Institutional barriers to learning: A case study of a university in KwaZulu Natal.

By

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# ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates the institutional barriers to learning encountered by students at one campus of a university in KwaZulu Natal. The objective of the study was to identify institutional barriers to learning from the perspective of students, and to ascertain how these barriers impact on student achievement. The overarching theory used to frame this study is Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic perspective. In addition, the notion of inclusion in education proved useful as a conceptual framework to the study.

My interest in barriers to learning arose from my observation that many students experience difficulties in achieving their educational goals. While there are many kinds of barriers to learning that students experience, the focus of this study was on institutional barriers to learning, that is barriers arising from the educational institution. The study looked at the physical, psychological and social environment of the campus, the policies and practices of the institution, and the resources and facilities available to students at this campus.

A mixed methods research design was employed in order to answer the research questions. Through questionnaires and follow up interviews, this study sought to unearth the institutional barriers to learning experienced by students at this campus. Study findings indicate that participants encountered barriers to learning related to overcrowding in classrooms, inadequate institutional resources, lack of access to information and the registration process. Findings from the study also indicate some enablers to learning, including the inclusive, welcoming atmosphere

of the campus, the useful online learning websites and the fact that the library and computer rooms closed late in the evening, allowing students more time to work.

Recommendations are provided to the focal university aimed at reducing the institutional barriers to learning identified by the participants of the study.  Some of the recommendations are: to enhance the capacity of the university to cater for the number of students registered, to provide a longer and more effective orientation programme and to provide more efficient administrative procedures.

# DECLARATION

I, Monica Jennifer Grant declare that:

i) The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated is my original work;

ii) This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university;

iii) This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons;

iv) This thesis does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:

    a) their words have not been re-written but the general information attributed to them has been acknowledged;

    b) where their exact words have been used, their writing has been placed within quotation marks, and referenced.

v) The work described in this thesis was carried out in the School of Education, University of Kwa Zulu Natal from 2012 to 2014 under the supervision of Dr S Ntombela (Supervisor); and

vi) The ethical clearance No. HSS/0279/012M was granted prior to undertaking the fieldwork.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

As the candidate's supervisor I, Dr S Ntombela, agree to the submission of this thesis.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

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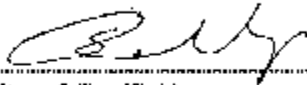
Dear Ms Grant

**Protocol Reference Number: HSS/0279/012M**
**Project Title: Institutional barriers to learning: A case study of a university in KwaZulu Natal.**

In response to your application dated 5 June 2012, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

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

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

Yours faithfully

**Professor Steven Collings (Chair)**
/pk

cc Supervisor: Dr S Ntombela
cc Dr D Davids

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# ABBREVIATIONS

CHE   Council on Higher Education

DOE   Department of Education

DP    Duly Performed certificate

ECD   Early Childhood Development

EWP   Education White Paper

FET    Further Education and Training

ICT    Information and Communication Technologies

LAN   Local area Network

SPSS   Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

UNESCO  United Nations Educational, Scientific and cultural Organisation

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# CHAPTER 1

# BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION TO STUDY

## 1.1 Introduction

It is reported that Horace Mann, a 19th century proponent of educational reform once said "education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery" (Cremin, 1957: p.2). These words offer a measure of just how important education can be both to the individual and to society. A key premise of this thesis is that there will always be hindrances that prevent learners from taking advantage of the educational opportunities presented to them. While these hindrances or barriers can stem from different sources, such as the society, education system, educational institution or the learners themselves, this study hones in on the barriers that arise from conditions at the educational institution itself. It is thus a snapshot of one moment in time and place.

This chapter begins by describing the background of the study. The focus, purpose and rationale of the study are then explained. This is followed by a brief overview of the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The research methodology used in the study is then summarised, followed by a review of the ethical considerations employed in the study. After a discussion of the significance of the study, the chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of this report.

## 1.2 Background of the study

In order to make sense of the current landscape of higher education, it may be helpful to review the foundations on which it was built. As a starting point, I first outline how the provision of education in South Africa was managed prior to 1994. I then look at some of the initiatives put in place to transform education, and specifically higher education.

According to Higham (2012), prior to 1994 the provision of education in South Africa was legislated by the Separate Amenities Act of 1953. This act allowed for the separate and unequal provision of education based on a hierarchy of racially defined population groups. This resulted in a separate Department of Education for each of the four population groups: White, Coloured, Indian and Black. According to Mubanga (2012) this allowed the school system to be used as a means of stratifying society along racial, ethnic and class lines. Consequently, schools for White children received more state funds, enjoyed better facilities and a higher teacher: pupil ratio. Mubanga (2012) further asserts that the curriculum taught in White schools was also different, and was structured such that White children would be prepared for further education and ultimately for professional positions in the workplace. Mdepa and Tshiwula (2012) echo this view, and argue that this segregation ensured that education in black communities remained inferior and limited. In effect, these policies served to exclude most of the population from accessing higher education and the economic advantages that come with it.

While the provision of higher education was not legislated for in the Separate Amenities Act of 1953, the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 served the purpose of dividing and segregating institutions of higher education along racial lines (Woodrooffe, 2011). As explained by Woodrooffe (2011) several universities were established for Blacks in different geographical areas, among them the University of Zululand in KwaZulu -Natal. The University of the Western Cape was created for Coloureds, and the University of Durban-Westville created for Indians (p.172). As was the case in schools, these segregated institutions also differed with regard to funding, institutional cultures and learning environments (Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012).

Since 1994, various aspects of South African society have had to undergo a great deal of change, as the country constructed its new democracy. The education system in South Africa has, of necessity, also had to transform itself to reflect the changes taking place in the rest of society. Badat (2007) contends that several initiatives were undertaken in an effort to transform higher education. Some of these include defining the purpose and goals of higher education, formulating and adopting policies, new laws and regulations being put in place, and major restructuring of

institutions and the institutional landscape of higher education. According to Woodrooffe (2011) higher education reform policies were implemented in order to promote a new, non-racial South Africa, and to improve efficiency in higher education. One such reform policy which has bearing on this study is the Higher Education White paper 3. The ultimate objective of this document "was to restructure the higher education system into a single, national, coordinated system" (Woodrooffe, 2011:p.174).

The South African national Department of Education (1997a) Education White Paper 3 (EWP 3) on the transformation of higher education affirms that "the challenge is to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities" (p.3). In light of this, EWP 3 (1997a) identifies several general purposes of higher education. Among these are:

- To equip individuals with the intellectual abilities through which they will be able to make use of the opportunities available and fulfil their aspirations. Thus, there could be a more equitable allocation of opportunity as well as achievement for South Africa's citizens.
- To equip individuals with the top-notch competencies and expertise required by the labour market and for the economic growth and development of the nation.
- To make a contribution to society by socialising its citizens to be enlightened, reflective and critical thinkers.
- To contribute to knowledge creation, distribution and evaluation through the pursuit of academic scholarship.

In order for institutions of higher education to serve the purposes outlined above, they are required to transform. EWP 3 (1997a) outlines two important ways in which they should transform. Firstly, there is a need for increased and broadened participation in higher education. There is a need for increased access to higher education for people who were historically disadvantaged. These include Blacks, women, mature students and people with disabilities. An effort also needs to be made to accommodate this greater and more disparate student population. This would entail reviewing curricula, models of teaching and learning, as well as modes of delivery. Thus, not only should students have increased access, they should also have opportunities to succeed in educational programmes. Secondly, there is a need for cooperation and partnership in governance.

This would facilitate the creation of "an enabling institutional environment and culture that is sensitive to and affirms diversity, promotes reconciliation and respect for human life, protects the dignity of individuals from racial and sexual harassment, and rejects all other forms of violent behaviour." (Department of Education, 1997a, p. 5).

To conclude, institutions of higher education are required to increase access and broaden participation in an enabling institutional environment. This means that institutions will have to recognise that their diverse student populations come with a corresponding diversity in terms of learning needs.

It would be ideal if the education system could effectively accommodate the needs of a varied student population. However, this does not always happen. Sometimes problems arise which prevent learners' educational needs from being met. These problems may be rooted in the society, the individual learner, the educational system, or an educational institution. In order to provide and sustain effective learning for this diverse student population, institutions need to recognise both the factors that hinder as well as the factors that facilitate student learning. The Report of the National Commission on Special Needs Education (NCSNET) and the National Committee on Education and Support Services (NCESS) defines barriers to learning as being "those factors which lead to the inability of the system to accommodate diversity, which lead to learning breakdown, or which prevent learners from accessing educational provision." (Department of Education, 1997b, p. 12)

The Department of Education (1997b) maintains that there are a broad range of barriers that can be seen as being located in the society. Some of these include poverty, various forms of discrimination and urban/ rural disparities in the provision of services. Poorly serviced communities may lack basic services such as adequate transport and primary health care facilities. For example, the lack of transport can pose a real challenge to students who use wheelchairs, as can the lack of health care facilities to students who suffer from chronic illnesses.

Walton, Nel, Hugo & Muller (2009) assert that barriers located in the individual learner may include impairments in the sensory, neurological, physical and developmental spheres, differing intellectual ability and psycho-social disturbance.

Barriers located in the education system can be related to disparities in the provision of educational resources (Department of Education, 1997b). There may also be inadequate numbers of educational institutions to meet the needs of the population. A further barrier located in the education system concerns the provision of inappropriate and inadequate support services. There may not be adequate development of the human resources needed to support educators in providing interventions to address barriers. This applies both to educators and specially trained personnel such as speech and language therapists.

Barriers located in the educational institution could include curriculum barriers, physical barriers to access, barriers created by the policies and procedures of the institution, barriers created by the inadequate provision of student support services and barriers created by the psycho-social climate of the institution. These institutional barriers will be focussed on in this study (Department of Education, 1997b).

## 1.3 Focus and purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to unearth institutional barriers to learning encountered by students at a particular university in KwaZulu- Natal. Once these are known, it is hoped that measures can be taken to address them such that learning is enhanced.

Educational institutions face the challenge of an increasingly diverse student population. Students differ in terms of their economic and cultural backgrounds, individual learning needs, learning styles and many other characteristics. In order to serve the needs of their students, educational institutions must be familiar with the kinds of barriers their students could experience, and take steps to minimize these. Barriers to learning could emerge from a variety of sources: from issues in the wider society, the individual student, the educational system or an educational institution.

The focus of this study was on barriers which arise from the educational institution. The Department of Education delineates barriers to learning as the elements which cause a hindrance to a person's ability to gain from educational provision. Such barriers could be located in an educational institution and experienced by any of the students in that particular institution. They may include physical barriers to access, barriers related to the organisation and management of the physical environment, curriculum barriers, or barriers created by the psychological and social climate of the campus.

The impact of such barriers to learning could be underachievement, dropping out or even exclusion from the institution. As such, the objectives of this study were:

- To identify institutional barriers to learning from the perspective of students.
- To ascertain how these barriers impact on students' academic achievement
- To elicit from students their opinion on the measures that could be employed to overcome the barriers they have identified.

## 1.4 Rationale for the study

Two rationales led me to this study. First my interest in barriers to learning arose from an observation that many students experience difficulties in achieving their educational goals. There are various reasons why students could experience barriers to learning. I have chosen not to focus on barriers within the learner, as there is extensive information on these in the field of Educational Psychology (Bishop & Rhind, 2011; Denhart, 2008; Howell & Lazarus, 2003). In contrast, there is limited information on the institutional barriers which can impede students' academic progress. Thus, I have decided to investigate whether there are institutional factors which can contribute to poor student performance at this university. Furthermore, my intention is to study the kind of institutional barriers that could affect all students, rather than barriers that are specific to students with learning or physical challenges.

Second, when I looked for literature I realised that there is a paucity of studies that investigate institutional barriers to learning. Some of the literature (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009) addresses barriers faced by students with specific physical and / or intellectual challenges. Denhart

(2008) focuses on the barriers faced by students with learning disabilities, while Bishop & Rhind (2011) focus on the barriers faced by visually impaired students. Howell & Lazarus (2003) look at the challenges associated with increasing access and participation in higher education for students with disabilities. One study (Thomas, 2002) addresses the impact of the values and practices of a higher education institution on student retention. This paucity of literature specifically geared towards uncovering the institutional barriers to learning in higher education encouraged me to undertake this study as its findings would fill an important gap.

## 1.5 The study

Around the world, researchers have been concerned with issues related to student participation in higher education. These studies have dealt with issues around access, participation and retention in higher education (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009; Machingami, 2011; Yorke & Longden, 2008). The literature reviewed in this thesis suggests a need for more research on barriers to learning that arise from educational institutions themselves. This thesis attempts to investigate what conditions in educational institutions are experienced as barriers to learning by students.

### 1.5.1 Key research questions

The key research questions of this study are:
- What are institutional barriers to learning encountered by students at this campus?
- How do these barriers impact on students' academic achievement?
- How can the university reduce their impact?

### 1.5.2 Theoretical frameworks for the study

The overarching theory used to frame this study is the ecosystemic perspective (Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana, 2010). The philosophy of inclusion (Booth, Nes, & Stromstad, 2003) has also proved useful to this study to provide a conceptual framework. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks will be discussed more fully in Chapter three.

The ecosystemic perspective was selected to frame this study because it offers a guide to discerning the interrelationships between individuals and their contexts. Bronfenbrenner's four levels of systems (micro, meso, exo and macro) were found to be particularly useful in trying to understand the impact of the institutional barriers to learning. This study focuses on the microsystem of students, the educational institution where they spend much of their time. Pieterse (2010) contends that the student is " at the centre of the microsystem and its subsystem" (p.203). Some of the subsystems in the microsystem include the learning environment and the peer group. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977) systems and subsystems interact with each other and influence the development of an individual. Further, human systems have particular patterns of functioning and patterns of communication that can have an impact on how individuals relate to their environments. This study aims to get a glimpse of what the patterns of functioning and communication are at this particular institution, and then determine whether these result in barriers or enablers of learning for students.

The conceptual framework that informs this study is the philosophy of inclusion. Although the idea of inclusion has been widely discussed in education, there are differing views on what is actually meant by the term. Booth, Nes & Stromstad (2003) distinguish between the assimilationist and transformative views of inclusion. They explain that the assimilationist view supports the idea that all learners, regardless of background, gender or disability status, "are meant to fit into a mono-cultural education system, with fixed curricula and approaches to teaching and learning." (p.2) Contrary to this outlook, Booth et al (2003) explain that the transformative view of inclusion supports the idea that education systems and educational institutions can be developed to accommodate the needs of diverse learners. This view of inclusion is concerned with developing cultures, policies and practices that will allow all learners to be valued equally. It is concerned with the conditions as well as the outcomes of learning, and supports the integration of special needs education into mainstream education (Booth et al, 2003). This study is based on the transformative view of inclusion.

### *1.5.3 Research methodology*

This study is underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define a paradigm as "a loose connection of logically related assumptions, concepts or propositions that orient thinking and research." (p.22). Thus, the paradigm chosen by a researcher will influence the purpose and motivation for which research is undertaken. According to Blaikie (2007) the interpretivist paradigm is rooted in the understanding that one cannot study social phenomena in the same way as one does natural phenomena, due to fundamental differences between the natural and social world. In the natural world, a particular action is likely to provide a given result, whereas in the social world, people act on the basis of their interpretation of situations. As a result, one cannot expect a particular action to consistently provide a given result when studying phenomena in the social world. According to Blaikie (2007) the aim of research underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm is to understand the subjective experiences of those being studied, and such research is concerned with how research participants think, feel, act and react in a particular context. In adopting this approach, the researcher acknowledges that there is no single reality, and attempts to discover the different ways in which participants interpret reality in this particular setting.

A mixed methods research design was used to collect and analyse the data. With regard to data collection, a questionnaire was used to gather initial information. This was followed by semi-structured interviews to facilitate further exploration of the issued uncovered in the questionnaire. In this way, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. One of the reasons for collecting both types of data was to allow for an expanded understanding of the issues being researched, which may not have been possible using either one of the data collection strategies on their own. Mark, Feller, and Button (1997) argue that mixing data collection methods can facilitate a broader and deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. This sentiment is echoed by Mathison (1988) who explains that different data collection methods may make it possible to tap into different facets of knowledge. Further, as explained by Kaplowitz (2000) I felt that the semi-structured interviews would enable the exploration of sensitive issues, which participants may not have felt comfortable expressing in a questionnaire.

This study adopted a case study approach (Yin, 1984) in order to investigate the research questions at a particular time and place. Baxter and Jack (2008) define a case study as "an approach to research that facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources." (p 544) As argued by Robson (2002), a case study has to delimit its unit of analysis. For this study the unit of analysis is one campus of a university in KwaZulu- Natal. Stratified purposive sampling was used in this study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). This allowed me to draw a sample of participants from different subgroups of the student population. For this study the subgroups (strata) were students in different years of study.

Data was collected using a questionnaire designed by me, as well as semi-structured interviews. The choice of questionnaire items was informed by the theoretical frameworks of this study, namely the ecosystemic perspective and the philosophy of inclusion. Data from the questionnaires was analysed and descriptive statistics produced to summarise the data. Data from the interviews was categorised in order to identify the themes and sub-themes (Punch, 2005) that emerged from the data.

### 1.5.4 Significance of the study

The findings of the study could enrich the knowledge base on institutional barriers to learning. The findings of the study could also be useful to:
- Students who are encountering the identified institutional barriers. The study will generate ideas on possible ways to overcome specific barriers. Some of these ideas could be utilised by students themselves in order to overcome barriers they may be experiencing.
- Staff members of the institution in terms of what constitutes barriers to learning for students and how these could be addressed.
- Highlight whether and to what extent some staff practices contribute or minimise students' experiences of institutional barriers.

- The institution being studied, to provide a clear understanding of which institutional barriers are impeding student success. This kind of information can enlighten the institution on crucial aspects that need to be changed to improve practice.

### 1.5.5. Ethical considerations

A number of ethical considerations were employed in this study. Permission to conduct the research was sought from gatekeepers (Appendix D). According to Berg (2004) formal gatekeepers are often officials of institutions who are tasked with protecting and serving a set population, and may have the authority to allow or deny the researcher access to a set population in order to conduct research. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and made aware of how the results would be used. Their voluntary participation in the study was also affirmed. Participants were also advised of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. These aspects are contained in the letter of informed consent (Babbie, 2010) given to participants before they took part in the study (Appendix B). The participants' rights to privacy and confidentiality were maintained by using pseudonyms in this report, and by only including information relevant to the study in the data analysis (Babbie, 2010). Finally, researcher bias (Denzin, 1989) in questioning was reduced by using the same core questions in the semi-structured interviews. These are contained in the interview schedule (Appendix C). According to Denzin (1989) using the same core questions for all participants facilitates comparing responses between participants. Further, the interviewer has the opportunity to change the wording, but not the meaning of questions in order to clarify questions for participants.

### 1.6 The structure of the study

Chapter One has provided the background and an overview of the key components of the research study. In Chapter Two, literature related to barriers to learning in higher education is reviewed. This chapter gives insight into the current situation in higher education pertaining to access, participation and retention of students. Chapter Three presents the theoretical frameworks of this study. In Chapter Four the research design and methodology employed in the study is explored.

Chapter Five presents and discusses the themes and subthemes emerging from the data analysis. In Chapter Six recommendations are made based on the findings of the investigation. This final chapter also contains a reflection of the completed research process, giving a summary of the main facts found in the review of the literature and the main findings of the study. Finally, conclusions are drawn and the limitations of the study pointed out.

## 1.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided the backdrop against which the study was conducted. It also oriented the reader to the focus and purpose of the study, and discussed the reasons why this study was thought to be relevant. Finally, it concluded with a synopsis of the chapters of this dissertation. In the following chapter, literature surrounding the issue of barriers to learning in higher education will be reviewed.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a broad overview of the issues around the provision of higher education. Against that background, a discussion of institutional barriers to learning is tabled and there is focus specifically on institutional barriers to student learning. Thus, this chapter reviews some of the literature around access, participation and retention in higher education.

A review of the literature reveals that there are various notions of access in the educational sphere. Thus, it is important to illustrate the notion of access which underpins this study. Geith and Vignare (2008) contend that a definition of access includes both the right to education and rights in education. Further, they argue that there are four critical dimensions to access that cannot be ignored. These dimensions are availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability (p.107). The dimension of availability includes the availability of educational institutions and teachers, as well as fiscal allocations for these. The dimension of accessibility involves the eradication of legislative, administrative, financial and discriminatory impediments to access. The dimension of acceptability involves the acceptability of educational provision to both students and their parents. The language of instruction used should be acceptable, and education should be provided in a way that respects the rights of learners. The dimension of adaptability "defines access in terms of its obligation to adapt to the unique needs of a wide range of constituents" (Geith & Vignare, 2008: p.107).

As is the case with access, there are variations in the literature on how the concept of retention is defined and measured. This study adopts Wyman's (1997) definition of retention which measures the "number of students who graduate or persist in their studies" at an institution (p.29). Thus, this definition of retention includes both the continuation rate and completion rate of an institution. The continuation rate measures the proportion of second year admissions of an institution. The completion rate measures the proportion of students who persist in their studies up to earning their qualifications (Wyman, 1997).

Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas (2009) assert that the worldwide trend to widen participation in higher education for the previously disadvantaged student groups has resulted in the retention and success of students being an area of interest in universities across the globe. Student retention is a complex issue, and there are a variety of reasons why students do not continue with their studies. However, looking at local and international studies of retention can provide useful insights into some of the barriers to learning experienced by students.

Several authors (Baron, Phillips, & Stalker, 1996; Department of Education, 1997b; Tinklin & Hall, 1999) have established the utility of the concept "barriers to learning" in connection with disability issues in higher education. According to Fuller, Healey, Bradley, and Hall (2004) the idea of focusing on barriers to learning reflects a paradigm shift from the medical model of disability which places the source of deficit in the individual and legitimizes exclusionary practices in education provided for people with disabilities. Lomofsky and Lazarus (2001) argue that the social model of disability is underpinned by the idea that society must transform in order to respond to the needs of its diverse people. Viewed from the perspective of inclusive education, special needs are seen to stem from the difficulties faced by the individual in relating to his or her surroundings, and the system needs to change in order to respond to the needs of individuals (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).

The National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) and the National Committee on Educational Support Services (NCESS) viewed the terminology "learners with special educational needs" as problematic, as it assumes that some learners do not fit into the mainstream education system (Department of Education, 1997b). They argued that this assumption did not provide any understanding of the source of learning breakdown, nor does it provide any reasons why learners with special needs are excluded from the education system. Thus, they advanced the notion of identifying "barriers to learning and development" in order to determine where the education system needed to transform so as to accommodate a variety of learner and system needs.

The Department of Education (1997b) conceptualises barriers to learning as those elements which lead to the failure of the system to respond to diversity, leading to a disruption of learning or preventing learners from obtaining an education. These barriers could be situated within the learners, within the educational institution, within the education system and/or within the wider political, social and economic milieu. Some of the factors that can result in barriers to learning include poverty, the inability to access basic services, chronic illness, discriminatory negative attitudes, an inflexible curriculum, language barriers, unsafe and inaccessible built environments, inadequate and inappropriate provision of support and all types of disability. This study uses this broad definition of barriers to learning envisioned by the National Department of Education.

## 2.2 The South African context

As indicated earlier, before 1994, the education system in South Africa was deeply divided, fragmented along racial lines. Nkoane (2006) asserts that the racial separation of universities mirrored the racial organisation that was prevalent in society. Admissions criteria established by state policy were racially restrictive and helped produce universities for Whites, Africans, Indians and coloureds. These universities displayed considerable differences in status, physical conditions and capacities, due to several factors. Among these factors were unequal funding, a racially slanted composition of staff and students, institutional histories and backing from business. Wolpe (1995) explains that historically white universities provided a comprehensive range of study and postgraduate programmes for their students, while historically black universities were confined to providing undergraduate degrees and diplomas that were mainly located in the social sciences and humanities, fields of study that would not threaten the prevailing racial division of labour.

Johnson (1995) asserts that the historically white universities could be further sub-divided into two groups: those in which Afrikaans was the language of communication and instruction, and those in which English was the language of communication and instruction. The historically white Afrikaans medium universities solidly backed the apartheid government and supported the higher education policies of that government. By contrast, the historically white English universities saw themselves as more "liberal" universities. The difference between these two types of historically white universities is evident when one looks at how they handled the admission of black students

to their institutions. Davies (1996) explains that a ministerial permit system was in place which granted white institutions the opportunity to apply for government authorisation to admit black students in fields of study not offered by black institutions. The historically white Afrikaans universities made very little use of this permit system, while the historically white English universities tried to enrol greater numbers of black students to their institutions using the permit system.

South Africa's first democratic elections heralded the explicit ending of the age of apartheid with its socially and racially divisive policies (Kraak, 2001). Since then, there have been many green and white papers, bills and legislative acts, policies and initiatives aimed at transforming education so that it can be more inclusive, hence able to respond to the needs of the democracy that was emerging (Makonl, Moody, & Mabokala, 2001). The South African constitution promises everyone the right to education. The reality for many South Africans is that accessibility to higher education has not been easily realised, as a result, in the new democratic South Africa this has become one of the many national imperatives. As discussed in Chapter 1, the transformation agenda expressed in EWP 3 stresses the importance of transforming higher education to reflect the new realities of a post-apartheid South Africa. EWP 3 (1997a) suggests that one way of achieving these national transformational objectives is by increasing and broadening participation in higher education, especially with regard to previously disadvantaged groups, which include women, Blacks and people with disabilities.

### 2.2.1 Issues around access and participation in South Africa

The Council on Higher Education reports that student enrolment in higher education rose from 425 500 in 1994 to 761 000 in 2007 (CHE, 2010). Other authors seem to agree that student enrolment in higher education has increased (Badat, 2010; Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012; Taylor, Fleisch, & Schindler, 2008). However, while access to higher education may be improving, Mdepa and Tshiwula (2012) argue that there is still a clear racial divide with regard to the participation rates of the different races, with statistics showing a participation rate of 60 % for Whites, 50% for Indians, and less than 20% for Coloureds and Blacks. Le Grange (2010) contends that the participation rates for non-white groups could improve if universities include diversity and

fairness as criteria for determining access to higher education. This could take the form of having different admission requirements for previously disadvantaged groups, and not just academic merit.

According to Mouton, Louw, and Strydom (2013) some universities have started to adjust their admission criteria in order to rectify inequalities caused by the education system under apartheid rule and are now trying to admit a more diverse student body. Some universities have started admitting students who do not meet their academic requirements, but who have the potential to succeed, using Senate discretion rules and policies on the Recognition of Prior Learning. (CHE, 2010) While these measures may seem to be a possible solution to increasing access and broadening participation in higher education, they are not without flaws, one being the issue of how one determines that a student has potential.

With regard to students with disabilities, the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions in the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM) (2011) estimates that students with disabilities account for less than 1% of the total student population in higher education. They explain that it is not easy to obtain accurate statistics for the number of disabled students in universities for several reasons. First, not all students with disabilities disclose this to their universities, and thus do not avail themselves of the services provided by Disability Units, therefore, the information provided by institutions only keep statistics on students who access the services provided by their Disability Units.

Even though accurate statistics for the number of students with disabilities in higher education is lacking, the approximation mentioned above is alarmingly low. Howell and Lazarus (2003) argue that little attention has been paid to increasing access to higher education for students with disabilities. This sentiment is echoed by Matshedisho (2007 ) who argues that there is a need to prioritize equal access to higher education for disabled students in South Africa.

The previous section has looked at issues around access to higher education. In the next section, issues around how students fare once they have gained access to higher education are addressed. The challenge is that opening access does not necessarily improve learning outcomes.

### 2.2.2 Issues around retention and success in South Africa

According to Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) 25% of students in higher education in South Africa are unsuccessful in completing their studies. These students drop out of higher education institutions without graduating with a degree. The literature reveals that there are many different factors that affect students' success in higher education.

Letseka and Cosser (2010) argue that one of the things that add to the student dropout rate is student under-preparedness for higher education study. The question of under-preparedness encompasses deficient language competency as well as a lack of mathematical and scientific skills. Badat (2010) offers the view that one way to address under-preparedness is to spend more money offering academic development programmes in higher education. These could include programmes that target enhancements in academic literacy and numeracy as well as improvements in conceptual knowledge and linguistic ability.

Cross and Carpentier (2009) concur that a lack of language preparedness is a barrier to success for many previously disadvantaged students. For many of these students, the medium of instruction is English, which may be their second or third language. The result is that students lack the capacity to express themselves in a way that is required by university study, and struggle to deal with the subject matter that they encounter. Universities have responded to this issue in different ways. Butler and van Dyk (2004) describe how the University of Pretoria has established a language unit which assesses the language proficiency of all first year students using a standardized measuring instrument, the English Language Skills Assessment for Tertiary Education (ELSA-PLUS). This is used to determine whether students need language support. Those students who are found to be deficient in language proficiency are obliged to enroll for the language proficiency course offered by the university's Unit for Language Skills development.

According to Davidowitz and Schreiber (2008) academic development programmes can vary greatly. Some of these programmes focus on psychosocial and affective factors, such as mentoring programmes, skills development and orientation programmes. Other programmes focus on cognitive and academic factors, and include access, foundation and extended programmes. These

adapted programmes may include adjustments to course content, delivery modes and the type of student support given.

Lovelock and Wirtz (2007) stress the significance of support services provided by an institution, and argue that this can determine the quality of a students' learning experience. According to Lovelock and Wirtz (2007) the core teaching and learning service of an educational institution must be supplemented by services in the following areas: the application and admission process, orientation, registration, finance, housing, counselling, educational resources and support services. These supporting services include information about courses, student advice, complaint handling and providing feedback in a friendly, trustworthy and timely manner.

Chetty and Vigar-Ellis (2012) argue that counselling and career advice are very important needs that students have, at the point of entry into university. They argue that this is especially important for students from disadvantaged school backgrounds who are availing themselves to alternative entry routes to university education. Chetty and Vigar-Ellis (2012) recommend that attention be paid to the clarity and simplicity of the information about the programmes on offer. Further, they recommend that this information needs to be translated into the main home languages of the applicants, so that it can be understood by both students and their families. The lack of adequate course information can also have an impact on students who are not participating in an academic development programme. Ramrathan (2013) agrees that poor programme and subject choices can contribute to student drop out. He explains that some students choose programmes of study or particular subjects without adequate information, while other students are given little choice in the subjects they can choose. This can depend on the course being studied.

Within access programmes themselves, there needs to be an awareness of the type of support students need. Aungamuthu (2010) found that students in an access programme faced barriers related to the use of ICT resources in their studies. These barriers related to physical and psychosocial access. With regard to physical access, students often had insufficient time to use the computers provided by the institution, as they had to wait in queues between lectures in order to access computers. In terms of psychosocial access, the students' lack of experience in using computers engendered uncertainty in using ICT resources. However, participants in the research

reported that the availability of peer support, where they could be helped by friends to understand how to use the ICT resources, helped them to overcome their fear and anxiety in using these resources.

Financial considerations seem to be another area of concern with regard to student retention and success. Despite the government's introduction of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), the lack of financial support still seems to play a significant role in student drop out. Breier (2010) asserts that this is especially true for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who either underestimate the cost of a university education, or drop out due to unexpected financial demands unrelated to their studies. While some students drop out because they can no longer afford to pay, others are excluded from institutions due to non-payment of tuition fees. Wangenge-Ouma (2012) agrees that the lack of finances continues to constrain opportunities to higher education, and cites as evidence the fact that Black students continue to demand free higher education. However, Wangenge-Ouma (2012) cautions that free higher education may not necessarily result in increased access for the poor. Instead, he argues, free higher education will serve to reinforce existing inequalities that contribute to unequal access to higher education, among these being the performance inequalities in schools due to differences in educational quality.

Lubben, Davidowitz, Buffler, Allie, and Scott (2010); Wangenge-Ouma (2012) also found financial difficulties to be one of the reasons students give for deciding to discontinue their studies. However, they add academic challenge, family issues and despondency due to poor course selection as other reasons students choose to discontinue their studies.

The way in which the curriculum is organized and managed can also have an impact on student success. Essack (2012) asserts that there are curriculum, pedagogic and support strategies that can be implemented to facilitate student retention and success. These include providing curriculum content that is relevant and contextual to students' life experiences. Such curriculum content could focus on indigenous knowledge, for example, promoting unique African philosophies. Further, Essack (2012) supports the use of appropriate teaching, learning and assessment methodologies that assist in developing students' general academic and cognitive skills.

The Council on Higher Education (2010) uses the notion of pedagogic distance to alert us to some of the barriers to learning faced by students. According to the CHE (2010), one of the reasons for undergraduate underperformance is the difficulty encountered by students in overcoming pedagogic distance. The term pedagogic distance is used to depict the gap between teaching expectations and learning outcomes, which occurs due to disconnectedness. The two dimensions of pedagogic distance that are relevant to this study are the emotional dimension and pedagogic dimension. The emotional dimension speaks to the ability of the lecturer to engage students emotionally in learning the subject matter, the ability to inspire students to make a connection to what is taught. The pedagogic dimension is concerned with methods of teaching and learning that are dissimilar to those experienced by students at school. According to the CHE (2010) many students express frustration at not knowing how to succeed in academic life. This frustration is compounded by the fact that different lecturers may have different expectations, leaving students confused. The pedagogic dimension can often be seen in terms of physical distance. This is true principally in first year courses, where class sizes tend to be larger. In these classes, the high noise level, the lack of support or tutorial classes, insufficient personal knowledge between lecturer and students and the shortage of direct supervision of students can make students more vulnerable to failure (Council on Higher Education, 2010).

Subotzky (2011) cites institutional culture as another factor in student drop out. According to Tierney (1988) the identity of an institution is shaped not only by external circumstances such as its economic, political and demographic conditions, but also by strong internal factors. These internal factors stem from the history of the institution, and are maintained by the values, goals and processes of the people involved in determining how the institution works. Thus, one can gain insight into an institution's culture by looking at what is done, how it is done, and who is doing it. Further, an institution's culture may govern the decisions made, actions taken and communication conveyed both explicitly and implicitly. However, the challenge is that leaders of an institution often have a passive awareness of the cultural conditions that govern their daily decision making. Tierney (1988) asserts that a fuller understanding of an institution's culture by its leaders can enable them to make decisions that accommodate the needs of the various groups in the institution.

Subotzky (2011) explains that some historically white institutions in South Africa have not transformed enough to facilitate the retention and success of black students. In these institutions, the Eurocentric cultures and practices of the institution can lead to black students feeling alienated. To respond to this issue, Machingami (2011) recommends that universities and academics need to view their students from a new perspective by developing a deeper understanding of who their students are, in order to develop them to their full potential. Further Machingami (2011) suggests that universities should pay some attention to facilitating a smooth progression from the familiar school life to the institutional culture of the university for students coming from diverse backgrounds.

Howell and Lazarus (2003) found that there are several barriers within higher education institutions that limit the ability of disabled students to participate. These include: negative attitudes to disability, inflexible academic curricula, inaccessible physical surroundings and the provision of academic support. Howell and Lazarus (2003) acknowledge that institutions do attempt to provide learning support to students with disabilities. However, they argue that the type and range of the services institutions are able to offer is often limited, due to resource constraints. Further, they argue that these services tend to be separated from the broader teaching and learning initiatives of the institution, thereby creating a structural separation between learning support for students with disabilities and other learning support initiatives. Howell and Lazarus (2003) conclude that institutional capacity needs to be enhanced, to enable institutions to deliver a more comprehensive service for a wider range of learning needs. They contend that this capacity building involves a process of systemic change, where the structural and discursive barriers that restrict access and participation for all students are addressed.

## 2.3 The international context

In recent decades, there have been changes in higher education around the world. Leach (2013) explains that the provision of higher education has changed, moving away from education for the elite towards mass education, where higher education is seen as a right that should be accessible

to anyone, regardless of social position.  Thus, many countries have made an effort to ensure that higher education is accessible to those who were previously underrepresented in higher education.  These underrepresented groups vary from country to country.  They include people of low socio economic status, people with disabilities and specific ethnic groups.

### *2.3.1 Issues around access and participation internationally*

On reviewing the literature internationally regarding access to higher education, it would appear that there has been some growth in the numbers of students accessing higher education worldwide.  Aseron, Wilde, Miller, and Kelly (2013); Blanden and Machin (2013); Tight (2012) agree that underrepresented groups have shown little change in their rate of access and participation.  Tight (2012) asserts that more females and people from ethnic minorities are accessing higher education in the United Kingdom, but little progress has been made in boosting student numbers from the lower socio economic groups.

This seems to be the case in Australia as well, where Armstrong and Cairnduff (2012) also note an expansion of the higher education system, but where the rates of access and participation for socially disadvantaged groups has displayed little advancement.  While Aseron et al. (2013) agree that the participation rate of underrepresented groups remains low, they argue that statistics show some improvement from 2001 to 2010.  Aseron et al. (2013) point out that one of the reasons for the continued low rate of participation by these groups may be due to perception.  For example, they argue that indigenous people may not perceive higher education as accessible, and may continue to find the higher education environment hostile and uncomfortable, resulting in the persistence of poor outcomes.

Various suggestions emerge from the literature on how universities can widen the participation of underrepresented groups in higher education.  Clayton (2012) suggests that universities could partner with schools serving underrepresented groups to implement outreach activities with them.  Further, he suggests that foundation courses could be a useful route to admission for students from underrepresented groups who do not meet the standard admission requirements.  Cuthill and

Jansen (2013) suggest that students from underrepresented groups could be offered financial aid in the form of scholarships. Jones and Lau (2010) argue that universities need to render more support to students and be more flexible, in order to widen participation. In particular, changes have to be made in how teaching is delivered, how learning takes place how that learning is assessed in higher education, in order to succeed in widening the participation of underrepresented people. Dawson, Charman, and Kilpatrick (2013) echo this view, and argue for the inclusion of a variety of learning methods. They argue that students should be given the opportunity to learn from a variety of sources, including lectures, tutorials, video conferences, learning from peers, online discussion boards and online materials posted by lecturers.

Internationally, various initiatives are in place in higher education to encourage parity of access for people with disabilities. However, significant barriers remain to students with disabilities participating in higher education. Denhart (2008) argues that greater numbers of students with disabilities are now gaining access to higher education, but that the dropout rate amongst them is high. This confirms the findings of research done in South Africa (Howell & Lazarus, 2003; Machingami, 2011).

Reed and Curtis (2012) highlight the fact that disabled students are often unaware that there are support services available to them in higher education. This paucity of information can become a barrier to disabled students even applying to university. Wray (2012-13) argues that the support given is of particular concern to disabled students when choosing a university, as students recognise these accommodations as significant enablers to their learning. Examples of such accommodations include providing extra time to complete assignments and providing tutors and mentors to assist students.

Goode (2007) confirms the importance of support services for the disabled, and suggests that universities should be concerned with how disabled students experience the provisions made for them by institutions. Goode (2007) maintains that by understanding how students experience the

university environment, there can be an improvement in understanding the barriers and enablers presented by the university environment. This understanding should then be used to inform future provisions for the disabled.

### 2.3.2 Issues around retention and success internationally

The literature reveals that there are many barriers to learning that can have influence whether students decide to continue with their studies. The literature also reveals that it is a combination of causes, rather than a single cause, which leads students to withdraw from their studies, or drop out. In this section, some of the factors that constitute barriers to learning will first be discussed. This will be followed by some of the suggestions to improve success and retention that emerged from the literature.

A comprehensive national survey conducted by Yorke and Longden (2008) identified seven factors which influenced student retention in the United Kingdom. These include: students being unhappy with the quality of the learning experience, students having difficulty coping with the academic demands of study, students having chosen their field of study poorly, students being unhappy with the location and environment of the institution, students being dissatisfied with institutional resourcing, students having financial problems and students having problems integrating with other students on a social level (Yorke & Longden, 2008).

In Sri Lanka, Hill (2009) identifies some institutional barriers to learning faced by students at a particular university. First, the interruption of classes due to strikes, and the changes to schedules made without adequate notice were identified as institutional barriers to learning. Second, inadequate resources and staff presented a barrier to learning. In particular, inadequate laboratory and library resources, as well as classrooms that were too small to accommodate the number of students were found to disturb students' learning. Third, complicated and time-consuming administrative practices, especially with regard to the registration process, were cited as institutional barriers to learning.

Other authors agree that large class sizes can have a negative effect on student learning (Council on Higher Education, 2010; Nicol & Boyle, 2003). According to Nicol and Boyle (2003) learning environments that allow for ample lecturer-student and student-student dialogue facilitate the development of critical thinking and deep conceptual understanding in students. Large class sizes are prevalent in many higher education institutions, especially in first year courses. This makes it challenging for lecturers to use teaching methods centred on dialogue and discussion. Further, large class sizes undermine the lecturers' efforts to actively engage all the students in learning and also thwarts the lecturers' efforts to gain valuable feedback on their students' learning. Consequently, Nicol and Boyle (2003) argue that lecturers may not get adequate information about the difficulties students may be experiencing with the content being learned.

Crosling, Heagney and Thomas (2009) argue that one way to improve student retention is by engaging students in their studies. Engagement of students in their learning starts at orientation and induction. Crosling et al (2009) assert that the orientation and induction process should start before students arrive on campus, and should last longer than the traditional week. Thus, students get the opportunity to assimilate all the new information they have received, and they get to develop a sense of belonging in the institution by socialising with staff and students through a variety of activities. Crosling et al (2009) maintain that this early contact with students is helpful for staff as well, as staff get the opportunity to cultivate an awareness of the diversity of students. This understanding informs decisions on the contents of the curriculum, to facilitate the provision of an authentic and relevant curriculum. Further, this understanding informs decisions on how learning programmes should be organised.

The importance of good staff-student relationships is echoed by other authors. Noble and Henderson (2011) confirm that students' good quality interaction with other students and with teaching staff in a casual environment are essential to academic success. They argue that, in developing programs aimed at facilitating the transition to university, student academic preparedness should be targeted along with their social preparedness. Noble and Henderson (2011) conclude that good staff-student interactions early in the academic year are important to support students in cultivating a feeling of security in the university context. Opportunities should

also be provided for students to meet each other before registration, in order to avoid students feeling isolated. Roberts and McNeese (2010) are of the opinion that students should be engaged in experiences which promote both academic and social reinforcement throughout the year. They assert that, in order to participate in a meaningful way in campus activities and organisations, it is vital for students to interact with their peers. By developing relationships with their peers, students feel an affinity with their institutions and are more likely to continue with their studies until graduation. This sentiment is echoed by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) who argue that students feeling like they are a part of the social life on campus can influence student retention to the same extent as academic factors.

Clark, Andrews, and Gorman (2012-13) suggest the use of peer mentoring as one of the strategies to promote a sense of belonging in students. While there are different ideas about what peer mentoring is, in this case it involves senior students offering social and/or academic support on a formally organised, voluntary basis to first year students. Clark et al. (2012-13) suggest that peer mentoring can ease students' transition into university life by allowing room for new students to establish connections with senior students early in their university lives. This gives new students (mentees) the opportunity to discuss things with mentors that they may not have been able to discuss with a member of staff. Clark et al. (2012-13) conclude that peer mentoring benefits both mentees and mentors. New students gain assistance and a sense of belonging, while mentors develop new skills and improve their subject knowledge.

Other authors illustrate the positive effects of a good staff-student relationship. Clark et al. (2012-13); Maher and Macallister (2013) assert that being able to contact staff plays a valuable role in students feeling a sense of belonging in the community, and increase students' eagerness to ask for assistance when they experience academic challenges, resulting in an increased likelihood of student success. Thomas (2012-13) points out that a positive staff-student relationship is beneficial with regard to assessment, so that students can be comfortable in asking for clarification if necessary. With regard to assessment, Thomas (2012-13) suggests that transparent assessment criteria, with clear guidelines on the assessment process and informative feedback given to students are enablers to student learning. Further, feedback on assessments needs to be helpful to students, with some guidance on how to use this feedback to inform future tasks.

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One research study investigated whether institutions could improve student retention by being learner centred (Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2006). They explain that being learner centred involves being welcoming and inclusive, making students feel appreciated, treating students fairly and being receptive to cultural diversity. Their study took the form of a survey administered to several institutions. The institutions with the lowest dropout rates were those in which students felt they belonged in the institutional culture, felt their diverse needs were recognised and accommodated, and felt that the quality of teaching and support they received was of a high standard.

Another study looked at how student outcomes could be improved in the initial year of study (Zepke, Leach, Prebble, Henderson, Leadbeater, Wilson, & Solomon, 2005). They provided guidelines that could be used to enhance student learning. One of their guidelines is that students should be given sound academic advice before they start their studies. Institutions can contribute to students making better choices by accurately describing what they have to offer and providing more guidance on subject choices prior to entry to university. Students should also be helped to have a more realistic view of the academic demands of university. This gives students much needed information on what they can expect, and information on what the limitations of provision are. Further, Zepke et al. (2005) assert that this academic advising should be coupled with an effective orientation programme.

Denhart (2008) investigated the barriers faced by college students with learning disabilities in the United States of America, and established that barriers faced by these students stemmed mainly from social causes. Some of these social causes include being misunderstood by staff, students being reluctant to ask for special accommodations, and students having to work much longer hours than others in order to succeed. Denhart (2008) found that students were reluctant to ask for accommodations for their learning disability because of the stigma attached to having a disability and because they feared discrimination. Thus, Denhart (2008) recommends that such social barriers can be minimised by increasing awareness of disability issues in the university environment.

More recent research  (Supple & Abenyega, 2011) acknowledges that, through inclusive policies, there is an attempt to promote access to higher education for students with disabilities in Australia, as is the case globally.  However, the researchers question whether the students' voices are being heard, in terms of their experiences of being disabled in the university environment.  This study was concerned with the students' experiences of inclusion, and focused on the impact of policy, resource deployment, support systems staff skills set on students' experiences of university life. The aim of the study was to identify barriers that could be changed, especially with regard to accessibility, quality of service and faculty awareness.  Supple and Abenyega (2011) concluded that an area of importance for inclusion was the professional development of staff.  They argue that it is vital to develop a sense of community in an inclusive environment.  This includes promoting a culture of inclusion amongst staff, as well as collaborative support structures for staff. Supple and Abenyega (2011) recommend that there should be compulsory training for staff.  This training should focus on the strategies and procedures staff can use in accessing the resources and support to teach students with diverse needs.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored a few of the challenges in higher education with regard to access, participation and retention of students.  It is hoped that this has provided valuable insights into how we could address barriers to learning encountered by all students.   The following chapter will discuss the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

# CHAPTER 3
# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the theoretical and conceptual concepts which serve as a backdrop to the study. The basic tenets of an ecosystemic perspective are first discussed, followed by a brief explanation of how these relate to the present study. The concept of inclusion is then discussed. Since inclusion means contrasting things to different people, it follows that it is implemented differently according to this, thus the researcher's view of inclusion is stated. The chapter concludes by highlighting a few of the issues around implementing inclusive policy and practice.

## 3.2 Ecosystemic theory

The ecosystemic perspective is viewed as an appropriate framework within which to contextualise this study, as this model facilitates an understanding of the complex interrelationships between individuals and their contexts. The ecosystemic perspective is a blending of the ecological perspective and a systems approach (Weiss, Coll, Wayeda, Mascarenas, Lawlor, & Debraber, 2012).

The ecological model associates human with all living organisms that depend on the interchange with their environment for survival and growth. The main concept taken from ecological theory is that of interdependence (Donald et al., 2010). Ecological theory views the relationship between organisms and their environments in a holistic way. Each part of the system is as important as the other and each part plays its role to safeguard the continued existence of the system. The system is kept alive by the relationships and cycles in the system being in balance. However, a disturbance in one part of the system can unbalance other elements of the system, and threaten the survival of the whole system. Systems theory understands human behaviour in terms of relationships. Further, systems theory is concerned with how a whole is made up of interrelated parts, and how change in one part can impact on other parts of the system.

Donald et al (2010) submit that these concepts can be applied to the interactions of human beings in their social contexts. Different groups of individuals can be seen as systems interacting with each other to ensure the functioning of the whole system. For example, the university may be seen as a system. The staff, students and curriculum can be seen as parts of the system that need to interact to ensure the survival of the university as the whole system. We need to explore the relationships between the different parts so that we can make sense of the system as a whole.

Thus, the ecosystemic perspective merges concepts from ecological and systemic theories and applies these to understanding different aspects of society. Kalenga and Fourie (2011) assert that the ecosystemic perspective helps us to understand the person-environment relationship. Further, they assert that it shows the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals or groups of different social standing, who are interacting in some way because they are part of the same system.

Donald et al (2010) explain some of the characteristic elements of human systems which need to be understood (pp.37-39).

- The interaction of systems and subsystems. Whole systems can interact with other systems, for example the university interacting with other universities. Subsystems can interact with each other and have an impact on the whole system, for example academic staff as one subsystem interacts with students as another subsystem, and the nature of that interaction can affect the whole university.
- Patterns of functioning. In human systems, people tend to interact with each other in distinctive ways. Individuals shape and are shaped by these regular ways of interacting which become patterns. To continue the university analogy, an institution has its particular norms with regard to how people interact with each other, and this undoubtedly has an effect on individuals.
- Patterns of communication. Communication takes place between subsystems, for example between students, or between staff and students. Communication also takes place between the whole system and other systems outside of it. The interaction and functioning of subsystems and systems depend on how clearly and directly communication takes place.

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- Roles within the system. The way the system functions as a whole is affected by how people's roles in the system are defined.

- Boundaries. The extent to which the boundaries between subsystems and between whole systems are flexible affects the functioning of the whole system.

- Cycles of cause and effect. The interrelationship between parts of a system means that cause and effect relationships tend to be cyclical rather than one-directional. Individuals become so locked into relating in a certain way that they eventually experience this as unwritten rules of the system.

- Goals and values. Systems have stated as well as hidden goals. These goals influence the system, are influenced by the system, and affect how the system relates to other systems.

- Time and development. Systems evolve over time, and a change in one part of the system affects the whole system.

These core concepts from the ecosystemic perspective were useful in determining the questionnaire items to be incorporated in the study. Based on these concepts, the broad categories of questions were constructed. These broad categories include the physical environment on campus, the psychological and social environment on campus, access to information, the policies and practices of the institution. Questionnaire items sought to clarify how factors in these categories impacted on students, and whether these led to barriers to learning for students.

In addition to this, Bronfenbrenner's model of the different levels of system was thought to be appropriate to this study. Bronfenbrenner ( 1977) identified four levels of system which are in continuous and dynamic interaction to influence the development of children. These levels can be applied to the educational setting to try to discern the barriers encountered by students. The levels are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The microsystem involves those interactions and relationships closest to the individual, i.e. the environment in which the individual is operating. An example of microsystems could be the family and the institution at which one is studying and spending a lot of time. In the context of this study, the microsystem comprises the student him or herself, other students with whom an individual student interacts, the academic and

support staff that the student deals with and the campus, with its resources and facilities, policies and practices (Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013).

The mesosystem involves the interaction of microsystems, for example the interaction between the family and the educational institution (McGuckin & Minton, 2014). The exosystem encompasses an environment in which the individual is indirectly involved, but which affects him / her because it influences the people with whom he / she has close relationships. An example of an exosystem could be the professional bodies to which academics belong. The macrosystem encompasses the larger cultural context, such as the wider society.

To conclude, I view Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic perspective as useful for understanding educational experiences. For this study, the utility of this perspective stems from the fact that it is centred on the idea that we can only understand the individual's experiences by examining the settings that meaningfully influence his / her life. This study is particularly concerned with how the environment impacts on students, by identifying the institutional barriers to learning present at this campus. Thus, this study shines a spotlight on the microsystems of students (the classroom, recreational and other organisations to which the student belongs, the campus neighbourhood). In other words, the focus is on contextual factors that are directly influencing students.

**3.3 Inclusion**

Inclusion means different things to different people. Ainscow and Sandill (2010) argue that while some countries view inclusive education as a means of educating people with disabilities in general education settings, the international trend is leaning towards seeing inclusive education in broader terms, as a reform geared towards supporting and welcoming all learners. These different views of inclusion can be described as assimilationist and transformative (Booth et al., 2003). In contrast to an assimilationist view of inclusion, where all learners are meant to fit into an education system that remains unchanged, the transformative view of inclusion focuses on how the education system can transform itself and accommodate the diverse needs of learners. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2009) this signifies a shift from seeing learners as the problem to realising that the problem may lie with the education system.

This entails looking at the policies and practices of institutions, in conjunction with the teaching and learning process. This study is based on the transformative view of inclusion, as this is also the view of inclusion adopted by the South African National Department of Education.

Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) on special needs education articulates the core ideas that underpin an inclusive education system (pp.6-7). These are:

- An acknowledgement that every learner is capable of learning, and that every learner may need help with their learning.
- Learners can differ with regard to ethnicity, age, language, gender, class, disability or health status. These differences must be recognised and given due consideration.
- An acknowledgement that learning is not restricted to formal schooling. Learning also takes place in the community, the home, in academic settings and in everyday life.
- The education system and approaches to learning can be configured in ways that afford the opportunity to cater for all learners' needs.
- The environment, methods of teaching, attitudes and behaviour can be changed to accommodate the needs of every learner.
- Learner participation in the curriculum as well as the culture of educational institutions should be maximised. To this end, barriers to learning and development must be uncovered and minimised.

While governmental policy on inclusion is a crucial first step towards transforming education, it is incumbent on the various institutions to bring inclusive practices and policies into play. Attention must be given to the different strategies and procedures that are adopted at the institutional level to help learners who are encountering barriers to learning. Different institutions of higher education will manage this change to inclusive policy and practice differently, depending on their contexts.

May and Bridger (2010) argue that there are three main areas of concern that need attention in order to change to inclusive policy and practice. First, effective inclusive cultural change requires institutions to target modifications at the institutional and the individual level (p.98). On the institutional level, changes can be made to internal policies and procedures in order to encourage

more extensive use of inclusive practice.  On an individual level, institutions can use different methods to encourage and support staff in implementing inclusive practice.  These may include providing continuing professional development, developing resources and materials, and communicating examples of effective inclusive practice. Second, May and Bridger (2010) argue that institutions need to build an evidence base from which to bring about change (p.99)  They argue that one component in the development of an inclusive culture in an institution involves collecting evidence that will provide the rationale for change in that institutional context.  As changes are implemented, evidence can also be collected to measure and evaluate the impact of the changes.  Third, May and Bridger (2010) assert that different stakeholder groups in the institution must be involved in a multi-method, tailored approach to bring about change (p.99). This means that institutions should use a variety of methods to engage both students and staff in the process of developing and establishing inclusive policy and practice.  However, May and Bridger (2010) caution that the methods used to bring about change must be adapted to the particular contexts in which they are being applied.

 Engelbrecht and Green (2007) advance the notion that an inclusive approach to education must be accompanied by the creation of health-promoting centres of learning. They contend that, to achieve learning success, institutions should concern themselves not only with the prevention of barriers, but also with the promotion of student wellbeing.  According to Engelbrecht and Green (2007), five areas need attention when developing a health-promoting centre of learning (pp.165-169).  First, comprehensive, co-ordinated support services need to be accessible to all who need them.  Second, the curriculum should include skills development and preparing individuals for the future.  Third, the psychosocial and physical surroundings should be supportive and favourable to learning.  Fourth, strong links should be forged with the local community.  Fifth, health-promoting policies should be implemented.

It is clear, then, that inclusion embraces the notion that education systems can be responsive to the needs of diverse learners, by developing cultures, policies and practices that value all learners. Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis (2009) give us an idea of how this looks like in practice.  They maintain that an inclusive educational environment is a place where all learners are integral members of the classroom, a place where learners feel an affinity to their peers, engage with

challenging and purposeful curricula and have access to the help they need to succeed.  This notion of learners being integral members of the classroom requires an educational environment that is welcoming to all learners, an environment where everyone can feel that they belong (Renzaglia, Karvonen, Drasgow, & Stoxen, 2003). Thus, an inclusive educational institution needs to be physically accessible to all learners.  It needs to have a welcoming psychological and social climate, where all learners can feel free to participate fully.

In order for learners to be given the opportunity to engage with a meaningful curriculum, an inclusive educational environment needs to have a flexible curriculum that accommodates different learning needs and styles.  According to Motshwane (2007) there are key components of the curriculum which can lead to learning breakdown.  These include the mode and tempo of teaching and learning, the manner in which the classroom is organised and managed, and the apparatus used in the teaching and learning process.  Lastly, an inclusive educational environment is one where learners who need academic support for effective learning are given such support.  These are some of the aspects that are looked at in this study, to ascertain how inclusive this educational institution is.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted key features of the ecosystemic perspective and inclusion that are pertinent to this study.  The theoretical and conceptual framework will assist the researcher to understand how students experience their life on campus, how these experiences promote or hinder students' outcomes, and will be useful in exploring possible solutions to the identified barriers.  Most importantly, these frameworks will highlight weak links in the system, where there is potential for learning breakdown and/or exclusion. The frameworks were also used to inform the construction of the questionnaire as well as tools for analysis of the data.  The following chapter addresses the research design and methodology employed in the study.

# CHAPTER 4

# RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

## 4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design of my study. I begin by explaining the study's paradigmatic orientation. This is followed by a description of the research design, paying particular attention to the mixed method and case study approach. Next I describe the methods and process of data collection, followed by a description of how the data was analyzed. I then highlight some of the limitations of the study before exploring issues of validity and reliability. I conclude by outlining the ethical considerations employed in doing this study.

## 4.2 Research paradigm

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) argue that research is underpinned by a researcher's worldview or paradigm, and that this paradigmatic orientation impacts on how the study is designed and conducted. Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe a paradigm as "the basic belief system or world view that guides the investigator" (p.105). Research paradigms differ with regard to their ontology, epistemology and methodology. Ontology deals with the essence of reality; epistemology is concerned with what constitutes knowledge , while methodology is concerned with the methods used to acquire knowledge (Krauss, 2005).

The positivist paradigm assumes that there can only be one reality which is objective and knowable. The assumption is that there can be distance between the researcher and the object of research, thus allowing the researcher to behave in a neutral, value-free way. The goal of research is seen as describing and analysing reality (Krauss, 2005). The critical paradigm sees reality as being by factors such as the cultural, political and social climate, as well as other forces that have crystallised over time into social structures that are taken to be real. The assumption is that there is a reciprocal interaction between the researcher and that which is being researched, and the values

of the researcher inevitably influence the research.  The goal of research is social transformation that will benefit those who have little power (Usher, 1996).

This study is informed by the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that there are multiple realities which are created through dialogue and consensus.  The assumption is that reality is adaptable and depends on the interpretation of particular people in a social situation. As argued by Neuman (1991) the aim of research is to develop a greater understanding of the way people make sense of their worlds.  Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2011) argue that theory follows research, and must arise from the data produced by the act of research.  Thus, theory is generated from participants' experiences and understanding of particular situations.  Furthermore, they assert that theory generated in this way must make sense to the people being studied and should enable others to see reality much like those being studied.  Neuman (2010) asserts that the theory "is accurate if the researcher conveys a deep understanding of the way others reason, feel, and see things" (p.105).

The interpretivist paradigm postulates that the researcher's ideals are ingrained at every step of the research process, and there can be no separation between that which is being studied and the researcher. Scott and Morrison (2006) contend that this is one shortcoming of the interpretive paradigm.  They argue that the findings and interpretations may be biased by the fact that researchers participate and submerge themselves in the research.

In this study, it is assumed that the different characteristics of students would lead them to have different experiences with and interpretations of institutional barriers to learning at this institution. In order to facilitate a greater understanding of students' experiences of barriers at this institution, multiple data collection methods were employed.  Data generated from both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was used to yield a deep appreciation of the way students experience institutional barriers to learning at this campus.

## 4.3 Research design

### 4.3.1 Mixed methods research

In this study a mixed methods design was employed to answer the research questions. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004) delineate mixed methods research as "the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study" (p.17). Cohen et al (2011) suggest that we can ask both "what" and "how" questions, and combine the responses from the two complementary types of data to give us an integrated response to our research questions. My rationale for mixing data collection methods was that numerical and narrative data could be combined, so that I could gain a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional barriers to learning experienced by students at the research site. I chose to use a questionnaire to gather data to answer the first research question and identify the institutional barriers to learning encountered by students, while also providing some numerical data about how common these were. Using a questionnaire allowed me to gather information from a larger sample of participants than would have been possible with interviews alone. By following up with interviews of a smaller sample of participants, it was possible to clarify and interpret the quantitative results by delving into the views of participants in more depth. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) argue that mixing qualitative and quantitative data can yield a better grasp of the problem than using one of the data sets alone.

Mixed methods research can be designed in different ways. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) argue that choosing a mixed methods design requires researchers to decide the order in which the different types of data will be collected and used, the emphasis given to each, and how the two types of data will be linked. They explain that concurrent timing occurs when the quantitative and qualitative data is gathered, analysed and interpreted at roughly the same time, while sequential timing occurs when one type of data is gathered and analysed before the other type of data is used. With regard to the emphasis placed on the two types of data, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) argue that the researcher needs to decide on the priority both types of data will have in answering the research questions. The researcher may choose to have the two sets of data play an equally important role, or may choose to allow one of them play a more important role in the study. They further maintain that this decision could be guided by the paradigmatic orientation of the researcher, the resources available to the researcher, or the researcher's experience with the two methods of data collection and analysis (Yin, 1984).

The research design utilised in this study can be described as a sequential mixed design. Teddlie & Tashakkori (2009) explain the features of such a design. First, the quantitative and qualitative avenues run one following the other. Second, one approach determines the subsequent one. Third, the major findings from both the approaches are synthesised. In this study, the quantitative data from the questionnaires was collected and analysed first. Data from the questionnaires then informed the collection of qualitative data in the semi structured interviews. The responses from both these types of data were combined, analysed and interpreted in order to answer the research questions. The qualitative data was allowed to play a greater role in answering the research questions, as this study has an interpretive paradigm as its foundation.

### 4.3.2 The case study approach

Yin (1984) describes the case study approach as "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (p.23). This definition highlights some important characteristics of the case study approach. One such characteristic is that the researcher is interested in studying a contemporary phenomenon in its natural environment. Thus, this approach is suitable for studies of real situations that occur at a particular time or place. This research is a case study of the institutional barriers to learning experienced by students at a university in KwaZulu-Natal. This study focusses on the current institutional barriers that students have to deal with at a particular campus.

Another characteristic of the case study approach is that numerous data sources and multiple data collection tools can be employed as a means of identifying what the variables are, and their impact on the case being studied. According to Yin (2009) this is a particular strength of the case study approach. Documents, artefacts, interviews and observations can be utilised effectively in a case study. Thus, a holistic, in-depth study of complex issues is possible (Zainal, 2007). This study uses questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of what the institutional barriers are, and how they impact on students.

Robson (2002) argues that an important issue in the case study approach is to determine the "unit of analysis", in other words, what constitutes the case. According to Robson (2002) a case may be a person, group, institution or a particular event.  Baxter and Jack (2008) warn against designing a case study which is too broad in focus, or has too many objectives. Some researchers (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003) suggest that this can be avoided by placing boundaries of time or place on a case. I have bound the study by limiting study to only one campus of an institution. I have further limited the study by seeking participation only from students engaged in initial teacher education on this campus.  This group is comprised of first, second, third and fourth year students registered for the Bachelor of education degree, as well as students registered for the Post graduate certificate in Education.

Yin (2009) discusses four types of arguments against the case study approach.  First, case studies are criticised for inadequate rigour, where the researcher has failed to follow systematic procedures in conducting the study, or where the researcher has permitted some bias to influence how the data and findings are interpreted.  Second, a criticism of the case study approach is that the small number of subjects provides little basis for scientific generalisation. This study is limited to one campus of a university, which can be seen as providing limited opportunities for generalisation. Third, case studies are seen as lengthy, time-consuming and difficult endeavours that generate too much documentation.  Data from the questionnaires was captured as soon as it was collected, to ensure that the data was managed and organised systematically.  Fourth, case studies are criticised for being unable to directly address causal relationships.

Data from the questionnaires was captured as soon as it was collected, to ensure that the data was managed and organised systematically. As an objective of the study was to understand the barriers experienced by students, it did not seek to establish any causal relationships.

### 4.3.3 The research setting

This research study was conducted at one campus of a university in KwaZulu-Natal. This campus is one of five campuses of the University.  Education is the only discipline offered at this campus. Programmes in initial teacher education as well as postgraduate study in education are offered on

this campus. The student population is multicultural and multilingual. Student socio-economic status ranges from the disadvantaged to the affluent.

### 4.3.4 Sampling

According to Cohen et al (2011) the sampling strategy employed by the researcher is one of the crucial elements that determine the quality of the study. Kothari (2009) explains that stratified sampling can be employed when the population from which the sample is being drawn is not a homogenous group. A representative sample can be drawn by dividing the target population into sub-populations (strata) that are more homogenous than the total population. Thus, the researcher has to identify the different subgroups of the population being studied. From within these subgroups, a restricted number of cases can be selected for the study.

Stratified purposive sampling (Kothari, 2009) was used for this study. In this study, the target population was students registered for full time study in initial teacher education at this campus, a total of 2789 students. There were five subgroups or strata, comprised of students in the different year groups in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programme (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th years) and students studying for the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (Pgce). For the questionnaire, a sample of forty students from each of the subgroups was sought. For the interviews, volunteer sampling was employed to identify participants who were willing and interested in providing more information.

## 4.4 Methods of data collection

Two research instruments were used in this study, namely a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

### 4.4.1 The questionnaire

Cohen et al (2011) list some of the advantages of questionnaires as being their usefulness in collecting numerical data, the relative ease with which this data can be analysed and the fact that they can be administered without the researcher being present. O'Leary (2005) lists a few more advantages of questionnaires, namely the fact that questionnaires facilitate gaining access to many

respondents and the fact that questionnaires allow for confidential and anonymous collection of data. Cohen et al (2011) argue that the benefits of using questionnaires must be weighed against the disadvantages. They mention the fact that it is time-consuming to develop, pilot and finalise the questionnaire. Further, Cohen et al (2011) maintain that questionnaires offer a limited scope of data that can be collected, a sentiment echoed by O'Leary (2005), who argues that it can be a challenge to collect in-depth data using questionnaires. Additional disadvantages of questionnaires include the challenge of getting respondents to complete the questionnaires and the difficulty in going back to respondents for clarity or for more information.

I chose to use a questionnaire (Appendix A) as one of my instruments for various reasons. I wanted to reach a large number of respondents who could complete the questionnaires anonymously. The fact that the questionnaires could be handed to respondents to complete in their own time also appealed to me. I chose to add open-ended questions to the questionnaire in order to gain some qualitative data.

The process of developing a questionnaire requires many decisions to be made, one being the format of questions to be used. According to Neuman (2010), open-ended questions refer to those where participants have the freedom to answer questions in their own way, while closed-ended questions refer to those where participants must choose a response from an established set of answers. In this study, I have used a mixture of open and closed-ended questions, as Neuman (2010) suggests that this can reduce the disadvantages of either question format.

Neuman (2010) explains further that writing questions for questionnaires is a creative, skilful act that requires much practice. He explains some of the frequent errors to be avoided when constructing questions. Researchers may write questions that are ambiguous, confusing and vague, which can cause participants to become frustrated with the questionnaire, or cause them to provide inaccurate information. In this study, the clarity of questions was enhanced by piloting the questionnaire on a sample of students. Pilot study participants were tasked with providing feedback about the following: the length of time it took to complete the questionnaire, whether there were any questions that were vague or obscure, whether there were any sensitive questions

that should be left out, and whether there were any questions that should be included. This feedback was used to modify and finalise the questions.

Another error to avoid in question writing, according to Neuman (2010) is that the response categories provided should not overlap, but must be mutually exclusive. Further, response categories should be exhaustive so that every participant can choose one of the answers. Finally, response categories should be balanced. This can be achieved by offering polar opposites of responses at each end of the continuum. When appraising attitudes, one can determine whether a person is in favour of, or against something, as well as how strongly they feel about it. Neuman (2010) further suggests that this can be achieved by providing more choices. In order to gauge how strongly participants felt about each questionnaire item, I chose to distinguish between the "strongly agree" and "agree" response on the one end of the continuum, as well as between the "disagree" and "strongly disagree" response on the other side of the continuum.

The researcher also has to decide whether to include a response category for those participants who either lack knowledge or hold a neutral position on the subject. Neuman (2010) suggests that offering a neutral position allows one to distinguish between participants who really have an opinion on the matter and those who do not. I chose to include a "neutral position" response category for all closed-ended questions in the questionnaire, as this would allow participants with no opinion to declare so.

A short introduction explained the purpose of the questionnaire and reminded participants not to write their names on the questionnaire as their responses were confidential and anonymous. The next part of the questionnaire was split into eight sections. Section 1 consisted of three multiple choice questions requesting the biographical details of participants. Section 2, 3, 4 and 5 had a uniform design, but addressed different aspects of the institution. Each section consisted of statements. Participants chose how they felt about each statement on a 5 point Likert type scale (O'Leary, 2005). The response categories were: strongly agree, agree, undecided / don't know, disagree and strongly disagree. Section 2 listed five statements about the physical environment on campus. Section 3 listed twelve statements about the psychological and social environment on

campus.  Section 4 had eight statements about the organisation and management of the curriculum. Section 5 had eight statements about access to information.

Section 6 was concerned with the provision of resources and facilities on campus.  Thirteen resources and facilities were listed, and participants had to rate these on a 4 point scale.  The response categories were: excellent, adequate, poor and undecided / don't know.    With the exception of section 1, all of the sections above ended with an open-ended question where participants could comment on how any of the factors in that section impacted, either positively or negatively, on the participant's studies.

Section 7 dealt with policies and practices of the institution.  These were open-ended questions where participants could comment on how different policies and practices impact on their studies, both positively and negatively.  Section eight was an open-ended question where participants were asked to comment on anything not mentioned in the questionnaire which acted as a barrier to learning on the campus.  The questionnaire concluded by inviting participants to provide their contact numbers on the questionnaire if they were willing to be interviewed as a follow-up to the questionnaire.

### 4.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

Cohen et al (2011) argue that interviews are powerful research instruments that allow people to share how they see the world, and express their views on topics of mutual interest to the interviewer and interviewee.  Information is gathered by direct verbal interaction between people.  This gives rise to both the advantage and disadvantage of interviews.  It is advantageous in that it allows for greater depth of questioning, and the interviewer can probe the reasons why the interviewee responds in a particular way.  The direct verbal interaction is disadvantageous in that it can allow for interviewer subjectivity and bias to get in  (Cohen et al., 2011).

 Fontana and Frey (1994) use the degree of structure to differentiate between various types of interviews.  On the one end of the continuum are structured interviews, where interview questions are pre-planned and standardised for all participants and pre-coded categories can be used for

responses. There is very little variation and flexibility with structured interviews, as all participants answer the same questions, in the same order (Fontana & Frey, 1994). In contrast, unstructured interviews are on the other end of the continuum. With unstructured interviews, specific questions are not planned in advance, but are allowed to emerge as the interview unfolds. According to Fontana and Frey (1994), the unstructured interview is a powerful research tool that facilitates the production of rich, valuable data.

I chose to use semi-structured interviews as one of my data collection methods, as this would allow for some degree of flexibility in questioning, as argued by Greef (2011). This argument is echoed by O'Leary (2005), who explains that this type of interview can begin with a particular questioning plan, then deviate from the plan, either to follow the natural flow of conversation, or to pursue an interesting line of inquiry. In this way, the researcher can end up with interesting, surprising data in addition to the intended data. Greef (2011) contends that this allows the interview to be guided by the schedule, rather than dictated by the schedule, as is the case with structured interviews.

## 4.5 Data collection process

Questionnaires were handed out to students in various lectures, with the prior approval of the teaching staff involved. The questionnaires were accompanied by an informed consent letter (Appendix B) which explained the purpose and nature of the study, detailed the voluntary nature of participation, the fact that they could withdraw at any time and decline to answer particular questions. Participants signed a declaration confirming their understanding of the nature of the research project and confirming their voluntary participation in the study. This declaration was then torn off the bottom of the informed consent letter and handed to me. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed to students in this way, taking care to include lectures from the different year groups being targeted. Another one hundred questionnaires were handed to individual students who visited the teaching practice office over a two month period. Students were asked to complete the questionnaire at their leisure and return the completed questionnaire to me. Of the three hundred questionnaires that were handed out to students, a total of 180 questionnaires were returned.

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As questionnaires were returned, they were numbered and the data was captured onto a prepared Microsoft Excel spread sheet. I thought it was important to use an Excel spread sheet because it allowed me to capture both the quantitative data from the closed-ended questions as well as the comments made by participants in response to the open-ended questions. While capturing the data from the questionnaires, I made notes of the questions that were not answered fully by participants. I also identified some of the barriers that seemed to be mentioned frequently, in order to explore these further during the interviews.

On the questionnaire, participants had been asked to provide their contact numbers if they were willing to be interviewed. I contacted ten students to be interviewed, based on some of their responses on the questionnaire. Some of these students had raised uncommon issues in their responses to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire. Others had chosen not to respond to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire. Individual interviews were scheduled over a period of three weeks, at times convenient to the students.

Each interview was conducted in an informal manner, starting with a reminder that responses would be handled with the utmost confidentiality. Participants were given an estimation of the length of the interview, and advised that the interview would be recorded to aid in my note-taking. An interview schedule (Appendix C) was used so that the predetermined questions could be used as a guide to facilitate consistency of questioning. Each interview lasted approximately twenty five minutes. Once the interviews were concluded, the recordings were transcribed.

## 4.6 Data analysis method

Punch (2005) contends that an account of the methods used in data analysis is very important, as it helps one to determine how much confidence to have in the findings reported. Computer software was used to aid the analysis of data. For the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires, the software used was the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 19 (SPSS 19) To aid in analysing the qualitative data from the questionnaires and the data from the interviews, the software package Nvivo version 9 was used. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) argue that the advantage of using computer software in data analysis is that it is easier to work

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with, store and locate large quantities of data. They do acknowledge that a disadvantage of electronic data analysis is that acquiring proficiency in using the program can take some time.

### 4.6.1 Quantitative data analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that the three main components of data analysis include contracting of the data, exhibiting the data and drawing and verifying conclusions. According to Punch (2005) data reduction involves editing and summarising the data. Neuman (2010) asserts that an important initial step in data analysis calls for "cleaning" the data, as failure to do this can cause misleading results. Quantitative data from the questionnaires was "cleaned", or checked for accuracy, before being coded and imported into SPSS19 to be analysed. With data display, data is organised, compressed and assembled in some way, often graphically in the form of charts and diagrams (Punch, 2005). Descriptive statistics were produced to summarise participant responses to the closed questions of the questionnaire (Opie, 2004). In particular, bar charts were produced used to summarise participant responses. Punch (2005) contends that one reduces and displays data in order to facilitate drawing conclusions. While tentative conclusions may be drawn early in the analysis of data, these are finalised and verified once all the data has been analysed.

### 4.6.2 Qualitative data analysis

With qualitative data analysis, data reduction involves finding themes without losing any information (Punch, 2005). Responses from the open-ended questions of the questionnaires and interview transcripts were also read and checked for errors. This qualitative data was then read in order to identify initial themes and condense the data into categories. Strauss (1987) refers to this first review of the data as open coding. Data was then reviewed a second time to examine the initial codes, a process which Strauss (1987) refers to as axial coding. With axial coding, I looked for concepts that could be clustered together into a more general category. Data was then reviewed a third time to review the codes and look for data that illustrates the themes, a process which Strauss (1987) refers to as selective coding.

## 4.7 Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of this study stems from the fact that it is a case study of one campus of a university. Furthermore, this campus only offers programmes of study in the field of education, thus limiting the respondents to students of education. This means that the findings of this study represent the experiences of one faculty at one institution.

A further limitation stems from the use of the questionnaire as one of the data collection methods. As suggested by Neuman (2010), one of the limitations of the voluntary questionnaire is the difficulty in influencing the response rate. Further, participants are unable to raise any questions they may have about items on the questionnaire.

A limitation of using volunteer sampling for the interviews is that it does not ensure that the sample is representative of the population under study, as there are a range of motives for people deciding to volunteer to participate (Cohen et al., 2011).

A final limitation of the study is that I am a student of the institution being studied. I was also a staff member of the institution in the period in which I was collecting data. This can raise questions of bias and subjectivity, as I will be able to draw on my own experiences to get a better grasp of the findings. Further, this kind of "backyard" research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) can lead to compromises being made about information to be disclosed.

## 4.8 Validity, reliability and trustworthiness

Neuman (2010) argues that the standards of validity and reliability are not used in the same way in qualitative and quantitative research. According to Creswell (2009), ideas of validity and reliability are conveyed in words such as trustworthiness, dependability, authenticity and credibility in qualitative research. These terms are adopted to decide whether the research findings are true from the point of view of the researcher, the participants or the readers of a report.

Merriam (1988) asserts that credibility describes how consistent the findings are with real life. In this study, the following measures were employed to promote confidence that there has been an accurate recording of institutional barriers to learning on this campus. First, as suggested by Shenton (2004), an effort was made to ensure honesty of informants. Participants were given the opportunity to refuse to participate in the research study. This ensured that the data collection process involved only those participants who were willing to take part and were prepared to offer their information freely. Second, triangulation of data was made possible by using both questionnaires and interviews to gather data. Third, interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to provide an accurate and complete record of participant responses. Further, a selection of participants' responses is reported verbatim in the discussion of findings, in order to provide a thick description of their experiences.

According to Pitney and Parker (2009) dependability relates to research processes that are clear and appropriate. They argue that dependability can be achieved by making the details of the research process available. Shenton (2004) suggests that the research should be reported in such detail as to allow another researcher to duplicate the study, even though the findings may not necessarily be the same. In this study, I have attempted to enhance the dependability of my study by providing a clear description of the research process and the operational details of my data collection in this chapter.

## 4.9 Ethical considerations

Neuman (2010) argues that, morally and professionally, the researcher has a duty to conduct research in an ethically responsible manner. He explains that a trusting relationship exists between the researcher and participants. The researcher is responsible for making sure that the interests of participants are protected at all stages of the research process. According to Babbie (2010) the basic principles that guide ethical research involve acquiring the voluntary consent of participants, ensuring that participants are protected from harm and humiliation, and ensuring that no harmful information gathered for research purposes is disclosed.

Babbie (2010) asserts that participants need to know the basic details of a study before they can make an informed decision on whether they would like to be involved in the research. In this study, participants were given an informed consent letter prior to completing the questionnaires. This letter detailed the purpose of the research, and explained how the study would be carried out. As suggested by Babbie (2010) participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and could be withdrawn at any stage without any negative consequences to themselves. They were also informed that they could decline to answer any questions that they did not wish to answer.

To further protect the interest and well-being of participants, I decided to employ anonymity and confidentiality with regard to data collection, as recommended by Babbie (2010). Anonymity implies that a given response cannot be identified with a given respondent. This was ensured by asking respondents not to write their names on the questionnaire. Confidentiality implies that, although a respondent's identity is known, it will not be revealed in public. While the identities of participants in the semi-structured interviews were known to the researcher, participants were given the assurance that all information provided by them would be handled with strict confidentiality, and that pseudonyms would be used in the final report to protect their privacy.

Other measures were employed in order to adhere to ethical principles of conducting research. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Appendix D). Permission to conduct the research at the site was obtained from the Registrar of the institution (Appendix E).

**4.10 Conclusion**

This chapter described the research design and methodology of the study in detail. The following chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the findings.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter reveals and reviews the findings. Data obtained from the questionnaires was analysed and descriptive statistics obtained. This data will be presented first. The open-ended questions of the questionnaire as well as the interview transcripts were analysed by identifying units of meaning in each section. These were categorized so that initial themes could be identified. Some of the substantive points made by the participants are quoted verbatim here, so that the participants' voices are presented. These are indicated in italics. Pseudonyms are used for responses obtained from interviews.

In order to maintain the confidentiality of participants, the comments made by respondents in the questionnaires are identified by the questionnaire number. Questionnaire numbers 1 to 40 were allocated to first year respondents. As there were only 20 completed questionnaires obtained from first year students there is no data for questionnaire numbers 21 to 40. These questionnaire numbers were not allocated to other completed questionnaires for the duration of the data-gathering process, as there was no way of knowing whether more first year students would return completed questionnaires while the research was being conducted. Questionnaire numbers 41 to 80 were allocated to second year respondents. Questionnaire numbers 81 to 120 were allocated to third year respondents. Fourth year respondents were allocated questionnaire numbers 121 to 160. Pgce respondents were allocated questionnaire numbers 161 to 200.

The key research questions of this study were:

- What are the institutional barriers to learning encountered by students at this campus?
- How do these barriers impact on students' academic achievement?
- How can the university reduce their impact?

The first two research questions are answered in the sections below where the barriers to learning experienced by students are outlined. The third research question is addressed in the recommendations.

In order to develop a holistic understanding of the institutional barriers to learning encountered by students at this campus, this study undertook to examine the patterns of activities, roles and interactions experienced by students in their immediate environment. According to Bronfenbrenner ( 1977), these experiences which occur in one's immediate environment are part of the microsystem which contributes to shaping one's development. Thus, the focus was on unearthing the key factors in the microsystems of students that contributed to barriers in their learning.

## 5.2 Data from the questionnaires

In this section, responses from each of the questionnaire sections will be presented. This section aims to provide an overview of the quantitative data collected. The qualitative data generated from the interviews, as well as the comments derived from the questionnaire are dealt with in the next section, in the discussion of the themes that emerged.

### 5.2.1Respondent demographics

The first part of the questionnaire requested the biographical details of the participants, in particular their year of study, gender and race. One hundred and eighty questionnaires were completed and returned. An analysis of participation by year group reveals that twenty questionnaires were completed by students in their first year of study. In all the other year groups (second, third, fourth and Pgce students), forty questionnaires were completed by each year group.

An analysis of participation by gender reveals that one hundred and nine participants were female, sixty eight were male and three participants did not respond to the question. With regard to participation by race group, the number of respondents from the different race groups was as

follows: 85 African, 61 Indian, 16 Coloured and 12 White respondents.  Three respondents checked their race as "Other", and a further three respondents declined to respond to the question.

### 5.2.2 *The physical environment on campus*

This section of the questionnaire required respondents to choose how they felt about five statements on the physical environment of the campus.  The response categories ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".  The graph below displays a summary of the responses to these statements.
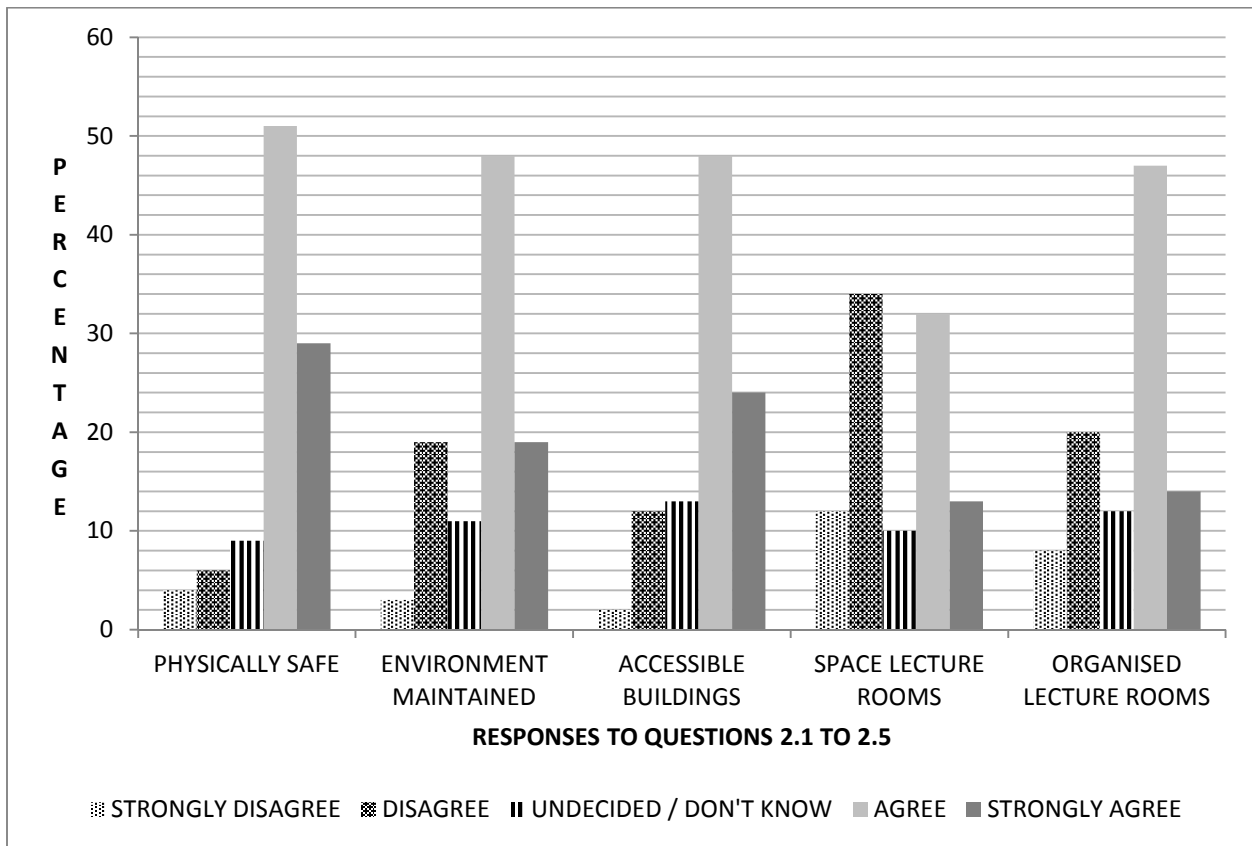


**Figure 1: Summary of responses related to the physical environment on campus**

From the frequencies shown above, it is clear that the majority of respondents responded positively to three statements about the physical environment on campus: "I feel physically safe on campus",

"the environment is adequately maintained in terms of safety, cleanliness and repairs" and "the buildings are accessible to all students".

The physical accessibility of buildings in an institution is especially important to disabled students. Howell and Lazarus (2003) affirm that an inaccessible physical environment can severely limit the ability of disabled students to participate in higher education.

Close to half of the respondents disagreed with the statement "there is adequate physical space in lecture rooms." Further analysis of respondents who either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement was done, to ascertain whether these responses were more prevalent in a particular year group. All the year groups, except the Pgce year group, had at least half of their respondents disagreeing with the statement. With the Pgce year group, a quarter of the respondents disagreed with the statement. In order to better understand how a lack of physical space in lecture rooms affected students, this question was tagged for inclusion in the interview schedule.

### 5.2.3 The psychological and social environment on campus

Several authors (Machingami, 2011; Noble & Henderson, 2011; Subotzky, 2011) address issues in the psychological and social environment of an institution that can affect students' perceptions of and experiences in an institution. Noble and Henderson (2011) stress the importance of good staff-student interactions in enhancing students' sense of belonging in an institution.

This section of the questionnaire required respondents to choose how they felt about twelve statements related to the psychological and social environment on campus. The graph below summarises the responses to the first six statements.
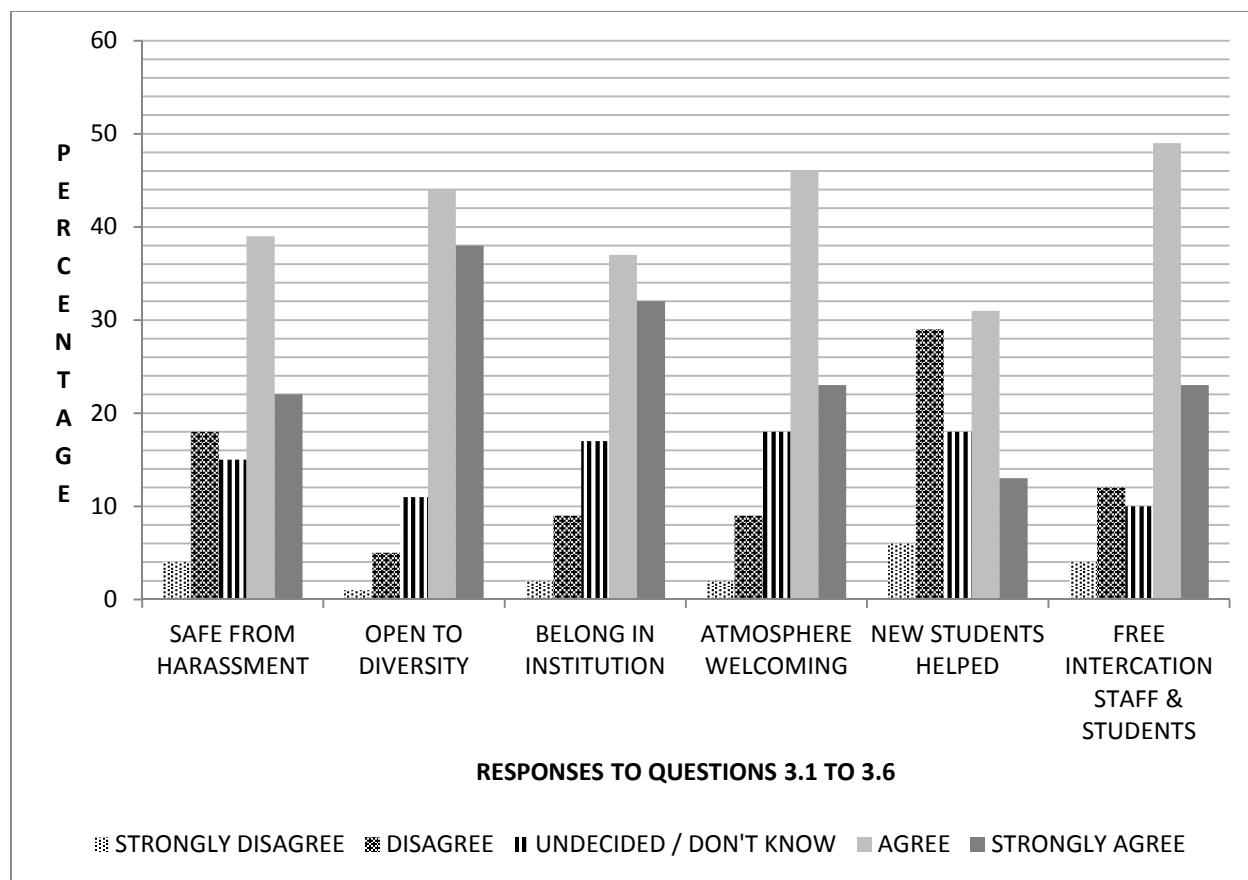
**Figure 2: Summary of responses to questions 3.1 to 3.6 related to the psychological and social environment on campus**

An analysis of responses to the first six statements indicates a largely favourable response. It would appear that many students feel safe from harassment based on race, gender, class, religion, language and sexual orientation. Results seem to signify that the majority of students agree that the campus is open to diversity and welcomes all cultures. Responses to the statement "I feel like I belong in the institution" also seem to be largely favourable. Other statements that garnered mostly positive responses were "the campus atmosphere feels welcoming and friendly" and "I feel free to communicate and interact with staff and students".

The one statement which a third of the respondents disagreed with was "new students are helped to settle in on campus". On closer inspection of the demographic details of respondents who had disagreed or disagreed strongly with this statement, it was found that the majority of these were from respondents in their first year of study. The "disagree" and "strongly disagree" response was then analysed based on the race of respondents, to determine the percentage of total respondents

from each race group who disagreed with the statement. The results of this analysis indicate that 50% of the White respondents, 44% of the Indian respondents, 43% of the Coloured respondents and 25% of the African respondents disagreed that new students are helped to settle in on campus.

With the last six statements related to the psychological and social environment on campus, three of the statements had largely favourable responses: "I feel comfortable answering questions in lectures without fear of being ridiculed", "staff and students treat each other with respect", and "staff are approachable and helpful to students". The graph indicates that approximately 30% of respondents disagreed with the statement "staff are always available for consultation at stipulated times". A quarter of respondents disagreed with the statement "students treat each other with respect". From respondent comments at the end of this section of the questionnaire, it appeared that much of the dissatisfaction with how students treat each other related to relationships between students of different races. This issue is explored further in the discussion of themes that emerged from the study.

The next graph summarises the responses to the last six statements about the psychological and social environment on campus.

**Figure 3: Summary of responses to questions 3.7 to 3.12 related to the psychological and social environment on campus.**

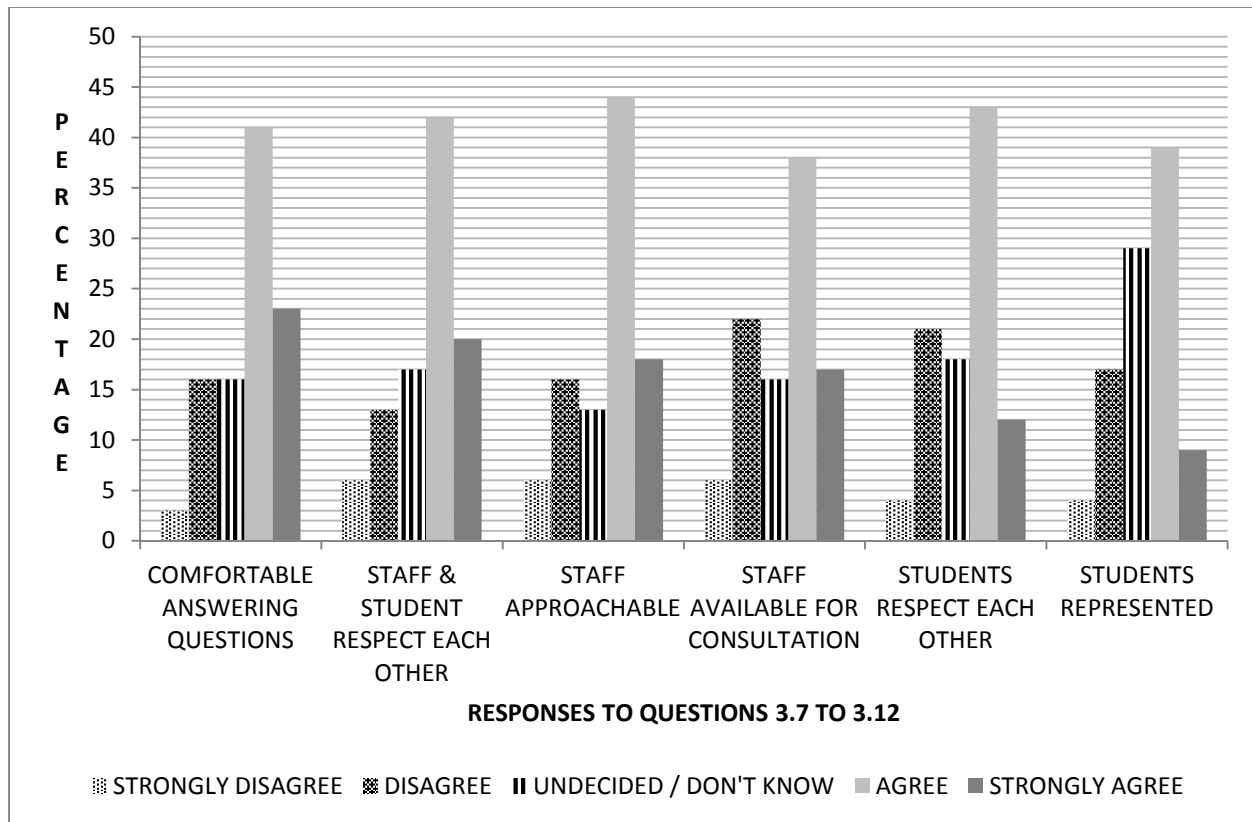*5.2.4 Organisation and management of the curriculum*

Essack (2012) asserts that student academic success can be enhanced by the use of appropriate teaching, learning and assessment methodologies. Jones and Lau (2010) suggest that universities need to be more flexible with regard to teaching, learning and assessment methods, in order to address the needs of a diverse student body.

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents gave their responses to eight statements about how the curriculum is organised and managed. The graph below summarises the responses.
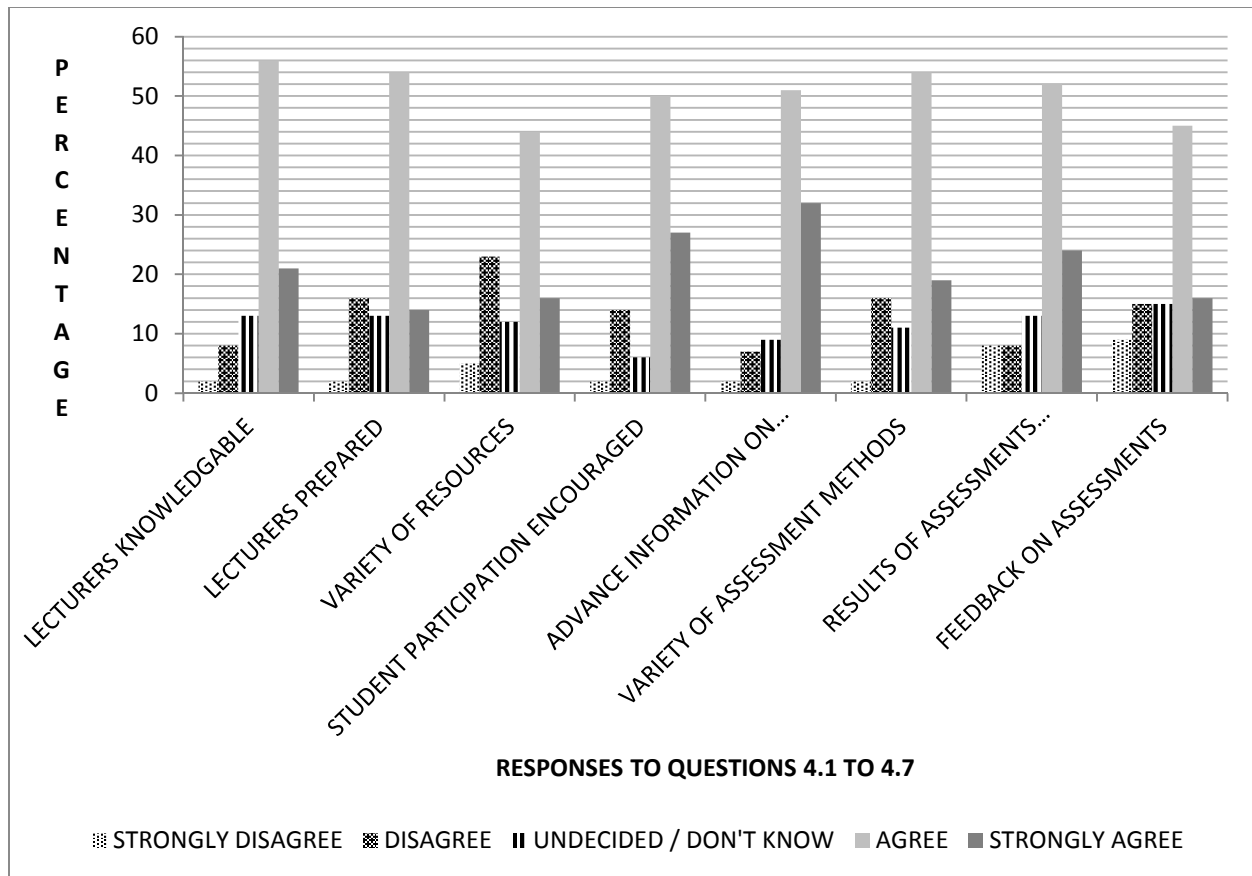
**Figure 4: Summary of responses related to the organisation and management of the curriculum**

Six of the statements in this section generated largely favourable responses. These are:

- lecturers are knowledgeable in their subject areas
- lecturers are well prepared for lectures
- all students are encouraged to participate in lectures
- lecturers inform students well in advance of forthcoming assessments / tests
- a variety of assessment methods are used
- the results of assessments are communicated to students

As indicated in the graph, more than 20% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the variety of resources used to enhance lectures. More than a quarter of the respondents also disagreed with the statement "feedback on assessments is given to students so that they know where they went wrong". An analysis of the comments given in this section reveals that most respondents who

disagreed with the statement felt that the feedback given to students is limited, as illustrated by these comments:

> **Questionnaire 22:** *"students are left to acknowledge their own weak points…"*

> **Questionnaire 17:** *"you are only given a mark.   You don't know how you did badly, or where you went wrong."*

> **Questionnaire 152:** *"there is no review of assessments.  How do we know what to avoid in the future?"*

## 5.2.5 Access to information
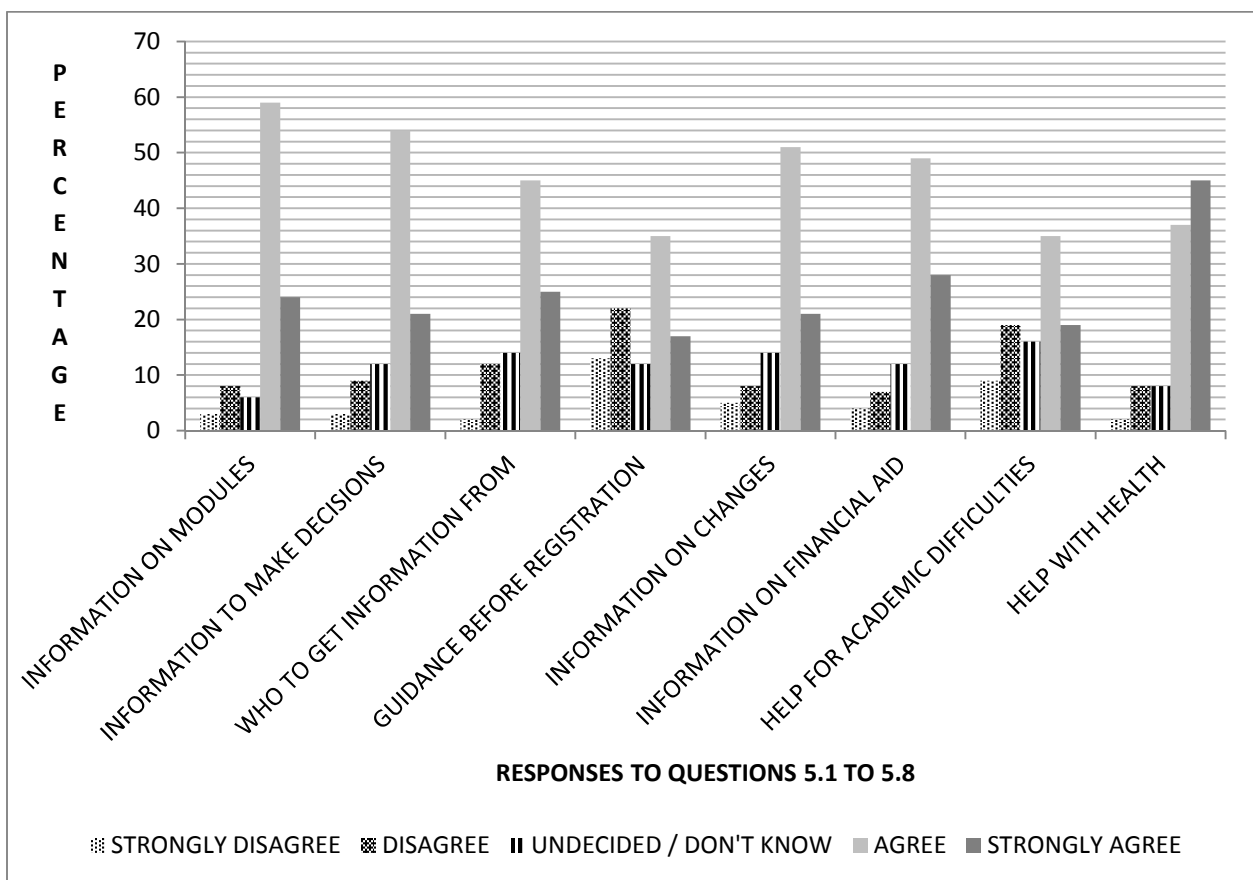


**Figure 5: Summary of responses related to access to information**

Several authors (Chetty & Vigar-Ellis, 2012; Ramrathan, 2013; Reed & Curtis, 2012) affirm the importance of students having access to pertinent information, to give them the opportunity to make more informed choices about their studies.

In this section of the questionnaire, it appears that many of the respondents gave positive responses. Of the eight statements in this section, six of the statements had more than two thirds of the respondents indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. In particular, the statement "I know where to get help with regard to my health" had an overwhelmingly positive response, with only 10% of the respondents disagreeing. The two statements that garnered more "disagree" and "strongly disagree" responses were: "I was given adequate guidance and information before I registered" and "I know where to get help if I am having academic difficulties."

### 5.2.6 Resources and facilities

According to Lovelock and Wirtz (2007) the support services offered by an institution have a huge effect on the quality of a student's learning experiences. Such support services include the provision of housing and educational resources.

In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to rate the resources and facilities provided on the campus. The section consisted of 13 questions, and the response categories were "excellent", "adequate", "poor" or "undecided / don't know".

The responses in this section suggest that the majority of students are satisfied with the provision of the following resources and facilities:

- electricity, water and bathrooms
- availability of technical support for help with using computers
- resources in the library
- computer and internet resources
- the number of lecturers
- the number of administrative staff

- the availability of health services on campus

These are the resources and facilities that were rated as "adequate" or "excellent" by more than 60% of the respondents. While respondents were mostly satisfied with these resources and facilities, some respondents were dissatisfied with their provision, and felt that the inadequate provision of some of these facilities was a barrier to their learning. This will be explored further in the analysis of the qualitative data.

Other resources and facilities did not fare as well. Fifty three percent of the respondents rated the facilities to purchase refreshments as "poor". The availability of student accommodation was rated as "poor" by 41% of respondents, while 31% of the respondents were undecided. Close to half of the respondents also rated the availability of student parking either as "poor" or "undecided". The graphs below summarise the responses to the section on resources and facilities.
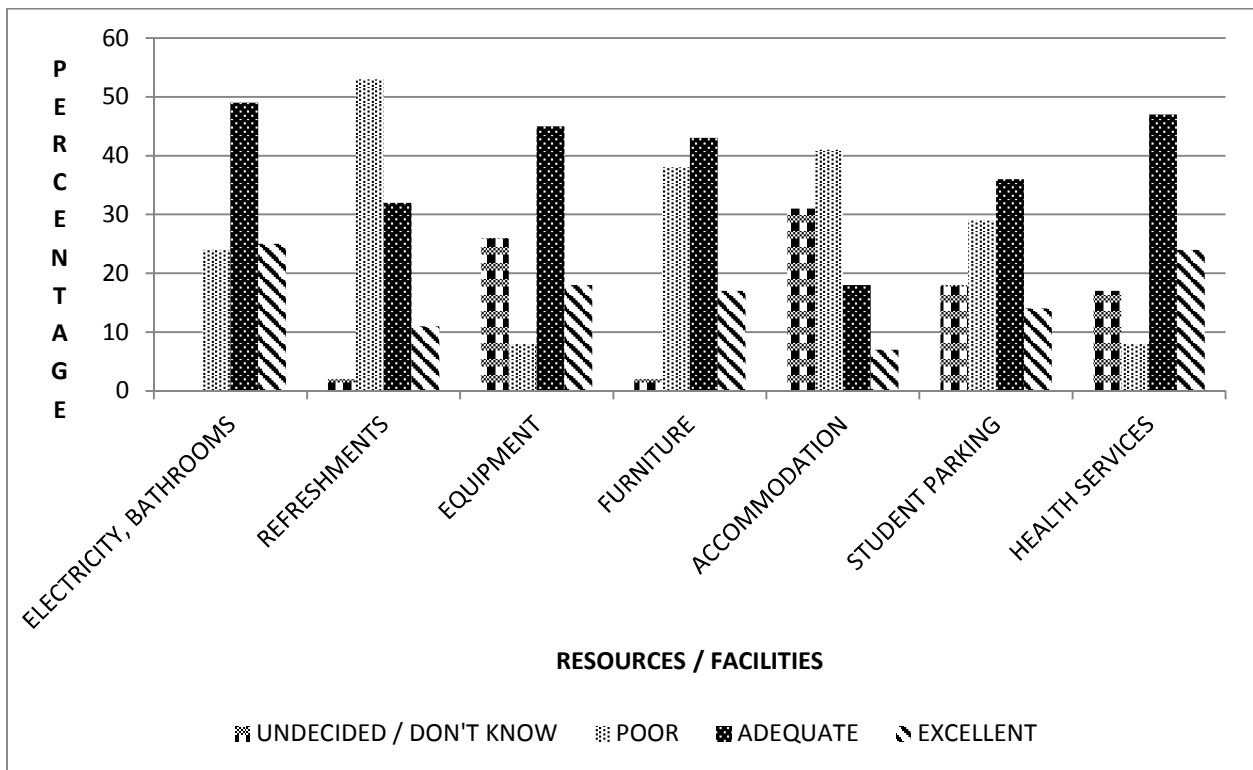


**Figure 6 Summary of responses to questions 6.1 to 6.7 of the questionnaire related to resources and facilities.**
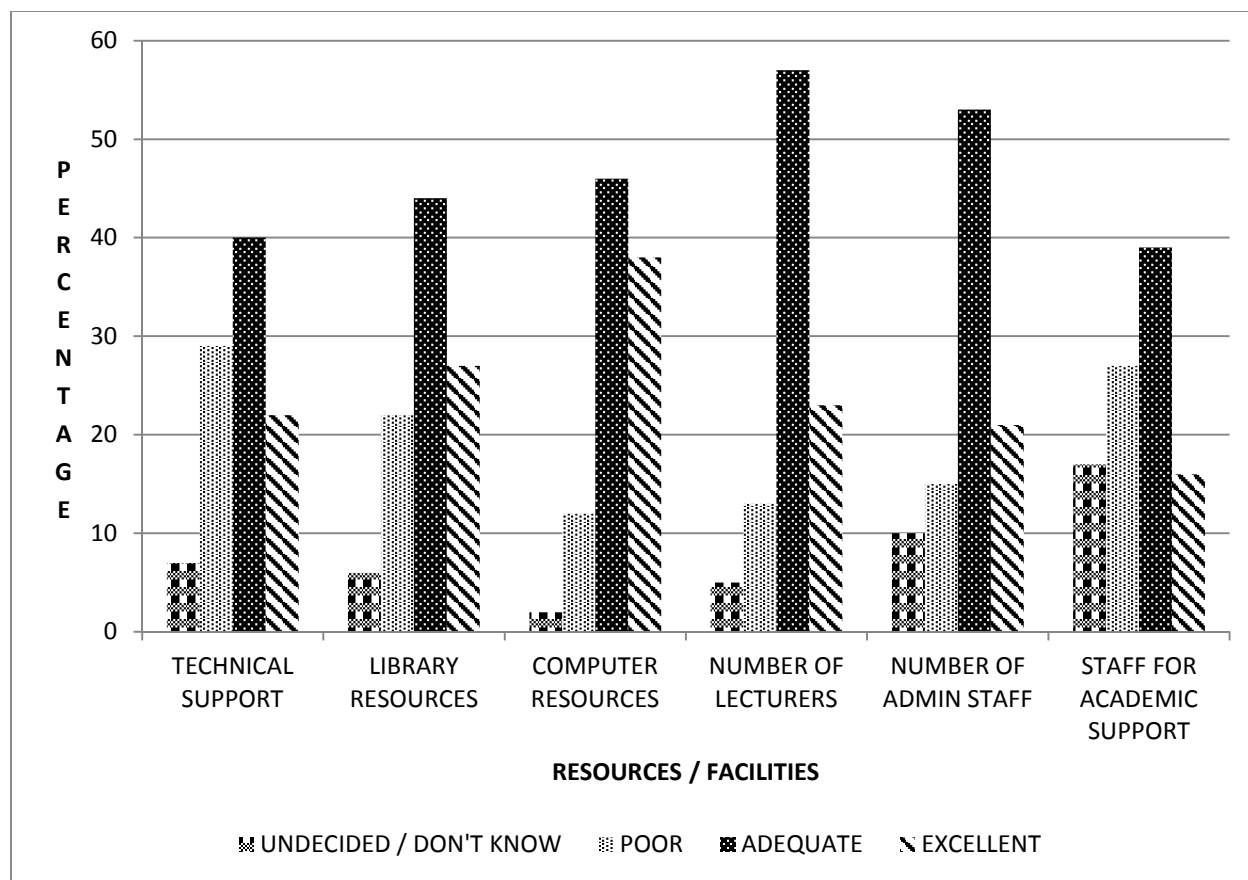
**Figure 7: Summary of responses to questions 6.8 to 6.13 related to resources and facilities**

This concludes the presentation of quantitative data from the questionnaires. The next two sections of the questionnaire required respondents to comment on the policies and practices of the institution, and whether these had a positive or negative impact on students' studies. The last section asked respondents to comment on anything not mentioned in the questionnaire that acted as a barrier to their learning. As there was a very limited response to these questions, it was decided to include these topics for follow up in the interviews. It was felt that these questions may not have been clearly understood by the respondents, resulting in the few comments.

## 5.3 Qualitative data from the questionnaires and interviews

Qualitative data from the questionnaires, as well as data generated from the interviews was analysed together in order to identify the themes and sub-themes. The findings suggest that institutional barriers to learning can stem from various elements of the institution. These became the basis for the themes identified. After an analysis of the data, six themes, with sub-themes emerged. These are presented in Table 1. Thereafter, a discussion of the themes and sub-themes will be presented.

| Themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| 5.4 Institutional barriers resulting from the physical environment on campus | |
| 5.5 Institutional barriers resulting from a lack of resources | 5.5.1 Student accommodation<br>5.5.2 Student parking<br>5.5.3 Access to computers and the internet<br>5.5.4 Library resources |
| 5.6 Institutional barriers resulting from the psychological and social environment on campus | 5.6.1 Assistance from staff<br><br>5.6.2 Students' treatment of each other |
| 5.7 Institutional barriers resulting from how the curriculum is organized and managed | |
| 5.8 Institutional barriers resulting from a lack of access to information | |
| 5.9 Institutional barriers resulting from the practices of the university | |

**Table 1: Themes and sub-themes which emerged from the study**

**5.4 Institutional barriers resulting from the physical environment on campus**

Engelbrecht & Green (2007) maintain that an inclusive approach to education goes hand in hand with establishing health promoting centres of learning. They argue that providing a physical environment that facilitates learning is one of the necessary factors in promoting student wellbeing.

Generally, participants responded quite positively to questions regarding the physical environment on campus. However, a factor in the physical environment which did arise as a barrier to learning was the physical space in lecture rooms, with 46% of the participants expressing the view that there is inadequate space in lecture rooms, thus creating an environment that is not conducive to learning. These findings confirm other research (Hill, 2009; Nicol & Boyle, 2003) who found that venues that could not accommodate all the students registered for the course created obstacles to students' successful completion of their course work. The negative impact of overcrowding in lecture rooms is illustrated in the following responses:

> **Questionnaire 9:** *"It's difficult to concentrate when the lecture room is too full ……..its gets hot and disruptive."*

> **Karen:** *"It's hard to concentrate….. sometimes we end up sleeping or making noise when there are too many students in the lecture room…….. it's hard to learn and we get afraid to ask questions ……. So students become passive because the lecturer is not able to engage all the students in the lesson."*

> **Nancy:** *"I am affected because there is no space for us to sit when we go to some lectures and if we are late for our lecture we have to sit outside. We don't hear what the lecturer is saying therefore we are not paying attention, we are on our phones, we are not focusing because we are outside the class and it is really affecting our studies."*

Furthermore, it seems that students observe what happens in their lecture rooms in order to get an idea of what good classroom practice is. The findings suggest that the overcrowded lecture rooms on campus do not allow lecturers to demonstrate some aspects of good practice, as illustrated in the following response:

**Siphiwe:** *"Ok, usually we are told to like in a classroom situation we are told to make sure that we know all the learners' names. So, in that way I do feel they are not practicing what they preach. If they are telling us to do that whereas it is difficult for them to know everyone in the class and how do they expect us to apply the very same thing or the thing that they are telling us to do in school."*

## 5.5 Institutional barriers resulting from a lack of resources and facilities

With regard to the provision of resources and facilities, some students appear to encounter barriers to learning in the areas of student accommodation, student parking, computer facilities and library resources. These findings support the conclusions drawn by Hill (2009), where inadequate student accommodation and the lack of adequate library, computer and internet facilities were cited as barriers to student learning. These findings also support prior findings by Yorke & Longden (2008), who asserted that student dissatisfaction with institutional resourcing was one of the factors that influence student retention. A study by Adeogun & Osifila (2008) found that the availability of physical, human and material resources impacted on students' academic performance.

### 5.5.1 Student accommodation

The findings suggest that barriers to learning arising from student accommodation are experienced in several ways. First, students expressed the view that there is inadequate student accommodation provided. This leads to some students trying to help their friends by allowing them to share their accommodation. Some students who have done this reported that they ended up regretting it, as this led to problems, such as not being able to study when one chooses because the other person is asleep.

 Second, some students experience the accommodation provided as a barrier due to the lack of control of student behavior. This is supported by the following responses:

**Musa:** *"There is a lot of noise there. I mean, you cannot do your work properly there because the students are out of control. They drink, they make noise, you can't even concentrate on your books."*

**Questionnaire 172:** *"Sharing a room in Res is a problem. I can't study when others want to sleep."*

Third, the way in which student accommodation is allocated presents a barrier to some students.

**Questionnaire 54:** *".......housing is awarded because of friendship, or relations or political affiliation."*

**Musa:** *"..........the university has given the housing department too much power to do whatever they want. The Resident Assistants are not fair, I mean, I am a second year but you will find that there is a fifth year student, and if he or she is on good terms with the RA, you will find him or her living in a double room, but only to find me a second year living with 4 people in 1 room. I don't think that is fair."*

### 5.5.2 Student parking

The inadequate provision of student parking seems to be experienced by some students as a barrier to learning. Some students reported that they sometimes get late for lectures because they have to drive around looking for parking. This is illustrated in the following comment:

**Questionnaire 93:** *"there is not enough parking. Sometimes I waste time driving around looking for parking. I end up parking in the wrong place and then get a parking fine."*

### 5.5.3 Access to computers and the internet

The findings suggest that barriers to learning are experienced by some students due to the provision of computer facilities on the campus. Students report that the number of computers available for use is inadequate, often resulting in students waiting in queues in order to use computers. When students do get a chance to work on the computer, their work is often interrupted by the internet connectivity being lost. The following responses illustrate this:

> **Questionnaire 3:** *"there is a long line for computer access."*

> **Questionnaire 15:** *"the LANs are always full. The computers are filthy and some don't work."*

For other students, the lack of staff to help with computer problems creates a barrier to them completing their work, as illustrated by the following responses:

> **Questionnaire 132:** *"there is very little help for students with the computers, yet all our assignments require the use of a computer."*

> **Questionnaire 166:** *"technical support for computers is poor. Systems go down randomly and printers are slow. This makes it difficult to meet submission deadlines, given our huge workload."*

### 5.5.4 Library resources

Some students reported that the resources in the library create a barrier to their learning. These students felt that many of the books in the library were too old to be useful as sources of information. This was a particular area of concern to students, as they felt that library resources were not keeping up with changes in the curriculum. This view is reflected in these responses:

> **Questionnaire 50:** *"the library has old books that are not useful."*

> **Questionnaire 108:** *"the resources in the library are old and insufficient ……we don't get the relevant resources."*

None of the questionnaire respondents commented specifically on the usefulness of the online resources available to them. This resource was also not asked about in the interviews.

## 5.6 Institutional barriers resulting from the psychological and social environment on campus

According to ecosystemic theory, human beings have patterns of functioning which have an impact on individuals (Donald et al., 2010). Individuals shape and are shaped by the regular, distinctive ways in which they interact with others. Thus, this section will scrutinize the psychological and social environment of the campus to ascertain the impact it is having on students.

Booth et al (2003) argue that their transformative view of inclusion requires the development of an institutional culture that will allow all learners to be valued equally. Zepke et al (2006) maintain that welcoming cultural diversity is one of the ways in which an institution can become more inclusive.

The majority of participants felt that the campus is open to diversity and welcomes all cultures, as illustrated in the following comments:

> **Questionnaire 72:** *"being at this university gives me the opportunity to experience cultural diversity."*

> **Questionnaire 20:** *"..coming from a rural environment, I get to interact with other races."*

Most felt that the atmosphere is welcoming and felt a sense of belonging to the institution. More than two thirds of the participants felt free to communicate and interact with fellow students as well as with staff. Many participants felt that staff and students treat each other with respect. However, there are some areas which seem to be problematic for students, and may be experienced as barriers to learning. The first area of concern to students is being able to get assistance from staff. The second area of concern is related to how students interact with each other.

### 5.6.1 Assistance from staff

One of the barriers faced by some students relates to getting assistance from staff. This issue was experienced as a barrier in two different ways. Some students felt that staff members were unapproachable and unhelpful. For other students, the issue was that staff members were often unavailable for consultation, even at times when they should be available, according to the time slots stipulated by staff members on their office doors. Some of the comments that illustrate the students' perceptions of staff accessibility and ability to help are:

> **Questionnaire 60:** *"I had clashes with my majors. The staff were unhelpful. I almost deregistered one module. Then I was helped by another student and told what to do."*

> **Questionnaire 159:** *"Some administrative staff are rude. It is difficult to approach them with problems."*

> **Questionnaire 100:** *"Some lecturers do not want to answer questions about their modules. That is why some of them don't even post their consultation times on their office doors."*

> **Questionnaire 54:** *"Some lecturers are racist. They only help students of their own race."*

### 5.6.2 Students' treatment of each other

A barrier related to the psychological and social environment on campus arises from students' relationships with each other. It would appear that there are two main issues of concern here: the impact of student behaviour on other students, and the way different race groups interact.

With regard to student behaviour, some students felt that it was their fellow students who were a danger to them, due to the high rate of drug and alcohol use. The students particularly affected by this seemed to be students who live in the residence on campus. As one of the students commented:

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**Questionnaire 84:** *"I don't feel safe at RES, especially when students get their meal allowance, because so many students get drunk and violent. When students get drunk and start fighting, they make a lot of noise and the environment is not safe for us."*

While students feel that the campus is open to diversity and welcomes all race groups, it would appear that there are challenges with regard to interaction between the different race groups of students. Many students felt that there was too little interaction between the races, with students tending to choose friends of the same race and not interacting with others. Some students felt that students of different races failed to treat each other with respect, and this impacted on how they participate in class. These students did not feel comfortable answering questions in lectures because of a fear of being ridiculed by other students. The following responses illustrate this:

**Questionnaire 2:** *"I do not feel safe due to my race. I keep isolated to avoid trouble. I feel like a minority race. I don't feel as free as other race groups to express my opinions. I only participate when topics are safe."*

**Questionnaire 82:** *"It can be intimidating when I am the only White student in the class. I cannot participate in or understand some discussions between Zulu speaking students and the lecturer."*

Other students expressed disappointment with the relationship between the races and commented:

**Questionnaire 120:** *"The atmosphere between students of different races is bad. I am not able to make friends of different races here, even though I was able to at school."*

**Questionnaire 64:** *"people of the same race become friends, and do not want to interact with others."*

These findings are congruent with other earlier findings (Yorke & Longden, 2008; Zepke et al., 2005) who found that opportunities to develop positive relationships between students was one of the factors that influenced student retention.

**5.7 Institutional barriers resulting from how the curriculum is organized and managed**

Education White Paper 6 (DoE 2001) argues that the curriculum itself can present a significant barrier to learning. It is argued that various aspects of the curriculum need to be scrutinized so that barriers to learning emerging from the curriculum can be addressed. These aspects include: how lectures are organized and managed, methods used in lecturing, the teaching materials used and how learning is assessed. Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) contends that education structures, systems and learning methodologies can be enabled to meet the needs of all learners.

Most of the participants felt that their lecturers were knowledgeable in their subject areas. The majority of participants also responded very positively to the statement that all students are encouraged to participate in lectures. Another area which yielded a favourable response related to assessment. More than two thirds of the participants agreed that students were informed well in advance of forthcoming assessments.

However, one of the factors which emerged as a barrier to learning was that some students felt there was a lack of variety in the way course content was presented and assessed. Some students remarked that lecturers do not use a variety of resources to enhance their lessons, with many lecturers relying mainly on power point presentations and the overhead projector to deliver the curriculum. Some students felt that this did not accommodate all types of learners. Some students were also of the opinion that there was an over reliance on essays for assessment, and that this was especially disadvantageous to students who felt challenged by writing long essays. These students felt that more opportunities should be given for them to do presentations or other forms of assessment. This is illustrated in the following comment:

**Silindile:** *"…ok like we don't always learn like on the same way. I'm good at writing test, some are good at writing an assignment, ok but then what happens is you have a test, your test is not like question for question, its got 3 essays that you have to write. If I'm not good at writing assignments, surely I won't be good at writing an essay. So it doesn't accommodate me who is not able to writing essays or assignments like that. So like what could happen is with my other module I know, which is information systems we have like different ways of accessing, the lecturer gives us different ways of presenting……what should happen is they should give us like different assignments, test, maybe a project like that, just to accommodate everybody."*

Another barrier related to the organisation and management of the curriculum was that some students felt that inadequate feedback on assessments is given to them, thus they often do not know what their mistakes were, in order to rectify these in future.

These findings support the recommendation by the CHE (2010) that teaching activities should be well communicated to students.

**5.8 Institutional barriers resulting from a lack of access to information**

The majority of participants responded positively that they knew where to get information relevant to their modules, and that they had enough information about their courses to make informed decisions.

However, some students felt that they were given inadequate guidance on course selection before registration. This was experienced as a barrier to their learning, as it resulted in them not completing their degrees timeously. One student commented:

**Questionnaire 64:** *"We need more advice in first year on module choice. Some people mess up their modules in first year and end up doing their degrees in five years."*

Another student highlighted how the lack of guidance on course selection affected her:

**Nancy:** *"Ok, when it comes to registration it is a bit difficult because from Matric I really didn't have guidance when I applied for university and once I got there I chose FET, and I changed to ECD with just like hearing from friends and I didn't have a mentor telling me how to go about registering and what you need to do……….. in a way it could prevent students from doing well, because you are not aware of if you are doing the right thing, if it suits you. Especially for teaching practice if you are choosing a phase and you are not sure if it's for your personality, if you are good at working with children compared to elderly children. So it does prevent you from doing well in teaching practice and in your learning.*

Another area which was a challenge to some students was that they did not know who to approach when they needed information, or when they were facing academic challenges. Coupled with this was the feeling among some students that the number of staff allocated to help students who need academic support was inadequate.

A final barrier concerned with access to information is related to the policies of the institution. When asked about the policies of the institution, an overwhelming majority of the students responded that they did not know what the policies were, as illustrated in this comment:

**Silindile:** *"I don't know any policy here. All I know for first year all I know is that I should have a DP to write my exam, from the students that are here before me."*

Those students who did have some knowledge of the policies were dissatisfied with the handbook in which the policies could be found. Students felt that the handbook was not user –friendly, and was difficult to navigate in order to find the relevant information. When probed about how

students find out policies without reading the handbook, the response was that students preferred to ask other students for information. The following excerpt from an interview gives an idea of the attitude towards the handbook:

**Nompumelelo:** *The thing is I am not familiar with the policies. If only I had the policies.*

**Researcher:** *The policies are the things that are in the blue book.*

**Nompumelelo:** *Most of us do not open because it has to be summarised.*

**Researcher:** *Why does it have to be summarized?*

**Nompumelelo:** *There is too much information in a small book. I only read that book when we decide on our majors. Besides that I don't open it.*

**Researcher:** *Do you find it difficult to read or difficult to understand?*

**Nompumelelo:** *Ok, if they like have a meeting, because lots of children are still concerned about that. We just get told read the book, read the book. We just have to know and if we don't read we don't understand what is going on and by the time something happens, we still have to come back another year just for that.*

This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee, who expressed her views on a possible solution:

**Nancy:** *"It shouldn't be just written and given to us in a rule book. We should have like a lecture where we get like advice on these rules. The rules are read to us and we are listening and you know it makes sense to us as students, especially first years. From the first year we should know the rules because it is going to affect us for the rest of our four years of study…… it would be useful and we would get more information. Not just one rule read, and we would get like questions from different students and we would look at it differently."*

These findings confirm other research (Ramrathan, 2013; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Zepke et al., 2005) which suggested that institutions should give students more guidance and information prior

to them starting university. They suggest that this helps students to make better decisions about their curricula, thus facilitating student retention. These findings are also congruent with recommendations from the CHE (2010) that universities should acculturate students into university life by teaching students about the rules and routines of the university environment. Other research (Crosling et al., 2009; Zepke et al., 2005) recommends a longer, more effective orientation programme to ensure that students are armed with enough information to begin their academic lives.

## 5.9 Institutional barriers resulting from the practices of the university

With regard to the practices of the university, one major barrier seems to be common to the majority of students, namely the registration process. Students felt that the registration process is slow, complicated, time consuming and disorganized, as expressed in this comment:

> **Questionnaire 160:** *"…… registration is a daunting task, every year I encounter errors which lead me to register or deregister modules, which is frustrating and a waste of my time."*

Many students blamed the way registration is done for registration errors that led to barriers to their learning. Some of the barriers mentioned were registration for the wrong modules due to timetable clashes, failing to register modules due to staff not being accessible, and a failure to register the correct modules due to a lack of guidance. Some of the views expressed about the registration process follow:

> **Karen:** *"It is very chaotic and in my opinion absolute disaster in the way that it is done. You got to run around and find signatures and some of the staff do not come on registration day and you can't get a signature. When that happens, if you do not have that lecturers signature because she or he is not here you cannot register for that module and for first and second years I think that is a big problem because a lot of the time they come into their*

*fourth year and when they go and check their credits they realize that they are missing 42 credits or 15 credits and that is because they haven't registered per semester for the right amount of modules and from a personal experience that it happened to me."*


**Nancy:** *"I always thought that they could like take their time, if they do that not rush through. I know that its busy days when there is registration but most lecturers should take their time and look at your modules, look at the academic record and see that there are no mistakes at the end. Like I am in fourth year now then I find out that I was supposed to do a module, because they changed. One minute they tell us that we are supposed to have three electives, its one elective, now you are confused and you don't know which is which and end up looking for more modules."*

These findings confirm research done by Hill (2009), who found that complicated and time-consuming administrative practices did constrain students' ability to succeed in their academic endeavors.


## 5.10 Enablers to learning

Although the focus of the study was on barriers to learning, it is refreshing to note the enablers to student learning identified in the study. The first enabler to learning identified by students was that the library and computer rooms or Local area Networks (LANS) close quite late in the evening, thus allowing students to work for longer periods. Second, some students felt that the student online learning website was very helpful, as they could access lecture notes, readings and other module information easily using this platform. Third, some students cited the University's policy of inclusion as an enabler. Some students felt that they were able to study because of this policy. This made them feel equally valued and empowered because they felt there was equity in the way students are treated, regardless of ability. Finally, many students felt that the policy of awarding the Duly Performed Certificate (DP) was an enabler to their learning, especially because students had to attend a significant proportion of their lectures as part of the DP requirement. As one student commented:

**Questionnaire 181:** *"The DP gives us motivation to attend lectures. It ensures that we do the assignments and learn continuously in order to pass."*

Another student explained how the Duly Performed certificate enables her learning:

**Nancy:** *"I think the policies for me like on the good side is the Duly Performance and you work really hard throughout the year and you do well in your exam and you put those 2 together you get such a good mark and for me that makes you work harder the next time because I know if I work really hard and just listen and I maybe don't do as well in my exam, you know my duly performance counts towards that."*

## 5.11 Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that there are several factors in the microsystems of students that have a negative impact on their learning. These include: the lack of physical space in lecture rooms, the lack of resources and facilities, the social interaction between students, the way the curriculum is organized and managed, the lack of access to information and the registration process. This chapter detailed the variety of barriers to learning which emerged from the study, and provided some information on the enablers to learning identified by students. The following chapter will present some recommendations which are felt to be pertinent.

# CHAPTER 6

# SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

## 6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the first two research questions were addressed, namely, what the institutional barriers to learning are at this campus, and how these barriers impact on student academic performance. This chapter seeks to address the third research question: how can the university reduce the impact of the barriers to learning identified in the study? The recommendations that follow are based on the findings of the study, and may be helpful in shaping policy and practice aimed at reducing institutional barriers to student success. There are five main recommendations that will be made in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research process and the main findings.

## 6.2 Recommendation one: Enhance the capacity of the university to cater for the number of students registered.

As evident from the findings, there are a few areas where provision is not adequate for the number of students. In particular, lecture venues, student accommodation and the number of computers available are areas of concern.

### 6.2.1 Lecture venues.

The findings suggest that the lack of adequate space in some lecture rooms presents a serious barrier to some students. In order to provide an environment more conducive to learning, Care should be taken to when assigning lecture venues. Consideration should be given to the number of students registered for the module. For modules with very large numbers of registered students, students should be split up into more groups so that the number of students in each venue is manageable, both for students and the lecturer.

### 6.2.2   Student accommodation

The findings suggest three main concerns.

- First, that student behavior in university accommodation makes the environment unsafe for some students, and is not conducive to learning for others. The recommendation is that the accommodation provided by the university needs to be monitored and supervised more closely so that it becomes a safe and comfortable place for all its residents. This may entail putting policies into place to govern how residences are utilized by students. This may also entail appointing people to ensure that policies are being adhered to. Such supervisors may be senior students (postgraduate students) or staff members.
- The second area of concern is that there is insufficient accommodation for the number of students needing it. It is recommended that the university seeks more accommodation that can be used by students.
- The third area of concern involves the process of allocating accommodation, which some students feel is flawed and leads to unequal treatment of students. It is recommended that protocols be established with regard to the allocation of student accommodation. These guidelines should clearly state the criteria used in allocating accommodation.   It is recommended that preference should be given to first year students for on campus accommodation.   The rationale behind this is that they are the ones who are still familiarizing themselves with the university environment, and would benefit from having all the resources they require in close proximity. This is particularly important for those students whose homes are far away, as they are not familiar with the area and ways of getting around.

### 6.2.3   Inadequate numbers of computers

Based on the findings, it is evident that students benefit from the fact that LANS are accessible for long periods. However, the findings suggest that there are an inadequate number of computers available during the day for the number of students. Students who

live in on campus accommodation are not as severely affected by this, as they can access the computers at night when there are fewer students on campus. However, students who do not live on campus are affected more severely by the lack of computers. Thus, it is recommended that the university should either increase the number of computers available for student use, or make an effort to help students to procure their own laptops. Being a large institution, the university is in a position to negotiate with computer service providers so that laptops can be sold to students at a discounted price. Alternatively, the university could incorporate the price of a laptop into the fee structure for each student.

## 6.3 Recommendation two: Provide a longer, more effective orientation programme

The findings suggest that a lack of access to information is a barrier to some students. Some students make poor choices with regard to course selection. Most students do not know what the policies of the university are. It is recommended that the university facilitates a smoother transition between school and the institutional culture of the university. One of the ways to do this is by having a longer, more effective orientation programme. Such a programme should have as its focus:

- Familiarising students with the routines of university life. This should include information on where students can access help in different areas, for example help for academic support, help with regard to health, help with administrative procedures such as de-registration. Students should also be made aware of where information can be found, for example, the school website and the student portal.
- Lots of guidance on course selection. Students should be aware of exactly what each phase specialization entails. The compulsory modules for each specialization should be clear, as well as the ancillary modules required for each course.
- User-friendly information on the policies of the university. Based on the findings, it is apparent that most students do not know what the policies of the university are, until they are affected by them. While many students are aware that the policies can be found in the student handbook, many felt that the handbook contained too much information and they struggled to find the information that was relevant to them. It is recommended that the important policies be highlighted at orientation. These important policies could include

academic rules for exclusion, the award of the Duly performed certificate and examination rules. These important policies could then be printed on a pamphlet and given to students.

## 6.4 Recommendation three: Provide more efficient administrative procedures

The findings suggest that the registration process at this campus needs to be streamlined to be more efficient. It is recommended that registration for senior students (years 3 and above) be done online. The rationale behind this is that these students would be more familiar with their courses, and thus be able to make appropriate module choices. For junior students who need more help with course selection, the manual process of registration can continue, but with modifications. One of the challenges faced by students during registration was looking for lecturers to sign their registration forms. It is recommended that all lecturers who are signing registration forms be accommodated in one large venue during registration, with clear signs indicating the modules they are responsible for. Students could then move around the room getting all the signatures they need before proceeding with the registration process, perhaps at another venue.

## 6.5 Recommendation four: Provide an institutional response to cultural awareness and diversity for students

One of the findings of this study was that students experienced challenges with regard to relationships with students of other races. It is important that the university articulates an authentic interest in improving race relations between students on this campus. It is recommended that the university provides more opportunities for students of different races to collaborate on projects and provides more opportunities for students to interact socially. It is important that these opportunities are institution –led, as it confirms the institution's commitment to cultural diversity.

## 6.6 Recommendation five: Build the capacity of the institution to support the full range of learning needs of students

The findings propose that there is inadequate variety in the way course content is presented and assessed. This means that the way the curriculum is organized and managed does not

accommodate the full diversity of student learning needs. It is recommended that the professional development needs of staff need to be assessed, so that they can deliver a more flexible curriculum that is responsive to the diversity of learning needs. This may entail training on the different ways in which course content can be presented and assessed. It may also entail training on how to access resources for students with diverse needs.

## 6.7 Conclusion

In post-apartheid South Africa, many changes were brought about in higher education in order to align the provision of higher education with the changing social and political landscape of the country. Many of the new policies and laws that were adopted with regard to the provision of higher education were meant to enable redress of past inequalities and promote a single co-ordinated system that reflected the diverse needs of the South African population.

Two key areas that the new policies were aimed at are relevant to this study. One, new policies aimed to address the need for increased access and participation of previously disadvantaged groups in higher education. Two, new policies aimed to transform aspects of the curriculum to accommodate the different needs of a more diverse student population in higher education. Thus, the move was towards a more inclusive education system.

This thesis was based on the key premise that there will always be barriers that prevent learners from making full use of the educational resources available to them. The focus of this thesis was on uncovering the barriers that arise from the educational institution itself. With this is mind, a case study was undertaken of one campus of a particular institution, in an attempt to unearth what the institutional barriers to learning were at this particular institution.

Based on information gathered from questionnaires and interviews, barriers to learning were found to be in the following areas: the physical environment, the psychological and social environment,

institutional resourcing, the management and organisation of the curriculum, access to information and the practices of the university.

With regard to the physical environment on campus, overcrowded lecture rooms emerged as a barrier to learning. With regard to the psychological and social environment on campus, most of the participants felt that the campus had a welcoming environment that is open to diversity. On the whole, participants also felt that staff-student and student-student interactions were positive. The minority of students who did not enjoy positive student-student relationships attributed this to difficult interactions between students of different race groups.

There was a largely favourable response to the availability of resources and facilities on campus, except for the provision of student accommodation, parking facilities and inadequate library resources. While mostly favourable responses were obtained with regard to how the curriculum is organized and managed, two areas of concern were identified. First, some students felt that the lack of variety in the way course content was presented and assessed meant that all types of learners were not being accommodated. Second, some students felt that they did not get adequate feedback on their assessments, which meant that they did not have guidelines on how to improve on their work.

With regard to access to information, the majority of participants felt that they knew where to get the information they needed. For some participants, the barrier to learning emerged from the fact that they felt they were not given enough information before registering for their courses. For others, not knowing where to get help with regards to academic difficulties was experienced as a barrier to learning.

The final area in which barriers to learning emerged concerns the practices of the university. In particular, the registration process was experienced as a challenge by the majority of participants.

A common sentiment expressed was that the registration process was arduous and time-consuming. Some of the students felt that the way registration is done led to errors such as registering for the wrong modules, or failing to register for needed modules.

Based on the findings of the study, five recommendations were made in this chapter in order to reduce the institutional barriers to learning identified in the study. These include: enhancing the capacity of the institution to cater for the number of students, providing a more effective orientation programme, providing more efficient administrative procedures, providing an institutional response to student cultural awareness and enhancing the capacity of the institution to support the full range of learning needs.

To conclude, the limitations of this study need to be noted, and suggestions for further research were raised. The scope of this study was limited to a case study of just one campus of the institution. This means that participants were all in the same field of study. I would suggest that further research that includes students from other campuses of the same institution would be beneficial, as it would include students in other fields of study. Further, this study was limited to mostly undergraduate participants, with the exception of students from the Pgce group. It would be interesting to find out whether post graduate students at this campus as well as university-wide would experience the same barriers to learning. Another area that would enhance understanding of the barriers to learning at this institution would be staff views on the matter. Staff members could provide very useful information on why things are done in a particular way, and what challenges staff members face in trying to enhance their practice. Eliciting responses from all the stakeholders at this institution is likely to reveal a more complete picture of the barriers to learning at this campus

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# APPENDICES

**Appendix A**

## Questionnaire: Barriers to learning

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out if there are factors in this institution that prevent students from achieving academic success. The information that is gathered will be used to write a report and to publish research papers.

***Please do not write your name on the questionnaire since all responses are confidential and anonymous.***

1.  Please circle the correct response to your demographic data

    1.1 Year of study:      1st            2nd            3rd            4th            Pgce

    1.2 Gender:            Male            Female

    1.3 Race:     African        Indian        Coloured      White        Other

 **Please indicate how you feel about the statements below by ticking the box that best matches your opinion.**

2.  **The  physical environment on campus**

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Undecided/ don't know | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2.1  I feel physically safe on campus | | | | | |
| 2.2  The environment is adequately maintained in terms of safety, cleanliness and repairs | | | | | |
| 2.3  The buildings are accessible to all students | | | | | |
| 2.4  There is adequate physical space in lecture rooms | | | | | |
| 2.5  Lecture rooms are organised in a way that is suitable for learning | | | | | |

**Comments:** do any of the factors mentioned above affect your studies, either positively or negatively?  Please explain how.

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### 3. The psychological and social environment on campus

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Undecided/ don't know | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3.1  I feel safe from harassment based on race, gender, class, religion, language or sexual orientation | | | | | |
| 3.2  The campus is open to diversity and welcomes all cultures | | | | | |
| 3.3  I feel like I belong in the institution | | | | | |
| 3.4  The campus atmosphere feels welcoming and friendly | | | | | |
| 3.5  New students are helped to settle in on campus | | | | | |
| 3.6 I feel free to communicate and interact with staff and students | | | | | |
| 3.7 I feel comfortable answering questions in lectures without fear of being ridiculed | | | | | |
| 3.8  Staff and students treat each other with respect | | | | | |
| 3.9  Staff are approachable and helpful to students | | | | | |
| 3.10 Staff are always available for consultation at the stipulated times | | | | | |
| 3.11  Students treat each other with respect | | | | | |
| 3.12 Students are well represented with regard to the running of the university | | | | | |

**Comments:** do any of the factors mentioned above affect your studies, either positively or negatively?  Please explain how.

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### 4. Organisation and management of the curriculum

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Undecided/ don't know | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4.1 Lecturers are knowledgeable in their subject areas | | | | | |
| 4.2 Lecturers are well prepared for lectures | | | | | |
| 4.3 Lecturers use a variety of resources to enhance lessons | | | | | |
| 4.4 All students are encouraged to participate in lectures | | | | | |
| 4.5 Lecturers inform students well in advance of forthcoming assessments / tests | | | | | |
| 4.6 A variety of assessment methods are used | | | | | |
| 4.7 The results of assessments / tests are communicated to students | | | | | |
| 4.8 Feedback on assessments is given to students so that they know where they went wrong | | | | | |

**Comments:** do any of the factors mentioned above affect your studies, either positively or negatively?  Please explain how.

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### 5. Access to information

| | Strongly agree | Agree | Undecided/ don't know | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5.1 I know where to get information relevant to my modules | | | | | |
| 5.2 I have enough information about my course to make informed decisions | | | | | |
| 5.3 I know who to approach when I need information | | | | | |
| 5.4 I was given adequate guidance and information before I registered | | | | | |
| 5.5 I know where to find out about changes to lecture times or the exam timetable | | | | | |

| | Excellent | Adequate | Poor | Undecided/ don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5.6  I know where to get information about financial aid | | | | |
| 5.7  I know where to get help if I am having academic difficulties | | | | |
| 5.8  I know where to get help with regard to my health | | | | |

**Comments:** do any of the factors mentioned above affect your studies, either positively or negatively?  Please explain how.

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## 6.   Resources and facilities

**Please rate the provision of the following resources and facilities.**

| RESOURCE / FACILITY | Excellent | Adequate | Poor | Undecided/ don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6.1  Electricity, water and bathrooms | | | | |
| 6.2 Adequate facilities to purchase refreshments | | | | |
| 6.3 Equipment in specialist rooms eg. Laboratories | | | | |
| 6.4 Availability of furniture in lecture rooms for the number of students using the room | | | | |
| 6.5 Availability of student housing / accommodation | | | | |
| 6.6 Availability of student parking | | | | |
| 6.7 Availability of health services on campus | | | | |
| 6.8 Availability of technical support eg. help in using computers | | | | |
| 6.9  Resources in the library | | | | |
| 6.10 Computer and internet resources | | | | |
| 6.11 Number of lecturers | | | | |
| 6.12  Number of administrative staff | | | | |
| 6.13  Number of staff for student academic support | | | | |

**Comments:** do any of the factors mentioned above affect your studies, either positively or negatively?  Please explain how.

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7.  Are there any policies implemented by the institution that you feel are having a
    **<u>negative</u>** impact on your studies? Eg. policy on academic exclusion, policy on award
    of DPs

                          **Yes**                    **no**

If **<u>yes</u>**, please state which policy you are responding to and comment on how it impacts
on your studies.
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8.  Are there any practices of the institution (the way things are done) that you feel are
    having a **<u>negative</u>** impact on your studies? Eg. the process of registration, the
    process of curriculum change

                          **Yes**                    **no**

If **<u>yes</u>**, please state the practice you are referring to, and comment on how it impacts on
your studies.

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**9.**  Are there any policies implemented by the institution that you feel are having a
    **<u>positive</u>** impact on your studies?

                          **Yes**                    **no**

If **yes**, please state which policy you are responding to and comment on how it impacts on your studies.

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10. Are there any practices of the institution (the way things are done) that you feel are having a **positive** impact on your studies?

**Yes**                  **no**

If **yes**, please state which policy you are responding to and comment on how it impacts on your studies.

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11. Is there any other thing you think acts as a barrier to learning on this campus? Please explain.

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Thank you very much for filling in this questionnaire. I would like to have the opportunity to follow up some of the responses to this questionnaire in an **interview**. If you are willing to talk to me about some of the issues raised in this questionnaire, please provide a contact number below. Your responses will be **anonymous and confidential**.

**Contact number**:..........................................................................

**Appendix B**

Dear Participant

I am undertaking a research project entitled "Institutional barriers to learning: A case study of a university in KwaZulu Natal."  I am interested in finding out if there are factors at this institution that prevent students from achieving their educational goals.  The results of this study will hopefully provide a clear understanding of which institutional barriers are impeding student success and need to be changed to improve practice.

The research will be carried out in two parts.  First, a questionnaire will be made available to interested students.  Second, interviews will be conducted with students who volunteer to provide additional information.  Individual interviews will be arranged for times convenient to participants' schedules.

Please take note of the following:
- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary
- There are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study
- All your responses will be treated with strict confidentiality
- You may decline to answer any of the questions you do not wish to answer
- You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative or undesirable consequences to yourself
- No video recording will be made, but a tape recorder will be used for the interview to ensure the accuracy of your input
- Your name will not appear in any thesis or publication resulting from this study

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information, please contact me at 031 260 3410 or by email (grantm@ukzn.ac.za).  You can also contact my supervisor Dr S Ntombela by telephone at 031 260 1342 or by email (ntombelas1@ukzn.ac.za).

Thank you in advance for your co-operation and valuable time.

Ms M J Grant

University of KwaZulu Natal (Student number 862868676)

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Please sign the following declaration:I,
…………………………………………………………………….(full name 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 this study.  I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

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Signature of participant                                                        Date

**Appendix C**
**Barriers to learning interview schedule**

**Introduction**

You have been invited to this interview because you indicated a willingness to follow up some of your responses to the questionnaire in an interview. I would like to remind you that all your responses will be treated with strict confidentiality. I would also like to remind you that your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you may decline to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. The interview will be recorded and transcribed to help me with note-taking. Thank you for agreeing to participate.

I have planned this interview to last no more than half an hour. During this time, I would like to explore some of the questions that were not answered fully in the questionnaire.

1. a) One of the concerns raised by some of the participants was that lecture rooms are overcrowded. Are you affected by this at all? How?
   b) Do you have any ideas on how this can be improved?
2. I would like to ask you about whether you are affected by any policies of the University. When we talk about policies, think about the rules of the university, for example:
   - Students have to go to both resourced and under-resourced schools for teaching practice during the course of their degrees
   - Students should not attend lectures for a module that they are not registered for
   - Students may not write exams for a module unless they have a duly performed certificate (DP) for that module
   - If students miss an exam, they must apply for special exams within 5 days of the exam.
   a) Are there any policies / rules like the ones I mentioned, that you think are preventing students from doing well in their studies?
   b) Are there any policies / rules that you think are helping students to do well in their studies?
   c) Can you think of any ways in which policies / rules can be improved to help students?
3. I would like to ask you about some of the practices of the university. By this I mean how things are done, for example:
   - How registration is done
   - How students are placed in schools for teaching practice
   - How students are awarded a DP
   a) Is there anything in the way things are done that prevents students from doing well?
   b) Is there anything in the way things are done that helps students to do well?
   c) Do you have any ideas on how the university can improve on the way things are done?
4. Are there any comments you would like to make about how the university can improve generally, so that students are helped to perform better?

## Appendix D

UNIVERSITY OF ™
KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI

15 June 2012

Ms Monica Jennifer Grant 862868676
School of Education & Development

Dear Ms Grant

Protocol Reference Number: HSS/0279/012M
Project Title: Institutional barriers to learning: A case study of a university in KwaZulu Natal.

In response to your application dated 5 June 2012, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

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

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

Yours faithfully

Professor Steven Collings [Chair]
/pk

cc Supervisor: Dr S Ntombela
cc Dr D Davids

Inspiring Greatness

# Appendix E

**UNIVERSITY OF**
**KWAZULU-NATAL**
**INYUVESI**
**YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

14 March 2012

M J Grant

Edgewood Campus

UKZN

Email: grantm@ukzn.ac.za

Dear Ms Grant

## RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal towards your postgraduate studies, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained via the Research Office. It is noted the title of your dissertation is:

"Institutional barriers to learning: A case study of a University of KwaZulu-Natal"

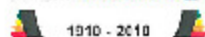Please note that the data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely,

Professor JJ Meyerowitz

**REGISTRAR**