentiality.

HOW DO I SIGN UP?

In order to participate in the research please send an e-mail to me (Ms Nontobeko Buthelezi) at buthlezin@ukzn.ac.za . Please include the following information in your e-mail:

1. Your student number
2. Your name
3. Your gender (male/female)
4. The campus on which you are studying
5. The degree you are registered for (BA, BSocSc, etc)
6. Your contact number.

We only require 100 students for the focus groups, and respondents will be accepted on a first-come basis. Successful applicants will be notified by e-mail regarding the time and venue of their focus group. All participants will be paid R100.00

FURTHER INFORMATION.

I can be contacted at buthelzin@ukzn.ac.za if further information is required.

Statement of Consent: I.....Student No..... (full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project. I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

Signature of ParticipantDate.....

Appendix 4: Focus group discussion questions

FOCUS GROUP QUESTION NO. 1

What do you think is helping you and other students to cope successfully with being a university student?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTION NO. 2

What is making it difficult for you and other students to cope successfully with being a university student?