

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU NATAL

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

PHD THESIS

TITLE

**ACADEMIC INTERVENTION EXPERIENCES OF 'AT-RISK' STUDENTS: A CASE
OF AN UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMME IN A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY**

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SUPERVISOR: PROF. L. RAMRATHAN

DECLARATION

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This theses is submitted with/without the supervisor's approval

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Date

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Firstly I would like to express my sincere thankfulness to my **Lord and Saviour, God Almighty** for power, courage, strength and health he provided me to complete this theses. To my supervisor, Prof.Labby Ramrathan, thank you for your support, guidance and encouragement. Without you, I wouldn't have successfully completed this study.

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Three wonderful men who believed in my dreams, my late husband Bongani, my late father Philemon and my late brother Ntokozo, I miss you dearly and this is for you

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated with love to:

My son, **Ndalo Mngomezulu** for giving me the courage to do well and persevere through difficult circumstances

My family, my mother **Bongekile Mkhwanazi** and my late father **Philemon Mkhwanazi** for making me believe that the sky is the limit and their encouragement in my academic life.

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ABSTRACT

The higher education landscape in South Africa has significantly changed upon attainment of democracy in 1994. Access to higher education has been increased for students from previously disadvantaged groups. However, access to higher education has not been met with success as a significant number of students fail to complete degrees in the minimum time required or drop out of programmes completely. Universities have to be responsive to such challenges hence there is a need for institutionalization of academic support programmes. This study sought to ascertain students' experiences of causal factors and of academic support interventions in one of the Schools in a South African university.

The study is underpinned by the Ecosystemic Perspective Theory, Attribution Theory, Vygotsky's Social Development Theory and Chickering's Theory of Identity Development theories. Informed by the interpretive research paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative case study design in which data were solicited from a purposive sample of 'at-risk' students participating in academic support programmes offered by the School. Data was collected through document analysis, focus-group as well as individual interviews. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to analyse data. Content analysis through emerging themes was also used to analyse data. Data presentation is in the form of thick description in which verbatim quotations are used to present participants' views.

Findings were analyzed and collated into common themes which revealed that 'at-risk' status is caused by multiple factors emanating from both secondary and higher learning education. The study revealed that some challenging factors emanating from secondary schools were prevalent at a higher institution. Academic and non-academic factors were considered to be the main factors that contributed to poor academic performance. Participants revealed that they dealt with challenges differently depending on the nature of the problem. It emerged that warning of 'at-risk' status created a plethora of emotional and psychological experiences. It also emerged that intervention support participants received was beneficial to participants but some felt it was reactive rather than being pro-active.

In conclusion, the study showed that student performance was negatively affected by academic and non-academic challenges that were both in and prior to university studies. Academic support programmes in place assisted the students and to a certain level but the timing of support and a

non-holistic approach remained a challenge. I recommend an inclusive approach to student support within higher education which is largely data driven and includes all registered undergraduate students. Furthermore, early warning detection systems should be built into the data- handling systems so that students, staff and the intervention student support services can respond appropriately and timeously to potential impediments to students' academic progress.

Key words: At-risk students, Institution of Higher Education, interventions, warning signs.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATION

UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
DMI	Data Management Information
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CAO	Central Application Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
NSFSAS	National Students Financial Aid Scheme
REAP	The Rural Education Access Programme
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
ZPD	Zone of proximal development
FET	Further Education and Training
LRC	Learner Representative Council
LoLT	Language of learning and teaching
DP	Duly Performance
ALE	Academic literacy in Education
STP	Supplementary Tutorial Programme
CSV	Community Service Volunteers
HE	Higher Education
DoE	Department of Education
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal

KEY CONCEPTS

Academic Monitoring and Support programme: Intervention programme that support undergraduate students whose academic performance is unsatisfactory

Identification of 'at-risk' students: It is defined as the process of giving warnings to students with poor academic performance

Monitoring: Is a process of tracking students' academic progress

Pre –enrolment factors: Are aspects which affect students prior to higher education

Post enrolment factors: Are aspects that affect students in higher education

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENTS		PAGE
Declaration		i)
Acknowledgements		ii)
Dedication		iii)
Abstract		iv)
Acronyms and Abbreviations		vi)
Key concepts		vii)
Table of contents		viii)
CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY		
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Background of The Study	1
1.3	Focus of the study	5
1.4	Rationale and motivation of the study	5
1.5	Statement of the problem	6
1.6	Main Research Questions	8
1.7	Research Strategy	8
1.8	Significance of the study	10
1.9	Limitations of the study	10
1.10	Definition of relevant terms to the study	11
1.11	Theoretical and conceptual framework	13
1.12	Research design and methodology	16
1.13	Organisation of thesis	19
1.14	Summary	19
CHAPTER 2:REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE		
2.1	Introduction	20
2.2.1	Global perspectives on Access, Throughput and Success interventions in Higher Education	20
2.2.2	South African perspectives on Access, Throughput and Success interventions in Higher Education	21
2.3	Identification of students as ‘at-risk’ of academic failure in Higher Education	24
2.4	Pre-enrolment factors and becoming ‘at-risk’ of academic failure in Higher Education	26
2.5	Post-enrolment factors and being ‘at-risk’ of academic failure in Higher Education	29
2.6	Academic Support Programmes as intervention for students ‘at risk’ of academic failure in Higher Education	39

2.7	Summary	46
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK		
3.1	Introduction	47
3.2	Theoretical framework	47
3.2.1	Vygotsky's Social Development Theory	47
3.2.2	Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory	49
3.2.3	Attribution Theory	52
3.2.4	Chickering's Theory of identity development	54
3.3	Summary	57
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY		
4.1	Introduction	58
4.2	Research paradigm	58
4.2.1	Interpretive paradigm	58
4.2.2	Comparison between research paradigms	60
4.3	Research approach	61
4.4	Qualitative research approach	61
4.4.1	Justification for a qualitative research approach for the study	62
4.5	Research design	63
4.5.1	Justification of case study research design	64
4.6	Identifying a case study	64
4.7	Selection of participants	65
4.8	Biographical information of participants	66
4.9	Methods of data collection	68
4.9.1	Summary of methods of data collection and analysis	69
4.9.2	Data collection method process	71
4.9.2.1	Interviews	71
4.9.2.2	Focus group interviews	74
4.9.2.3	Documents	77
4.10	Data analysis process	78
4.11	Issues of quality in qualitative research	81
4.11.1	Trustworthiness	81
4.11.2	Credibility	81
4.11.3	Transferability	82
4.11.4	Dependability	82
4.11.5	Confirmability	83
4.12	Limitations of the study	83
4.13	Ethical considerations	83
4.14	Pilot study	84
4.15	Improvements to instrument after pilot study	86
4.16	Summary	86

CHAPTER 5: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION (FIRST SECTION)		
5.1	Introduction	87
5.2	Biographical information of participants	88
5.3	Background information on each participant	89
5.4	Exploring factors as reported by students that led them to be identified as ‘at- risk’	94
5.4.1	Factors beyond university education which ultimately compromised the performance of students ‘at- risk’.	98
5.4.1.1	Academic challenges faced prior to university studies	98
5.4.1.2	The impact of family before higher education	105
5.4.2	Contributing factors in higher education which compromise the performance of students ‘at-risk’	108
5.4.2.1	The environment as a contributing factor in higher education	108
5.4.2.2	Personal factors that students attribute to their poor performance	116
5.4.2.3	Academic challenges faced at the university level	120
5.4.2.4	Social issues as a challenge in higher education	124
5.4.2.5	Lack of resources for students	127
5.5	Summary	131
CHAPTER 6: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION (SECOND SECTION)		
6.1	Introduction	133
6.2	Nature and usefulness of academic support aimed at supporting ‘at-risk’ students in higher education	134
6.2.1	Notification of ‘at-risk’ status	134
6.2.1.1	Students’ initial responses to being notified of their academic performance status	135
6.2.2	Stages through which the students experienced when identified as ‘at risk’	136
6.2.3	Intervention programme aimed at supporting ‘at-risk’ students	143
6.2.3.1	Current intervention programmes in place to assist ‘at risk’ students	143
6.3	Usefulness of academic support aimed at supporting	149

	'at-risk' students in higher education	
6.3.1	Students' reflections after intervention support	149
6.3.1.1	Participants' views on how effective they perceived the nature and usefulness of academic support	149
6.3.2	What participants consider as a necessary response to supporting students 'at risk'	156
6.4	Concluding comments of the value of the Students at Risk (Academic Support) programme offer to students 'at-risk'	157
6.5	Data analysis summary	158
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS		
7.1	Introduction	160
7.2	Discussion of results	160
7.2.1	Academic factors that compromise students' performance	161
7.2.2	Non-academic factors that compromised students' performance	169
7.2.2.1	Environmental factors as a challenge	169
7.2.2.2	Personal factors	174
7.2.3	Students' approach to personal challenges	177
7.2.4	Emotional and psychological experiences caused by identification and notification of 'at-risk' status	179
7.2.4.1	Psychological stages through which the students experienced when identified as 'at risk'	180
7.2.5	Negative and positive impact of academic intervention programmes	184
7.2.5.1	Positive impact of the academic intervention programme	184
7.2.5.2	Drawbacks of the programme	187
7.3	Summary	189
CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION		
8.1	Introduction	190
8.2	Response to the research question	193
8.2.1	Research question one	193
8.2.2	Research question two	197
8.2.3	Research question three	199

8.2.4	Research question four	200
8.2.5	Research question five	201
8.3	Limitations of the study	202
8.4	Recommendations	203
8.4.1	Holistic and developmental academic support model	203
8.4.1.1	Systemic / Process	205
8.4.1.2	Implementation level	206
8.4.1.3	Interaction between systemic and interaction level	206
8.5	Conclusions	207
REFERENCES		211

CHAPTER ONE: ORIENTATION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

Chapter one presents an introduction to the study. This study focuses on ‘at risk’ students’ experiences of accessing and using academic support programmes as an intervention for enhancing student success. This chapter contextualizes the problem under study by outlining the background to the study internationally and locally, particularly focusing discussion on the area this study was carried out. It explains the rationale of the study and introduces the research questions. Chapter one goes further to present a description of the research approach, research methodology and design. Furthermore, this chapter explains the conceptual framework of this research study outlining the rationale that informed the study and the significance of the study. Finally, chapter one outlines the structure and organisation of the study, giving a brief overview of the component sections of the research study, and gives a summary of the chapter.

1.2. Background to the Study

Higher Education institutions have increased access to university education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Downs, 2010). However, increased access is not being matched by students’ success (Letseka & Maile, 2008). In ensuring access to education, other issues have emerged which tend to erase the gains achieved through increased access for disadvantaged students. These issues are related to student dropout and throughput rates, which are major concerns in Higher Education experience (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Godler, 2001). Assumptions about the causes of these throughput and dropout problems, and different responses by institutions of higher learning have been noted. It is also noted that school leaving marks are not satisfactory in terms of higher institutions entry requirements because of the school environment (Van der Merwe & De Beer, 2006). What this may imply is that there seem to be a mis-match between entry level knowledge expectations and the higher education institutions’ foundation level knowledge requirement.

Beyond the issues of preparedness, however, these same students can be observed as often confronted with a range of other challenges such as the language barrier, family problems, financial problems, transport issues, illness, pregnancy, time management problems and lack of resources. These additional challenges also put them ‘at risk’ of being academically excluded. However, there does not seem to be clear or sufficient evidence from

research about how these factors contribute towards students' dropout rate. Thus far, focus has been placed on accelerated physical access with the assumptions that enough and relevant resources for support have been created and are there for the dis-advantaged ('at-risk') students; however, once in the system, how these students access these support resources on the one hand, and how these support resources are accessible to them on the other, are experiences and narratives with which we are not familiar as yet.

While the government has invested a great deal of money in student funding, very few students graduate within the expected time frame. Higher Education institutions have put in place support programmes such as student counselling, financial support and academic monitoring programmes, but the phenomenon of being 'at risk' is still not clear. This study hopes to uncover factors that contribute to students becoming 'at -risk', what the students' experiences are when using these support programmes and what students' experiences are in accessing (i.e. trying to avail themselves of the support) these programmes as provisioned by higher institutions.

There are challenges that affect students in general, locally and internationally, however, it is recognized that individual students may have needs over and above these general challenges. Some students show another sub-layer of need which negatively impacts their academic performance. These students with additional level of needs are referred to in this research context as 'at risk' of academic failure. What has been seen in terms of intervention is a kind of a 'default' strategy approach to the intervention programmes designed to respond to these needs. Students are identified, notified about their poor performance and advised to attend intervention support programmes so that problems can be patched up as they emerge. The challenges are also seen and addressed as they surface and there is no systematic theoretical approach to the needs of these students. This study therefore hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of students' experiences of accessing and using these support programmes. A nuanced understanding of students' experiences is crucial in identifying and theorising systematized and evidence-informed approaches to the phenomenon of 'at risk' students in Higher education institutions. Furthermore, while there is sufficient literature that seek to uncover the secret of retention through previous academic achievement, character factors and demographic characteristics (Berger & Milem, 1999; Komarraju & Karau, 2005), contextually, the articulations of these in terms of strategy and practice have only been seen in the developing of the early-warning systems that are able to identify students who are 'at-risk' (Beck & Davidson, 2001).

The literature observes various methods of defining, identifying and monitoring of students targeted as 'at risk', however I have considered how the university under the study defines "at-risk" students.

The University has proposed a three-colour academic standing system, to be visible on the central Student Management System. This system alerts students (and support staff) of their need to take action. The color green designates good academic standing: the student has passed at or above 70% of the normal credit load for the semester and has passed at or above 75% of the credits expected for regular progression into the selected degree (for completion in the minimum time). No action is required for green academic standing; however, optional counseling and support are available if requested, to support the goal of passing all modules in the following semester. Orange indicates that the student is 'at risk'; either because he or she has passed less than 70% of the normal credit load for that semester or because he or she has passed less than 75% of the credits expected for normal progression in the selected degree. The student is required to take immediate action, with the goal of returning to green status by the end of the following semester. The onus is on the student to participate in this developmental programme and to achieve the set target. Red indicates serious under-performance. That is, the student's progress is below School minimum progression requirements. After compulsory academic and personal/career counselling, should the student wish to persevere with the degree, he or she may continue in the School for one additional semester on strict probation with specific and realistic conditions to be met at the end of the semester. In regards to this, continuous academic support is available and it will be recommended that financial aid and residence status remain unchanged; hence the onus is on the student to participate in the developmental programme.

The following intervention strategies for the 'at-risk' students are implemented by one of the Schools where the study is located:

Workshops, Monitoring Chart System, Academic Counselling, Peer-mentorship and Referral system.

- Workshops

Workshops are held every Thursday during the forum period (non-contact/free period) to provide students with additional support. During these workshops, students break into smaller groups to give each other feedback and to provide group support based on the lessons led by the academic counsellors or workshop facilitator. Workshops are designed according to the need of the student which is consequential to their wish during the interview. Additional topics could be added according to the need of the students, and guest lecturers are invited to speak on specialized topics.

- Monitoring Chart System

At students' 'at-risk' orientation meeting, students are given monitoring charts for each of their courses. According to the monitoring chart, students must meet three times each semester with their module tutors (once with module coordinators, twice with academic counselors and once with the Academic leader). Each staff member must comment on the students' progress, clearly state intervention support and sign the chart after each meeting with the individual student. This is intended to provide transparency between staff and students with regards to the students' progress. A monitoring chart must be completed for each module where the students are enrolled. The Academic leader will make a comment on the progress of each learner at the end of the semester.

- Academic Counselling

One-on-one academic counselling is provided by the Academic monitoring coordinator and Academic Qualification Coordinator for students who need academic guidance or advice. This general academic support was designed to complement the module-specific support they receive from module tutors and coordinators.

- Peer-to-peer mentoring program

This offers more tailored support via smaller, peer-led breakout sessions held weekly. The Peer Mentoring Programme was initiated because it had been identified as a possible support strategy for identifying 'at-risk' students. All 'at-risk' students are given an opportunity to be part of the peer mentoring programme and information was circulated to them to ensure that they became aware of the programme and its importance. Students are encouraged to participate in the programme given that the programme was not made compulsory. Status can only be assigned once incoming first-year students have completed two full semesters at the university. To allow adequate time for transition from school to university, current intervention strategies are put in place.

- Referral system

Students are referred to the following university sectors according to their specific need:

Campus-based student counsellor, student funding office, disability office, campus residence office, mentorship programme, Academic Leader and other support sectors.

From this account of the process of identification and monitoring of students 'at risk' in the university where this study is located, it seems that institutions of higher learning are taking this issue very seriously. However, the interventions are still largely at the level of practice and are informed more from a response perspective than from a theoretical perspective. This study hopes to put emphasis at both the response perspective and an

intellectual perspective that enlighten academic intervention programmes aimed to support students in completing their degrees.

1.3. Focus and Purpose of Study

The focus of this study is to explore ‘at risk’ students’ experiences of accessing and using academic support programmes as an intervention for enhancing student success.

1.4. Rationale and Motivation of the Study

The research study takes orientation from and is motivated by my personal experiences and self-reflections on professional practices, having worked as both an academic staff as a lecturer and as a student s’ academic support services staff at a higher education institution in South Africa. During academic registration in the year 2010, my responsibilities were to conduct a survey to understand reasons for unsatisfactory academic progress and to use this information to design relevant workshops for the students. I interviewed students deemed ‘at risk’, transferred students from other faculties with poor academic records, and all bursary holders of the Funza Lushaka bursary who were in danger of losing their bursaries because of unsatisfactory performance. In order of relevance, the following major themes were identified:

Inaccessible modules, family problems - issues, poor attendance / no commitment, personal problems, wrong choice of modules - phase, accommodation, financial difficulty, illness, transport and time management as underlining or defining the reasons for the unsatisfactory academic progress. These themes illustrated that there are more factors contributing to academic failure than just unpreparedness and language issues.

My experience of working with gifted and talented students in previous employment stimulated interest in looking at the other side of the coin to understand issues that challenge ‘at risk’ students. My understanding of both sides will give insight and allow for comparison on what students attribute their academic challenges to and it will give clarity on how to better approach problems related to their academic performance.

A review of the literature on this topic in South Africa claims that the throughput rate in Higher Education is a major concern both for institutions and for the Department of Education. Family background, poor schooling and financial problems are some of the factors that have been identified as the main causes of academic failure

(Wangenge-Ouma, 2010). In this research study, however I critically examine and engage patterns and trends that have been established to address the identified factors that contribute to student failure. In doing so, the research was informed by the need for inquiry into, and an understanding of the nature and impact of university academic intervention programmes from the perspective of the ‘at -risk’ students and their experiences of accessing and using these intervention programmes.

Reports have emerged that academic interventions programmes are not achieving consistent success in terms degree completion and throughput rate (Kaftarian, Robinson, Compton, Watts-Davis & Volkow, 2004; Slavin, 2008; Smink & Schargel, 2004; U.S., Williams & Riccomini, 2006).

Literature suggests that listening to the narratives of student’s experiences who are deemed ‘at risk’ of academic failure and who access these intervention programmes can be considered necessary in order to design responsive and evidence-based interventions that effectively attend to their needs (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morrison, 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004; Slavin, 2008). According to Cook-Sather (2002), building a system of learning without discussing with the end user at any time leaves a gap in any such system. Cook-Sather further asserts that so much can be learned from people who have experienced a system under the microscope. By utilizing the voice of those who are ‘at risk’ of academic failure and who are experiencing university intervention programmes, this study intends to explore the dimension of understanding the phenomenon of ‘at risk’ student, and associated challenges to achieving academic success. My anticipation is that this study will add to awareness by way of providing a more nuanced understanding of ‘at -risk’ students and the nature of academic support that can meet their needs.

1.5. Statement of the Problem

South African higher institutions have, as an integral part of the transformation agenda of Higher education in South Africa, opened up access to all. Several steps have been taken over the last decade in targeting the previously disadvantaged as part of the initiatives of achieving the transformational agenda of Higher Education in South Africa. These initiatives include the development of access programmes, increased awareness, marketing of Higher Education in previously- marginalized communities and curriculum reviews to incorporate foundational learning into mainstream degree programmes (UNESCO, 1998; Pandor, 2005). A review of recent literature on student enrolment within Higher Education highlights the changes in demography of student populations across all Higher Education institutions in South Africa, suggesting that transformational access targets have to a large extent been realized. While this transformation goal seems to have been met, the

literature review also alludes to a more significant finding regarding students' throughput rates. According to Van Schalkwyk (2007), the dropout rates are extremely high in the first year of study and are of equal concern in other years of study. Furthermore, the low number of students completing their degree in the minimum time is rather alarming. These emerging findings are of major concern both to the transformational agenda of the Higher Education sector as well as to the institutions themselves, since throughput has major funding implications for them.

In recognition of the above mentioned emerging trends, Higher Education institutions are beginning to develop and implement programmes of support for students with a view to targeting the successful completion of their degrees and diplomas. These intervention programmes are usually designed to respond to both their personal and academic needs (challenges to success). While the reason/s why students considered to be 'at risk' of not graduating on time have been identified, tracked and monitored, several challenges towards realising a critical mass effect of the intervention programmes are being seen. Several mechanisms have been used to promote throughput towards completion. Also, thus far, much of the emphasis in supporting these 'at risk' students has come from institutional initiatives.

There is a great deal of literature on student support within Higher Education, most of the current literature focuses on the interventions from the institution's view points and not the students' viewpoint (Xiong, Lee & Hu, 2011). There are few studies, especially within a transformational context, on the actual experiences of students who have been identified as 'at risk' and who have been subjected to intervention programmes. There is therefore, the need to study the student 'at risk' phenomenon with the view to understanding who these students are, what their experiences of academic support interventions are, and how these experiences might be useful in explicating the phenomenon. It can be said that students considered as 'at risk' of academic failure are not being fully understood in terms of what exactly constitutes their needs outside of the prescription-imposed, generic needs designed for them from an institutional perspective, therefore, it is perhaps compelling to state that the one-size-fits all approach to academic intervention has not provided an adequate answer to the recurring deficit in 'at-risk' students' successful completion of their studies. This observed need for further inquiry into the students' experiences of the academic support programmes necessitated this study considering that students 'at risk' are typified as individuals with specific and special issues that need to be understood and timeously addressed at the time of need.

1.6. Main Research Question

What are ‘at risk’ students’ experiences of academic intervention implemented by the School of Education in a South African university?

Sub-research Questions

- i) What do individual students identify as their academic support needs?
- ii) How do these students understand and deal with challenges to meeting their academic support needs?
- iii) In what way(s) are students identified and categorised as ‘at risk’ of academic failure at a School of Education in a South African university?
- iv) How do students identified as ‘at risk’ of academic failure react to their identification and notification at a School of Education in a South African university?
- v) How do students identified as ‘at risk’ experience academic support intervention programmes at a School of Education in a South African university and why?

1.7. Research Strategy

Table 1.1 gives a brief description of the research plan of action, details of which are given in the research design and methodology chapter.

Table 1 Study plan of action

Guiding Research Question	
What are ‘at risk’ students’ experiences of academic intervention implemented by the School of Education in a South African university?	
Paradigmatic Suppositions	
Epistemological Models	Interpretivism
Methodological Model	Qualitative Approach
Research Design	
Case Study	
Selection of Participants	
Purposive Sample	Twelve ‘at risk’ undergraduate students

Data Collection	
Data Collection Methods	Individual interviews Focus -group interviews Document analysis
Data Analysis and Interpretation	
Data Analysis Method	Content Analysis, Transcribing Data, Forming Meaning Units, Condensing Meaning Units, Categorizing and Theming
Data Trustworthiness	
Aspects of Trustworthiness Attended to.	Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability
Ethical Considerations	
Ethical Elements attended to.	Research Permission, Informed Consent, Confidentiality And Anonymity.

1.8. Significance of the Study

This study intends to bring a depth of understanding for the relevant personnel of the experiences of students ‘at risk’ of academic failure of the Academic Monitoring and Support programmes designed and implemented by a higher institution for them. What and how their contextualised academic needs and contingencies from the perspective of their experiences are addressed by the existing academic support programmes and how they access and use these support programmes to meet such needs are explored. The understanding of ‘at- risk’ students’ experiences of access to the academic support programmes and use of these programmes will throw some light on what kind of challenges these students encounter that subsequently compromise their throughput and successful completion of their studies. In this way, perhaps, understanding and know- how and when intervention should take place will be facilitated. It is therefore anticipated that the study will contribute towards refreshing ideas and spurring further discussions and research into theoretical models that will better enhance students’ academic support and success. Furthermore, as an outcome, findings from this research study may be

useful to many stakeholders in the education system such as the policy-makers, Academic Development sectors of higher institutions, school authorities and the Department of Education, thus bringing a depth of information to bear on policy and policy- implementation processes. In addition, the study opens paths for possible further studies on ‘at risk’ students’ academic intervention experiences on a larger scale and comparative basis, for example, studies that will engage further on: identifying strengths and weaknesses of the intervention programmes for the ‘at- risk’ of academic failure; identification and implementation of new strategies to improve high school and higher institutions transition gaps; addressing the issues of increasing access; systematising relevant academic support programmes and structures for enhanced throughput and student success. In summary, this study is significant for prompting cross-cutting issues critical for consideration by South African universities implementing students ‘at-risk’ of academic failure. It is significant in understanding students’ experiences with, and of, the Academic Support Programmes in order to lessen student attrition and increase throughput and better support for students through successful completion of their studies.

1.9.Limitations of the Study

The following are the limitations of the present study that may need to be considered when forthcoming research is conducted:

- The study focused on students ‘at risk’ in the School of Education in a South African university. Future studies could include other Schools within the same university. This study could limit the generalization of the study but this was done because of time and financial considerations.
- The study only focuses on the students ‘at risk’ who are monitored and supported under the Academic Support Programme in the School of Education. Future studies may look at other intervention programmes in place to support students ‘at risk’ who may not have been identified, monitored and tracked.
- The study used interviews as the main data collection instrument and this was complemented by focus group interviews and document analysis. The use of other data collection methods could help to bring a better understanding of the issue under the microscope.

1.10. Definition of relevant terms to the study

The following terms must be clearly defined:

‘At-risk’ students: These are students who, owing to predisposing factors, are deemed to be ‘at risk’ of not completing their Higher Education. It refers to learners who experience negative life experience known to be

associated with adjustment difficulties (Fraser 2004). Frymier (1992) claims that being 'at-risk' is not only as a result of low financial status but there are multiple factors that contribute to poor performance. Ferguson (2000) define the 'at-risk' students as students who have a learning disability or students who are underprepared or those categories of students who lack skills in meeting the academic demands of post-secondary institutions. In this study, the 'at- risk' students shall be taken to mean those students in any year of study who are 'at- risk' of being unsuccessful as university students and whose academic performance is unsatisfactory and which puts them in danger of not completing their degrees in the required time.

Access: Strydom (2002) defines access to higher education and training as providing learners with the possibility of gaining access to educational institutions where high-quality education and training is provided thereby preparing them for the world of work. There are many factors that lead to a participation gap in higher institutions. Doherty-Delorme and Shaker (2001) define access as the liberty to attain and take an advantage to study in higher education institution. In this study, 'access' shall be taken to mean ensuring that a substantial amount of students from different ethnic background and diverse areas enter higher institution.

Dropout: This is a student who leaves a school or college before completing a course of study or before the end of a semester (Hawkins, 1991). Dropout can be defined as a form of withdrawal which is consequential to poor attendance, poor academic performance and unsuccessful school experience (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Godler, 2001). In this study 'dropout' shall be taken to mean students who leave higher education institutions before graduation.

Induction: According to Harvey and Drew (2006), induction is viewed as an important part of the package desirable to encourage students' retention in an effective way. Martinez (1994) maintains that the term induction needs careful definition to avoid an interpretation that simply focuses on orientation to a new place rather than being a full support programme to meet the needs of new undergraduate students. In this study 'induction' shall be taken to mean support programmes for new students during their transition stage, whereby students are orientated during their first year of study to prevent 'at- risk' status.

Intervention: According to the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993, intervention is the traditional and familiar word used for school-based efforts to improve clients' lives and to change problems (cited in Murphy & Duncan, 1997). Smith (2007) defines intervention as a way of a critical counseling or support that is accessible to students in response to identified challenging issues. In this study, 'intervention' shall be taken to

mean support programs offered by a university to assist students to cope with challenges that affect their studies leading to failure, withdrawal or expulsion.

Risk factors: Risk is secondary to a number of factors associated with negative outcomes including personal, familial or neighborhood characteristics (Greene, Conrad, Livingstone, Barton, Watkins, Blundo and Riley, 2002). Barr and Parrett (2001) divide factors that place children ‘at-risk’ into two primary areas: those related to the individual, family, and community, and those related to school. In this study ‘risk factors’ shall be taken to mean factors that compromised students’ performance which are related to access, individual, ill health, family, financial, stress, institutional, educational, teaching methods, medium of instruction factors etc.

Adversity: This describes negative life experiences and is a general collective term used by researchers to refer to the conditions to which that the ‘at- risk’ learners are exposed (Schoon, Parsons & Sacker, 2004). Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (1993) defines adversity as a state, condition, or instance of serious or continued difficulty, distress or adverse fortune. In this study, ‘adversity’ shall be taken to mean that students ‘at risk’ experience moments of distress, feel demotivated and face struggles and academic difficulties.

Resilience: This is a global idea that deals with how a child copes with stress and recovery from suffering. Resilience, like ability and adaptation as outcomes of coping, concerns positive growth, orientation toward future and hope (Murphy, 1987). Resilience is defined as that eminence in children who, though visible to major stress and hardship in their lives, do not submit to the specific school failure, substance abuse, mental health and youthful misbehavior problems they are at greater risk of experiencing (Blaustein, 2010). In this study ‘resilience’ shall be taken to mean students’ adaptation to the higher institution environment despite challenges of coping academically.

1.11. Theoretical Framework

The study falls within the discipline of Higher Education studies. Its main focus is to explore the academic intervention experiences of ‘at- risk’ students in pursuing their undergraduate studies in one of the Schools in a South African university. Four theoretical frameworks were found useful for this study, namely, Attribution Theory, Ecosystem Perspective Theory, Vygotsky's Social Development theory and Chickering’s theory of identity development.

1.11.1 Ecosystem Perspective Theory

Kramer and Tyler (1995) define Ecosystem Perspective theory as a social system that can be considered in terms of interpersonal relationships, families, groups, organizations and societies. This study uses Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory which postulates that organisms (including human beings) are interdependent and has relationships between themselves and their physical environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These relationships are seen holistically. It further maintains that every part, together with all other parts, ensures the survival of the whole.

Based on this theory, this study argues that institutions enrolling students who come from diverse backgrounds form part of the physical environment for such students. In this way, the student and institution are interdependent. Changes in one part of the system affect the rest of the system. This means that if one person in a group or organization is affected by an ordeal, for example, something leading to underperformance in the classroom, then the educator or the institution needs to take into consideration all the factors including the home environment, the student's well-being, support structure, and so on in order to tackle such problems. The ecosystem perspective is important for understanding the social challenges which influence the academic intervention challenges; it also explains the interdependence of factors that lead to unsatisfactory performance by students.

The adoption of the ecosystem framework in this study will be useful as it highlights the need to have co-operation from all role players. If there is an imbalance in the programme relating to the educator or peers' socio-cultural background, it will have an adverse effect on at-risk students. This means that for access, throughput and retention programmes to be successful, the relationships and cycles within the whole institutional context and students enrolled in the institution should be in harmony.

1.11.2 Attribution Theory

Weiner (1992) defines Theory of Attribution as perhaps the most powerful current theory with consequences for academic motivation. Weiner (1992) established a theoretical framework that has become very significant in social psychology today. Attribution Theory assumes that people try to define why people do what they do, that is, they attribute potential causes to an event or conduct.

This theory is mainly about achievement. It incorporates behavior change in the sense that it highlights the idea that learners are strongly driven by the satisfying result of being able to feel good about themselves. It includes cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory in the sense that it stresses that learners' existing self-perceptions will strongly impact the ways in which they will understand the achievement or failure of their current efforts; hence their future propensity to perform these same conducts.

There are four factors related to Attribution Theory that impact inspiration in education: ability, task difficulty, effort and luck (Weiner, 1992). These four factors can be analyzed in the following way:

- Ability is a relatively internal and stable factor over which the learner does not exercise much direct control, for example, some students are accepted into a programme and choose their specialization based on their matric score, yet fail to cope with the challenges of the modules which make them become 'at-risk'.
- Task difficulty is an external and stable factor that is largely beyond the learner's control. For example, the differences in writing style, analysis of information and performance expectations between high school and university can be overwhelming for students who are underprepared which eventually make them to be 'at risk'.
- Effort is an internal and unstable factor over which the learner can exercise a great deal of control, for example, where a student makes an effort to attend classes, meets due dates and studies, he or she is more likely to succeed whereas laziness, poor commitment and poor attendance are factors that can contribute to academic failure.
- Luck is an external and unstable factor over which the learner exercises very little control, for an example, a student can be labeled 'at risk' because by chance he or she is accepted to study at a higher institution but cannot meet the standard or the expectations of the programme.

The use of Attribution Theory in this study will provide an understanding of how 'at-risk' students explain the reasons for their underperformance and how they explain their experiences. This study will show whether or not intervention programmes assist students to connect their academic failure to its causes and how programmes assist in reducing the stress associated with uncertainty.

1.11.3 Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

Intervention support was introduced in higher institutions to supplement mainstream teaching as a student support programme. Students 'at-risk' are supported by their peer mentors with good academic standing. Vygotsky's theories highlights the vital part of social collaboration in the development of cognition (Vygotsky,

1978), as he alleged intensely that community shows a central role in the manner of "making meaning." Vygotsky (1978) state that, much significant learning by the child happens through social interaction with a skillful tutor. The tutor may show ideal conducts or deliver oral directives for the child. Vygotsky mentions this as co-operative or collective discussion. The child seeks to realize the engagements or directives provided by the tutor then adopt the information, using it to guide or control his or her own performance.

Vygotsky (1978) describes the zone of proximal development as the gap between the actual growth of a child as revealed by the way he or she is able to tackle a problem and the level such a child can attain through the supervision of an adult with the help of fellow capable peers. Vygotsky's ZPD can be perceived where learning takes place in discussions between students who have reached different levels in their individual learning and who can benefit from each other's experience and knowledge. The implication of this to the present study is that collaborative peer efforts in the learning that is encouraged in the Academic and Support programme can uplift students with unsatisfactory academic progress to a higher pedestal of academic success. The use of Vygotsky's Social development theory in this study will provide an understanding of how mentorship provides social interaction in the development of cognition of 'at- risk' students. This study will show whether or not 'at -risk' students benefitted from mentorship programme.

1.11.4 Chickering's Theory of Identity Development

Students in higher education have individualities that change in their years of study, from the point of entry to their final year (Evans 1995). During the transition period they discover independence, change in their feelings and the way they do things. While in that transition period they discover their identity. Exploring student development theory helps one to know why students sometimes present certain individualities by illustrating stages of development. Identity development theory is based on the work of Chickering (1969) who identified seven vectors (Developing competence, Managing emotions, Moving through autonomy towards interdependence, Developing mature interpersonal relationship, Establishing identity, Developing purpose and Developing integrity) that depend largely on social norms, making them dynamic since social values change through time and are different around the world. The use of Chickering's Theory of Identity Development in this study will provide an understanding of how students develop intellectual competence and what barriers of intellectual competence compromise academic performance. It will also throw light on psycho-social development as they enter into a new environment of higher education, and what the psycho-social challenges are as experienced by students when moving through autonomy towards independence. For the purpose of this

study, the emphasis will be on vector one to six as vector seven and others did not feature very strongly in participants in this study.

1.12. Research Design and Methodology

1.12.1 Research Paradigm

This study is approached from an interpretive paradigm. In an interpretive paradigm the emphasis is on experience and interpretation. This approach aims to explain the subjective reasons and meanings that underpin social actions. It is fundamentally concerned with meaning and seeks to understand social members' definition and understanding of situations (Cohen et al., 2000). Furthermore, an interpretive paradigm seeks to produce a descriptive analysis that emphasizes deep, interpretive understanding of a social phenomenon; it does not concern itself with a search for broadly- applicable laws and rules. I believe that the reality to be studied consists of people's subjective experiences of the external world. This study will thus focus on inter-subjective experiences using an interactional epistemological stance towards reality, and will rely on methodologies such as semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

1.12.2 Research approach

This study uses a qualitative case- study approach. Qualitative case studies are used for smaller-scale studies with a small sample, but aim at in-depth study of a phenomenon and thereby provide rigour in explaining the phenomenon in a deeper sense (Maree, 2007). For this reason, the case study method is relevant in this study since the design of this study has a small sample and aims at an in-depth description of the experiences of at-risk students.

Laban (2010) successfully conducted a qualitative case study in a South African public primary school and used focus- group interviews, document analysis, observations and questionnaires as data collection methods. The aim of the study was to explore the depth of foundation phase educators' insight into educational resilience as defined by their ability to recognize, understand and enhance its presence in learners. The findings suggested the following:

- Educators lacked depth in understanding of Educational Resilience
- Educators were able to identify 'at- risk' learners but failed to be responsive in their teaching methods

- Lack of parental support was a factor in the difference in educational resilience in learners with similar socioeconomic risk factors

Pizzolato (2003) conducted a qualitative case study at Michigan State University and used the interview method to collect data. The aim of the study was to discover to what point high-risk college students influenced self-authoring ways of knowing and what types of practises are linked with improvement of self- authoring ways of knowing. Findings suggest that high-risk college students frequently develop self-authoring ways of knowing before enrolment in college, especially if the students have low levels of privilege. Self-authoring ways of knowing appear to increase from students' willingness to process challenging interpersonal experiences.

1.12.3 Identifying the case study

I have a thorough understanding of the research site since it is my workplace. The cohort was identified during exam School board meetings, where each student's academic performance is analysed. According to the 2010 survey I conducted in order to understand reasons for undergraduate students' poor performance, the following factors caused students to be 'at risk': module inaccessibility, illnesses, family problems, poor attendance, lack of commitment, personal problems, financial difficulties, lack of transportation, poor time management, difficulty adapting to university life, and (to a small extent) module clashes. This study will aim to gain a deeper understanding of at-risk students' academic intervention experiences.

1.12.4 Data collection techniques

In order to obtain relevant data to explore causal factors and 'at- risk' students' experiences of academic intervention, students' documents were studied, focus- group discussions and interviews were conducted. Printed and electronic documents such as academic records and registration form can be reviewed to elicit the meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge. Both printed and electronic documents contained text (words) that had been recorded without my intervention. Students' academic records, registration forms, data from DMI were examined and interpreted to elicit meaning. Shumba (2011) successfully used document analysis to gain insight into what services were available to learners, although the study was actually on bereavement experiences of secondary school learners. She studied school timetables and analyzed Ministry

of Higher Education HIV/AIDS syllabi for teachers' colleges, secondary school Guidance and Counselling syllabi.

A focus group interview is a planned, relaxed, real dialogue among a small group of people on a specific topic (Bloor et al., 2001), for example, using focus group interviews to study students' academic intervention experiences can produce data that contains collective meanings about their academic intervention experiences. Laban (2010) successfully used focus groups to explore the insight of Foundation Phase educators in educational resilience in a South African public primary school. The focus group discussion was held with three teachers that taught Grade 3 learners.

Interviewing is a way of collecting data as well as gaining knowledge from individuals. Interviews require participants to get involved and air their views. In this study, the interviewees were able to discuss their perception and interpretation in regard to their academic intervention experiences. Thaanyane (2010) successfully used interviews to understand teachers' experiences of implementing business education in three secondary schools in Lesotho. She interviewed teachers and principals of the schools concerned.

1.13. Organisation of Thesis

Chapter 1: This chapter provides an outline of the background of the study, rationale of the study, a brief description of theoretical frameworks a literature review for this study, a brief explanation of research design and methodology used, significance of the study, focus of the study, research questions and limitations of the study

Chapter 2: This chapter provides the review of related literature and discusses the main issues related to students 'at- risk' and academic intervention experiences.

Chapter 3: This chapter discusses the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study.

Chapter 4: This chapter provides a description of the research design and methodology for this study

Chapter 5: This chapter presents findings of the study.

Chapter 6: This chapter discusses the analysis of the findings.

Chapter 7: This chapter presents recommendations and conclusions of the study.

Chapter 8: Summary, Recommendation and Conclusion

1.14. Summary

In this introductory chapter I outlined the background to the problem, explained the statement of the problem and the main research question with sub-research questions that guided the study. Furthermore, the rationale for undertaking of the study was given. An overview of the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study is also explained and key terms were defined. Finally, the research methodology was discussed. In the next chapter, I present a review of related literature.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter gave an introductory background to the study. This chapter presents a review of literature relevant to the study. In recognition of the view that no study operates in a vacuum (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006), and that there is a need to anchor any significant study on a firm foundation in the relevant literature, focus in this literature review was given to literature that bears on themes related to the research study's sub-research questions. This was done in order to ensure critical and extensive engagement with the literature relevant and appropriate to the study. The literature review was thematically informed; five themes were developed and these themes guided the search process and the text inclusion and exclusion criteria. The literature search was also historically sought and progressed organically within the remit of the search criteria. Furthermore, the review of literature was organised according to the five themes which include:

- i) Perspectives on Access, Throughput and Success interventions in Higher Education
- ii) Identification of students as “at risk” of academic failure in Higher Education
- iii) Pre-enrolment factors and becoming “at risk” of academic failure in Higher Education
- iv) Post-enrolment factors and being “at risk” of academic failure in Higher Education
- v) Academic Support Programmes as intervention for students “at risk” of academic failure in Higher Education

2.2.1 GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESS, THROUGHPUT AND SUCCESS INTERVENTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the last two decades, the global trend for higher institutions of learning has seen a growth in the physical access rate of students from divergent backgrounds (Gladieux and Swail, 2000), for instance, it was reported that across Europe, the United Kingdom and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, that students' participation over the last twenty years has recorded high improvement (Archer, 2005). Internationalisation has also meant that universities have increased access to students from diverse communities (Adams, 2006).

Studies, however also show that higher institutions are struggling to cope with increasing numbers of local students in terms of infrastructure as well as personnel. Internationalisation has made it such that higher institutions are further challenged by the influx of foreign students in terms of maintaining old-fashioned

established morals and practices (Hsieh, 2012). Perhaps, these trends continue to necessitate the need to develop academic programmes and models capable of accommodating a larger and more diverse student population. Arguably, increased access to Higher Education has also brought pressure on governments, especially in the contexts of countries where there are huge aspects of state funding channelled to Higher Education (Gladiex & Swails, 2000).

Equally identifiable are a number of challenges that higher institutions have in fashioning solutions to the multiple and contested problems that have arisen with increasing expansions of access. Such solutions have had to include planning for, and putting into place intervention support strategies, inclusion policies, strategies for students' readiness, resources and learning spaces' infrastructure improvements and upgrades, etc. (Lau, 2003). This study focuses on students' intervention support experiences and their academic challenges.

Globally, increasing rates of students' access has brought into focus the question of readiness of both higher institutions and the students themselves for the challenges of enhancing academic progress and success of students; however, it is nonetheless noted that the level of readiness differs in each country (Archer, 2005). The implications of these developments have been the increasing concerns within higher institutions with students' access, progress and throughput by way of initiating programmes and interventions designed "to equip them with knowledge and skills that will enable them to succeed in their studies" (Adams, 2006:15).

It is, however observed that increasing global access to higher education is not matched by the same level of growth in resources and infrastructure in the higher institutions (Hubball and Burt, 2004), therefore, it has been argued that in order to balance the intake with the throughput rate, extensive intervention support programmes should be established (Agar and Knopfmacher, 1995). How this act of balancing is achieved within the South African Higher Education landscape is important to study and understand. Perhaps this is particularly so in order to further develop systems that best enhance students' success.

2.2.2 SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESS, THROUGHPUT RATE AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Expanding access and ensuring throughput in South African Universities had been identified in literature as a perennial challenge (Goastellec, 2010). Since the 1930s, evidence from literature shows that the nature of access and throughput challenge has changed over time. Due to the restricting policies of the apartheid era before the

inceptions of the transformation period in Higher Education beginning 1996, there were imbalances amongst racial groups in terms of student access to higher institutions (Akojee & Nkomo 2007). According to Akojee and Nkomo (2008), the social and political agenda that accompanied the transition and transformation era of South African Universities has meant that the challenge of access has been defined within these agendas.

Defining access refers to first entry to a higher institution. Letseka and Pitsoe (2013) explain access contextually, as applied to South African Higher education, to mean the process whereby students register to study a certain degree or profession full time. Furthermore, he explains that access means that students are accepted and admitted based on certain criteria such as matric points. According to Nyamapfene and Letseka (1995) and Moll (2004), however access in higher education is challenged by under-preparedness of students who come from secondary schools to engage with teaching and learning at university level. Some of these students are recognized as coming from homes where they are first generation university students implying that their social network is limited. These categories of students may be coming into the university with little exposure to the notions of university life and experiences.

The South African Higher Education system has expanded considerably in the size of its enrolments and has reached a considerable gain (Council on Higher Education, 2010). As the CHE's State of Higher Education Report (2009) has indicated, the system has made important gains; however, it is observed that the general performance of Higher Education is not completely satisfactory (Ntakana, 2011). Boughey (2003) concurs by stating that as much as access into Higher Education has improved, epistemological access is still a concern. While gains in access to higher education are being made, the not-so-smooth transition from secondary school level to university undergraduate studies' level expectations, in the South African context, remains a challenge that compromises student success.

The deficits of apartheid still continue to reflect on the social and economic stratification of South Africa. To date, it can still be said that South Africans are divided along the line of advantaged and dis-advantaged, at least in terms of access to Higher Education. The diverse nature of the student population since the opening up of access to Higher Education (Chikte and Brand, 1996; Goduka, 1996a) attests to the diversity that defines the Higher Education space, particularly in terms of race, gender, social status, cultural lineage and levels of academic achievements. The possible implications of these are continued reenactments of the legacy of higher educational access equating to privilege as a carry-over prejudice from apartheid era; therefore, it can be said that students who enter the higher institutions come from different cultural backgrounds with different life practices, educational opportunities and a great variety of prospects, of learning needs and requirements and of

academic potentials (Fraser & Killen, 2005). McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) recognise that the focus of Higher Education Institutions continues to shift from restrictedness to expansion of access to other races and working class people and the opening of doors to accommodate a diverse community of students.

Presently, some higher institutions in South Africa offer “Access” programmes. These are programmes that are specially designed as bridging courses aimed at ensuring that students who do not meet university entry requirements, particularly those that come from disadvantaged backgrounds, are supported foundationally to start their degree studies (Waetjen, 2006; Maphosa & Mudzielwana, 2014). The South African government also gives scholarships and loans such as National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFSAS) to students from low socio-economic status backgrounds to access higher education (Wangenge-Ouma, 2010). Whereas opening up of access to higher education has translated into opportunity for students from diverse backgrounds to enter the university, it has also opened up other challenges for higher education access. The emerging issues around what has been recognized as epistemological access in South African Higher Education are particularly of concern ((Slonimsky and Shalem 2006).

As much as access to Higher Education has its own advantages for the country a number of drawbacks have been noted, especially amongst different racial groups. Students from low social and economic backgrounds are challenged by learning barriers such as lack of finances, and social network and resources, inferiority complex and fear of failing their studies (Steyn, 2009). Access has also brought the challenges of institutional readiness, government readiness, family readiness as well as students’ readiness to engage with epistemological access and processes of knowledge in higher institutions (Pandor, 2005; Akooje and Nkomo, 2007). Due to increasing physical access of students, universities are now faced with challenges such as under-preparedness of the new-entrant first-year student; for instance, the medium of instruction, which is English language (second language), serves as a barrier to some students in Africa (Nkosi, 2013). Leibowitz (2004) confirms that students are not only dealing with the challenges of adapting to a new academic environment but with challenges of using the language at university which is not their first language. These barriers impact student retention and throughput.

Approximately one in every three students enrolling at South African Universities will have dropped out by the end of their first year of study (Van Schalkwyk, 2007). Reasons for drop-out especially for first years (Lau, 2003), have been noted as; firstly those reasons beyond institutional control such as lack of finances, poor student-institution fit and career change. Secondly, other reasons within institutional control are when institutions fail to create a conducive environment for teaching and learning inside and outside the classroom. Thirdly, reasons based on the student as an individual can result in drop-out (Lau, 2003). In addition to what is

highlighted by the literature, in practice what is noted is that some students drop out because of the overwhelming new environment such as change in infrastructure and need for conformity with new and complex university environments. Moreover some are faced with the huge responsibility of decision-making and coping with life challenges. Due to the perceived impact of these reasons on the drop-out rate in South African universities, there is a call for the provision of support capacity provided by counselling and development centres to attend to students' support needs (Morrison, Brand & Cilliers, 2006).

Ntakana (2011) suggests that if a higher education system is to engage in effective learning and prevent learning breakdown, it is crucial that strategies that aim at breaking down barriers to learning be organised into the education system. Such approaches must encourage the development of an effective learning and teaching environment (Nqadala, 2007). Environment is a crucial factor that has an impact on students' progress (Schunk, 2008; Weiner, 1985, 2000). Access to tertiary education has, since 1994, methodically transformed institutions (Page, Loots & du Toit, 2005), and this is why I concur with the study conducted by The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) (2008) that reveals that there is a wide range of interacting personal and social attributes, as well as institutional practices, which impact on students' retention rates. Page, Loots and du Toit (2005) also maintain that the monitoring of progress and consolidation of the support system have become a commanding strategy at South African universities.

2.3 IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENTS AS 'AT RISK' OF ACADEMIC FAILURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Access of students from various backgrounds to higher education has been seen as a positive strategy within the South African higher education system, largely as a result of the problems of the apartheid system; however expansion of access has brought some challenges to keep and assist students in completing their degrees on time. According to Akooje and Nkomo (2007), access to higher education has been largely on participation rather than access with success.

As much as access has been increased throughput and drop-out rate remain a challenge (Letseka, 2008). To achieve success, intervention strategies have been put in place as ways of working around this expansion and access globally and locally.

Globally, there are identification, intervention, monitoring and tracking systems for students that are targeted as 'at-risk' of academic failure that have been tried and implemented (Aguilar, Lonn and Teasley 2014), including that of UKZN through its robot system (as discussed in Chapter one). The execution of these identification, tracking and monitoring processes of students targeted as 'at risk' tend to differ in terms of identification, tracking and monitoring of both first years and returning university students. Campbell and Mislev (2012) suggest that early identification may assist in targeting and retaining students, however, Thompson and Geren (2002) state that identifying students who are at risk of academic failure is not an easy job, especially at the point of entry. Then again, some studies maintain that identification often includes real examples of behaviours, such as absences or tardiness, missed assignments, mid-term grade performance, or even lack of academic goals (Cuseo, 2006). These studies observe that these kinds of behaviors may not show at the beginning of the academic year but later in their studies. What these possibly imply is that there is a need for continuous strategies regarding observation and identification with follow-up intervention. Interventions such as tracking systems, follow-ups to monitor and support students who the universities target as 'at risk' are necessary in order to improve 'at-risk' student retention and should therefore be put in place (Schuman, Walsh, Olson, & Ethridge, 1985; Rudmann, 1992; Tinto, 1993; Cuseo, 2006). This suggests that for higher institutions to increase throughput rate, early and continuous identification, tracking, monitoring, support and continuous follow-ups is a possible way forward.

A study of students considered 'at risk' among high performing institutions was conducted at the university of Hawaii Manoa in USA. This study was a case study of four institutions focusing mainly on the criteria these four intuitions used to identify, track and monitor 'at-risk' students. Findings from the study indicate that there are both differences and similarities in terms of criteria used by the different institutions to identify, track and monitor students 'at risk' (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001). Furthermore, Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida (2001) report that it is worth noting that even though strategies used to identify, track and monitor 'at-risk' students differ, all use an academic performance index which is below the expected standards (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001). Other studies also show that there are common strategies in place used to identify 'at-risk' first years such as academic performance which is below the expected standard (Kuh, 2001). The discussions above show that even though higher institutions are reported in literature to be implementing a system of identification, monitoring and support of students they target as being 'at risk' of academic failure, what seem to be lacking in the discourse is the lack of students' voice; students' voices, as opposed to institutional-oriented factors, seem to be missing and there appears to be a gap in these.

2.4 PRE-ENROLMENT FACTORS AND BECOMING ‘AT RISK OF ACADEMIC FAILURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Literature suggests that in the South African context some students perform poorly in Higher Education as a result of insufficient preparation for the academic demands of Higher Education (Ross, 2010; Coetzee & Johl, 2009; van der Merwe & de Beer, 2006). There are pre-enrolment risk factors that contribute to student performance in Higher Education. These pre-enrolment factors include: family instability, socio-economic status, under preparation for higher education, personal challenges, under-resourced schools and parenting (Barr & Parrett, 2001). According to Paxton (2007), poor performance is caused by students entering Higher Education and not having mastery over new discourses to be learnt. Other studies show that unsatisfactory performance in Higher Education is caused by first-intake student with matric results which are below the average performance (Cliff, Ramaboa & Pearce, 2007; Weideman, 2003). In my opinion, performance entry score is not the only measure of how well the student will perform in higher education. Some students who enter higher institution with good matric results also experience academic failure.

Family support in terms of financial provision at university level also plays an important role in student success (Steyn, 2009). Other studies show that parental involvement creates encouragement and a caring educational environment for student success (Downing, Kwong, Chan, Lam & Downing, 2009). In my experience, when parents take an interest and get involved in their children’s education it stimulate motivation and the urge to do well. This shows that there is a link between the microsystem and student success. This perspective is in agreement with the microsystem of Ecosystemic theory because it involves the family, classroom, neighbourhood or systems in the immediate environment in which a person is operating. In my view, as much as family support has a bigger role in terms of motivation, and caring but lack of family support may become a motivational factor. This motivational factor may result in student developing resiliency from a range of difficulties and circumstances and become intrinsically motivated and see success as the way out of difficulties.

The type of primary and secondary school is one of the main factors that impacts greatly on student success such as how well-resourced the school is, how content is taught and teaching skills, intensity of curriculum and effectiveness of students engagement in teaching and learning (Horn, Kojaku and Carroll , 2001; Martinez & Klopott, 2003; Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez, 2001).

Frymier (1992) conducted a study called the Phi Delta Kappa national study of at-risk factors. The purpose of the study was to show a scale for predicting risk among young people. He concluded with five risk factors that

emerged through the analysis and these included i) personal pain, ii) academic failure, iii) socio-economic status of the family, iv) family instability, and v) family tragedy. Another study by Rush and Vitale (1994) developed a profile for determining 'at-risk' elementary school students by using teacher surveys of 5, 250 students in Grades 1-5 within a single school district. Eight factors emerged from a factor analysis that accounted for 53% of the variance. The eight factors that formed the profile were: i) academically at-risk, ii) behavior and coping skills, iii) being socially withdrawn, iv) family income, v) parenting, (vi) language development, vii) retention, and viii) attendance (Baditoi, 2005). The findings above show that factors that influence student performance are expanding to include socio-economic status, family instability, personal factors and language development.

In South Africa, the majority of students at school level, who are second-language speakers of English, experiences challenges in the use of English as a language of instruction. Research shows that non-English speakers are not below average in cognitive ability but other barriers to learning compromise their academic success. Ushie, Emeka, Ononga, and Owolabi (2012), state that the degrees of complexity of the students' background could influence, for example, their ability to deal with academic language and engage with the content, with students from a less sophisticated background encountering more difficulty in effectively employing skills and the language of academia. Risk factors that influence academic achievement do not only emanate from an individual and cognitive ability but also from external factors.

Risk factors that influence academic achievement emanate from secondary sources, such as career choices, module choices, orientation and induction programmes. Career choices partially can impact negatively on a student's performance. According to Martinez and Munday (1998), making wrong choices before entering higher education is the main factor to withdrawal and non-completion of academic programmes. Students start to make choices about which institution, course of study before entering higher education. Some rely on friends, family, schools and community for information. McInnis et al. (2000) observed that "many students are seriously under-informed on key issues about their choice of an institution" as they rely on word of mouth, hearsay and vague impressions about institutions rather than well-founded, adequate information. According to Rickinson and Rutherford (1996), students who lack pre-information regarding career choices end up changing modules or phase specialization or move from one degree to another. Literature suggests that the problem lies with the schools in South Africa which are under-utilizing Life Orientation periods (Maree & Beck 2004). Some schools use it to cover the syllabus for other subjects and other schools do not have qualified teachers to teach Life Orientation as a subject (Chireshe, 2012). The education the students receive should make them aware about the expectations and requirements of basic personal qualities to succeed in any occupation (Maree

& Beck 2004). This does not only impact on throughput issues but also on the time factor. Literature shows that higher institutions, who are engaged in recruitment career advice roadshows of first intake, have rates of retention that are above the benchmarked levels (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). This is also maintained by Dodgson and Bolam (2002) who contend that some universities are making use of the summer and half term periods to prepare students for entry to Higher Education, with high rates of retention.

Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) conducted a study to investigate factors that influence career decisions. Results revealed that family variables of parental high expectations of children and appropriate communications within the family, as well as factors such as prestige statuses of some occupations, school curricular subjects, academic performance, teacher influences, and peer pressure had strong, positive influences on career choices. Barriers to career choices identified included finance, lack of appropriate information, poor academic performance and unsatisfactory career counselling services. The result of the study suggests the need for a better approach to career education in schools and counseling services that are adaptive to social, economic, and cultural contexts. Therefore better strategies in both schools and higher institutions should be considered to provide students with necessary information to make sensible decisions when selecting a course or area of degree study.

Due to high competition for admission spaces in Higher Education, students end up choosing any career for the sake of being admitted. Opting for a last resort career usually has negative impacts on interest and attitude which may adversely affect academic performance (Maringe, 2006). Nevertheless, academic advice before registration and informative continuous orientation and an induction programme should assist students to integrate both socially and academically (Warren, 1998). Furthermore, Warren (1998) maintains that early engagement could include the provision of timetables, use of the library, course handbooks and reading lists, support services, or materials accessed via a virtual learning environment. This implies that if provision of career guidance at secondary school level and involvement of institutions in offering career guidance before and during enrolment are made, it may result in a high retention rate of students in higher education.

2.5 POST-ENROLMENT FACTORS AND BEING ‘AT RISK’ OF ACADEMIC FAILURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Academic and non-academic factors have been linked to poor performance in higher education, according to Akbas and Kan (2007) and Xiong, Lee and Hu (2011). There is a large body of international research and theory exploring the individual, social and organisational factors which affect students’ retention in higher education (Lau, 2003; REAP, 2008). Relating to Eiselen and Geysers (2003) the following factors such as biographical variables (age, race and gender), financial and family problems, obscured goals, inefficient study skills, institutional variables, such as the behaviour of the lecturer, the number of students enrolled, student support services and poor social integration challenged retention in higher education . Some of these factors are institutional based, some are individual based and some are family and community related.

In Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, all ecological systems are interrelated and have to be considered, therefore, institutional, individual and family factors are interconnected and contribute to student performance. In my view, factors that negatively affect a student’s performance in higher education do not only emanate from one point; their origin could bring about in multi-dimensional ways such as school level, family, government and at a personal level. As causal factors are multifaceted and wide, the following factors have been defined for engagement through the literature due to their close relation to this study: academic factors, socio-cultural factors, environmental factors and personal factors.

2.5.1 Academic factors linked to poor performance in higher education

In the study shown by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) into South African Universities’ drop-out rate, the main factors highlighted by students from all races hinge on poor academic preparation for tertiary education in school and inadequate academic teaching and support in higher institutions (Rural Education Access Programme, 2008). Moreover, Yorke and Longden (2008) claim that students who are short of basic skills such as academic literacy or language competency, fail to adjust to the unfamiliar ways of learning and teaching in higher education; they struggle with aspects of the academic discipline, fail assessments and feel unable to ask staff or peers for help, which may result in their studies being compromised. There have been broad claims of poor literacy amongst learners in South African schools which compromises their success in higher education (Deller, 2010). This implies that adequate preparation for these students’ higher education should be given keen consideration (Rural Education Access Programme, 2008).

In my experience, all first year students, irrespective of race or socio-economic background, are challenged by the new environment at different levels. Some challenges could be the medium of instruction, freedom, independence, academic writing, managing their finances and management of their time. Through structured support at first year level their academic journey could be easier. A move from under-prepared students' discourse to preparedness on the part of the institution is therefore encouraged.

2.5.1.1 Language as a barrier in higher education

In South Africa, English is used as the common medium of instructions in Higher Education and is taken by pupils, parents and teachers as the key to open global doors. Language as a medium of instruction plays a vital role in communicative practices in the classroom and is crucial in understanding of subject matter (Paxton, 2007). Engelbrecht and Green, (2001) suggest that there is a disjuncture between language of instruction and mother tongue competence. Its impact on learning is quite extensive and this disjuncture is considered to be a key barrier to learning. This means that if the students are not competent in using the language which is the medium of instruction that will have negative impact in student progression. The majority of South Africans do not speak English; it is not their mother tongue. Therefore it is either a second or a third language but English is the medium of instruction both in secondary and higher education (Howie, 2003). When students enter Higher Education, they are expected to use English as the main academic language or medium of instruction. Kamwendo, Hlongwa and Mkhize (2013) note that not only South Africa but "African countries are generally and deeply dependent on non-indigenous languages as a means of instruction in the education sector", therefore a student who is not used to communicate in English from secondary school faces a challenge of language skill as a barrier in higher education and thus multiple academic difficulties (Zulu, 2004; Leibowitz, 2004). Leibowitz (2004) further states that linguistic proficiency is necessary, although it is not essentially a pre-condition for academic literacy. Other studies claim that one of the contributing factors to students' underperformance in universities in South Africa is that, for many of the students, English which is the language of instruction is not their mother tongue (Leibowitz, 2005; Niven 2005; Pretorius 2005; Van der Walt & Brink, 2006). In my experience, when students struggle to understand the medium of instruction, it makes it difficult for them to engage with academic work and ask questions in class. They feel too embarrassed to consult with their lecturers because of language. Paxton (2007) argues that the majority of first year student struggle to engage with academic discourse because they come ill-prepared to master the new discourses they are acquiring. "Interim literacies" might therefore be a more useful term when describing the writing and related practices of first-year students. Introduction of "interim literacy" is where by students are assisted in terms of

knowledge-making and communicative practices of the subject area (Paxton, 2007), for an example, a science student from an under-resourced school with no experience of a laboratory but who is good in theory might need key words for apparatus to engage with an experiment, this requires communicative practice for that specific subject area.

According to Deller (2010), the language-related work settings in which successful candidates are expected to perform in formal education have some distinctive features, which have become known collectively as academic literacy. This means that when students are challenged by academic literacy, she/he will find it difficult to engage with tasks such as assignments or essays).

Literature shows that universities are taking the necessary steps to deal with the language issue as it negatively affects the throughput. One South African university, where this study is located has started introducing one of the indigenous languages, IsiZulu, as one of the mediums of instruction as it is spoken by the majority of students (Kamwendo, Hlongwa and Mkhize, 2013). The introduction of the indigenous language, IsiZulu has resulted in some challenges. One of the challenges is highlighted by Mgqwashu (2014), who says, “as long as the education system within South Africa remains Eurocentric and insensitive to indigenous ways of being, such epistemic assumptions will not be accommodated”. In my opinion the use of indigenous language will ease up the freedom of communication in the classroom. Students will have the confidence to address their academic challenges with staff and it will liberate writing expression. However, it can be debatable because of the epistemological context which is Eurocentric. Literature argue that lack of success in HE in South Africa is generally attributable to an inferior schooling system, lack of reading and writing skills, lack of fluency and proficiency in LoLT (language of learning and teaching); and the failure of the curriculum to move beyond or circumvent Eurocentric paradigms (Chisholm, 2003; Makoe, 2006).

2.5.2 Non-academic factors linked to poor performance in Higher Education

2.5.2.1 Financial factors in relation to student’s performance

Higher education is very expensive and has been eminent worldwide. Finance is one of the factors that have a great impact in student performance in higher education (Zappala & Considine, 2001). Since higher education is very expensive it means that students with no financial support struggle to succeed, impacting negatively on their performance and other secondary factors such as food security, accommodation, transport and living expenses.

What have been found to be the contributing factors that have influenced this situation are the following factors: economic state, massification, social circumstances, and economic conditions. Teferra and Altbach (2004) claimed that all African institution of higher learning at the beginning of the twenty-first century had severe financial problems. Teferra and Altbach (2004) further suggest that academic institutions, even in well-off industrialised nations, face economic problems, but the greatness of these financial challenges is larger in Africa than anywhere else. Teferra and Altbach (2004) highlighted the causes of financial challenges, and they could be observed from:

- The burdens of growth and “massification” that have increased numbers of students to most African academic institutions and systems.
- The fiscal challenges facing many African countries that make it difficult, if not impossible, to offer enlarged subsidy for higher education.
- A transformed economic climate encouraged by multidimensional lending agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.
- The lack of ability of students to have enough money for tuition fees necessary for financial stability and in some cases inability to enforce tuition fees due to political or other pressure.
- Misallocation and poor prioritisation of available financial resources, such as the tradition of providing free or highly subsidized accommodations and food to students and maintaining a large and cumbersome non-academic personnel and infrastructure, among others. Not all of these elements are present in every African country, and financial circumstances vary, but overall, funding issues loom very large in any analysis of African higher education (p.26). For example, a highly subsidized scholarship creates a big gap in terms of students that have it all and those that barely have any. In my opinion, highly subsidized scholarship should be adjusted with the aim of assisting more students. Budlender and Woolard (2006) claim that financial problems faced by students in higher education are related to; registration fees, accommodation, meals, books as well as transport fees. Due to lack of financial resources students end suffer anxiety and stress which is an emotional matter noted in Chickering’s theory of Identity Development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Budlender and Woolard (2006) conducted a study in South Africa for National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) concurs with the above statement in that financial constraints were the main reasons contributing to students’ drop-out rate; hampering them from affording registration, tuition fees, accommodation costs, meals books and travel costs. The above statement is supported by an analysis conducted by the HSRC and the CHE into South Africa’s university drop-out rate, which showed inadequate financial resources as the main reason for students’ drop-out at the university. It further reported that this was significantly a greater factor for African and Coloured students than for White or Indian students (p.3).

Watts and Pickering (2000) points out that financial difficulties is visible particularly in students having difficulty affording registration fees, accommodation, meals, books and transport fees. According to a survey conducted for the Scottish Council for Research in Education, six out of ten students experience financial problems and four out of six experience academic challenges once they take on employment (Watts & Pickering, 2000). It can then be said that the prospects of spending four years in relative poverty and acquiring further debt undoubtedly deters some students from entering higher education. What this means is that for those audacious enough to enter, added to the difficulties of coming from non-traditional background where money is already a problem, they face greater challenge for their retention and success.

(Davies, 1999) contend that as much as finance has been known to be a main issue relating to higher education studies and student performance, however it is not a primary cause of student drop-out. Rather, issues pertaining to pedagogy, practical organisational issues and the support provided have the most noticeable impact on retention rates. Nevill and Rhodes (2004) reached a parallel conclusion using a student survey, and they asserted that debt and money worries are significant, but so are those of learning and teaching. It can be said that for those students who managed to register and have bare minimum to survive, finance to become the main barrier to access pedagogical knowledge and academic support. For example students struggle to study in an empty stomach.

In my experience, some students become 'at risk' of academic failure even though they are fully funded for their studies. Also, related to financial factors are factors such as lack of a quiet space to study, distance from campus and pressure from students' families to leave their studies in order to provide financial support, also contributed significantly to students' drop-out (Harrison & Hatt, 2012). Literature has shown these concerns regarding financial related issues that impact negatively on student's performance.

- Worry about tuition fees, accommodation fee, transport and living expenses
- Fear of dropping out due to financial constraints
- Accumulation of debts loans such as NSFAS

The CHE report (2013) pointed out finance as an obstacle to entering and succeeding in higher education. However, it is equally suggestible that while limited finance continues to require focused intervention, addressing material disadvantage is not a substitute for dealing effectively with the academic and other factors impacting on student progression. Directing all available additional resources into student financial aid, as is sometimes suggested, would not be productive. If anything will be done at all, it seems clear that the investment in NSFAS and private-sector bursary schemes need to be complemented by interventions to improve the

effectiveness of the educational process in higher education if a substantial increase in the number of graduates is to be achieved (Taylor, 2011). I can conclude that access to financial resource in higher education is one of the main factors that compromise students' success. If students go to classes hungry, it is less probable that they would concentrate, as hunger affect their cognitive skills and leads to poor performance. Weaver-Hightower (2011) conducted a research about how nutrition affects learning. His findings suggest that there is a close relation between diet and cognition and children who do not eat fruit and vegetables showed low academic performance to those who had adequate fruits and vegetables. It is necessary for those students have a basic means of life such as food to improve success rate.

2.5.2.2. Family issues related to student performance

Socialising takes place through the relations with various agents during an individual's personal lifetime and these include of the family, the peer group, the school and mass media among others (Ajila & Olutola, 2000). The family as a socialising agent plays a very important role during childhood stage and the child learn to behave in a certain manner and get to know the right and wrong doing taught by family. The learning that takes place is informal, the child begins to learn manners and they are reprimanded for wrong doing and rewarded for good behaviour. As a result, the child will have the same expectation of consequences to the outside world and academic world.

The first socialisation equips students with self-control which is the key element in university life. It also teaches the student appropriate behaviour which is the crucial element to a graduate and social skills as students are expected to work with other students in a group setting. Yorke and Longden (2008) claim that students who lack basic skills, fail to adjust to the unfamiliar approaches to learning and this may result in poor academic standing. Respecting time and other people will bring harmony to the student's dealing with academics and other students. Self-discipline, motivation and socially appropriate behaviour contribute to academic success in higher education.

As family is the first nest where the child grows and raised, it has a great influence in student's life. The school works with the family to assist the child to succeed academically. For example homework tasks, examination preparation, financial and moral support, conducive environment for learning, transportation to and from school and food security are influencing factors of success. Ajila and Olutola (2000) argued that the home has a great

influence on a one's psychological, emotional, social and economic state since the parents are the first socializing agents in an individual's life. The student at school level depends on his/ her family for moral, financial, physical and psychological support. This support brings stability and less worries in a student's life. Once the student enters higher education the absence of this immediate support becomes a challenge resulting in students taking longer to adapt to university life. Osunloye (2008) is also of the opinion that family background is the foundation for children's development because family background in terms of family structure, size, socio-economic status and educational background play important role in students' educational attainment and social integration. In my experience poor family socio-economic status may be the motivation to student's educational poverty. Education may be taken as the way to financial independence. Family setting like the number of parents in a family can have impact in a student's performance. This is supported by the study that was conducted by Salami and Alawode (2011) in Nigeria. His findings suggest that single parent's families struggle financially as compared to families with both parents which ultimately have a direct or indirect impact on student's performance.

Furthermore, OECD/ UNESCO highlights that since single parent is faced with double responsibility of being employed and raise children, maintaining supportive learning environment may be challenging. This finding further strengthens the link between having a strong family foundation and student academic performance. This is also addressed by Gutierrez et.al (2009) who state that the relation between student's performance and parent's affirmation. Gutierrez et.al (2009) further explain that it seems that students perform better and are more likely to do well when families support their students' choices and inspire them to stay on the right course. Hence, parental support plays an important role in student's academic life, the more they feel supported the more they get motivated to do well.

The right and appropriate parental involvement and support can assist to balance negative effects of adversity to some extent (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001). Physically, emotionally and financially parental involvement provides a supportive learning environment for students. Literature suggests that students whose parents cannot afford to pay university fees are pushed by circumstances to study and seek part time employment. Balancing studies and employment may result in students turning at risk of not completing their programme within the stipulated time-frame (Attinasi, 1989; London 1989; Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al. 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). The lack of financial support could lead students to struggle in higher education resulting in splitting the focus between employment and studies.

2.5.2.3 Students' living conditions and its relation to their performance

Literature suggests that student accommodation is one of the key factors that have a significant impact in students' academic performance. The Euro-student report on student housing released by the Department of Higher Education and Training (2009) emphasises that; student housing is a significant variable in students' academic life. However what controls the variables of students' academic life needs to be closely examined. Funding for such accommodation plays a key role in the selection of student housing. Adequate accommodation coupled with sufficient funding form a strong framework condition for the 'smooth operation' of studies (Taylor, 2011). Students from low socio-economic status end up looking for cheap accommodation and some are non-conducive living for learning. Students are faced with tough choices with regard to accommodation due to financial difficulties. For instance, students may have to make a choice of either remaining with their parents and studying in the university nearest to this address or choosing an alternative study location and having to work during studies to cover the expenses for rent (Schnitzer, 2008). The choice of study accommodation depends on economic background which may compromise accessibility to university resources like library which has impact on student's performance. Some students end up choosing cheaper accommodation that is far away from campus or remain with their parents because of affordability. This means that the students have to leave campus early because of transport and that ultimately impact negatively on student's performance.

In South Africa, universities are under great pressure to open the doors of learning to all and to make further education available and accessible, in line with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Higher education being thinly located across the country with higher concentrations of Higher Education Institutions in urban settings of major cities in South Africa, accessibility by all students becomes problematic, particularly in terms of living cost and student accommodation.

It can be said that the high demand for student accommodation and financial support to pay for these accommodation becomes a critical issue that is worth noting for higher learning institutions particularly when it comes to mass access. Living on campus is an important environmental factor related with increased student participation, which in turn is a cause of improved critical thinking ability, access to resources, intellectual growth and persistence to graduation (Gellin, 2003; Pascarella, Bohr, Zusman, & Inman, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pike, 1991). In my opinion, living on campus is one of the significant factors that have an impact in students' life, as much as the proximity of the residence has a significant role in their life, other issues that seem to influence academic progression such as the suitability of accommodation for learning, political affiliation, freedom and entertainment.

Worley (2011) argues that student residences are of strategic importance to students because they are ideal locations for both teaching and learning and for social and recreational life because they can create a sense of community whereby students learn to help each other and have an opportunity to engage in intellectual discussion with other students. Worley (2011) suggests that student residences have, or ought to have, four key functions: i) A pedagogical function because residences are places of teaching and learning; ii) induction and orientation and assist students easily adapt to academic culture by learning from each other, iii) accessibility to resources, and iv) a cultural function because students engage in clubs and societies which enable members to learn valuable skills and constructive use of their time. The skill can be transferable to academic demands such as dedication and time conscious and planning your daily activities social function. Having fun is key to student life which helps them with socializing skills which assist students to develop friendship with their peers and leadership function – residences are a training ground for students' leadership, this is a useful skill as students learn leadership qualities (Worley, 2011). In my view, what is concerning is that, student residences can become an inconvenience environment for learning, for an example the noise level and other distractions that prevents students from studying.

According to Taylor (2011) most student unrests were in relation to student housing issues. This assertion was based on a survey on students housing across South African universities. Taylor (2011) noted that 39 cases of students' protest over the past five years have been related to frustration with students housing facilities and maintenance across the country's institutions. Nzimande, the Minister of Education, shows his discontentment when he reveals that it was disconcerting that only 5.3% of first-year students, possibly those in serious need of accommodation were in the residences. Taylor (2011) further report that while most of the infrastructures observed during site visits were in an average condition, almost a quarter of all residential infrastructures were considered by the universities themselves to be unsatisfactorily poor. This implies that student accommodation in South African higher learning institution remains an issue that needs to be considered, particularly for first year intake to increase persistence and retention.

2.5.2.4 Personal factors in relation to student's performance

According to the CHE (2013) reports on affective factors and its influence on student performance, affective factors such as motivation and anxiety have impact on student's performance. Perhaps, what the CHE report overlooked is the fact there are lines of differences between the many higher institutions in South Africa. Higher institutions are differentiated in terms of types, status, programme offerings and locations. What this might

imply is that the affective factors that impact student performance will not be the same across these different institutions. Therefore, any intervention developed to attend to these factors has to take into cognisance the varied nature of the differentiations that obtain in the SA higher education landscape. Motivation is one of the impulsive power strength which gives some guidance to behavior of students in higher education. Akbaş and Kan (2007) describes motivation as a gross power bearing organism achieving to certain objective and being able to do essential engagements in specific situations, giving energy and a guide to behaviours causing an affective advance and with a purpose to reach a goal. It is considered that motivation, maintaining interest, willingness to make an effort and not giving up on demanding circumstances would influence the academic achievement and anxiety level of an individual (Akbaş & Kan, 2007). Similar results were shown by Yidirim's (2000) study that academic success was predicted by loneliness and anxiety.

The CHE report (2013) further shows that addressing affective or psychological factors is as equally important, and no more demanding as addressing other challenges. The report establishes that these other challenges are also barriers to success in higher education. These findings imply that as much as other factors play an important role in academic success, affective factors should not be overlooked as they contribute to student failure.

Roeser, Strobel, and Quihuis (2002) argue that students' confidence, motivation and general wellness may be compromised by their inability to cope with the educational process they find themselves in. This claim relates with CHE report in that it highlights the impact of lack of affective factors which negatively affect student's performance. CHE's proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa (2013) revealed that effective educational practices extend beyond the formal curriculum into the provision of psychological and social support, and of opportunities for students to engage actively with their institution and environment in a variety of ways. The report reveals that if the teaching and learning process itself is not effective or geared to facilitating positive learning, it cannot be compensated for by interventions that focus on addressing affective or material factors (Coetzee, 2014).

2.6 ACADEMIC SUPPORT PROGRAMMES AS INTERVENTION FOR STUDENTS ‘AT RISK’ OF ACADEMIC FAILURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In South Africa, unlike in many parts of the world, support programmes were not identified by various institutions of higher learning before 1994. However, with the birth of democracy in 1994 and the new wave of access to higher education that it heralded, support programmes began to be part of the higher institutions’ strategy to enhance access, drive throughput and target students’ success. Since the majority South African schools were disadvantaged in term of learning resources, large numbers of the students entering higher education institutions are ill-prepared to engage in terms of their access to the pedagogical knowledge of higher education. The purpose of such support programmes were designed to attend to the students’ needs that resulted from the deficits of the past education system with its injustices and inequalities and quality disparities. The programmes were also being designed to attend to the nature of increasing diversity that mass higher education and the widening of access into higher education institutions had become.

However, it had been reported that the widening of access did not adequately consider that students come from different social structures, meaning that some are more privileged than others (Shah, Goode, West & Clark, 2014). Students from under resourced schools were academically disadvantaged than students from resourced and private schools in terms of preparedness (Shah, Goode, West & Clark, 2014). Similar findings were discussed by Vakalisa, (2008) who states that students who receive poor quality schooling tend to lack the range of academic skills such as study skills and time management demanded by higher education. On the other hand, Fraser & Killen (2005) suggest that it is not only restricted to South African but is also noted in developed countries. Then again, it has been commented that widening access is being done in such ways that it was taken for granted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly Black students will adapt smoothly into campus life (Karavel, 2005). The implications of the historically uneven educational landscape resulting to the positions of advantage and disadvantage is the need to recognize that the South African student support context requires that before the student is supported academically, there are multiple key factors that also need to be considered in terms of barriers to student academic success. Included in such barriers are for an example the factors of; food security, accommodation, learning resources and student well-being (REAP, 2008). It has also been further argued that implementing intervention support is necessary due to the unequal educational opportunities, the disjuncture between higher education and social norms within communities, under-preparedness of students into higher education institutions and poverty (Shah, Goode, West & Clark, 2014).

More recently support programmes within higher education in South Africa have become institutionalized with structures and policy frameworks that bring importance and credibility to the process of student support. Student support within higher education ranges from low to highly structured academic intervention through integrated intervention system. Piaget (1997) and Vygotsky (1978) open up a number of methods that encourage collaborative learning to support students and their work. The works of these seminal authorities have been influential in the developing of various intervention strategies of students' academic support (Hornos, Hurtado, Fernandez-Sanchez, López-Martínez, Benghazi, Rodríguez-Almendros, & Abad-Grau, 2012). These intervention strategies include; mentoring, peer-tutoring and supplemental instruction (Fachikov, 2001). Adams (2006) observes that supports offered to students are targeted towards addressing academic under-preparedness and some focus on social and emotional needs. This is also observed through a survey I conducted, result of which partly motivated this study. The survey result shows that students attributed their failure not only to academic under-preparedness but also to psycho-social needs and physical needs.

Martin and Arendale (1994) explain that a number of intervention strategies such as Supplementary instruction are implemented globally in order to stem high attrition rate in higher institutions. In South Africa, these intervention strategies are being modeled to focus on those students who enter higher education and are already disadvantaged by being underprepared from a sub-standard secondary school system (Tinto, 1993). Compounding the state of their academic under preparedness also is the fact that these students are the same ones that come from economically and culturally deprived communities (Hofmeyer & Spence, 1989). Thus, several institutions, as a common practice today in South Africa, have added different intervention strategies in their curriculum aimed at addressing perceived factors that contribute to student attrition and increasing students' success rate (Masehela, Ndebele, Sikhwari & Maphosa, 2014). The nature of these intervention strategies are saturated and attempts to contain with students' flexibility in terms of time. For instance, it has been seen that some strategies are put in place for conducting during the week-ends tutorial sessions for the purposes of facilitating group sessions.

For the purpose of this study, four models of integrated support relevant to the focus of the study are discussed. These are the following intervention support programmes; peer mentoring support, emotional support, supplementary instructions, academic support programmes.

i) Peer mentoring support

According to Ntakana (2011) mentoring is defined as a vibrant, shared personal rapport in which a more knowledgeable person acts as an advice-giver, direct and acts as a role model for someone who has less experience in a particular field, the mentee. Masehela et al (2014) state that real mentoring should be more than just answering sporadic questions or providing informal help, rather, it is about an on-going relationship of learning, negotiation and facing trials. Ning & Dowling (2010) note that globally, peer assisted learning has a long tradition in higher education institutions and is one of the most important methods for promoting student learning. Ning and Dowling (2010) further confirm that peer mentoring improves academic support and assist students to take ownership of their learning. Adams (2006) note that peer mentorship is crucial because university environment is unfamiliar to first year students and some struggle to adjust. This claim is supported by Ntombela, Ogram, Zinner et al. (1994) who contend that university environment can be alienating in many ways such as operations of systems which differs from secondary school systems. They further argue that peer mentorship becomes the key aspect of orientation and induction especially to students who comes from rural areas and were taught in a foreign languages to the language used in the university.

Contextual to this study, developing an effective mentorship in the Academic Support programme under the School of Education has been an on-going process. The Academic Support programme coordinates the orientation programme of the first years and this has contributed to easy adjustment to both academic as well as campus life. This provides students with trained support for personal issues, study skills, life skills, time management, examination preparation and writing skills. Mentees are linked with mentors who are doing same specializations to support the mentees with academic challenges.

Falchikov (2001) defines four main categories of peer tutoring, namely:

- same-level peer tutoring, where participants within a cohort have equal status, e.g. in terms of their experience, skills and/or attainment levels;
- same-level peer tutoring, where unequal status is identified and introduced by the co-ordinator, e.g. students may be selected to assume the role of tutor on the basis of their higher level of skills and/or academic attainment;
- Cross-level peer tutoring, involving a single institution, where unequal status derives from existing differences between student tutors and tutees (e.g. second- or third-year undergraduates tutoring first-year students).

- cross-level peer tutoring, involving two institutions, e.g. the UK's Community Service Volunteers (CSV) 'Learning Together' programme, in which volunteer undergraduate student tutors support pupils' learning by assisting teaching staff in local schools and colleges.

Peer to peer mentoring offered by Academic Support programme under the School of Education programme where this study is located is a cross level peer tutoring between second to fourth years undergraduate and post graduate students with academically excellent performing senior students who facilitate the mentorship sessions. This claim of identifying 'suitable' senior students (third or fourth or postgraduate students) to be appointed as mentors for 'at risk' students can also be confirmed beneficial (Masehela et al. 2014).

Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh and Wilss (2008) suggested that mentoring fulfill psychosocial functions such as;

- Accessibility to mentees - can use different means of communication with mentors such as text message and other social media. This assist mentees to get timely access immediate help
- Providing mentees with support and affirmation of their worth- mentors support mentees during one on one and in group sessions. They can listen to their challenges, having someone to listen to your challenges and share experiences may provide psychological relief
- Being intentional role models- mentors model good academic behaviour which motivates their mentees
- Providing socialisation for the inculcation of professional values-Mentorship programme activities such as sports provides socialisation skills
- Delivering constructive criticism and allowing increasing collegiality-constructive criticism shown by mentors provide a space of development and provide non-threatening environment because there is mitigated power relations.

Kirkham and Ringelstein (2008) suggest that peer mentoring create a sense of community. When students interact with one another as a mentor and mentee, the interaction enhances networking which leads to formation of study groups. Peer mentoring provide a non-threatening atmosphere which is conducive to learning and provide study and learning strategies that can be applied in other areas of study. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development remains the foundation of peer assisted learning, and its many educational advantages have been explored: "more active and interactive learning, more open communication, immediate feedback, lowered anxiety and greater students' ownership of the learning material and process" (Topping, 1998:53).

It can be said that when mentors and mentees interact during mentorship sessions, there is a level of intellectual growth brought by interactions learning, discussions, questions and answers and so forth. The accessibility of mentors provides immediate and timely feedback. Thus peer to peer mentorship provides a conducive atmosphere with less anxiety and less embarrassment. When interaction between mentors and mentees takes

place, the transition process becomes easier, particularly for first year students in undergraduate programmes (Calder, 2004). Mentorship support is therefore seen in the literature as one of the key intervention strategies of the Academic and Support programme in higher institutions.

ii) Emotional support programmes

According to Hyun, Quinn, Madon, and Lustig (2006) the commonness of mental health necessities among students in higher education institution is high. Hyun et al. (2006:248) further state that nearly half of the participants (49%) in a survey study had a stress-related difficulty that significantly affected their emotional well-being and academic performance within the previous year. An additional 58% reported knowing of another graduate student in higher education who had experienced problems related to stress within the previous year. Studies by Benton (2003), have also documented that graduate program characteristics are related with students' emotional well-being and the likelihood of completing their graduate program. These characteristics include a focus on professional versus academic degrees, a high level of administrative, social and financial support provided by the department, a more democratic supervisory structure, mentoring and utilization of counselling services are positive and protective factors in the psychological transition to successful completion of graduate programs (Benton, 2003). Similarly, Toews (2005) found that graduate students had significantly higher frequency of thoughts on quitting their studies as a result of emotional instability. Financial stability has a greater impact in degree completion and is a significant contributor to the emotional well-being in university students. Steyn and Kamper (2011) also identified the primary cause of withdrawal amongst full-time students as being caused by financial difficulties. Higher socio-economic status is generally recognized to contribute positively to mental health across ages and ethnic groups. Findings from this study corroborate with those from other studies of graduate students, showing that financial problems, family issues as well as personal issues contributes significantly to emotional distress (Toews, 2005). Ajila and Olutola (2000) also speak of home as the environment that has a great influence on the child's psychological, emotional, social and economic state since the parents are the first socializing agents in an individual's life.

It can be said that, emotional and mental well-being of students are some of critical areas that needs to be attended to for success of students in higher education institutions.

iii) Supplementary instructions

Literature suggests that attrition cannot be addressed successfully by offering assistance only to those students who show either indicating weaknesses or performing poorly. According to Martin and Arendale (1993) Supplemental Instruction (SI) programme is a student academic assistance program that increases student academic performance and retention. Martin and Arendale (1993) further argue that SI did not only target high-risk students but also identified high-risk classes to avoid the remedial stigma often attached to traditional academic assistance programs. A study by Martin and Arendale (1994) shows that SI targeted traditionally difficult academic courses, particularly, those that have 30% or higher rate of D or F final course grades. Targeted classes were provided out-of-class peer-facilitated sessions that offer supplementary course information (Martin & Arendale, 1994). This implies that the programme was inclusive as it was also targeting the course, which means even students who are performing well were benefitting. The inclusion of well performing students removes the stigma from the intervention programme. Ashwin (2003) found that in United State of America students' attendance at SI sessions was positively and significantly related to academic performance. However, the challenge faced by institutions is that students who are 'at risk' are infamous for their reluctance to refer themselves for assistance until when it is too late. Whether through denial, pride, or ignorance, students who need help the most are least likely to request it; so goes the saying of the learning assistance trade (Porter, and Swing, 2006). The literature establishes that for Supplementary Instructions to have positive impact in students' performance more focus should be on class target rather than individuals and students should participate in the programme.

Martin and Arendale (1994) suggest that by integrating appropriate study skills with the review of the course content, students begin to understand how to use the learning strategies they have heard about from professors and advisors. Researchers further state that the inclusion of more capable students in intervention programmes endorses that the sessions are not remedial. That fact motivates those students who are not performing well to participate without the fear of being stigmatized. Martin and Arendale (1994) as well as Porter and Swing (2006) contends that the whole-cohort preparatory programs may not be realistic in many degree and contexts. Therefore students often who are most in need of assistance do not seek it (Porter and Swing, 2006).

What this might imply is that, there is a demand to consider alternative strategically focused, time effective and context relevant interventions is obvious. The focus of related research on this topic has covered models available to assist students 'at risk' strategies and diverse approaches from institutional perspective. Little is known about student's perspective and their academic intervention experiences to give light to the specific need and real students' challenges from the students themselves. The literature on academic intervention experiences

is limited; however studies conducted have explored the reasons of high failure rate and intervention strategies which focus on students from disadvantaged schools, disadvantaged background, student/teacher relationship, perception of textbooks and nature of assessment.

iv) Academic support for students in higher education

Literature suggests that mass access in higher education demands universities to offer academic support to enhance performance, reduce attrition rate and increase throughput and retention. According to Warren (1998) in Adams (2006) students' support programmes: a) Assist students from under-privileged backgrounds to cope with mainstream courses; b) Provide a separate, safe space for addressing their learning difficulties; c) Develop study and writing skills; and d) Clarify key concepts and elements of content. Likewise, Nqadala (2007) observes that students' support programmes break down barriers to learning and promote effective learning. What might this imply is that, student support programmes contributes towards epistemological access and assist to lessen encountered academic challenges.

Literature suggests that academic support reduce attrition rates, increase retention and throughput rates. Kirkham and Ringelstein (2008:40) claim that academic support programmes are strategies to assist students in their learning process and thereby encouraging them to remain committed to completing their higher education. Martin & Arendale (1994) cited in Kirham and Ringelstein (2008:40) recognizes students' attrition as a major concern and therefore recommended the use of students' support programmes to contest the problem. Martin and Arendale (1994) further maintain that supplementary instruction provides opportunities for students to be more involved in the learning and teaching process and increase their rate of retention and academic success.

According to Warren (1998) in Adams (2006), academic support help students acquire knowledge and develop life skills. Findings from the research conducted by Kirkham and Ringelstein (2008:40) shows that students' participation has a motivating influence on performance. Researchers such as Astin (1984), Mallette and Cabrera (1991) reported that the level of student involvement with on campus activities was positively correlated with retention at university. Students' involvement in activities outside the traditional lecture or tutorial, contributes towards acquisition of knowledge, development of relevant skills and the likelihood of remaining at university (Kirkham & Ringelstein, 2008).

2.7 Summary

This chapter engaged the literature deemed related and relevant to the focus of this research. The literature search and inclusion process was guided from thematically developed sub-headings within the chapter, and the review of literature was done using both global and contextually current discourses, debates and contestations that inform research in the broad area of this study's focus. The review of literature suggests it can be concluded that factors affecting students' academic success are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Factors that are within the students as individuals, and factors outside the students like teaching and learning processes, academic support interventions and other factors all have impact on the student academic progression and success. The next chapter discusses the theoretical framework for the study.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I reviewed relevant literature related to the present study with the purpose of presenting a framework of current knowledge that informs the focus of the study. In this chapter, I now turn my attention to the theoretical framework that underpins the study, and shows how this framework has informed the data management process with a view to explaining the findings of the study, in this respect, Vygotsky's Social Development theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Attribution theories and Chickering's theory of Identity Development are presented and discussed.

3.2 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is a description of a certain set of observed phenomenon in terms of a system of hypotheses and laws that relate these hypotheses to one another (Phakisi 2008). A theoretical framework allows unambiguous hypotheses to be made about interrelatedness in the world (Henning et al, 2004). For the purpose of this study, where the depth of 'at risk' students' experiences are being discovered, theories derived from educational psychology in the social context are significant in forming the framework for the complexity of contributing factors. Phakisi (2008) points out that a theoretical framework provides an underpinning outline which allows me to frame the research problems and examine appropriate research questions. She further states that it also serves as a guide in selecting the research design. It assists me to resist off track by digging into information that has nothing to do with the study because the framework acts as a guideline or a boundary. This chapter, therefore, presents these boundaries, as influenced by the chosen theories, in order to streamline the study within the identified research focus and the theorizing thereof.

3.2.1 Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

Intervention support was introduced in higher institutions to supplement mainstream teaching as a student support programme. Students 'at-risk' are supported by their peer mentors of good academic standing to promote social interaction. In this respect, Vygotsky's theory stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of making meaning. According to Vygotsky (1978), much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction

with a skillful tutor. The tutor may model behaviours and/or provide verbal instructions for the child. Vygotsky refers to this as co-operative or collaborative dialogue. The child seeks to understand the actions or an instruction provided by the tutor then internalizes the information, using it to guide or regulate his/her own performance.

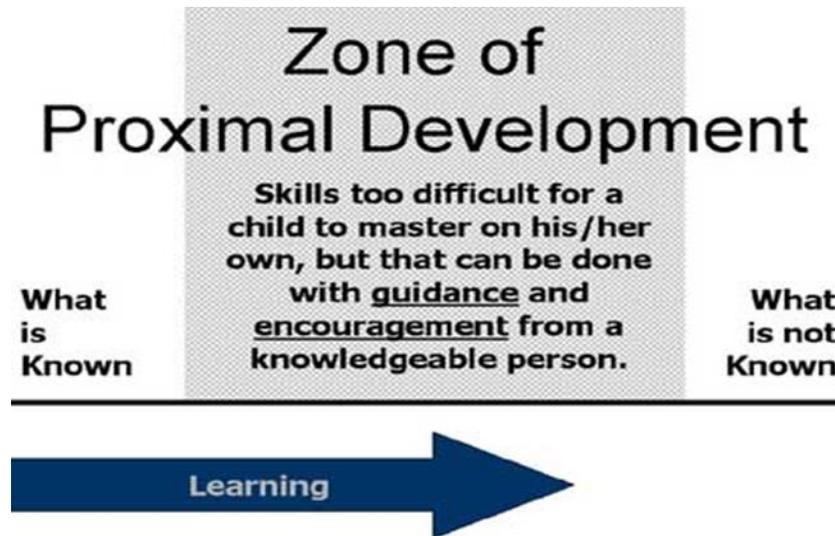


Figure: 1, which shows Zone of Proximal Development

This is an important concept that relates to the difference between what a child can achieve independently and what a child can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner. This theory is central to the mentorship program offered by the Academic Monitoring and Support programme where students come to a solution of a particular problem through one-on-one as well as group discussions during mentorship sessions. These group meetings create a social learning space. Social learning space refers to myriads of physical as well as virtual resources which support students as well as interactive learning in a formal and informal context (Land & Hannafin, 2000). Vygotsky (1978) sees the Zone of Proximal Development as the area where the most sensitive instruction or guidance which allows a child to develop personal skills should be given. This helps in developing higher mental functions.

Vygotsky also views interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies; this is parallel to what Academic Support programmes offer; whereby mentees are paired with mentors of the same specialization. He suggests that teachers should use cooperative learning exercises where less competent children develop with the help from more skillful peers - within the zone of proximal development. During the proximal development stage mentors share their experiences and insights which assist in the development of

mentees. The intervention support provides a space whereby 'at risk' students targeted interact with one other, share challenges and develop skills during workshops and in group meetings.

Vygotsky's theory emphasizes that at any given age, full cognitive development requires social interaction in terms of problem solving under adult assistance or in collaboration with more capable peers. This is shown in the mentorship programme whereby mentees seek advice regarding challenging tasks and engage in task oriented discussion with a mentor and other mentees during group discussions. Vygotsky highlights knowledge as being interpersonal before it becomes intrapersonal. In order to foster interpersonal knowledge construction, social interaction is crucial. Consequently, the presence of peer collaboration and intensive and task-oriented social interaction can be regarded as an important benefit of collaborative learning in general and of peer tutoring in particular (Duran & Monereo, 2005:179-199). Vygotsky's theory observes that the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) appears to be associated with the usefulness of collaboration among peers (Van Der Stuyf, 2002) whereby a mentee gains insight or shows improvement during the mentorship session. The ZPD is the space between the actual developmental levels as unwavering by autonomous problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult leadership or in partnership with more capable peers (Van Der Stuyf, 2002), for example, a mentee gains knowledge in terms of academic writing skills and feels capable of carrying his/her task after being involved in a mentorship session.

McLuckie and Topping (2004) notes that the ZPD relates to peer tutoring since this type of collaborative learning is characterized by specific role taking, where one partner clearly takes a direct pedagogical role. This is shown by a mentor taking a supportive academic role to assist a less experienced mentee; the tutor is considered to adopt the role of facilitator, converting the collaboration into learning opportunities (Topping, 1996:322). In this study Vygotsky's concepts of social interactions and collaborative learning formed a key lens to explore the tenants of the Academic Support programme design and how students experienced their learning within these spaces of engagement. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development in this case allows one to understand the nature of support students receive prior university and reactive approach used for the 'at-risk' students in higher education. The challenging issue is the understanding what happens during the transition process which is a gap that needs to be further explored.

3.2.2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development is useful in examining in detail the relevant social context in this study. This model serves as a framework that examines interrelated factors that contribute to

students' failure. It makes it possible in this qualitative study to analyse effectively the contributing factors, 'at risk' students' experiences and their relationship with their environment. In order to understand the context of 'at risk' students, this Ecosystemic model was used to guide and explain the literature and the results of the study since it focuses on factors in the immediate environment of the individual students' experiences and interaction, amongst other factors.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory defines five types of systems which contain roles, norms and rules that shape the development of the child. The systems include a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The microsystem is the family, classroom, neighbourhood or systems in the immediate environment in which a person is operating; in this case it refers to family, lecture rooms and university community. The mesosystem is an interaction of two microsystems, such as the connection between a child's home and school or between church and home and in this case it refers to the student's home and university. It also refers to relations between microsystems or connections between contexts. Examples are the relation of family experiences to school experiences, school experiences to church experiences, and family experiences to peer experiences. It is also possible that children, who have been rejected by their parents, may have difficulty developing positive relations with teachers (Maher, 2007:8). The exosystem is an environment in which an individual is indirectly involved in and is external to his experience, yet it affects him anyway; for example, when a student's parent's workplace requires lot of travelling and the father or the mother becomes an absent parent. The absence of the parent at home creates some challenges to parental roles and this might increase conflict with the spouse which in turn affects the children. Parental absence might affect communication at home with children or spouse and links between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role in the individual's immediate context. The macrosystem is the larger cultural context. The cultural context includes developing and industrialized countries, socio-economic status, poverty and ethnicity. It also helps explain depression in many students, with cultural values moving more towards technology oriented thinking. For example where institutions depend highly on computers to communicate with students, we tend to have little time to talk and listen to our students. This has a great impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are still in a transition stage. A student, its parent, its higher institution, and its parent's workplace are all part of a larger cultural context. Members of a cultural group share a common identity, heritage and values. The macrosystem evolves over time, because each successive generation may change this, leading to their development in a unique macrosystem. Chronosystems encompass developmental time-frames, pertaining to environmental events and transitions over the life course, family structure, socioeconomic status, living conditions as well as socio-historical circumstances (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). These environmental events and transitions could, for example, be the transition from high school to university, living

away from home etc. For the purpose of this study, the chronosystem refers to multiple physical, social and cultural dimensions that can influence student's academic progress. Swart and Pettipher (2005) explain that the way individuals perceive their circumstances influences the way they respond to their human and physical contexts. These systems helped me in explaining the factors that affect students' development and progress towards achieving their undergraduate qualification. In terms of Bronfenbrenner's theory, children are located at the centre of their nested structures, therefore they are endlessly affected in one way or another by changes that occur in the environment that surrounds them (Howard & Johnson, 2000), therefore, in understanding the factors that impact on a student's success, it was imperative to examine the various factors in the systems as they conformed to the aims of the study.

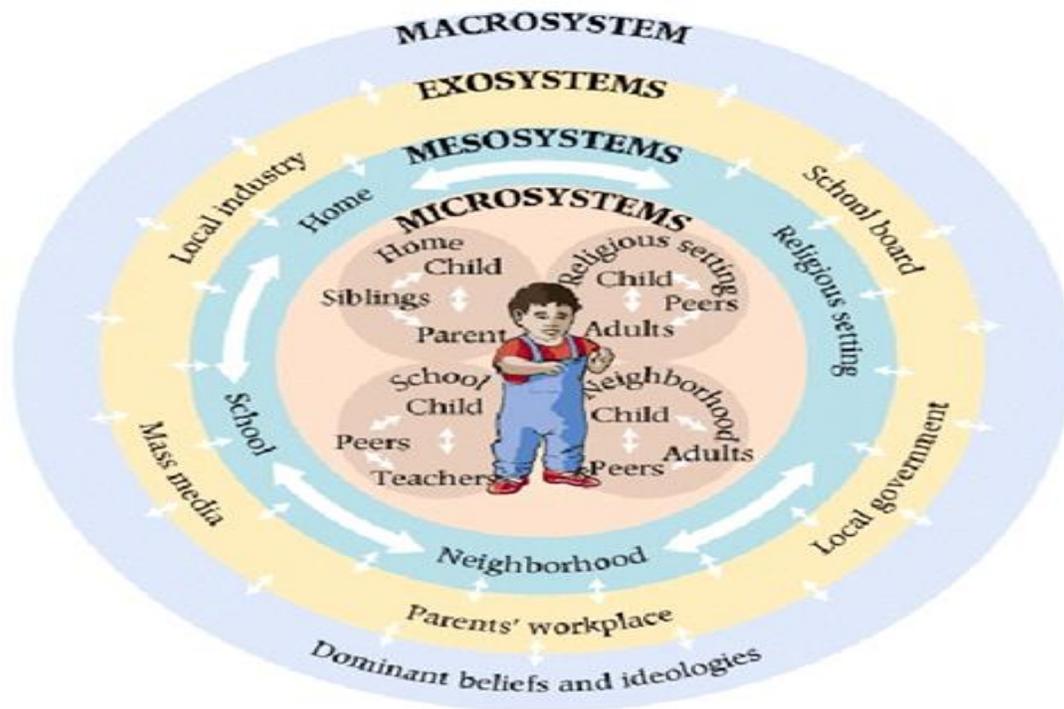


Figure 2, which shows Bronfenbrenner's ecological model

The use of Bronfenbrenner's theory in this study will provide clarity on:

- How family, economy and political structures influence the development of a child into adulthood.
- How the child development, the interaction within his/her own environment becomes more complex and how this complexity arise as the child's physical and cognitive structures grow and mature.
- How Ecological Systems Theory attempts to explain the differences in each individual's knowledge, development and competencies through the support, guidance and structure of the society in which each lives.
- How all factors are intertwined and impact the development cycle.

- How educators can use this model to assess problems in a student's life and aid in the rebalancing of a student's environment to begin to plan for necessary intervention.

In this present study, the Bronfenbrenner's theory will be used as a theoretical underpinning to fully understand the 'at-risk' students. This will be done by seeking to have a holistic understanding of factors affecting their performance from family, peer, teaching approaches, social, economic and any other related factors. As Bronfenbrenner advocated for the understanding of an individual by considering the interrelatedness of factors affecting the individual, the same will be applied to 'at-risk' students. Bronfenbrenner's (1979;2005) ecological model of child development is applicable in inspecting in detail the relevant social context of this study. The Social Ecological Model, also called the Social Ecological Perspective, is a framework that observes the multiple effects and interconnectedness of social elements in an environment. In a qualitative study, this makes it possible for numerous contexts involving people and the environment and influences on other to be effectively analysed. Due to the complexity and various factors that are involved in this study, this ecological model seems to be an appropriate lens to explain factors that lead to students becoming 'at-risk' of academic failure and how they experience intervention support. It is crucial to understand the interactions of these systems as this is the key to understanding how a child develops and what factors lead to the failure; and these factors inform the type of intervention support system needed.

3.2.3 Attribution Theory

Weiner (1992) defines Theory of Attribution as probably the most influential contemporary theory with implications for academic motivation. Weiner (1992) developed a theoretical framework that has become very influential in social psychology today and which can be applied within the school context. Attribution Theory assumes that people try to determine why people do what they do, that is, attribute possible causes to an event or behaviour. According to Weiner (1998), people have initial affective responses to the potential consequences of the intrinsic motives of the actor, which in turn influence future behaviour. The individual's own perceptions or attributions determine the amount of effort the person will engage in activities in the future. Weiner (1998), moreover, claims that individuals exert their attribution search and cognitively evaluate causal properties about the behaviours they experience. When attributions lead to positive effects and high expectancy of future success, such attributions should result in greater willingness to approach similar achievement tasks in the future than those attributions that produce negative effects and low expectancy of future success. Eventually, such affective and cognitive assessment influences future behaviour when individuals encounter similar situations.

This theory is mainly about achievement. It incorporates behaviour modification in the sense that it emphasizes the idea that learners are strongly motivated by the pleasant outcome of being able to feel good about themselves. It incorporates cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory in the sense that it emphasizes the view that learners' current self-perceptions will strongly influence the ways in which they will interpret the success or failure of their current efforts – and hence their future tendency to perform these same behaviours.

There are four factors related to Attribution Theory that influence motivation in education: ability, task difficulty, effort and luck. These four factors can be analyzed in the following way:

- Ability is a relatively internal and stable factor over which the learner does not exercise much direct control; for example some students are accepted to a programme and choose their specialization based on their matric score, yet fail to cope with the challenges of the modules and become 'at risk'.
- Task difficulty is an external and stable factor that is largely beyond the learner's control; for example, the differences in writing style, analysis of information and performance expectations between high school and university can be overwhelming for students who come underprepared, and that leads to them becoming 'at risk'.
- Effort is an internal and unstable factor over which the learner can exercise a great deal of control; for example, where a student makes an effort to attend classes, meet due dates and studies, s/he is more likely to succeed. Laziness, poor commitment and poor attendance are factors that can contribute to academic failure.
- Luck is an external and unstable factor over which the learner exercises very little control; for an example, a student can be labelled 'at risk' because by chance s/he is accepted to study at a higher education institution, but cannot meet the standard or the expectations of the programme.

There are a number of possible causal attributions stored in memory, but a relatively small part of these are noticeable in the attainment domain. The most usual ones of these causes are ability and effort; with success being linked to high levels of ability and effort, and failure being associated with low levels of ability and lack of effort (Weiner 1985). There are three causal properties of attributions identified by research: Firstly, the locus (internal/external), secondly, stability (stable/unstable) and thirdly, controllability (controllable/uncontrollable) (Weiner, 2000).

The *locus* dimension distinguishes between causes that are inside the individual and those which are on the outside, such as their ability (internal) and social factors (external); *stability* distinguishes between causes which

can change in time and those which cannot and *controllability* differentiates between causes that can be controlled and those that cannot (Haynes et al., 2009). Thus, all perceived causes (for example, abilities, luck, effort, task difficulty, mood, etc.) can be located in a tridimensional causal space (Weiner, 2000). Weiner (1985) also stresses the fact that the interpretation of specific causal inferences may vary (for example, abilities can be considered stable or unstable), but the underlying dimensions remain constant. The way students deal with these causes varies and depends on each individual; for example, two students with the same experience of the causal factor may deal with the problem differently. One could be motivation for success and one could be a weapon used to shift the blame. In order to understand the consequences of attributions Schunk (2008) observe that it can be characterized in psychological consequences (expectancies for success, self-efficacy, affect) and behavioural consequences (choice, persistence, level of effort, performance). In this study the consequences of attribution focuses on what students attribute their failure to, which may also include both psychological and behavioural consequences.

The use of Attribution Theory in this study will provide an understanding of how at-risk students (personal attribution) explain the reasons for their underperformance and how they explain their experiences. This study will show whether or not intervention programmes assist students to connect their academic failure to its causes, and how they assist in reducing the stress associated with uncertainty.

3.2.4 Chickering's Theory of Identity Development

Students in higher education have individualities that change in their years of study, from the point of entry to their final year (Evans, 1995). During the transition period they discover independence, change in their feelings and the way they do things. While in that transition period they discover their identity. Exploring student development theory helps to know why students sometimes present certain individualities by illustrating stages of development. Identity development theory is based on the work of Chickering (1969) who identified seven vectors that depend largely on social norms, making them dynamic since social values change through time, and are different around the world. Reisser (1995) who was the dean of student services at Rockland Community College revised the theory. Chickering's theory focuses primarily on identity development and is a well-known psychosocial theory of student development (Schuh, 1989). The vectors have a propensity to interrelate with each other, although they build on one another; the vectors do not follow a strict sequential order. Developing in multiple vectors allows individuals to function with greater stability and intellectual complexity (Evans, 1995).

Larrosa (2000) describes seven paths of development which contribute to the development of identity as follows:

The first vector, “Developing competence”, comprises intellectual, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence. An intellectual level of competence involves using one’s mind to build skill using analytical and comprehensive thought and the development of forming points of view in dealing with experiences of life. The physical and manual aspects involve athletic and artistic achievement, respectively, as well as an increase in self-discipline, strength and creation. Interpersonal characteristics encompass skills of listening, understanding, communicating and functioning in different relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The second vector of Chickering’s theory is “managing emotions.” This is when students can manage their emotions by recognizing them, accepting them, appropriately expressing them and being able to manage them; for an example anxiety, anger, depression, desire, guilt, shame and embarrassment do not become risky to the point where they interfere with educational proceedings. Knowing and becoming conscious of these emotions at their lowest and extreme levels and finding out ways to cope with them are key to moving through this vector (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The third vector of the developmental theory is “moving through autonomy toward interdependence.” Autonomy is dependence on others, while interdependence is dependence on one’s self. This is the level whereby a student increases his/her freedom as an individual and is able to make decisions and learn to function with relative self-sufficiency. This includes becoming free from the consistent need for comfort, affirmation, and approval from others. Individuals also see growth in problem solving abilities, initiative and self-direction. They begin to understand that they are part of a whole. They are autonomous, but interdependent on others in society. The transition from autonomy toward interdependence requires emotional and instrumental independence. Emotional independence occurs when there is a separation from a support group, such as parents, peers, and teachers. One must accept voluntarily the loss of the support group in order to strive for one’s goals in life and express own opinions. A student achieves instrumental independence once he or she is able to organize activities and learn how to solve problems on his/her own. Thus, thinking up ideas and then putting those ideas into action is instrumental independence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Developing mature interpersonal relationships is the fourth vector. This path has two important aspects: “tolerance and appreciation of differences and capacity for intimacy” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993: 48). This is the level where they develop both intercultural and interpersonal tolerance. Openness for the understanding of a person for what qualities they possess, respecting other people’s religion and /or cultural differences, instead of labelling, is an increase in tolerance. The capacity for intimacy entails moving from a significant amount of

dependence on others toward interdependence between people in one's environment and being able to have healthy intimate relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The fifth vector is "establishing identity." This vector is significant because it embraces development that occurs in the first four vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The development of identity includes the following: "(i) comfort with body and appearance, (ii) comfort with gender and sexual orientation, (iii) sense of self in a social, historical and cultural context, (iv) clarification of self-concept through roles and life-style, (v) sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, (vi) self-acceptance and self-esteem, and (vii) personal stability and integration" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993:49). Knowing one's self and the attitudes towards one's self is important in establishing identity.

"Developing purpose" is the sixth vector. Developing a purpose for why one attends- higher education varies and depends on careers goals, personal aspirations, commitments to personal interest, family lifestyle of individual and other aspects of one's own life. In this vector, an individual develops commitment to the future and becomes more competent at making and following through own decisions, even when they may be contested. Decisions must be made in order to learn to balance these career goals, personal aspirations and commitments to family and self (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The seventh vector of Chickering's theory is "developing integrity." Integrity regarding one's beliefs, values and purposes must be established. This vector consists of three stages which flow in chronological order, but are able to overlap. These stages are humanizing values, personalizing values and developing congruence. The process of humanizing values encompasses the shift from a cold, stiff value system to one which is more balanced with the interests of others matched with the interests of the self. After this is established, the individual begins to assemble a core group of personal values which are firmly held, but the beliefs of others are considered and respected. Also, thinking about others beliefs and points of view and the willingness to preserve self-respect while monitoring behavior is important in college students' development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The use of Chickering's theory of identity development in this study will provide an understanding of how students develop intellectual competence and what barriers to intellectual competence compromise academic performance. It will also highlight psycho-social development as students enter into a new environment of higher education the psycho-social challenges experienced by students when moving through autonomy towards independence.

3.3 Summary

In this chapter, theories relating to how students ‘at risk’ experienced academic support intervention were explored. In the next chapter, I present the research design that produced the data for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, theories that underpin the study were discussed. This chapter discusses research design and methodologies for the study. Here, I discuss the research paradigm, research approach, the research field, selection of participants, biographical profile of participants and data- collection methods. Furthermore, this chapter discusses data analysis, trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the study.

4.2 Research Paradigm

A paradigm influences how one sees the world; it defines one's perspective, and shapes one's understands of how things are connected (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The paradigm, 'generates new concepts and stresses constructing theoretical interpretations' (Neuman, 2006), thus the researcher does not only focus on a specific question but considers the theoretical paradigm in an intrusive and open-minded way. Student academic support has been shown through the literature as a complex field of engagement, suggesting that there are multiple perspectives that could come to bear on this phenomenon. Hence, selecting a world view regarding this phenomenon is crucial to establishing coherence in the approach to researching the phenomenon of student academic support.

The appropriate paradigm selected, will play a vital role in understanding 'at risk' students' beliefs and how they relate to the university environment from a focused perspective. On the interpretive paradigm, Abes (2009) claims that researchers involved in qualitative research, consider that persons knowingly make their own understanding of the world through experience. I therefore justify making the choice of a paradigmatic position in this study by way of considering it as an angle from where one sees the world, but positioned in theories. In this study the exploration of students 'at risk' phenomenon is done through an interpretivist paradigm. The choice of interpretivist paradigm is relevant to the study because it enabled an in-depth probing during interviews so as to get deeper insight into the phenomenon under study and other hidden issues related to challenges experienced by 'at risk' students and their experiences of academic support intervention programmes.

4.2.1 Interpretive paradigm

According to Terre Blanche and Kelly (2004), interpretive methods try to describe and interpret people's feelings and experiences in human terms rather than quantification and measurement. In this study I had attempted to describe the "at-risk" students' experiences with a view to interpreting meanings that these

participants had given to their experiences. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that whilst working from the interpretive paradigm, certain demands on the researcher are made. These demands include; “the questions the researcher asks and the interpretations he or she brings to them” (p. 22). In this research study, the research questions and analysis of data elicited from the research questions are guided by the interpretivist approach.

Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) maintain that “the degree to which a given account of the world or self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitudes of the social process” (p.49). Therefore, for the interpretivist researcher, the process of social interchange in generating knowledge takes on a significant consideration in research with regards to concepts used (Flick, Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004). The implication of this for this research study for the researcher is for the researcher, understanding and negotiating, all through the process of the research, certain awareness that research is an interactive process shaped by the researcher’s own personal bearing. Therefore in this study, I am guided by a clear understanding of the fact that, the possibilities of the societal procedures involved in the research process influence what survives as a valid account (Flick et.al. 2004). Being a practitioner researcher of aspects of my own work and practice, the recognition of this and its impact in the negotiation of my being in the research process was of valuable importance in the conduct of this study.

Therefore, in this research, the interpretivist paradigm will enable a process whereby I relied on the research “participants’ view of the situation (or phenomenon) being studied” (Creswell, 2003, p.8) while taking into cognition my own influences in terms of experiences and background as impacting on the research. However, as Pan and Tan (2011) argued that our bias and prejudices influence us to see things in certain ways and not others, it is significant to note that in the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher being part of the research process is not thus perceived as being entirely objective (Carcary, 2009).

Interpretivism as Klein and Myers (1999) explains illuminates everyday life experiences of the subject, and in a holistic perspective, it considers various variables including the context of study. Carcary (2009) contended that people cannot be assumed separate from the setting of their ongoing interactions with other people or separate from their interconnectedness with the world. In the interpretivist approach, context is therefore regarded as critical. Hence the interpretivist approach aims to grasp the diversity of subjects’ experiences (Kvale, 1996) within their context from their point of view. In this research, in concurrence with the interpretivist paradigm, qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews and participant observation are used to understand and interpret meanings, actions and situations

Furthermore, an interpretive paradigm seeks to produce descriptive analysis that emphasises deep, interpretive understanding of a social phenomenon – it does not concern itself with a search for broadly applicable laws and

rules (Cohen et al., 2000). I believe that the reality to be studied consists of people’s subjective experiences of the external world; this study will thus focus on inter-subjective experiences using an interactional epistemological stance towards reality, and will rely on methodologies such as in-depth individual interviews, focus group and document analysis.

Yom (2014) breakdown three paradigms into three aspects: First of all the majority of paradigms have Ontology: the idea about how we interpret “nature and ourselves as human beings”. Secondly, each paradigm consists of Epistemology: the idea of knowing and this different kind of knowledge is more suitable for diverse kinds of things or beings. It also indicates that knowledge a simple consideration of realism or a by-product of research methods. Thirdly, Axiology: the idea of giving reasons about the importance of what we study and the ultimate gain out of this effort for ourselves and our subject of learning.

4.2.2 Comparison between research paradigms: Basic beliefs associated with the major paradigms

Basic beliefs	Positivist/Post positivist	Interpretive	Critical theory
Ontology (nature of reality)	One reality: knowable within probability	Multiple, socially - constructed realities	Multiple realities shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender, and disability values
Epistemology (nature of knowledge; relation between the knower and would be known)	Objectivity is important : researcher manipulates and observes in a dispassionate, objective manner	Interactive link between researcher and participants; values are made explicit: created findings	Interactive link between researcher and participants; knowledge is socially and historically situated
Methodology (approach to systematic inquiry)	Quantitative (primarily); interventionist; decontextualised	Qualitative (primarily) hermeneutical; dialectical; contextual factors are described	More emphasis on qualitative (dialogic) but qualitative design could be used : contextual and historical factors are described especially as they relate to oppression

Table 2: Source: Adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994)

4.3 Research approach

This study uses a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research approach allows for smaller-scale studies using a small sample with an aim to do an in-depth study of a phenomenon (Maree, 2007). The purpose of this is to give rigour and breathe in exploring and explaining the phenomenon under study (Maree, 2007). Case study design focuses on investigating specifics regarding a particular activity or a person (Picciano, 2004). Cohen et al. (2000) maintains that “a case study provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than by simply representing them with abstract theories or principles” (p. 181). This study therefore adopts a case study design. Adopting a case study design in this research study, it was possible to use a small sample of participants that permitted an in-depth description of the “real people in real situations” experiences of ‘at-risk’ students at a School of Education in a South African higher institution. Therefore, a qualitative approach to the research study that enabled using a case study design is considered appropriate for the methodology for two main reasons:

- The study attempts to understand students’ experiences of particular intervention programmes at a particular institution, influenced by its daily practices and guided by its policy context.
- The intervention is specific to this institution; findings are not necessarily generalisable to all institutions in South Africa. However, understanding the nature of these experiences can be informing in terms of knowledge of academic support interventions and the intersections with students’ expectations and understanding of their academic support needs.

4.4 Qualitative Research approach

According to Mouton and Prozesky (2001), qualitative research tries to yield discoveries arrived at from real-world settings where the phenomenon of interest is revealed naturally; in this case, the phenomenon is experiences of ‘at- risk’ students. This paradigm was chosen for its realistic approach that seeks to understand a real-world setting of ‘at- risk’ student’s experiences and I do not endeavour to influence the phenomenon of interest (Henning, et al., 2004). A qualitative approach was expected to provide a holistic, deeper understanding of the challenges of ‘at risk’

students from one of the schools in a South African university, their experiences of academic support and the relevant context, as discussed above. A qualitative approach was also considered suitable for this study since it presents facts in a narration of words, as compared to quantitative research which presents statistical results numerically (Henning, et al., 2004).

4.4.1 Justification for a qualitative research approach for the study

Several writers have identified what they consider to be the prominent characteristics of qualitative, or naturalistic, research (Babbie and Mouton, 2001; Merriam, 2002; Leedy and Ormrod, 2010). The list that follows represents a synthesis of these authors' descriptions of qualitative research: Firstly, Qualitative research uses a holistic strategy, whereby the researcher aims to describe and understand events within the concrete natural context in which they occur. (In this study, I, described the experiences of 'at risk' students of intervention support in their natural context). Secondly, I act as the "human instrument" of data collection. In this study one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews were conducted. Thirdly, qualitative research involves with fieldwork which allows the researcher to be acquainted with the phenomenon being studied; thus should be small and practicable. (In this study, I selected a small sample of 12 participants which was manageable). Fourthly, qualitative research pays attention to human behavior as it is affected by the environment in which people live; each context has its own morals and values, thus, the holistic approach of qualitative research explains in detail how and why events occur in their context. (The decision was therefore best suited for this study because it looked at a phenomenon in totality, hence giving the researcher the ability to look at challenges that negatively affected students' performance and their experiences of intervention support). Lastly, qualitative research allows the researcher to describe the situation in rich detail and the readers can draw their conclusions from the data presented. (I also sought the opinions of colleagues in the field in order to determine whether I had suitably interpreted and drawn valid conclusions from the data). A qualitative approach permits the researcher to use the thematic approach in analyzing the data; this gives thick descriptions of the data collected and makes it easy for readers.

4.5 Research design

The research design is a researcher's plan of action that will give direction during the research, indicating who or what is involved, and where and when the study will take place (du Plooy, 2009). This study assumed a case study as it selected a group in the School of Education in a South African university (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). A research design encompasses thoughts of a research approach to be used and the best methods of collecting and analyzing data. It also connects data collection and analysis events to the research questions that are being addressed (Thaanyane, 2010). Normand (2007) suggests that the design of a study start with an identification of a topic and a paradigm. Once the topic for this study was selected as being an investigation into 'at risk' students' experiences of academic intervention implemented by the School of Education in a South African university, the choice of the paradigm was located within the interpretive, the research approach was decided as qualitative and these informed the adoption of case study as the research design appropriate for the study.

4.5.1 Justification for a case study research design

This study adopted a case study design as a research design. A case study was chosen to achieve in-depth understanding of 'at risk' students' experiences of intervention programme. To avoid generalizing, the case study design was chosen to analyse a precise situation in-depth. According to Picciano (2004), a case study can be selected to inspect, in detail a particular activity or persons. Case studies use qualitative approaches, which rely on interviews and documentation such as review of documents (Picciano 2004). For rigor and in-depth understanding of 'at risk' students' experiences, the case-study design allowed me to focus on a small-scale study (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). The advantage of the case study is that it breaks down the broad field of research into one that is easily researchable (Takuraneyi, Jenny & Maphosa, 2014). The case study allows the researcher to use thick descriptions as it takes multiple perspectives into account (Babbie and Mouton 2001). I intended to find out about the challenges faced by 'at-risk' students' experiences of academic intervention implemented by the School of Education in a South African university. The study investigated how students identified as 'at risk' of academic failure experienced academic support and what individual students identified as their challenges and academic support needs. A case study permitted me to gain insight into perception, feelings, concern about their identification and support provided. Suter (2011) explains that a case study is

about descriptions of experiences and not explanations or an analysis. This was relevant to this study because I was able to describe the experience and voices of the participants and made me aware of the real meaning on the real context.

4.6 Identifying a case study

The School of Education in one South African university was selected as the case study site. This selection was motivated by the researcher being an employee at this site. The university offers both undergraduate and postgraduate Education degrees. The Faculty offers intervention support for 'at risk' students through the Academic Support programme. The programme supports the three categories of students: Firstly, students 'at risk': the at-risk students are students whose academic performance is unsatisfactory. Secondly, transfer students: transfer students are those transferring from other faculties and presenting with poor performance records from their previous faculties. Thirdly, scholarship recipients: recipients who are 'at risk' of losing their bursaries because of unsatisfactory performance are also included in the Academic and Support program. Lastly, there are self-referral students who participate in the programme regardless of their academic standing.

This programme monitors and supports these students by offering one on one consultation, academic counselling, workshops, monitoring charts and peer- to- peer mentoring programme. The University proposed a three-colour academic standing system, to be visible on the Student Central Management System. This system alerts students (and support staff) to their need to take action. At-risk students are identified by the colour coding system that appears on students' performance records. Orange on the records indicates that the students must consult the Dean and they are advised to attend the intervention programme. This programme offers support to students but it is not compulsory for students to attend.

I have detailed understanding of the research site since it is my workplace. I used purposive sampling, which is sometimes known as non-probability sampling. Mncube, Thaanyane and Mabunda (2013) argue that purposive sampling is a useful method in selecting participants due to the fact that it often coincides with convenience sampling whereby the researcher choose a

sample that is easy to reach. To select the study group, 'at-risk' students were identified from the second year of study to the end of the qualification; therefore three groups of students were used to collect data: second years, third years and fourth years. Twelve students from the School of Education in a South African university were selected (three students from Foundation Phase, three students from Intermediate Phase, three students from the Senior Phase and students from Further Education and Training (FET)). Each interview session took about 30 minutes and interviews were conducted at the end of the second term. It was challenging to get appointments with students because they were preparing for their examinations. A tape recorder was used to record the interview sessions. Each participant was given a letter of participation for the study which included a plan of the study. I told the participants that participation was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time they wished they could withdraw without any consequences to them. Moreover, those who were willing to participate were required to sign an informed consent form and return them to me. All participants signed and were willing to participate. They were advised to see the campus-based student counsellor after the interview should they so desire.

4.7 Selection of participants for the study

As indicated earlier, the participants were selected purposively. The key selection criterion for this purposive sampling was that each of the participants' academic record reflected an orange performance status, suggesting that academic intervention was needed. Other selection criteria included selecting students across the years of study, from different geographical home backgrounds, reflecting gender diversity and racial diversity. In a qualitative study, the researcher should open a world of rich, exhaustive and tangible description of people and places so that the phenomenon can be understood (Patton, 2002). Students' files, as well as information from DMI (Data Management Information) were used to obtain students' biographical information. Students' files are official documents kept by each School's admission office. It comprises students' background from the CAO (Central Application Office) with details which indicate their socio-economic status, gender, age, home address, school address and matric results. This was verified during individual interviews. Academic records were requested from

admission office which shows student number and name, student's progress, whether the student is risk 1 or risk 2, year of study and phase specialization. Fee statements were also used to show students' funding status; whether the students reside off campus or use university residences.

Table 3: presents a detailed biographical description of the participants selected for this study.

4.8 Biographical information of participants

Participants	Gender	Race	Age	Home language	Financial Aid	Residence	Year of study	Type of school student	Family profile
PP1	F	Black	21	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	3	Rural	Orphan from a rural area, had traumatic physical experience.
PP2	F	Indian	23	English	yes	home	3	Urban	Middle class family of four, father passed away, mother is employed as a chef. All other children still at school.
PP3	F	Black	23	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	4	Rural	Both parents died, she lives with aunt and uses bursary funding to support family
PP4	M	White	22	English	No	Home	2	Urban	Both parents are working.

									Father is paying the tuition fees
PP5	F	Black	26	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	4	Rural	Both parents died; she is supporting her child and siblings with funding
PP6	M	Black	24	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	2	urban	From a single parent home. mother is supporting all 4 children
PP7	F	Black	21	IsiZulu	No	Home	1	Rural	From a middle class family, mother is a teacher and her role model.
PP8	M	Black	21	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	1	Urban	From a supportive and middle class family. Both his parents are alive and the father, whom he claimed is his role model, is a principal
PP9	F	Black	24	IsiZulu	No	Home	1	Urban	She has a very supportive mother who was paying her school fees
PP10	M	Indian	24	English	No	Home	2	Urban	Lives with both parents, father self-employed and mother stay at home
PP11	F	Black	22	IsiZulu	Yes	Univ.res	4	Rural	From a polygamous

						/off campus			family, only her father is working (as a security guard). She has 10 siblings.
PP12	F	Black	21	IsiZulu	Yes	Home	3	Urban	She lives with her two sisters, her father and her two children. PP12's mother passed away when she was doing her first year.

The biographical data above plainly show that this study comprised of 12 participants, of whom four were males and eight were females. Three racial groups were interviewed: nine were Black, two Indians and only one White. Indians and White students' native language was English and the Black students spoke IsiZulu. Five of them lived on campus, six lived at home and one lived off-campus but at a university residence. Five students come from a single a single parent home, three of them are orphans and four had both parents. Three students from each year group (1-4) were interviewed.

4.9 Methods of data collection

In order to obtain relevant data to explore 'at- risk' students' experiences of academic intervention, I used students' files, academic records, mentors' reports and information from interviews. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted.

(Henning et al, 2004) argues that the nature of a qualitative case study requires the utilisation of qualitative data-collection methods to obtain rich description of students' experiences about academic failure. Cohen et al (2007) states that methods include a range of approaches that are

used in educational research to collect data and are also used in interpretation and analysis. Maree (2007) encourages the use of more than one method of data collection to enhance the validity of the findings. To enhance the validity of the findings in this research study, I employed the following methods of data- collection techniques: document analysis, focus- group interview and personal stories obtained through semi-structured interviews. These methods of data production illuminated, through the participants’ personal accounts of their experiences of academic intervention, the factors (Attribution theory) that contributed to their “at-risk” status and how these students associate aspects of their lives and environment (ecosystemic theory) with their underperformance.

4.9.1 Table 4: Summary of methods of data collection and analysis

Research questions	Data-gathering technique	Information generated	Participants	Data analysis
a) Who are the ‘at-risk’ students by demography?	Document analysis: academic records and DMI records. Interviews with at-risk students.	Ethnic group, school background, school results, family background, funding, accommodation.	Records of students in the intervention programme. Students ‘at-risk’.	Content analysis: findings analysed for emergent issues.
b) What do individual students identify as their academic support needs?	Semi-structured interviews. Focus-group	Experiences of ‘at-risk’ students in intervention programmes.	Students ‘at risk’.	Discourse analysis: patterns of speech and themes emerging from students’ accounts of their experiences. The comprehensive view which helped identify emerging

<p>c) How do these students understand and deal with challenges to meet their academic support needs?</p> <p>d) In what way(s) are students identified and categorised as ‘at risk’ of academic failure at a School of Education in a South African university?</p> <p>e) How do students identified as ‘at risk’ of academic failure react to their identification and notification at a School of Education in a South African university?</p>	interview.	Challenges and opportunities faced by students through the intervention programme.		<p>patterns.</p> <p>Interpretive phenomenological analysis to analyse data.</p>
<p>f) How do students identified as ‘at risk’ experience academic support intervention</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews.</p> <p>Focus group</p>	<p>Reasons behind students’ experiences of intervention programmes.</p>	<p>Students ‘at - risk’.</p>	<p>Discourse analysis: the study looked at the patterns of speech and themes emerging from students’ accounts of their experiences. The</p>

programmes at a School of Education in a South African university and why?	interview.			comprehensive view helped identify emerging patterns. Interpretive phenomenological analysis will be used to analyse data.
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4.9.2 Data collection methods process

The following methods were used in this study to collect data: document analysis, individual interviews (personal stories) and focus- group interview.

4.9.2.1 Interviews

An interview is a systematic way of talking and listening to people (<http://www.who.int>) and it is also another means of collecting data from individuals through conversations. The researcher or the interviewer often uses open-ended questions. Data is collected from the interviewee. The interviewee or respondent generates the primary data for the study. Interviewing is a way of collecting data as well as a means of gaining knowledge from individuals. Maree (2007) explains that interviews allow the researcher to see the world through the eyes of the participants. Interviews help participants to be more involved by expressing their opinions. Furthermore, the interviewees are able to discuss their perception and interpretation in regards to their academic intervention experiences. That is, their subjective views.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 267) state that "... an interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself and its human rootedness is inescapable." The qualitative research interview seeks to describe the meanings of central themes through the lived experience of the participant. The key task in interviewing is to recognize the sense of what the interviewees say. Neuman (2006) believes that interviews allow the researcher to talk

naturally with participants. This gave the participants in this study an opportunity to freely express their feelings, concerns and aspirations.

- **In-depth interview**

The twelve selected participants were interviewed over a period of 3 months. I communicated telephonically with the participants to arrange appointments. It was a challenge to get convenient time because the students were attending lectures. All participants were however, willing to take part. I was not worried about my position (wearing two hats) because of the experience from the pilot study. Participants were relaxed and understood that they were interviewed purposes, I gave them a letter that explained the nature of my study, contact details of my supervisor, confidentiality and that if they did not want to participate they were free to decline. All were happy to participate and the interview was voice recorded. After the interview the participants were advised to see the campus- based student counsellor because the interview was based on their experiences of unsatisfactory performance. Past experiences give rise to lots of psychological issues hence counselling is necessary for healing purposes.

In this study, interview was the basic mode of inquiry and data-collection method in relation to academic intervention experiences of ‘at risk’ students. Interviews were face-to-face interactions, which were used to solicit information through interaction between myself and the respondent. I used a tape recorder because, according to Opie (2004) recording of the interviews makes it possible to get details and a more accurate record than note taking and it facilitates the interview process by allowing both the interviewer and interviewee to communicate more freely.

For this study, I used a semi-structured interview schedule. This semi-structured technique allowed me to uncover almost every detail pertaining to at-risk students’ experiences and it helped me to listen to their personal stories. Interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view. In this sense, “the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life; it is part of life itself and its human embeddedness is inescapable” (Cohen et al., 2000:265).

I probed further if the answers given by the respondent were not very clear. According to Cohen et al (2007), interviews increase the chance of obtaining valid information from the participants. Maree (2007) also agrees that semi-structured interviews allow for probing and clarification of answers. Interviews are comprehensive and adaptable and can be designed to address a very wide range of outcomes. Interviews range from highly- structured activities with predetermined questions and response categories to open-ended, in-depth conversations with minimal steering from the interviewer. While structured interviews will yield quantitative data, open-ended interviews require a more qualitative, descriptive approach. What qualitative analyses lack in statistical rigor, they can make up for by telling details that can provide insight and lead to improvement.

- **Strength of interview instrument**

The interview allows room for the researcher to probe further if the answer given by the respondent is not clear. The researcher can explain or rephrase the questions if respondents are unclear about the questions. I chose to use in-depth interviews because they worked well with the qualitative paradigm and are usually used for studying multifaceted and sensitive areas as the interviewer has the opportunity to prepare a respondent well before asking questions (Wellington, 2004). According to Cohen et al., (2007), interviews increase the chance of obtaining valid information from the participants. If well conducted, interviews provide in-depth data and they solicit more information without confining respondents to particular themes. They can equally assist the researcher to minimize bias because the researcher has to have aims and questions in mind and this helps in shaping the questions posed and the direction in which the discussion runs (Kumar, 2005).

- **Weaknesses of interview instrument**

Interviews can be challenging to administer. Since useful results depend on the interviewer's expertise, training is required. I have experience in conducting interviews as I have worked as a research assistant before. To avoid delays and disappointments, participants must be contacted;

they must agree to participate and appear for the interview, and, finally, the interview itself may take considerable time. Students were contacted and interviews were conducted during their non-contact periods when students were free to come for an interview. One of the major disadvantages of an interview is that the interviewers can be biased and interpret responses in the way that suit them (Kumar 2005). I avoided loaded questions when probing and was consistently objective towards the responses. I resisted providing particular frames of reference for the respondent's answers. I sustained neutrality by encouraging expression, but not helping constructing responses. I also ensured that the results of the research were recorded accurately to avoid bias.

4.9.2.2 Focus-group interview

A focus group interview is one that takes place in an individual or a group setting (Doyle, 2004). For this method I brought together a small number of students 'at risk' to discuss a topic of interest. The group size is kept deliberately small so that its members do not feel intimidated but can express opinions freely; it is made up of people with similar characteristics using a predetermined, structured sequence of questions in a focused discussion (Patton 2002). The focus-group consisted of six participants for each session as smaller groups show greater potential (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The participants were also interested in what other respondents were saying. They were allowed to ask questions or seek clarity if they do not understand the question. It was more of a discussion but I acted as a facilitator. The discussion was tape recorded and was transcribed and analysed.

Henning *et al.* (2004) argues that the nature of focus-group interviews in a qualitative case study is, as is clearly stated by Bloor *et al.* (2001), that focus groups provide access to group meanings, processes and norms. In other words, data that is generated by using focus-group interview techniques provide rich information regarding what the group believes in, what processes lead them to construct meanings associated with a given issue, and what norms are held by the group, for example, when using focus-group interviews to study students' academic intervention experiences; the data produced contains collective meanings about their academic intervention

experiences. As a result of this, a detailed account by students reflected their shared experiences for this study.

The focus group interview enabled each participant to express their experiences on academic intervention and at the same time I was able to get the common views of all participants on the subject. Patton (2002) suggests that focus groups work best when people in the group are strangers to each other; the dynamics are quite different and more complex. In this study it was not possible to select strangers because it was a purposeful sampling of students 'at risk' in the Faculty of Education who attended the intervention programme but they only met during workshop and mentorship sessions. These students were enrolled for different modules and attended different lectures and they were in different year groups so they were not friends. Before I started the interview I gave all participants a letter that gave an overview of the study and its purpose. I further assured them about the anonymity of their identity and they all signed participant's letters. Some participants expressed the view that they were used to taking part in research and they respected research work because they knew that one could not conduct research in the institution without permission from the gatekeepers.

Each question was written on small cards and distributed to all participants so that they could refer to the question. The focus -group interview took place in a mentorship room, which is normally used by all students 'at- risk' who attend intervention programmes they were therefore familiar with the environment. The setting was informal as they had some drinks during the interview and sat in a semi-circle which made the participants feel comfortable during the discussion session. Birmingham (2003) sees focus-group as a moderated informal discussion where a person's ideas bounce off another's therefore generating a chain response. The tape recorder was placed in an appropriate place so the discussion could be recorded. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) suggest that a focus- group interview encourages people to sit together to talk about challenges that they face, either individually or collectively.

Ten questions were selected from the main research qualitative open-ended questions. The use of the same question in both individual and focus group interview questions increased the trustworthiness of the study because it allowed me to cross check the responses. It was

interesting to see other participants asked follow-up questions from others that contributed to the richness of the data.

- **Benefits/strengths of focus-group discussions**

Information can be obtained more quickly because only one interview must be scheduled for a group, rather than one for each person. The group setting allows individuals to use the ideas of others as clues to fully elaborate on their own views. Furthermore, a group discussion produces data and insights that would be less accessible without interaction found in a group setting; listening to others' verbalized experiences stimulates memories, ideas and experiences in participants. This is also known as the group effect where group members engage in "a kind of 'chaining' or 'cascading' effect; talk links to, or tumbles out of the topics and expressions preceding it" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182).

- **Problems experienced through the focus- group interview**

The researcher has less control over a group than a one-on-one interview, and thus time can be lost on issues irrelevant to the topic. The data is tough to analyze because the talking is in reaction to the comments of other group members. In this study, I went over the recording several times to capture responses accurately. It is difficult to arrange focus group meetings with participants from different cohort group because of the time table clashes. In this case, the common non-contact period was used which allowed all focus participants to be available. During focus groups discussions, it was difficult to probe the answers in-depth as can be done in one on one interview due to time constraints. I allowed other members to comment on the issue if there were any added opinions. This type of interview, does however allow participants to listen to each other's responses which can lead to bias in their own responses. To deal with this situation, participants were given equal chances to respond and were encouraged to comment on responses from others.

4.9.2.3 Documents

Documents are secondary data which fall into two categories: personal as well as official documents. (Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003) suggest that documents are constant sources of records. Students' admission files, academic records and information from DMI were used as official documents and sources of data. This was used to strengthen the data obtained through interviews and the focus group.

4.9.2.3.1 Document analysis

Several writers have identified what they consider to be the advantages of using document analysis (Bowen, 2009; McMillan and Schumacher, 2006; Creswell 2008). The list that follows represents a synthesis of these advantages of document analysis: Firstly, documents comprise text (words) and images that are recorded without the researcher's influence and have no influence of biasness. Secondly, documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate a case of text providing context, if one might turn a phrase. Bearing witness to past events, documents provide background information as well as historical insight. Thirdly, documents provide supplementary research data. Information and insights derived from documents can be valuable additions to a knowledge base. Fourth, documents provide a means of tracking change and development. Where various drafts of a particular document are accessible, the researcher can compare them to identify the changes. Lastly, documents can be analysed as a way to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources. Sociologists, in particular, typically use document analysis to verify their findings (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000). If the documented evidence is contradictory rather than corroboratory, the researcher is expected to investigate further. When there is convergence of information from different sources, readers of the research report usually have greater confidence in the trustworthiness (credibility) of the findings. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic material. Corbin and Strauss (2008) state that document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge. Document analysis yields data-excerpts, quotations, or entire passages that are then organized into major themes, categories and case examples, specifically through content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003). Document analysis was the easiest part of

collecting data because I did most of the work at home. Students' academic records were used to analyse students' performance, identify which modules they had failed, and obtain factual information about students' academic standing and what 'at risk' category they were in. Assessment (tests and exams) occur in a conventional setting, so the test performance data that was used has strong validity. DMI (Department of Management Information) and student's file records were used to obtain concrete data about each student's personal details, such as gender, race, matric score, and address and so on.

- **Disadvantages experienced during the document analysis process.**

Document analysis is not always advantageous. A number of limitations in-built in documents are described: Firstly, insufficient detail: documents are produced for some purpose other than research; they are treated as independent of a research agenda. Consequently, they usually do not provide sufficient detail to answer a research question. I used different documents such as files, DMI data academic records in order to get all necessary information. Secondly, it has low retrievability: documentation is sometimes not retrievable. In this study, all relevant documents were collected to prevent bias. Documents were not used alone but with other methods for triangulation. According to Robson, (2002), documents are used to compliment other methods of data collection; for example, focus group discussion and interviews used in this study.

4.10 Data analysis process

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003:76) state that qualitative analysis is aimed at capturing the richness and describing the unique complexities of data. De Vos (2005) states that qualitative data analysis "is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data (p.334)". This entails transforming the data by reducing the amount of raw data, sifting out relevant information, identifying significant patterns and developing a framework for conveying the essence of what is revealed in the data (Creswell, 2003; Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003). Students' statements were analysed to identify categories of responses and were then further reduced to significant patterns that contributed to the understanding of 'at risk' students' experiences of academic support from the intervention programme.

Content analysis was used to analyze documents such as students' records and DMI records. Qualitative research assumes that every document has been produced or read in a different context, and therefore needs different subjective opinions (Turner, 2010). This difference can be identified in terms of context of production, purpose intended, actual audience and researcher's reasons for selecting, analyzing and interpreting the text. Once the documents had been validated, they were analyzed for emergent issues, constructs and theories.

Discourse analysis was used to analyze the flow of communication during the interviews. This method looks at the patterns of speech, such as how people talk about a particular subject, what metaphors they use, how they take turns in conversation and so on. Components or fragments of ideas were identified to develop a theme. Themes that emerged from students' experiences were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience. The comprehensive views lead to the identification of emerging patterns.

In this study the process of qualitative data analysis involved gathering information from interviews and documents to understand the experiences of students attending intervention programmes.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis was employed to examine the interview transcripts, focus group interviews and documents. This analysis assisted in recognizing recurrent themes across transcripts. Rule and John (2011) state that themes are repeated and have characteristic features of participants' interpretations, characterizing particular observations and/or know-how, which the researcher sees as applicable to the research question. There are the steps that I followed in identifying common themes. Creswell (1998) in De Vos et al. (2005) recommends the following steps: identifying statements that relate to the topic, grouping statements into meaning units, seeking divergent perspectives and constructing a composite. Colaizzi (1978) in Goulding (2005) suggests seven steps:

- (1) The first task of the researcher is to read the participants' narratives, to acquire a feeling for their ideas in order to understand them fully.
- (2) The next step ("extracting significant statements") requires the researcher to identify key words and sentences relating to the phenomenon under study.

- (3) The researcher then attempts to formulate meanings for each of these significant statements.
- (4) This process is repeated across participants' stories and recurrent meaningful themes are clustered. These may be validated by returning to the informants to check interpretation.
- (5) After this the researcher should be able to integrate the resulting themes into a rich description of the phenomenon under study.
- (6) The next step is to reduce these themes to an essential structure that offers an explanation of the behaviour.
- (7) Finally, the researcher may return to the participants to conduct further interviews or elicit their opinions on the analysis in order to cross check interpretation.

I followed the steps given above, however this was not done in this particular order. The process needed a lot of reflexivity and bracketing since I had to draw out substances and structure of the phenomena. This meant “acknowledging the assumptions, naming them and setting them aside so as not to impede their view of the phenomenon or...to colour their (phenomenologists) perception” (Rule & John: 2011:pg 98). The approach used was to take each case, describe it and identify inductively the themes that emerged from the data. Inductive analysis implies that patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis (Rule & John, 2011).

Identifying themes is not an easy task. In support, Ryan and Bernard (2003) claim that recognizing themes is never basically a matter of finding something lying within the data remnant in a rock. It always involves the researcher making choices about what to include and what to discard and how to interpret participants' words”. This exercise required a lot of repetition by going through each script over and over in order to come up with some semblance of themes. Peer assistance was also sought to verify whether or not these were meaningful.

Chapter 5 will show where individual cases were identified and analysed to establish the themes emerging from the individual cases and across cases. Main findings were then drawn out and these fed into the discussion of findings.

4.11 Issues of quality in research

4.11.1 Trustworthiness

In qualitative studies, researchers talk of trustworthiness; this is viewed as validity and reliability in quantitative studies. According to Merriam (2002), validity is described as the ability of an instrument to provide data which is true to what is being studied. Measures to test credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability ensure trustworthiness in a qualitative study (Strauss & Myburgh 2001).

Validity and reliability are research concepts that originate in quantitative research methodology. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) suggest that “validity represents how well a variable measures on the retest”. Validity is important in descriptive studies, while reliability impacts more on experimental studies. Since this research will not be experimental, the emphasis will not be on issue of reliability but rather the issue of validity.

Qualitative researchers argue for a dissimilar set of standards necessary to judge qualitative research, namely “trustworthiness.” Vithal (2003) suggests several forms to test validity: triangulation which consists of multiple data sources, methods and theoretical schemes; construct validity when operating in a context of theory-building; face validity in the process of recycling description, analysis and findings through at least some participants in the study (Vithal, 2003). Healy and Perry (2000) propose four criteria that should be considered by qualitative researchers in pursuit of a trustworthy study: confirmability (in preference to objectivity), dependability (in preference to reliability), transferability (in preference to external validity and generalisability) and credibility (in preference to validity).

4.11.2 Credibility

To establish credibility I used triangulation, early familiarization, purposeful sampling, negative-case analysis, thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny and member checks whereby the participants were contacted telephonically to check the accuracy of the data and my reflection methods. Credibility, which refers to the confidence one can have in the truth of the findings, can be established by various methods. One is triangulation, which in this case were in-depth

individual interviews, focus groups and document analysis. The study also made use of different data gathering techniques for triangulation of results and audiotaped the data. Triangulation is a means of validation, which allows me to be more certain of the study. The pilot testing was done to check for any faulty methodologies, as elaborated on later (under pilot study) to ensure the credibility of the findings. Before the collection of data I attended intervention workshops which contributed to early familiarization of the participants to learn how they participated and benefited from these intervention workshops. My attendance was intentional because I wanted to establish a relationship of trust. Purposeful sampling of a range of diversity groups in terms of gender, race, year of study and phase specialization was employed to increase credibility.

4.11.3 Transferability

According to Trochim (2006) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability denotes the point to which the results of qualitative research can be generalised or transmitted to other contexts or settings using different participants. Transferability deals with the generality of the discoveries from the target sample to the population (Rossouw, 2003). According to Strauss and Myburgh (2001), qualitative research aims to realize a phenomenon in a particular context and it is therefore possible to transfer findings to similar contexts this means, in principle, that other researchers can apply the findings of the study to their own. To provide for transferability, this study presented findings with “thick” descriptions of the phenomena of both practical and theoretical context.

4.11.4 Dependability

Dependability refers to the steadiness of the findings over time and employment of overlapping methods. In this study, this was achieved by using overlapping methods such as focus- group and individual interviews. According to Rossouw (2003), and Strauss and Myburgh (2001) dependability denotes the fact that the findings stay dependable, and the same conclusions are drawn during triangulation, even if other researchers were to repeat the raw data.

4.11.5 Confirmability

Trochim (2006) recommends that researchers should document the techniques followed by checking and rechecking the data throughout the study. In this study, I followed this technique by checking the data from documents, in-depth interviews and focus- group interviews several times to ensure confirmability. Strauss and Myburgh (2001) confirm that there should be a sequence of proof supporting the logic of the researcher's argument.

4.12 Limitations of the study

The following are the limitation of the present study that needs to be considered when forthcoming research was to be conducted.

- The study focused on students 'at risk' in one of the Schools in a South African university. Future study could include other Schools and in other South African universities. This delimitation limited the generalisation of the study but this was done because of time and financial considerations.
- The study only focused on the students 'at risk' who were monitored and supported under the Academic Monitoring and Support programme in one particular School. Future studies may look at other intervention programmes in place to support students 'at risk'.
- The study used interviews as the main data-collection instrument and this was complemented by a focus-group interview and document analysis. The use of other data collection methods could help to bring better understanding of the issue at hand.

4.13 Ethical consideration

I was accountable for protecting the rights, confidentiality, and welfare of the participants. The higher degree committee of the university, where the study was located, scrutinized the proposal for the study and issued an ethical clearance certificate which permitted the commencement of the study. In this part, I discussed how the following issues were dealt with: participation, confidentiality, withdrawal, informed consent, anonymity and research permission.

- Voluntary participation and withdrawal

The participants were informed that their participation would neither be revealed in report writing, nor will be revealed in the dissemination of the findings of the research. Should there be a need to make specific comments about their participation and information they provide in the research dissemination process, permission would be sought from them prior to such disclosure.

I explained to them that their participation was voluntary and they can withdraw from this research process at any time that they feel they should. They were assured that their responses would be treated confidentially and pseudonyms would be used instead of the actual names. Furthermore, the recording of the interviews on cassettes would be demagnetized and incinerated. This would be done after five years of keeping the data in the School of Education and Development in a secure room under the custody of my supervisor.

- Harm

I told the participants that they could consult with a university based Student Counsellor, should they feel the need after the interview.

- Research permission

Permission to conduct research in the School was sought from and granted by the gate keepers where the study was located. I started to collect data after receiving a letter from the registrar who granted the permission to conduct the study.

4.14 Pilot study

The participants for the pilot study comprised a quarter of the real sample. Polit et al. (2013) state that a pilot study can refer to the so-called feasibility studies which are small scale versions, or trial run, done in preparation for the major study. According to Van Tejligen and Hundley (2002), a pilot study could recognize parts where a research study may go pear-shaped,

procedures may be not monitored or whether proposed methods or instruments are unsuitable. I conducted the pilot study because of the following reasons:

- It gave me advanced warning about where the main research could fail or succeed
- Ascertained whether the timing and the instrument were appropriate.
- Tested whether my position/status would bring biasness during the interview session.
- Tested whether participants would understand the language used
- Assessed whether the research procedure would be realistic and workable
- Identified logistical problems which might occur using proposed technical tools such as tape recorder and voice recorder
- Tested research questions and whether they would give clear findings pertaining the main research

After the pilot study i had to make some changes, for example rephrasing the questions and putting them in chronological order, adjusting time scheduled, making and rescheduling the appointments with the participants as some of them cancelled the scheduled time but was happy to reset another appointment. I have learnt that as a researcher, I have to familiarize myself with the technical issues relating to using voice recorder and tape recorder. This practice gave me confidence when using these technical devices (tape and voice recorder) for the real study. It also helped me to rephrase items in the data- gathering tools to improve on clarity and avoid ambiguity in some of the items. The document analysis checklist was also tested before full-scale implementation. The pilot test was also meant to test the interview schedule as well as the interviewing methods chosen. One student preferred to write some of her responses and explained that she expressed herself better when writing.

4.15 Table 5: Improvements on data collection instruments after pilot study

Type of Instrument	Nature of Correction Effected	Item before Pilot Testing	Item Improvement after Pilot testing
Interview Schedule: students ‘at risk’	Word choice	compromised	allowed
	Type of questioning	Probe	More probing
	Number of interview questions	21	17
	Time allocated	25 minutes	30 minutes
	Interview method	Voice recorder	Voice recorder
Document Analysis Instrument	Type of documents	Students’ academic records Students’ files DMI information	Improved by adding information from mentors and survey documents from the ‘at-risk’ cohort.
Focus group interview schedule	Interview method	Voice recorder	Voice recorder and tape recorder
	Time allocated	30 minutes	40 minutes
	Appointment	Monday 4.30pm	Thursday – forum period

4.16 Summary

In this chapter I discussed research design and methodologies related to this study. In the next chapter I will be discussing the data presentation, analysis and interpretation. It is at this level that the main findings will be discussed using qualitative data gathered through interviews, focus group and document analysis.

CHAPTER FIVE

SECTION ONE: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 outlined the methodological approach adopted for this research. The purpose of this chapter is to present and analyse the qualitative data gathered through one-on-one interviews, the focus-group interview and document analysis. Data presented addressed the following main and sub-research questions stated below.

Main Research Question

What are the ‘at risk’ students’ experiences of academic intervention support implemented by the School of Education in a South African university?

Sub Research Question

- i) What do individual students identify as their challenges and academic support needs?
- ii) How do these students understand and deal with their identified challenges and academic support need?
- iii) In what way(s) are students identified and categorised as ‘at risk’ of academic failure at a School of Education in a South African university?
- iv) How do students identified as ‘at risk’ of academic failure react to their identification and notification at a School of Education in a South African university?
- v) How do students identified as ‘at risk’ experience academic support intervention programmes at a School of Education in a South African university and why?

The presentation of data is intended to address the research questions. The data was generated from Bachelor of Education students identified as being at risk of academic failure and who were purposefully selected from the second year of study to the end of the qualification; therefore, three groups of students were used to collect data: second years, third years and fourth years. These comprised twelve students from the School of Education (three students from the

Foundation Phase, three students from the Intermediate Phase, three students from the Senior Phase and three students from the FET).

Each interview session took about 30 minutes in duration and interviews were conducted at the end of the second term. A tape recorder was used to record the interview sessions. Each participant was given a letter of participation for the study which included a plan of the study. I explained that participation was voluntary, and that they were free to object; those who were willing to participate were required to have an informed consent form signed and returned to me. All participants signed and were willing to participate. They were advised to see the campus-based student counsellor after the interview should they feel the need.

5.2 Biographical information of participants

For this study, twelve students were purposefully selected from the list of students being categorized as ‘at risk’. Within the Academic and Support programme, these students are being monitored and being given academic and other support to enable them to pass their modules. A summary of the biographical information of these students is presented in a table below. Pseudonyms are used to protect students’ real names.

Participants	Gender	Race	Age	Home language	Financial Aid	Residence	Year of study	Type of school student attended
ZODWA	F	Black	21	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	3	Rural
SABRINA	F	Indian	23	English	yes	Home	3	Urban
ZODUMO	F	Black	23	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	4	Rural
LUKE	M	White	22	English	No	Home	2	Urban
NOZIZWE	F	Black	26	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	4	Rural
MUSA	M	Black	24	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	2	Urban
MBALI	F	Black	21	IsiZulu	No	Home	3	Rural
SIZWE	M	Black	21	IsiZulu	Yes	Campus	1	Urban

KHETHIWE	F	Black	24	IsiZulu	Yes	Off campus res	2	Urban
NEVAN	M	Indian	24	English	No	Home	2	Urban
NOKUTHU LA	F	Black	22	IsiZulu	Yes	Univ. res/off campus	4	Rural
BUSISIWE	F	Black	21	IsiZulu	Yes	Home	3	Urban

Table 6: Biographical information of students

5.3 BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON EACH PARTICIPANT

This section serves to introduce the participants by providing summaries of their background information. Student background issues have been known to influence students' performances within higher education in South Africa (Letseka & Malie, 2008). The presentation of the students' background is to enable the findings of this study to be mapped against the backdrop of the contextual realities that have been known to impact on students' throughput, and within which the student support programmes have been conceptualised, enacted and reflected upon. Furthermore, the knowledge about each participant will assist in understanding what factors contributed to their failure and how the intervention programme offered by the School of Education, known as the Academic and Support Programme contributed towards the development of these students.

The biographical information of participants is divided into eight aspects. These include age, gender, place of home, language spoken, residence whilst studying, parental information, funding to support their studies and additional information that may be relevant for consideration in the analysis process. According to the conceptual framework developed by Ramrathan (2013), on exploring student throughput within higher education, the biographical factors indicated above have been identified as having some influence on student throughput. Hence, an understanding of the participants' background needs to be explored within a framework that

links the complex nature of student throughput as experienced and as expressed in the students' own words. Some students receive funding from NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme).

The following section is an introduction to each participant.

5.3.1 Zodwa

Zodwa is a 21- year- old student from a rural area (which includes schools that are outside the cities and towns which are disadvantaged in terms of resources) who lives with her grandparents because both her parents passed away. She attended her primary and secondary school in a disadvantaged area (i.e. an area with low-socio economic background and poor infrastructure). She was a Learner Representative Council (LRC) member and was performing very well as a high school learner. Teaching was her first career choice. She chose this career path because she *“just loves working with kids”*. She was funded by NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) but lost the funding owing to her poor academic performance in her first year of study. She now borrows books and other materials from friends. According to her, she realised in the second semester of her first year of study at the university that her performance was unsatisfactory. She has been given ‘at risk’ status. Having a very good record from her previous school experience, she felt shocked by this status.

5.3.2 Sabrina

Sabrina comes from a middle class family of four; her father passed away and her mother is employed as a chef. She is the eldest in the family; two siblings are still at school and her sister is doing her first year Bachelor's degree in the same institution. Her home language is English and she attended her primary and secondary education in an urban area. She wanted to do nursing as her first career choice but *“mom insisted that I take teaching”*. She was awarded a scholarship due to her performance in grade twelve. This scholarship does not only assist her studies but also provides funds for her sister who does not have any scholarship funding.

Sabrina realised that she was one of the students identified as student ‘at- risk’ on the university website for the release of results (which is also known as the Student Central System). She failed Physics and later realized that she had enrolled for the wrong subject specialisation. She subsequently changed her curriculum to specialize in another subject.

5.3.3 Zodumo

Zodumo is a 23-year-old female from a rural area who lives with her aunt, who supported her during her primary and secondary education since both her parents passed away. Her home language is IsiZulu. She received financial aid from (NSFAS) in her first year of study and stays on campus. She uses part of this funding to support her family. She completed both her primary and secondary schooling in a disadvantaged area.

5.3.4 Luke

Luke is a 22-year-old male who lives at home. He attended a secondary school in an urban area (i.e. a geographical area constituting a city or town). His home language is English. He has a stammer and was home-schooled for some of his Foundation Phase education. His university fees are funded by his parents, who are both working; he drives from home to university. He took a gap year (a period, typically an academic year, taken by a student as a break between school and university or college education) and registered at the university a year after his matric.

5.3.5. Nozizwe

Nozizwe is a 26-year-old single female from a rural area. She comes from a very big family with one sister and four brothers. She claimed that her performance was affected by a number of traumatic events that she had experienced. She lost her mother who was working as a domestic worker. In the same year she fell pregnant, but lost her child in 2008. She fell pregnant again soon after the child passed away. Her home language is IsiZulu. She completed her primary and

secondary education in disadvantaged schools. She lives on campus and her studies are funded by NSFAS. She uses part of this funding to support her siblings and the child.

5.3.6 Musa

Musa is a 24-year-old male from a township (which is an urban living area situated on the periphery of towns and cities; some of these areas are underdeveloped). He is a first born child from a single parent home, with two younger brothers and two younger sisters. He was brought up by his mother because his father passed away. His home language is isiZulu and he completed his primary and secondary education in under-resourced schools in the township. He matriculated in 2005 and joined the army. During his army training, he registered to study medicine but dropped out of university because of challenges. He is now studying towards a teaching degree.

5.3.7 Mbali

Mbali is a 21-year-old female from a rural area. She attended both primary and secondary schools in a rural area. Her mother is a teacher and the only breadwinner in the family. She commutes by taxis from home to campus because she lives very far from campus. She did not get funding and her studies are sponsored by her mother. Her home language is IsiZulu. Her father is alive but he lives with someone else. Her siblings live at home with her and her mother.

5.3.8 Sizwe

Sizwe is a 22-year-old male from an urban area. Both his parents are alive and the father is a principal in one of the secondary schools near where they live. He stays at a campus residence and was awarded a scholarship in his first year of study because of his performance in Grade 12. His primary school was a multi-racial school and he moved to a public school in a township for his secondary education. His home language is isiZulu.

5.3.9 Khethiwe

Khethiwe is a 24-year-old female from a township. Her home language is IsiZulu. Her studies are funded by the National Skills Fund, which is a one- year, non-renewable funding scheme. She has a very supportive mother who was paying her school fees. She stays at an off-campus residence and commutes by bus to campus. She completed both her primary and secondary education in a disadvantaged area.

5.3.10 Nevan

Nevan is a 24-year-old Indian male who lives with his mother and father. His home language is English. His father was a teacher but resigned after 20 years of teaching; now the father is self-employed and his mother is a housewife. He grew up in an urban area at his grandparents' house and later relocated to stay with his family in a city. He completed both his primary and secondary education in an urban area. He moved to different schools because of the family business. He did not get funding for his studies and depends on part-time jobs to pay his university fees and living expenses.

5.3.11 Nokuthula

Nokuthula is a 22-year-old female student from a rural area. She is from a polygamous family, with one father and two mothers. Her biological mother is the first wife and has 11 children; she is the fourth child of her mother's children. Nokuthula's father is the only breadwinner and is employed as a security guard. She completed both her primary and secondary education in a disadvantaged area. She has a hearing disability which was not disclosed at the point of entry into university. Her disability was established through an interview held by the academic coordinator as part of the process to support students identified as 'at risk' by the university. She was awarded a disability bursary in her second year of study. She started using hearing aids a year after registering at the university. She stays in on off-campus residence and commutes by bus to campus.

5.3.12 Busisiwe

Busisiwe is a 21-years-old female student from a township. She lives with her two sisters, her father and her two children. Her mother passed away when she was doing her first year of study at the university. After the death of her mother she moved from a campus residence to live with her siblings and her two children at home. She completed both her primary and secondary schooling in predominantly Indian schools. Her studies are funded by NSFAS.

- **Concluding comments on the participants' biographies**

From the biographies of these participants, it seems that no one biographical factor is common for these participants labelled as 'at risk'. Some participants have both parents and live at home, yet they have been identified as 'at risk' while others do not have a parent and are also identified as 'at risk' students. Some come from rural communities and others come from an urban environment. Some are fluent in English (the medium of instruction at the case-study institution) while others speak more fluently in their mother tongue. This diversity of biographical factors, including that of the diverse school education backgrounds, suggests that correlations between biographical factors and students 'at risk' are not necessarily clear, however, it may well be that specific biographical factors do impact on students' progress within higher education.

While these biographical factors are important to keep in mind when exploring issues of academic support, they should not be the main focus as these issues may confuse the emphasis of the study.

5.4 Exploring factors as reported by students that has led them to be identified as 'at risk'

This section dealing with data presentation, analysis and discussion is divided into two sections. Section 1 will explore the factors, as reported by the students that have resulted in their being identified as 'at risk'. In Section 2, Academic Support as an intervention programme is explored to get a sense of how students experienced this intervention and what was beneficial in Academic Support that contributed to positive student support in their academic studies.

An interpretive phenomenological approach was used to analyse the interview transcripts, focus group interviews and documents. This analysis assisted me in identifying repeated themes across transcripts. 'Repeated themes' means the connected ideas and, thoughts, images, and accounts shared (Moustakas, 1994). According to Smith (2003) interpretative phenomenological analysis explores, in detail, how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, particular experiences and events. Rule and John (2011) concur by saying that Themes are recurring and unique structures of participants' accounts, characterizing particular insights and/or experiences, which I see as relevant to the research question.

Identifying themes was not easy. Literature suggests that recognising themes is never simply a matter of discovering something lying within the data fossil in a rock (Ryan & Bernard 2003). Identifying themes involves decision-making, selecting what is relevant to the questions and removing information that does not answer research questions and interpretation of the words. I had to go over the transcript several times to get the meaning of the words. Independent coder assistance was also sought to verify whether these were meaningful or not.

These are the steps that the researcher followed in identifying common themes. Creswell (1998) in De Vos et al. (2005) recommends the following steps: identifying statements that relate to the topic, grouping statements into meaningful units, seeking divergent perspectives and constructing a composite. Colaizzi (1978) in Goulding (2005) suggests seven steps:

- (1) The first task of the researcher is to read the participants' narrative, to acquire a feeling for their ideas in order to understand them fully.
- (2) The next step, "extracting significant statements," requires the researcher to identify key words and sentences relating to the phenomenon under study.
- (3) The researcher then attempts to formulate meanings for each of these significant statements.
- (4) This process is repeated across participants' stories and recurrent meaningful themes that are clustered. These may be validated by returning to the informants to check interpretation.
- (5) After this the researcher should be able to integrate the resulting themes into a rich description of the phenomenon under study.

- (6) The next step is to reduce these themes to an essential structure that offers an explanation of the behaviour.
- (7) Finally, the researcher may return to the participants to conduct further interviews or elicit their opinions on the analysis in order to cross-check interpretation.

In my analysis, I did not use these steps religiously; instead this sequence was used as a guide. The process needed connecting of points across participant's experiences as well as in transcripts from documents, one-on one interviews and focus group interview. This needed "acknowledging the assumptions, naming them and setting them aside so as not to impede their view of the phenomenon or to colour their (phenomenologists') perception" (Rule & John, 2011, p 98). The method I used was to take one case, describe it and identify inductively the themes that emerged from the data. Inductive analysis implies that patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge from the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis (Rule & John, 2011). Sub-themes were identified from the data and discussed under each of the main theme as two tables below illustrate.

TABLE 7: THEMES DRAWN FROM DESCRIPTIONS

CATEGORY (MAIN THEME)	RESPONSES OF PARTICIPANTS
<p>THEME 1: FACTORS BEYOND THE IMMEDIATE EDUCATION THAT PARTICIPANTS RECEIVE WHICH ULTIMATELY COMPROMISE THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS 'AT RISK'.</p>	
<p>Academic challenge</p>	<p>Mother tongue versus language of instruction, under-preparedness for higher education, teacher paternalism</p>
<p>Social challenge</p>	<p>Lack of family support</p>

THEME 2: CONTRIBUTING FACTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION WHICH COMPROMISE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENT 'AT RISK'.	
Environmental challenges	Lack of time management skills, incorrect registration and selection of wrong modules, choice of wrong career path, difficulty in adjusting to university academic life, lack of responsibility
Personal challenges	Presence of disability, pregnancy, bad relationships, lack of budgeting skills
Academic challenges	Non interactive and non-stimulating teaching methods, poor academic literacy, lack of support from lectures
Social challenges	Poverty, family instability
Lack of resources for students	Living environment not conducive to learning, lack of access to university resources, lack of reliable transport, working while studying

Table number seven above shows themes and sub-themes stemming from the data gathered from interviews and focus group interviews depicting challenges faced by 'at risk' undergraduate students in a South African university. I will now give an interpretation of the main themes of Section 1

Section 1:

5.4.1 FACTORS BEYOND THE IMMEDIATE EDUCATION THAT PARTICIPANTS RECEIVE WHICH ULTIMATELY COMPROMISE THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS ‘AT-RISK’

Theme 1 which shows challenges that compromised ‘at risk’ students’ performance prior to higher education, as presented and interpreted below

5.4.1.1 Academic challenges faced prior the university

This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to how the students ‘at risk’ refer to academic challenges prior to their university admission that have impacted on their ability to succeed in higher education studies. The three academic challenges prior to the university studies identified by at-risk students included language barriers, under-preparedness and teacher paternalism. These prior academic challenges have been categorised under the theme of academic challenges prior to university studies because the participants have identified them as contextual issues related to academic challenges during their school education and which they have identified as reasons for them not coping with higher education studies. Furthermore, using the lens and theoretical constructions of Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958), it was appropriate to categorise these issues under academic challenges prior to participants’ university experience.

- **Mother tongue versus language of instruction**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to the shift in emphasis from learning in a second language with language support, to learning through a second language without language support as a contributing factor to their poor performance. Teachers used code switching, that is, they switched to the mother tongue when deemed necessary. Participants reiterated that at university, this translation support was lacking and the participants find it difficult to learn, understand and be assessed in the content of what is being taught within their modules. This finding confirms what was observed by Engelbrecht & Green, (2001) who postulate that there is a disjuncture between language of instruction and mother

tongue competence, its impact on learning is quite extensive and this disjuncture is considered to be a key barrier to learning. Some students had coped with the use of English content because it was translated into their native language by teachers at school.

Some of the students who experienced language as a barrier to learning indicated the following: *“In high school, we were taught in isiZulu as a language. Other subjects were translated and the problem we faced at the university is that we have to write essays in English when we don’t understand what to say or how to answer questions. At the university it is very difficult to translate what lecturers are saying, especially English-speaking lecturers who teach in a very difficult language; you have to listen very carefully.”* **Zodumo.**

“What is a problem here at the university for me is the language; I am not used to be taught in English, my teachers were teaching in IsiZulu. They will try and translate and explain in IsiZulu. To prepare for exams we used and practised previous question papers.” **Khethiwe.**

“Even when I was attending Saturday classes in Grade 12, the classes were taught by Indian teachers and I struggled to understand what they were saying. When you try and practise talking English at school they will laugh at you, saying all those things that you think you are better than them.” **Nokuthula**

As one may notice from the above, some experiences show that at school level some students were supported by teachers who used the indigenous language to make knowledge accessible to them but doing so did not prepare these students for higher education. Teachers were helping them at school by translating the content of the subject into their native language but they only realised when they entered university that the medium of instruction was English and that there was no translation support by university lecturers.

From this data set, it seems that two important factors contributed to students’ low performance within higher education. The first relates to the context of support that these students were accustomed to during their schooling. While school education was through the medium of

English, despite their mother tongue being other than English, their teachers provided the language translation support to enable them to learn, understand and be assessed through the language of English. At university, this translation support was absent and these students then had an additional burden of becoming acclimatized to a new learning environment that privileged English. The second factor relates to how the environment is supportive of individual responses to the language barrier. While students had the opportunity of developing their communicative skills in English whilst at school, their ability to take up this opportunity was compromised by others within their school environment. Some learners made them feel uncomfortable when they attempted to develop and use their English language communicative skills, hence these students would rather not practise English language communication so as not to be embarrassed by their peers. These students then come into a university that privileges English as the medium of instruction; their English language communication is not sufficiently competent to support the independent study required of higher education in the language of instruction different from their mother tongue.

The realisation that the shift in emphasis from learning in a second language with language support, to learning through a second language without language support, as experienced by these participants motivated me to explore how and why these participants laid the blame on academic challenges prior to the university experience for their underperformance. Using Attribution Theory, therefore allows one to understand why these students lay blame on or attribute their underperformance to factors outside of themselves. The use of Attribution Theory in this study illustrates that any communication event or behaviour can be viewed as an effect that has some cause, and the cause one attributes (e.g., being taught in IsiZulu and being unable to practise speaking English as a medium of instruction) is likely to influence the meaning of the action and how one might respond to it. Furthermore, the participants blamed (or attributed their underperformance to) their school environment for not providing them the scope to prepare for higher education within the English medium of instruction. As much as they perceived being taught in their native language as support in high school, the discontinuation of support at higher education institution made it difficult for them to easily adjust to academic challenges at the university. They shifted the blame to their teachers who did not prepare them for higher education challenges. Literature confirms this finding by suggesting that lack of success in HE in

South Africa is generally attributable to an inferior schooling system, lack of reading and writing skills, lack of fluency and proficiency in LoLT (language of learning and teaching); and the failure of the curriculum to move beyond or circumvent Eurocentric paradigms (Chisholm, 2003; Makoe, 2006).

This language barrier makes it difficult for students to adapt to university life; it delays the smooth transition from high school life to university life. It is one of the factors contributing to the students' failure.

- **Under-preparedness for higher education**

Participants of this study indicated that their under-preparedness for higher education fell within their school experiences, suggesting that their school environment did not prepare them for continuing education within higher education institutions.

This finding is consistent with literature that suggests that students experience an academic culture shock as they make the transition from school to higher education (Quinn et al, 2002). Most students who entered higher learning institutions lacked study skills, knowledge application, writing skills, time management, and the capacity to undertake self-directed learning. Some of the students who experienced under-preparedness as a barrier to learning indicated that

“Teachers were not reliable especially in Grade 8 and 9; sometimes they taught us and sometimes not. Some will sit in the staffroom and some will be absent for many days and my performance at school was not very good because of the challenges that we had. Some of the subjects we will spend some weeks without a teacher.” **Khethiwe**

“I struggled to learn technology because it is a practical subject but we didn't do any practical at school because of shortage of resources and we didn't have electricity, no laboratories and computers.” **Nokuthula**

The same student also mentioned the following: *“We only had electricity in our school when I was doing Grade 12. I was doing Physical Science and Biology but we never did any practical at*

high school. I did pass these subjects because I attended Saturday classes in another school; in our school we didn't have Saturday classes.” **Nokuthula**

From this data set, it seems that two important school environmental factors contributed to students' low performance within higher education. The first relates to the context of school teachers who missed their lesson periods so learners ended up not being taught regularly. As one may notice from the above, the school environment contributed to under-preparedness for higher education; some lessons were not regularly taught at school level and that impacted negatively on the participant's readiness for higher learning. In this case some students blamed their schools for being unreliable, for the lack of teaching and learning, for absenteeism from the classroom, for shifting the responsibility to pupils and for under-preparing them for higher learning; these factors all relate to the process of learning rather than the content of learning. The process of learning then becomes an obstacle to the preparation of school learners for higher education studies. The second relates to the lack of resources at school which resulted in practical and science-related subjects being taught in theory only; that consequently impacted on their lack of readiness for higher education; they struggled to adjust to university life because they lacked practical skills and the required basic skills to learn science and technology subjects. Participants did not have the practical knowledge which they needed to apply in higher education. In this situation, the content of learning had been compromised by the lack of resources.

The use of Attribution Theory as a theoretical lens to understand the factors that impact on student academic progress within higher education is helpful in highlighting how students shift the blame of their failure to external factors (such as the instability of the schools, including teacher absenteeism) over which the learner does not exercise much direct control (Weiner, 1985). Attribution Theory also reflects the way students shifted the blame to internal factors that compromised their performance such as lack of practical skills and skills to apply the knowledge to practical subjects such as science and technology.

In short, students shifted their failure from internal factors, such as their lack of practical skills, to school environmental factors that compromised their performance, such as process and content of learning within the school environment. Within Attribution Theory (as supported by

Weiner, 1985), associating blame for their poor performance to an external object, like lack of teaching commitment and lack of basic practical subject skills, can be seen as an explanation for why the school environment contributed to student's under-preparedness for higher education. These students laid the blame on the process and content of learning within the school environment for their poor academic performance, thus implying that they did not have any direct control over it. Some students experienced the use of technology for practicals, such as computers and laboratories, for the first time at university. (See Nokuthula's interview statement above). Therefore environmental factors and its association with their academic performance seem crucial and significant for the students who felt under-prepared for higher education.

- **Teacher paternalism**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to their dependency on teachers, their lack of maturity regarding academic issues prior to university. During their school study programme, their teachers were constantly reminding them about their responsibilities, and some sort of punishment was used to force them to study. At university, students are often dependent and participants find it difficult to suddenly become responsible. They have no one to rely on and have no one who keeps motivating them to study. They are expected to be mature and independent students. The issue of teacher paternalism is highlighted by Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001), who state that the quality of academic experience and student-teacher dependency affects almost every aspect of success in postsecondary education. According to these researchers, school curriculum and teaching as well as learning style have a direct impact on a student's readiness for higher education.

One of the students who experienced teacher paternalism indicated that:

“School was very different because you were given a task to do and if you did not do it you will be punished; this was forcing us to study, and then when I came to university no one was asking me to study.” **Nozizwe**

“University is different because no one is behind you and pushes you which mean that you need to grow up very quickly. If you don't hand in your assignment it's your own story.” **Sabrina**

“Things are different at university, I enjoyed my secondary school compared to university, and I was supported by my family and teachers unlike here where no one is behind you.”

*“At school teachers were supportive and they explained things clearly compared to university; I think my teachers assisted me more.”***Mbali**

The school did not prepare me for university at all because I struggled to write an assignment when I came to university. Lecturers don't spoon feed you like teachers do at school.” **Busisiwe**

Analysis of this set of data indicates that two important factors have contributed to students' low performance within higher education. The first factor relates to the context of spoon-feeding that these students were accustomed to during their school study programme. This is an age-old problem; learners are not taught to work independently and engage with self-directed learning. It surfaces in higher learning institutions where students are expected to work independently. Teachers at school level cushion and support students by helping them in class, giving reminders, and helping with homework and revision for exams. Some students appreciated the fact that teachers from secondary school gave them their support; however this support also contributed to their lack of maturity. Students explained that they were spoon-fed by teachers and that created the culture of teacher dependency. From students' responses it shows that the transition from dependent pupil to independent student delayed adaptation to the higher education institution. Some students became 'at risk' because no one provided extrinsic motivation to submit assignments on time they were not “pushed” to study; they had to grow up very quickly and develop intrinsic motivation to pass their studies. (See Sabrina's statement above). There is a dichotomy regarding attribution; students attribute their failure to institutional factors; there is discontinuity of support from the university; the higher education institution expects students to cope intellectually with academic demands and be competent. The second factor relates to punishment as a tool used to encourage them to study. For some, performance depended on harsh consequences such as punishment which is contrary to an institution of higher learning where students are taken as adults who are responsible and mature. When students entered a higher learning institution the motivation to succeed has to shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.

To summarize, students shift the blame regarding their underperformance to external factors such as spoon-feeding from teachers, student-teacher dependency and punishment used as a tool to encourage them to study. This shift confirms Attribution Theory. When students receive results which show underperformance, they start to perceive the causes of the negative outcome and they tend to attribute their failure to environmental factors for negative outcome (Schunk, 2008; Weiner, 1985, 2000). Learners often respond positively to negative extrinsic motivation such as punishment at school. In this study, participants perceived teacher dependency as support in secondary school, the discontinuation of this support at higher education made it difficult for them to adjust to academic challenges at the university. They shifted the blame to the school environment and teachers who did not prepare them to adapt easily to university life. These experiences show that students first attribute their failure to higher learning institutions that they perceive to be unsupportive and uncaring then the blame shifts from higher learning institutions to lack of preparedness at secondary school level.

5.4.1.2 The impact of the family before higher education

This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to how the students ‘at risk’ refer to family circumstances impacted on and that compromised their ability to succeed in higher education studies. Participants identified lack of family support as a contributing factor to their under- performance. To understand how students explain and attribute their academic failure to circumstances, the lens and theoretical constructions of Attribution Theory and Ecological System Theory were used to categorise this issue under family impact as these participants referred to them as reasons that contributed to their underperformance in higher education studies.

- **Lack of family support**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to the lack of family support as a contributing factor to their underperformance. This finding is also consistent

with assertions by Howard and Johnson (2000) who suggest that children are located in the centre of their nested structures and are therefore endlessly affected in one way or another by changes and challenges that occur in the environment that surrounds them, such as family. Parental encouragement plays an important role in students' achievements and behaviours under certain environmental conditions and challenges. Some of the students who experienced lack of parental support indicated it this way:

“I was the first girl to attend school from my house because my father believed that educating a woman is a waste of time because girls will finish school and go and get married so my father did not support me at all. My mother who worked as a domestic worker was the one who encouraged me but it was really tough.” **Nozizwe**

“There was no one at home to support with my homework because no one is educated at home, even if I had homework no one will help me or support me. I lived very far from school; it was difficult for me to stay after school and work there because I had to walk a long distance back home.” **Khethiwe**

“My schooling life was not o.k, because I kept changing schools which was daunting for me because of family business. My grandmother gave us a business to run but things didn't go well that is why we had to move around a lot. Academic-wise I have never been a shining student from high school. I finished matric and started working in the family business. I got used to earning money then when I became a student it was then a huge issue not having any income. I don't think my parents realised how unsettling it was to change schools all the time.” **Nevan**

In this set of data three important factors contributed to students' low performance within higher education. The first relates to the context of parents and their beliefs in gender roles and believing educating a girl is a waste rather than empowerment. Some parents still believe that since women leave home after getting married it means that they are wasting their money in educating them, because they will eventually not receive benefits and they see education as an investment for themselves rather than supporting the future of their daughters. This lack of motivation and financial support from parents affected student's performance. The second one

relates to the absence of academic support from family. Some of these students mentioned that they had to travel long distances to school and they struggled with homework as no one was able to assist them at home. This lack of academic support compromised their studies. The third one refers to the context of instability within the family which had an impact on school adaptation, and affected continuity and stability, especially as the participant mentioned that he was not one of the more successful students. As much as the family relocating was business-related and intended to benefit the family, it nonetheless impacted on the students' performance. This finding is in line with Ecological System Theory as it suggests that parental and family support from the system that is closest to the child and changes in one part of the system, such as family instability, both affect the rest of the system and result in family instability (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). The participant stated that the change of residence resulted in change of school which affected his schooling programme. The student therefore was attributing failure to his parents who contributed to the daunting and unsettling experience of changing schools. He perceived himself as not being a good student; this might have resulted in his lack of adaptability to new areas as the participant changed schools consequently which negatively impacted on his learning. Changing schools may well have contributed to his thinking he was not a good student.

One student attributed failure to environmental issues such as walking a long distance to and from the school which prevented her from staying and doing homework at school since she was not getting help at home as no one is educated. Drawing on Ecological Systems Theory, this study argues that schools enrolling learners who come from diverse remote areas form part of the physical environment for such students. Rural students are also affected by distance and lack of transport. In this way the learner, school and home are interdependent and important role players in the development of the learner. If there is an imbalance in one part it means that other parts become affected. Lack of family support was experienced by students who live in both rural and urban contexts, but in different ways. The urban participant is affected by parents who kept on moving to new places because of family business which then negatively affected the student. Some rural students are affected by unsupportive parents who see education as a waste of time for women and some experience lack of homework support from home because parents are illiterate.

5.4.2 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS WHICH COMPROMISE PERFORMANCE OF STUDENT'S 'AT RISK'.

5.4.2.1 The environment as a contributing factor in higher education

This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to how the students 'at risk' referred to how the environment in higher education impacted negatively on their ability to succeed in higher education studies. Five key issues that were identified by at-risk students were lack of time management skills, incorrect registration and wrong module selection, difficulty adjusting to university life, choice of wrong career path and lack of responsibility. These five environmental issues are categorised under the theme of environmental factors because the participants identified them as circumstantial issues related to the environment at university which they identified as factors that compromised their studies.

- **Lack of time management skill**

The participants referred to the lack of time management skills as a contributing factor to their underperformance whilst at university. Their schooling environment used different strategies such as the ringing of the bell, assembly periods, instructions from principal and teachers and constant reminders from home and school. These strategies are lacking at a university and as a result students fail to manage time independently; this ultimately impacts negatively on their performance.

Some of these students who experienced lack of time management skills indicated the following:

“Procrastination, and time management is a foundation of my failure and people who are surrounding me. I thought I will catch up with time but my work kept on piling up.” Sizwe

“My performance was not good because I failed to submit assignments on time. Workshops helped me to know how to study, how to organise myself and time management. The following semester, I passed all my modules. I tried to follow all methods they were teaching us. This programme came at the right time for me.” Nokuthula

“I didn’t give myself enough time, didn’t get to lectures on time, it is laziness, even though I promise myself to change, but I can still see myself doing the same thing. Even though I attend the support programme, I haven’t changed, haven’t dealt with it but I think I am getting there”.

Focus group

From this data set, it seems that two important factors contributed to students’ poor performance within higher education. The first relates to the context of self-organisation that was lacking. These students were accustomed to constant reminders from both school and home. They were used to a system that was structured for them to adhere to the time. At university, these supportive systems are absent and students had to adjust to independent systems of managing their time. The second relates to the context of procrastination. These students underestimated the work load and they kept delaying completion of tasks which became then burdensome; consequently they failed to cope academically. This finding confirms Attribution Theory which reflects students attributing their failure to factors which they could control themselves, such as procrastination, failing to submit work on time, not being punctual at lectures and not giving themselves enough time for their studies. This theory further illustrates the presence of causal factors that were within themselves such as procrastination and failing to manage time, which can contribute to a students’ poor performance.

- **Incorrect registration and wrong modules selection**

The participants referred to incorrect registration and wrong modules selection as a contributing factor that compromised their performance whilst at university. At the beginning of each academic year, the university offers an orientation programme aimed at enlightening and inducting first year students with necessary information before registration. Failure to attend the orientation programme results in students finding difficulty in selecting the correct modules. Some of the students who experienced registration and wrong module selection indicated the following:

*“I took demanding modules and the load was too much; when I realised that I have a heavy load then it was too late to change the curriculum. Then I failed one of the modules.” **Musa***

*“I actually became ‘at risk’ because I did not deregister two modules on time. When I went to admission office they said it was too late, but in my statement it shows that I failed because I did not write these two modules but I also saw that my credits were low.” **Busisiwe***

From this data set, it seems that three important factors contributed to students’ poor performance within higher education. The first relates to registering for the wrong modules and for overly demanding modules. Some students felt challenged by certain modules; some by the number of modules per semester. Students experience difficulties in choosing relevant modules at entry point in higher institutions. Some register for a module but lack the knowledge required about each course; they underestimate the demand of each module and find themselves not coping with the load. The second relates to the context of students failing to observe and adhere to the due dates such as deadlines for change of curriculum. As much as a university places notices across campus and on university website/notices, students often do not read information and they miss the opportunity to correct their registration errors. This consequently results in incorrect modules being shown in their academic records. These modules reflect as a fail when the student did not actually write the exam for the module for which they had not deregistered. The third relates to students registering or attending fewer modules per semester than required. They realise too late that they took insufficient modules for the semester and end up with an insufficient number of credits; this ultimately delays their degree completion. This is because some students do not familiarise themselves with the number of credits required for each semester and end up being ‘at risk’ of academic failure. Students attribute their failure to their actions; they lay the blame on themselves for registering for demanding modules, too many modules and/or failing to adhere to the dates set for deregistration. This results in their studies being compromised. The biographical data shows that students registering for too heavy a load and incorrect modules are experienced not only by first year students but across all year groups.

- **Choice of wrong career path**

The participants referred to the choice of the wrong career path as a contributing factor that compromised their performance whilst at university. After completion of their school programme, some students are disappointed by their matric points so they end up registering for

an available course. Some at first are attracted by the status of the degree but change their degree later because of academic demands. Literature suggests that from the point when students make career choices, through induction and throughout the study period, they need directions such as career guidance, academic support and pastoral support (Quinn et al, 2002). In this study most participants confessed that the teaching profession was not their first choice but they chose teaching due to reasons ranging from individual circumstances to their low matric points which precluded entry to other degrees. Choice was also influenced by friends and parental advice.

Some of the students who experienced registration problems and wrong module selection indicated the following:

“One thing that affected me was the fact that teaching was not my first choice so I was turned off by that; then spoke to my mum about it, then focused on the issue that sport science was my major subjects but still have to pass these other modules. It’s about mental battle because of the choice of career.” **Luke**

“I wanted to do pharmacy, I started at Westville then they counted my points then told me that my points are low for Pharmacy, I then registered a science course which was going to lead me to do pharmacy but also I did not reach the points. I then changed my career and transferred to teaching, it was not my first choice but when I came I didn’t think that I will fail.” **Nokuthula**

“After dropping out from Medicine, I taught/ facilitated first aid course in the army and it was assessed externally, students got very good results. My friends actually told me that I am good at teaching and may need to consider teaching career but teaching was not my first choice”. **Musa**

From this data set, it seems that three important factors contributed to students’ low performance within higher education. The first relates to the context of taking teaching as a career because they failed to meet entry requirements for other degrees. The second relates to students taking teaching as a career because they failed to cope with the academic demands of other degrees and transferred to the Bachelor of Education course. The third relates to students registered for the Bachelor of Education degree but struggling to accept teaching as their career. In the above

cases, the evidence is that for some students teaching was never their first choice. Some students were convinced by family or friends and they experienced the mental battle of accepting the career that they did not intend to pursue. This external motivation directly impacted on their performance. Attribution Theory helps one in this study to understand why students shifted the blame of their failure to a difficult task (just as pharmacy and medicine are seen as difficult) and placed the responsibility on external factors that then led to their unsatisfactory performance. Students attributed their failure to internal factors such as the mental battle resulting from accepting teaching as their career choice, which negatively affected their performance. Some students attributed their failure to ignorance; since they were refused entry to other degrees because of matric points and they then opted to study the Bachelor of Education degree assuming they would not experience academic difficulties.

The participants referred to making wrong career choices as one of the factors that contributed to their studies being compromised. Students stated that before they enrolled for a degree leading to teaching as a career they did not get proper guidance about career choices. Some were not accepted into their first choice of programme. They ended up taking teaching just to get access to higher education. After registration some realised that they had chosen the wrong career path (that of teaching) and struggled to cope academically. These findings concur with the view of McInnis et al. (2000), indicating that access to a programme is influenced by several factors including that of family, peers and availability of places within institutions of higher education. These contextually related factors have been known to lead to poor academic performance and student drop-out. McInnis et al. (2000) further argue that making wrong choices was a key factor in withdrawal and non-completion. It seems the most important factor in poor career choices that contributed to students' low performance within higher education related to the context of lack of proper career guidance at school level. Some students completed their secondary schooling not knowing which career would be suitable for them. While parents, family, teachers and friends may suggest suitable careers, they do not necessarily provide proper career guidance in accordance with the student's capability and student's interest. One student attributed his failure to his lack of interest, which was a personal factor whereby which only he had the power to change. This is confirmed by Attribution Theory which highlights the view that the causes to

which we attribute the behaviour of ourselves or others influence our future performance. It further illustrates that any career guidance may contribute to a student's performance.

In the above cases, it is clear from the participants interviewed that this problem did not start at university but rather at secondary school where some chose a career for the wrong reasons. Data shows that students from both disadvantaged and advantaged areas depend on the school and parents (outside factors) for career guidance. Some students from urban and township areas are exposed to career information from the internet and library, where they can take the initiative and do research. However, some students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have access to information and depend exclusively on the school, community and parents to guide them. Data shows that both the school and higher institutions have a role to play in terms of guiding students to choose their careers before they register for any course.

- **Difficulty in adjusting to university academic life**

Some participants referred to the difficulty in adjusting to academic life as a hindrance. The big gap between secondary school education and higher education is shown by the way students struggle to adjust to university life. Teaching style, academic demands and lecturer expectations are contributing factors which compromise a student's performance. Some students enter higher education lacking basic skills, fail to adjust to the unfamiliar approaches to teaching and learning, struggle with aspects of the academic discipline, fail assessments and feel unable to ask staff or peers for help (Yorke & Longden, 2008).

Students in this study did allude to some of the difficulties experienced in adjusting to university life as indicated in the following comments:

"The school did not prepare me for university at all because I struggled to write an assignment when I came to university. Lecturers don't spoon feed you like teachers do at school". **Busisiwe**

"I remember when I didn't get a DP; I went to the lecturer and asked what is meant by DP. I tried to convince her that if she allows me to write I can even get 100%, she said you are not

allowed to write and you can't get that mark because it also form your course mark." **Focus group**

"My first year after matric, I did a gap year which I took because Central Applications Office lost my forms. I took a gap year which did not benefit in any way except my self-esteem; then decided to study a year after. It was hard to adjust from doing nothing straight to higher education." **Luke**

From this data set, it seems that two important factors have contributed to students' low performance within higher education. The first one relates to adjusting to university academic life. University academic life seems to be quite different from that of school, and as indicated earlier, work demands, independent learning and lack of supervision (as experienced differently in their school education) are recurring aspects as factors impacting on student progress in their higher education studies. Some students adjust quickly to the demands of the new learning context and others take longer. Those who take longer to adjust risk poor academic performance, hence the length of adjustment time needs introspection, with further insights on what might hasten the adjustment time, is an important consideration in student academic performance.

The second factor relates to knowledge and understanding of university rules and regulations. As much as all students are given the handbook which explains all terms and rules of the university and for each degree, some students do not read information or understand the consequences of rule violations that impact negatively on their academic performance. Assumptions about written rules and the belief that students can make sense of these rules are points of concern as related to student progress. The simple example of DP (Duly Performance) refusal demonstrates this concern. While students may know of the concept of DP from the rules and regulations of academic engagement, the calculations and understanding of the consequences of not obtaining a DP may not be apparent to the student. Students however, tend to react when it is too late to do anything about it (usually at the time just before the examination commences). This lapse may then have implications for the students' academic progress but may not necessarily relate to their ability to cope academically.

- **Lack of responsibility**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to lack of responsibility as a contributing factor that compromised their performance whilst at university. When students enter higher education institutions, they do not realise how much their behaviour and conduct can impact on their studies. Some act irresponsibly and underestimate the consequences. In support, Thompson & Geren, (2002) suggest that students who are failing to take responsibility may show signs of irresponsibility such as absenteeism from lectures, failing to hand in assignments or meet deadlines. This is shown in the statements that follow:

“It was me who messed up because I didn’t know that if I don’t submit my assignment on time I will fail”. **Sabrina**

“The lazy attitude of attending classes let me down; sometimes I will wake up late and miss lectures then I struggled to catch up.” **Focus group**

Second semester I went to my sister’s wedding abroad and it took me time to get out of that mood and excitement of going abroad; I didn’t meet deadlines for my work.” **Focus group**

In this area, it seems that three factors contributed to student’s underperformance. The first one relates to the lazy attitude which compromised their performance. When students miss lectures, they are automatically behind and that results in their studies being compromised. The second one relates to students being ignorant by not adhering to deadlines to submit their task, which ultimately results in the loss of marks and DP. In such situations, students do not realise how their own behaviour impacts on their studies. The third one relates to irresponsible behaviour whereby students are overwhelmed by the situation and fail to prioritise their studies. These findings are in line with Attribution theory, which states that behaviour remains meaningless until we attribute a cause for that behaviour and the cause to which we attribute the behaviour influences our future performance (Heider, 1958). When students fail to submit work on time and miss classes because of laziness, or show irresponsible behaviour, they do not realise the

impact of that behaviour until they fail. These students lay the blame on their inappropriate behavior, which leads to their status as being students ‘at risk’ of academic failure.

5.4.2.2 The personal factors to which students attribute their poor academic performances

This section relates to how the students ‘at risk’ refer to personal issues that have impacted on their ability to succeed in their higher education studies. The five personal issues identified by ‘at-risk’ students include presence of a disability, making wrong career choices, pregnancy and bad relationships, lack of budgeting skills and lack of understanding of the university system. These have been categorised under the theme of personal issues because the participants have identified them as key personal issues that in their view were reasons for them not coping with higher education studies.

- **Presence of disability**

Some participants referred to the presence of a disability as one of the factors that contributed to their studies being compromised. Students presented disabilities such as hearing and stammering which contributed to their failure. During their school study programme, they managed to pass despite the presence of this disability because the school was aware of this condition and the environment was conducive for learning. According to Madaus (2005), transitioning from high school to higher education is particularly difficult for students with disabilities. Students ‘at risk’ are identified by the university system at the end of each semester and then attend interviews at the Academic Monitoring and Support office. During interviews, students are expected to give reasons for their failure, and disclose the disability. After the interview, the students are then referred to other university support sectors for support and further investigation. **Nokuthula** states that after being referred to the disability unit, she received a hearing aid and was also awarded a disability scholarship. It is not clear why she did not have a hearing aid at secondary school level, why the school did not ask for a referral to the medical departments or whether she was coping at school. She claim that after using hearing aids her academic results improved,

which means that disability was a contributing factor to her poor performance (see **Nokuthula's** statement below).

“I had hearing problem since I was born. I passed at school because I was sitting in front and my teachers knew that I had this problem. When I came to university I had to attend hospital appointments during lecture period; my appointment was clashing with ALE lecture, which means I had to bunk the lecture. That is why I failed it but I needed to go for a check-up because I didn't have hearing aids. I used to sit in front but didn't hear the lecturer because the class was noisy. After failing first semester, the Academic and Support programme coordinator asked me about why I failed. Firstly, I was embarrassed to talk about my hearing problem but she contacted the disability office which helped me to get hearing aids and I am happy that they organised disability bursary for me because my results have improved because I can hear properly”. **Nokuthula**

“I was having problems with my speech; was stammering, then had home schooling. I used to attend speech therapy and extra lesson. My parents thought school was a waste of time, then they kept me at home but that did not work either because I was young and kept playing up/messing around then went back to school but was 2 years behind. Knowing that I have this problem I took time to accept that I need to study these other modules at university because I wanted to be a sport science teacher and I really battled with my decision because of stammering I am not sure if teaching is good for me and this has affected my performance. I didn't tell anyone at university because I discuss all my challenges with my mother.” **Luke**

In both these examples, non-disclosures of their disabilities at the point of entry at university could have led to their poor academic performance. In the second participant's case, non-disclosure of his stammering has led to him questioning his choice of study programme, and by extension, questioning his ability to be a good Sports Science teacher. In the first example, the participant's non-disclosure impacted on her ability to negotiate with her lecturers on alternative arrangements for non-attendance as a result of attending to her medical needs. In addition, the non-disclosure kept her in an embarrassed state; a state that she could have resolved through disclosure and acceptance, leading to the support that she is entitled to as a student. In support,

Madaus (2005) suggests that students often face the burden of disclosing their disability to university officials because they feel embarrassed. It is to the student's benefit to disclose the disability to higher learning institutions to reduce the impact of the problems that will unavoidably be confronted. Schools and parents also have a responsibility to support students with a disability by providing relevant information to the higher learning institution for a smooth transition to take place and to avoid embarrassment that the student could confront at university. In this study, these students attributed their failure to non-disclosure of their disability, resulting from their embarrassment. The presence of disability led to the one participant missing lectures to attend to her medical needs and led another participant to question his choice of career.

The data from the interviews with these participants revealed that disability played itself out in two distinctive ways, affecting students' academic performance. The first relates to non-disclosure and the second relates to balancing disability needs and academic needs.

- **Pregnancy and bad relationships**

One participant referred to the way she dealt with pregnancy and abortion as a contributing factor to her poor performance in higher education. The participants expressed her views on the experience of emotional and psychological trauma brought about by pregnancy and bad relationships, which compromised her studies.

One of the students who experienced pregnancy and bad relationships said:

"I lost a child in January, and I fell pregnant again in May same year. The boyfriend told me to abort the child, I pretended to go to the hospital but I did not do it, this made me worry a lot."

Nozizwe

Another student stated: *"Relationships inside university and the lazy attitude messed me around. Now I realized that I have to concentrate on my studies."* **Focus group**

In this case, data shows that students' poor decision making can be a hindrance to their success. Some get involved in unprotected sex and get pregnant, confirmed by **Nozizwe**. These unplanned

pregnancies resulted in harsh decisions and very traumatic psychological experiences, from the loss of the baby to forced abortion. This worry may have resulted from many unresolved issues in the participant's history.

From the case of pregnancy and bad relationships, it emerged that some students go through a great deal of psychological trauma because of decisions they make and relationships they get involved in; these become a barrier to the required focus on their studies.

- **Lack of budgeting skills**

Some the participants referred to lack of budgeting skills as a contributing factor to their poor performance in higher education. Some participants reported that they received scholarships for their studies at their point of entry at university. Lack of budgeting skills and inexperience of handling money resulted in their focus being shifted from studying. This finding suggests that as much as scholarships are intended to make students' lives less stressful, sometimes the contrary scenario happens and some students experience failure because of misuse of funding. For example, some participants claimed that they were negatively affected by mismanagement of bursary funds.

One of the students who experienced the lack of budgeting skills indicated this:

“There have been such as freedom, it's tough, having access to funding sometimes you misuse the money, handling the money and using it for wrong things.” **Sizwe**

“When I got a bursary things fell apart having to experience having money in my account for the first time and I think I did not spend it wisely but now I am fine I can handle it.” **Focus group**

These participants admitted a lack of budgeting skills and mishandling of scholarship money as a contributing factor to their poor academic performance. Some students are not sufficiently experienced to handle their finances and take responsibility. Students attribute their failure to too much financial freedom, to their first exposure to handling money and inappropriate expenditure. Funding in this case becomes a hindrance to success instead of an aid to address their academic

financial need. This suggests that students were not exposed to handling finances at home (see Focus-group statement above) and as a result the first exposure to money in their accounts meant excitement and freedom in decision making which compromised their studies and this means such skills should be taught. The freedom of having money results in student focusing on other things and gets distracted from studying.

5.4.2.3 Academic challenges faced at university level

This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to how students ‘at risk’ refer to academic challenges faced at university level that have impacted on their ability to succeed in their studies. These four challenging academic issues such as: difficulty understanding English as a medium of instruction, non-interactive and non-stimulating teaching methods, poor academic literacy and lack of support from lecturers have been categorised under the theme of academic challenges faced at university level; the participants identified them as contextual issues related to academic issues at university and as reasons for them not coping within higher education studies.

- **Non-interactive and non-stimulating teaching methods**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to non-interactive and non-stimulating teaching methods as a challenging academic issue in higher education. According to Nevill and Rhodes (2004), teaching methods, teaching style and teaching material have a significant role in a student’s retention. Participants’ responses showed that students found it difficult to adjust to the new teaching style; they were demotivated and missed classes; this ultimately affected their academic performance. Some students claimed that the teaching methods in higher learning institutions did not match their learning styles and lectures were not interesting.

Some of the students who experienced non-stimulating and not interactive teaching method indicated the following:

“The experience of university was daunting for me; teaching is not the same like high school, lecturers don’t make learning interesting, monotonous lecturing, and boring lecturers. I know that you should have your own initiative but going to lectures doesn’t interest me.” **Nevan**

“What is a problem here at the University is the way they teach which is very different and I am not used to be taught in English; my teachers were teaching in IsiZulu. They will try and translate and explain in IsiZulu. To prepare for exams we used and practised previous question papers with teachers but here lecturers don’t show you how to prepare for exam.” **Khethiwe**

From the focus group discussion, one student remarked: *“At school the culture of teaching was that the teacher will teach you and revise with students, here at university no one will do that you study on your own.”* **Focus group**

From this data set, it seems that two factors related to methods of teaching in university contributed to students’ low performance. The first relates to the context of non-stimulating lectures. In this case, students attribute their failure to boring and uninteresting lectures and a monotonous teaching style which lacks differentiation to meet individual needs.

Some participants claimed that unstimulating lectures demotivated them so they missed classes. Secondly, they attributed failure to lack of support during the revision and pre-exam period. At secondary schools teachers assisted students until they finished exams but at university, participants felt that they were unsupported during exams. Students tended to attribute their failures to external factors like task difficulty and boring lectures and teaching methods (McClure, Meyer, Garisch, Fischer, Weir & Walkey, 2011). When students explain the cause for their exam failure, they often look for external factors that may have contributed to low performance and exonerate themselves from blame and responsibility for their studies. The participants who experienced this were from diverse education backgrounds and some were

fluent English speakers while others spoke more fluently in their mother tongue. This diversity suggests that students from all walks of life find it difficult to adjust to the way of teaching at university level.

- **Poor academic literacy**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to poor academic literacy as a challenging academic issue in higher education. Participants claim that they experienced difficulty in writing assignments; lecturers expected students to be ready to engage with academic tasks. In line with this, (Paxton 2007) confirms that a large number of first-year students arrive at university not having grasped the new discourse that they are expected to have acquired from high school.

Some of the students who experienced poor academic literacy indicated the following:

“The school did not prepare me for university at all because I struggled to write an assignment when I came to university.” **Busisiwe**

Another participant stated:

“Even in my assignment they tell me to improve my English and academic writing but lecturers don’t explain how.” **Zodumo**

“My problem is application of knowledge because I contribute in class and help other people but when it comes to test I fail especially Physics.” **Nozizwe**

From this data, three factors are seen to be contributing to students’ low performance. One relates to the difficulty in writing assignments. In this case, Nozizwe attribute her failure to secondary school teachers who did not prepare them to engage with academic writing was now struggling to write assignments at university. The second one is related to lack of knowledge on how to improve their academic writing. In this case, some students attributed their failure to lecturers who did not explain how they needed to improve when they failed assessment tasks. The third one is related to failure to apply knowledge during tests. In this case one student

claimed that she helped other people in class and participates during lectures but failed to apply knowledge during assessment.

- **Lack of support from lecturers**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to lack of support from lecturers as a contributing factor to their poor performance in higher education. Students are used to having teachers verbally remind them about school processes and procedures. Higher institutions use different procedures and processes which become a challenge to students who are in transition from high school to university.

Some of the students who experienced lack of support from lecturers indicated it in these words:

“I registered late to study here and didn’t ask about dates for assignments because I thought the lecturer will tell me that you have missed the assignment and this is what you need to do. No one is guiding you about expectations.” **Focus group**

“I felt embarrassed carrying the monitoring chart from the support programme; the lecturers will pass negative comment about my progress before even looking at this chart.” **Focus group**

“I tried to speak to one of the lecturers and she totally wrote me off about me passing this module and was not helpful at all. I also feel that they over marked my work like in ALE, she never gave me a chance as a result I didn’t want to attend these two lectures that my performance dropped. In Maths last year, a new lecturer came I think he was racist but I can’t say that because I can’t prove it. She said to me “here at university it’s your responsibility and don’t make it my problem”, that is the attitude you get from lecturers with arrogance; they are not supportive like teachers at school.” **Nevan**

It seems that two factors related to lack of support from lecturers. These contributed to students’ poor performance. The first relates to the lack of assistance by lecturers. In this case, students who registered late and missed some of the lectures attributed their failure to lecturers who did not tell them about key information for their modules; they were accustomed to this kind of support at secondary school. The second relates to negative attitudes from lecturers. In this case, the students felt embarrassed talking about their academic progress because the lecturer would

pass negative comments before assisting the student. It became clear from the responses above that lecturers contributed to students' failure by making students feel humiliated and helpless; this discouraged students from consulting them when they were faced with difficulties. Students attributed their failure to lecturers who they described as arrogant, not helpful and with an uncaring attitude, who failed to give them any hope of passing a module when spoken to (see **Nevan's** statement above). Students had expectations of the institution and of their lecturers. They expected the institution and the lecturers to remind them about their responsibilities and university rules; for an example, if a student missed a task, they did not explain what the consequences are and what procedures could be followed.

5.4.2.4 Social issues as a challenge in higher education

This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion addresses the question of how the students 'at risk' referred to family issues that have impacted on their ability to succeed in higher education studies. The two issues identified by at-risk students included poverty and family instability caused by circumstances. These family issues were identified by participants as factors in the context that impacted negatively on their academic performance.

- **Poverty**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to poverty as a contributing factor to their poor performance in higher education. Students receiving scholarships for their studies sometimes used some of the money to support their families financially because of poverty. As many participants explained, family sufferings contributed to their psychological problems which consequently impacted on students' performance.

Some of the students who experienced poverty indicated the following:

"I have a bursary, Funza Lushaka bursary, I can't use it for my studies only. I also use it to pay for my sister's university fees. I don't have to stress about my single parent having to struggle and pay for my transport fees. It also took a lot of pressure from my mother. Now I can't really

buy all what I need for my modules because I have to use my scholarship to look after my family.” Sabrina

“My aunt, who is receiving social grant, helped me to pay for school fees, at university I have Funza Lushaka bursary which is supporting me and I also use this Funza Lushaka to support at home because there is no one who is working.” Zodumo

“I come from a poor family where there is no one working; I use money from National Skills Fund bursary to support my family. As long as I have money left for me to eat and I know that at least my family can buy few things to keep them for a while. I worry a lot about them.” Khethiwe

In the above cases, it seems that two factors related to poverty contributed to student’s low performance. The first relates to the context of scholarship funding not used only for student’s needs. In this case participants take the responsibility of supporting their families with their scholarship which compromises their academic needs (see **Sabrina’s** statement above). The second one relates to the psychosocial burden of their family socioeconomic status. In this case students worried about the financial status of their families and this resulted in students failing to concentrate on their studies (see **Khethiwe’s** statement above).

As much as showing responsibility for family is a positive gesture it compromised students’ resources, this ultimately impacted on their studies. The biographical data and student interview responses showed that poverty was experienced by students from different ethnic backgrounds. This suggests that students are not only faced with academic and personal challenges but other factors like their background and socioeconomic status, these contributed to the challenges which resulted in failure.

- **Family instability**

Participants referred to family instability caused by circumstances as a contributing factor to their poor performance in higher education. Students are directly or indirectly affected by the changes and tragedies experienced by their families and this negatively impacts on their studies.

Their experiences are confirmed by Howard & Johnson (2000) who suggest that children are positioned in the centre of their nested organizations and as such they are unendingly affected in one way or another by the changes that occur in the environment that surrounds them. Some of the participants reported their emotional experiences resulting from loss, moving house, and parent's job instability.

“My family issues contributed a lot since 2008, I lost my mother in September the very same year. I didn't deal with these issues I pretended as if nothing happened. It is only now that I started to deal with it; then my brother passed away in 2009.” **Nozizwe**

“When my mother passed away things began to fall apart now that I don't have someone from family to talk to about my problems.” **Zodumo**

Nevan expressed the feeling of stress that he went through because of home instability, and he explained how he was affected by his father's anger resulting from his career and business changes which were not successful.

“My father studied another degree while he was teaching then after completion he then started his own firm but the business has not picked up. There is a lot of financial strain that the family is experiencing at the moment and this makes life difficult for everyone. I can't say that it is his fault but it's just that he takes his frustration to other people which makes it difficult for me study at home.” **Nevan**

In these two cases, it seems that two factors related to family instability contributed to students' poor performance. The first relates to the context of psychological problems caused by loss in the family. In this case the participant did not attend counselling and this haunted her and ultimately affected her performance. Another participant claimed that losing her mother resulted in her not being able to talk about her challenges. The second one relates to family financial instability which created a stressful and tense environment which was not conducive for learning. This suggests that a student's performance is directly linked to family circumstances. Students are psychologically affected indirectly by a family's negative experiences.

5.4.2.5 Lack of resources for students

This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to how students ‘at risk’ refer to lack of resources at the university level that have impacted on their ability to succeed in their studies. These four are: the non-conducive living environment, lack of access to university resources, lack of reliable transport and lack of funding.

- **Living environment not conducive to learning**

Participants referred to the non-conducive environment as a contributing factor to their poor performance in higher education. Participants attributed their failure to environmental issues; specifically they expressed the view that the study environment was not conducive for learning; off-campus university residence were noisy and some of the participants that lived at home did not get enough time to study because of family responsibilities.

Some of the students who complained of living in a non-conducive environment spoke thus:

“It is not easy to study where I live because it’s very noisy. I commute with the bus from Nagina Marianhill to campus. I am now forced to study when I am on campus only.” **Khethiwe**

“I stay at home and this has contributed a lot to my poor performance; honestly I don’t get time at home. I got so many responsibilities at home and wish that one day I will live on campus.”

Mbali

“First year I stayed on campus but when my mother passed away then I had to move back home because there was no one to look after my sisters and my two babies. It was very difficult; at first I couldn’t adjust because of the responsibility; I have to cook, do washing and make sure that everyone is fine before I study.” **Busisiwe**

“I live in university residence, if I were to live at home with my mom I can do better because she will motivate me.” **Focus group**

In the above cases, it seems that three factors related to a non-conducive environment and thereby contributed to students' poor performance. The first related to a noisy environment; in this case the participant was unable to study at the university residence because of the noisy environment. The lack of time available during the day to study on campus compromised her studies. The second factor related to limited study time at home because of family chores; in this case some participants claimed that staying at home distracted their focus and concentration because they were tasked with many chores which prevented them from studying. The third one related to lack of motivation at a university residence; in contrast to the above cases the participant has access to all resources within a university residence but attributed her failure to lack of parental involvement and support from her parent because she did not stay at home.

- **Lack of access to university resources**

Lack of access to university resources was seen as a contributing factor to students' poor performance in higher education. Participants expressed the view that they experienced living away from campus as a challenge because it prevented them from using resources such as the internet, the library and books. This corresponds with findings by Nyamweya (2013) who found that the availability of reading material, writing desks, food and a clean environment were high priorities for constituting a good learning environment.

Some of the students who experienced lack of access to university resources indicated that:

“There is no internet at home; if I have to use internet for research then I go to my dad’s office.”

Luke

“I stay at university residence which is off campus; I travel by bus which is a problem because if I don’t catch a bus on time from university to our residence it means I have to take a taxi. Sometimes it is not safe in the evenings and sometimes that become a challenge if you still want to use the library”. **Nokuthula**

“Certain things like prescribed books I don’t have but I use books from the library only when I am on campus but it is very difficult because I live at home.” **Nevan**

In the above cases, it seems that living away from university resources is a factor that contributed to students' poor performance. Some students who lived off-campus had to catch a bus back to residences early and that prevented them from using the campus library and accessing other resources like the internet for research.

- **Lack of reliable transport**

Participants who resided off-campus (home and private accommodation) felt disadvantaged as they had no option but to take unreliable transport to commute to the campus. The participants' responses revealed that commuting to campus by bus prevented them from accessing university facilities and lecturers because of the unrealistic time schedule. Some students attributed their failure to attend classes on time to the unreliable transport service. Some of the students who experienced lack of reliable transport indicated the following:

“I take public transport which is a problem because sometimes I come on campus late and become late to my lectures.” **Mbali**

“Transport is reliable but it leaves campus at certain times. Sometimes by the time the bus leave sometimes I want to stay a bit longer to study but unfortunately not”. **Khethiwe**

“I travel by bus which is a problem because if I don't catch a bus on time from university to our residence it means I have to take a taxi. Sometimes it is not safe in the evenings and sometimes that become a challenge if you still want to use the library.” **Nokuthula**

In the above cases, it seems that there were two related factors. The first related to the use of unreliable public transport. In this case students attributed their failure to public transport because they were unreliable and students ended up being late for lectures. Participants explained that lack of reliable transport compromised their safety as they had to stay on campus and use the library till late.

The second factor related to campus buses which had limited scheduled times and did not accommodate students who want to use university resources during late hours. The students shifted the blame on the transport operations and accommodation department who were not meeting their needs.

- **Working while studying**

Financial difficulties were seen by some participants as a contributing factor to their poor performance in higher education, resulting in part from juggling part-time jobs and studying. Some attributed their underperformance to hunger at university. In support of this view, Stone and O'Shea (2013) say, it has become a custom that full-time students who are financially challenged combine paid employment and study; consequently, this negatively affects students' performance.

Some of the students who experienced financial difficulties indicated the following:

“I don't have funding; I depend on any job that comes my way to pay my university fees. It takes a lot of time, having to look for a job and attend classes can be very difficult. Sometimes I get home tired and also having to face my father with his attitude is another story.” **Nevan**

“Losing my mother made me look for some jobs to support my baby at home. It was difficult to concentrate in my studies because I also need to go to work” **Nozizwe**

In this case, it seems that two factors contribute to students becoming 'at-risk'. One relates to students struggling to focus on their studies and the balance between studying and employment.

In most cases students develop coping mechanism and accomplish successful life outcomes in spite of their adversity (Knight, 2007). Despite the general coping mechanisms and resilience described in the literature, some students are struggling to keep up with the job and studying. The second one relates to students who experience hardships such as a lack of minimum financial

support. Such hardship in most cases is beyond their control and it prevents them from performing well. In spite of it all, they show resilience by wanting to continue studying (see **Zodwa's** statement above). This suggests the need for all university stakeholders to be alert to such cases and provide services that will focus on a student's need beyond the classroom.

5.5 Summary

This section of this study shows that sometimes a factor can have a negative influence and at times the same factor can have a positive impact such as working while studying. Sometimes a single factor has a devastating academic consequence and at times a number of factors are at play, such as pregnancy and bad relationships. It further shows that some factors are adjustment factors and can be resolved quickly while others involve problems that may be experienced across the study period. Some factors are student directed, such as incorrect registration of modules and some are institutional directed, such as non-interactive and non-stimulating teaching methods.

CHAPTER SIX

SECTION TWO: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 8

THEME 3:	
NATURE OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT AIMED AT SUPPORTING ‘AT-RISK’ STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION	
Notification of ‘at-risk’ status	Students’ initial responses to being notified of their academic performance status
Stages through which the students experienced when identified as ‘at risk’	Alarmed (shocked, hurt, guilt, disappointment,) concealment, forced compliance, acceptance
Intervention programme aimed at supporting ‘at-risk’ students	Peer-to-peer mentoring programme, referral system, academic counselling, monitoring chart, means of communication, workshops
THEME 4:	
USEFULNESS OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT AIMED AT SUPPORTING ‘AT-RISK’ STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION	
Students’ reflection after intervention support	Revelation discourse, provided technical support, provided comfort and hope, collegial and collaborative learning discourse, provided structured support, provided a sense of community, evaluator discourse, enhanced skills and student’s accountability, provided motivation and gave hope for the future, monitoring chart aided in keeping them accountable and timing of the support programme

Concluding comments of the value of the students 'at risk' (Academic and Support) programme offer to students 'at risk'	Breaking the isolation, forced exposure, regulated compliance, monitoring progress, programme being reactive, stigma and timing of intervention
THEME 5: WHAT PARTICIPANTS CONSIDER AS NECESSARY RESPONSE TO SUPPORTING STUDENTS 'AT RISK'	Early identification, pro-active intervention support

Table eight above shows themes and sub-themes stemming from the data gathered from interviews and focus group interviews depicting experiences of the academic support programme aimed at supporting students targeted as 'at risk' in higher education in a South African university. I will now give an interpretation of the main themes of Section 2.

6.1 Introduction

The first section of data analysis deals with analysis of causal factors that students report contribute towards becoming 'at risk' of academic failure. This second section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to the nature of academic monitoring and support aimed at supporting students targeted as 'at-risk' in higher education. Categories under this theme include: i) notification of 'at-risk' students and responses towards notification of 'at-risk' status ii) stages through which the students go when identified as 'at-risk' iii) current intervention programme in place aimed at supporting these students, iv) students' reflection after intervention support and v) concluding comments about the value of the Academic and Support programme offered to students 'at risk'. These categories have been categorised under this theme because participants identified them as contextual issues related to their identification as being 'at risk', the experiences they went through after being notified and how they reacted towards the notification; it also shows the development of stages which formed a pattern such as alarmed (surprise), concealment and forced compliance they experience before accepting support.

6.2 NATURE OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT AIMED AT SUPPORTING ‘AT-RISK’ STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Theme 3 covers experiences of academic support programme aimed at supporting students ‘at risk’ in higher education as presented and interpreted below:

6.2.1 Notification of ‘at risk’ status

With reference to the background of the study, the colour-coded system is used by the institution to indicate the students’ academic progression status. The green colour on their academic record indicates that the student has met progression requirements, the orange status indicates that the student is ‘at risk’ of academic exclusion from the university by not meeting the programme progression requirements and a red colour code indicate that the student is being considered for academic exclusion. This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to how the students, categorized as ‘at risk’ (i.e. an orange colour code in their academic record), receive notification about their ‘at-risk’ status and their reactions towards this notification. This is an important analysis as it informs us about both the students’ emotional status at the point of knowing as well as the institution’s notification system and processes. Warning systems and the reactions of members within an eco-systemic environment allows one to understand the dynamics of change within the eco-system, and in this case, the “at-risk” management system. Here the Ecosystem’s theoretical framework makes provisions for this point of analysis because Ecosystem Theory holds that people encounter different environments throughout their lifespan that may influence their behaviour in varying degrees. The point of knowing as well as the institution’s notification system and processes influence how students react to their success or progress.

6.2.1.1 Students' initial responses to being notified of their academic performance status

The university's system of notification of students' academic standing includes notification through the student central system (students log on to the university student management computer system to view their academic profile), notification through their results sheet posted to them and notification at the point of registration for the next academic year. Students therefore have several points of official notification. In addition, students do have an idea of how they may have performed in their examination through their experience of writing their examination as well as their knowledge of their performance within the semester of their study through their continuous assessment process of the modules that they take for that semester. The analysis, therefore, needs to consider both the formal notification as well as the students' reaction within the ecosystem framing because, in an ecosystem, individual behaviours and relational behaviours do have significance in the maintenance of an ecosystem. Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants referred to the indicators of 'at-risk' status as the notification the university used to give them warnings about their unsatisfactory performance. Some of the students who received notification indicated the following:

"I saw my student colour changed from green to orange from student central system then I knew that my performance was unsatisfactory". Sabrina

"I saw it from student central that my status has changed and on my academic record it was written that I must consult the Dean. Musa

"During registration I was told to see the academic support office and they explained to me about my performance". Nevan

These quotes suggest that the students knew of the notification processes as well as the meanings of this notification. What seems important through these statements is that these students waited for formal communication from the university to inform them of their academic status. This could mean that students were oblivious about what is going on and what constitute as a good student or they are in denial. The realisation of being labelled as 'at risk' was delayed until the official notification of their academic standing, suggesting that these student were very reluctant

to be introspective or believe that they were not performing well academically, as was expected of the programme, thus leaving possibilities for external blame as is alluded to in sections that follow below.

6.2.2 Stages through which the students experienced when identified as ‘at risk’

This section relates to stages which students go through when identified as ‘at-risk’ of academic failure. Identification process of these participants followed a particular pattern: alarmed surprise, concealment, forced compliance and, finally, acceptance, suggesting a stage development process of acceptance of intervention through academic support. The participants stated that the awareness of their unsatisfactory performance resulted in a range of psychological experience such as disbelief, shock, devastation and demotivation. The different cases are discussed below:

- **Alarmed (surprise)**
 - i) **Shocked**

The notification of being ‘at risk’ came as a shock and some were hurt by the reality. Some of the students who experienced this surprise indicated their feelings by saying:

“I was scared and shocked I didn’t know what to do now. What will happen and again since am self-funded, what will happen, also its expensive for my parents to have to repay for modules”.

Mbali

I felt shocked, when I left pharmacy and came to the School of Education I thought I am going to do well. I was shocked to be told that I am ‘at risk’ of failing” **Nokuthula**

In this case, students thought that their academic problems were related to academic programmes beyond their academic capabilities. A participant initially thought that the problem was related to the Pharmacy programme and changed to Education but still continued to fail (see **Nokuthula’s**

statement above). This surprise in students about their own understanding of their academic potential shows how students can easily shift the blame of their performance to external factors which they think are hindering their performance; They choose not to acknowledge as blame. The students would already have had their results of their examination, which categorically indicate whether or not they have passed or failed a module. Through this result sheet and perhaps their prior experience (some had transferred because of poor performance in other fields of study), they would most certainly have known that they would be categorized as ‘at-risk’. In this respect, they now attempted to clarify that which was quite clear about their academic performance. The use of Attribution Theory in this study provides an understanding of how at-risk students explain the reasons for their underperformance and how they explain their experiences. Very often, they shift the blame away from themselves leaving possibilities for external blame such as the programme being difficult, despite a clear indication of their poor performance. Within this category of data presentation and analysis, participants were psychologically affected after being notified of their ‘at-risk’ status.

ii) Hurt

The interviewed students confessed that they experienced shock coupled with disbelief upon hearing that they were ‘at risk’. This was an immediate reaction to the news of underperformance.

Here is what some of them had to say:

“I realised when I got my results, I saw my result statement, I was very hurt to see that I failed computer literacy and ALE I didn’t think that I was going to fail those subjects”. **Khethiwe**

“It was hard enough; I wanted to leave when I saw that I was ‘at-risk’ on student-central I was crying because I thought that they were chasing me away” **Luke**

i) Guilt

I did not believe it, got so embarrassed, felt so guilty, took time to accept it and wondered what my parents will say. **Focus group**

These quotes suggest that students experienced shock and disbelief after realising that they were ‘at-risk’ of not completing their degrees on time. Participants explained that they felt hurt and shocked at failing certain modules such as ALE and Computer literacy as that came as a surprise. These experiences relate to underestimation of certain modules and programmes resulting in students not putting in enough effort. Some students explained that after notification of their ‘at-risk’ status they felt disbelief, were embarrassed and felt guilty. This relates to the fact that they did not realise that they had performed poorly in the exams, and they felt embarrassed to tell their parents about it; they also felt guilty about not doing better.

ii) **Disappointment**

Some participants expressed disappointment after being notified that they were categorised as ‘at risk’ of academic failure, they were devastated about the news and felt like dropping out because they were not coping with academic demands. This reaction shows that some students did not understand the meaning of being categorised as ‘at-risk’. The disappointment led to thoughts such as quitting, being a loser, not deserving to be a university student and some thought of exclusion from the university. This is what some of them had to say about their feelings upon realising that they were ‘at risk’:

“I felt like a loser and I was so disappointed with myself”. **Zodwa**

“It feels like I want to quit, the status on its own makes you feel like you don’t deserve to be here”

Zodumo

“First thing that came into my mind was exclusion; wondered what is wrong because at school I was getting position one; I felt like I do not deserve to be here but did not tell my parents about what was happening” **Focus group**

These quotes suggest that after notification of their ‘at risk’ status, students experienced a range of psychological issues such as disappointment, thoughts of quitting, feeling they did not deserve to be at university and fear of exclusion from the university. These issues could have emanated

from the fact that they performed well in high school and expected the same level of performance at university. They thought that they were doing well; the notification of their poor performance resulted in despondency. In an ecosystem, individual behaviour has a significance role in the maintenance of an ecosystem. When students put less effort in their studies, it impact negatively on their academic performance resulting in them wanting to give up studying. In agreement with the above statement, Powdthavee (2010) suggests that students may drop out because they anticipate that they will fail and not progress to the next level of study and ultimately may not graduate within the minimum time. The participants felt demotivated by poor academic achievement and that affected their self-esteem because some had thought of themselves as high achievers.

- **Concealment**

Most participants made all attempts to conceal their poor academic status. These attempts included not revealing to the lecturer, not wanting to engage in a support programme, imagining how others may view them, including how their lecturers would view and react to them and so on. The idea of concealment could be an extension of Flum and Kaplan (2012) notion of imagined response to account for why the students tended to conceal their academic status, imagining the kinds of responses that they would receive. After realisation and the emotional experience of denial of being ‘at risk’ of failure, students go through a concealment stage. During this stage they feel that people will stigmatise, label and pity them and believe that by not making their ‘at risk’ status known, they could continue with their academic study undetected by others. They assume if lecturers know about their ‘at risk’ status they will treat them differently. Some feel like quitting because the labelling makes them feel incapable.

Some of the students who spoke of concealment reported their experiences in this way:

“I don’t tell lecturers about my condition because I don’t want them to pity me and treat me differently, they already have a stamp on you, they have already categorised me that I am not going to make it. Nevan

I failed BIO 310 again. For some reasons, every time I did that module, I always run away from the garden project and because I never told my lecturer I am not good at gardening.

Luke

These quotes suggest that students undergo the concealment stage by shying away from support. Initially they do not want the lecturers to know that they are categorized as ‘at risk’ because of the fear of the stigma and special treatment. The ‘at-risk’ status makes them feel categorised as failures and students who will not “make it”. They keep their challenges to themselves because they want to hide their poor-performance status. This concealment emanates from the labelling as being ‘at risk’ and they see their future as being unsuccessful. The warnings and notification are not taken as warnings but a stamp condemning them to failure (see **Nevan’s** statement above). The concealment stage can lead to dropping out because they don’t feel capable enough to succeed at the university.

- **Forced compliance**

After students have received the university’s system of notification of students’ academic standing which include notification through the student central system, notification through their results sheet posted to them and notification at the point of registration for the next academic year, students are advised to attend the intervention programme offered within the School. The office of Academic Monitoring and Support sends emails, text message to students and notice board messages notifying and reminding them to attend the intervention programme.

Some of the students who experienced forced compliance indicated that:

*“When I was told I was the part of the programme I didn’t like it because I thought I was working hard enough to be able to pass my modules without the help of the program. **Musa, Nozizwe***

“Initially I felt ostracized by the whole thing when I was told I need to attend the program, now they know that I am not performing well, but it turned out to be a good thing because after talking to the support programme coordinator I was then sent to a university counsellor because

of my issues and depression. I was then referred to the hospital and they discovered that I have a bipolar disease. Nevan

What seems important through these statements is that these students felt that they were offered support that they did not need, suggesting forced compliance (receiving academic support). However much they had performed poorly in their studies, they still believed that they were capable of succeeding without intervention support. Initially, they reacted negatively towards the idea of attending the support program. This could have been brought about by the fear of knowing that the university was monitoring their progress. The change of attitude towards the programme was brought about by the positive assistance they received, particularly as they were given the space to talk about issues that compromised their academic performance (see **Nevan's** statement above). This shows that students are reluctant to receive intervention support until they see the benefit from it. The negative attitude towards attending the programme suggests that these students were very reluctant to introspective or believe that they contributed to their own poor performance and thus needing support; this leaves possibilities for external blame. In support of this view, Dodgson and Bolam (2002) observe that many students who would benefit from academic and other support services are reluctant to come forward and ask for the help that they need. Forced compliance seems to be the process through which these students come to realise the benefits that support programmes can offer. If left on their own, they would, most probably, not attend support programmes and consequently not realise the benefit of external intervention.

- **Acceptance**

After the students experience of alarmed surprise, concealment and forced compliance, they finally realise the importance of academic support and begin to unpack the reasons for failure and value the kind of support they receive from the Academic Monitoring and Support programme.

Some of the students who finally accepted help offered by the intervention support programme indicated the following:

“Now I realise that University is different because no one is behind you and pushes you; this simply means that you need to grow up very quickly. If you don’t hand in your assignment it’s your own story that is why I attend the programme now”. **Sabrina**

The lazy attitude messed me around now I feel supported, I wish I had this support in my first year of study at the university., Having a monitoring chart made me feel like I have something concrete that makes me go and speak to my lecturers. I now feel comfortable talking to the staff of the support programme about my challenges. **Focus group**

“When I was told to attend the meeting of the Academic and Support Programme I didn’t know what it was about so I was confused at first, then when you’re in there you realize that you’re not alone in this situation and feel better” **Focus group**

From this data set, it seems that two important factors contributed towards the acceptance of attending intervention support programmes. The first relates to the context of acceptance of their contribution to failure and self- realization of factors that hindered their performance. The second one relates to the acceptance and realization of the value of attending intervention support programmes. After taking part in intervention programmes they realized that they needed this kind of support on their point of entry at university (see focus group’s statement above). They now began to realize factors that contributed to their failure. As much as they accepted the blame for laziness that impeded progress, they also shifted the blame on the institution which did not provide support at their point of entry at the university and which might have prevented their failure. The Attribution theoretical framework makes provisions for this point of analysis because Attribution Theory holds that a process of attribution is involved in a person’s perception that is, students make sense of their behaviour. The above cases show that eventually students realised that they needed to change, grow up, take responsibility and be accountable. Students begin to accept consequences of their behaviour and consequently see benefits of attending intervention support programmes and the value of consulting with their lecturers. This indicates that after going through the phases of surprise, concealment, compliance and, finally, acceptance, students begin to realise that it’s not only about shifting the blame to other issues but accepting that their attitude and behaviour contributes to their poor academic performance.

6.2.3 Intervention programme aimed at supporting ‘at-risk’ students

This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to student’s reflection on current intervention programmes in place to assist ‘at-risk’ students after intervention support.

6.2.3.1 Current intervention programmes in place to assist ‘at-risk’ students

The university has an Academic Monitoring and Support Programme that assists and supports undergraduate students categorised as ‘at-risk’ of academic failure, after the students have been categorized as ‘at risk’ the onus is on the student to attend the intervention support programme. Students are advised by the university through sms, letters, academic records and e-mails to attend the intervention programme.

The current intervention programme which is being offered by the Academic and Support programme in the School of Education as explained below includes: a notification system, a peer mentorship programme, academic consultation, various means of communication, workshops, referral system, academic consultation and drop- in sessions. Some are keen to get help and some do not attend the intervention programmes even after several reminders. The analysis, therefore, needs to consider both intervention programmes available as well as the students’ reaction towards the programme within the ecosystem framing because, in an ecosystem, individual behaviours and relational behaviours do have significant roles in maintenance of an ecosystem.

- **Peer-to-peer mentoring programme**

Peer support offers a more tailored provision via smaller groups and individual meetings weekly. Mentors and mentees are matched according to their subject specialization. All ‘at risk’ students are given an opportunity to be part of the peer mentoring programme and information is circulated to them to ensure that they become aware of the programme and its importance. Responses from interviews and focus-group discussion reveal that a peer-to-peer mentorship programme is helpful, through some prefer to be mentored by a particular gender and some state that they miss workshops because of group discussions but mentors fill the gap. This is shown by statements below:

“I attend support programme but sometimes I have group discussion then I miss workshops, having a mentor assist me a lot” **Mbali**

From the focus group, one participant said: *When I got to the meeting I was assigned to a mentor; I am lucky that she is a female. She reminds me of my deadlines.* **Focus group**

“My mentor is helping me a lot if I need help”. **Khethiwe**

Now I attend the programme to prove to everyone that I can do it. **Luke**

These quotes suggest that students appreciate and value the peer-mentorship support; some miss workshops because of commitments and rely on mentors to assist them with information from the workshop. Some students prefer to be mentored by someone of the same gender as they easily relate to them. Participants explained that mentors reminded them of deadlines and they can easily approach mentors when they needed help. This shows that the presence of peer mentoring is a safe space for students where they can get support. This also gives students an option of choosing who they can speak to regarding their challenges at university.

- **Referral system**

To help in improving the quality of support that the programme offers, students who are involved in the Academic and Support Programme complete a survey questionnaire at the beginning of each semester. The survey questions are designed to find or investigate the reasons or challenges that lead to a student’s underperformance and this helps to design workshops that are tailor made to suit their needs. Students are then referred to the relevant university sectors according to their specific need mentioned during the survey; help can be accessed through lecturers, campus-based student counsellors, student funding office, the disability office, housing, clinic and other support sectors. This is shown by the statements below:

But now it’s better after seeing the psychologist and whatever and with the support from Tammy who was my mentor and all that. I have come out of it now. **Focus group**

“During first year I was pretending to be fine but now I am seeing the counsellor because my mentor referred me”. **Nozizwe**

These quotes suggest that students don't want to be known as people who are academically challenged. The negative attitude towards intervention support changed after they received help, then they realize that they needed this support. Some participants claim that despite their negative attitude towards the programme it has proved to be a way out of their misery. Some participants felt that the programme assisted them by deeply focusing on issues that contributed to their underperformance and referred them to relevant support structures. This means that students who are performing poorly are less likely to come forward and receive support. This can be brought by number of issues such as ignorance (see **Nozizwe's** statement) as well as stigma (see **Nevan's** statement).

- **Academic counselling**

One-on-one academic counselling is provided to students who need academic guidance either by the Academic Monitoring and Support Coordinator, lecturers or an Academic Leader. This general academic support was designed to complement the module-specific support students receive from module tutors and coordinators. This is shown in the following statements:

“During my first year I was pregnant I came two weeks late, I actually became ‘at risk’ because I did not deregister two modules on time. When I went to admission office they said it was too late. But in my statement it shows that I failed because I did not write these two modules but I also saw that my credits were low. The programme coordinator referred me to the Academic coordinator to check my modules”. **Busisiwe**

“I was so afraid; I didn't know that you can go to the lecturers and asked them to explain what I didn't understand in class. In the support programme and also in ALE the lecturer advised us to go and consult if you didn't understand. You can write an assignment and ask lecturers to check it for you; it is fine. Firstly, I thought I was not allowed to go to their offices. I only realise that late but now I am fine because I can consult if I need help”. **Focus group, Busisiwe**

“In my second year, my results were not good; I had to consult the Dean. When you get result they tell you that you need to consult the Dean”. **Nozizwe**

In this case these quotes suggest that the intervention support programme assisted and encourages students to consult with academic staff regarding their curriculum, subject

specialization, academic work and other related issues. Data from interviews and focus group indicates that the support programme has motivated many students to take advantage of consultation times, academic counselling, and credit load checking and speaking to their lecturers. Some explained that they only realized after attending intervention programme that if they need help they can approach their lecturers. This suggests that student success may rely on well operated systems. It is clear that there is a gap in student's awareness of university systems.

- **Monitoring chart**

All Academic Monitoring and Support programme recipients were given monitoring charts for each of their courses. According to the monitoring chart, students must meet three times each semester with their module tutors, once with module coordinators, twice with academic counsellors and once with the Academic leader. Each staff member must comment on the student's progress, clearly stating the intervention support that the student has received and sign the chart after each meeting with the student. This was intended to provide transparency between staff and students with regards to the student's progress and intervention support provided. A monitoring chart must be completed for each module where the student is enrolled. The Academic leader will make a comment on the progress of each learner at the end of the semester for example, some students reported the following:

"I felt supported, I wish I had this support in my first year level; having monitoring chart made me feel like I have something concrete that makes me go and speak to my lecturers". Sabrina

"Another thing that pushed me was the monitoring chart that you show to your lecturers and asking them for support. I don't want to do that again that is why I had to work very hard". Busisiwe

"Monitoring chart makes you speak to your lecturers. But I didn't speak to my lecturers before"
Focus group

From this set of data participants indicated that the monitoring chart worked as a tool which encouraged, and forced them to consult with lecturers regarding their academic progress. For some the monitoring chart was an extra burden and that encouraged them to pass their modules

so that they could be exempted from the Academic Support and Monitoring programme. Some participants claimed that they felt the monitoring chart forced them to consult with lecturers and motivated some of them to work hard. This suggests that for some students the monitoring chart aided as a tool to force them to discuss their academic progress with their lecturers. For some it speeded the process of being in good standing academically because they wanted to be exempted from the programme (see **Busisiwe's** statement above).

- **Communication**

The Academic and Support Programme office uses bulk sms, e-mails and telephone calls to communicate with students and to disseminate information about meetings and appointments. These means of communication provides confidentiality between the student and the office. This is meant to inform and remind them to attend intervention programmes; for example, some students reported the following:

“Last year, second semester, I received an sms to attend the Academic and Support programme. It was then that I realised there is something wrong. I kept telling myself that I will do better than this but it didn't happen when I was told that I have to attend the programme I realised I needed help”. **Mbali**

“I got sms that I have to attend the intervention programme, this sms made me feel nervous”. **Luke**

“Student should be sent only sms and e-mail” **Khethiwe**

These quotes suggest that these students were very reluctant to be introspective or believe that they were not performing well academically and needed to seek help. Students do have an idea of how they may have performed in their examinations through their experience of writing examinations as well as their knowledge of their performance within the semester of the continuous assessment process of their modules. As soon as they receive notification through sms or emails it should serve as confirmation that they need help if they have not complied with regulations.

- **Workshops**

Intervention support workshops are held every Thursday during the forum period to provide students with additional support. These workshops are designed according to the needs and interests of students and deal with many issues including time management skills, life skills, study skills, academic writing skills, exam preparation etc. During these workshops, students break into smaller groups to give each other feedback and to provide group support based on the workshop led by the academic counsellors, workshop facilitator or a mentor. The support received by students is in line with the Supplementary Tutorial Programme (STP) model which includes among other aspects: Assisting students from under-privileged backgrounds to cope with the mainstream course; providing a separate, safe space for addressing their learning difficulties; developing study and writing skills; and clarifying key concepts and elements of content. Additional topics are added according to the current needs of the students whereby guest lecturers are invited to speak on specialized topics. Some of the students who attended the workshop indicated the following:

*“I take my books highlights things and write down notes, we received guideline notes from the intervention programme, I want to apply that as well. **Zodwa***

*“I was helped by the programme because they talk about stress **Sabrina**
The workshop reminded me that I am no longer in high school but at university now and how I should do things and keeps me to date”. **Sizwe***

*“I feel comfortable to be able to talk to other students in our meetings because they attend the programme and I can easily communicate with them. When they share their experiences you feel that you are not on your own”. **Focus group***

Data from interviews and focus group indicates that workshops assisted the students with note-taking skills, stress management, orientation to university life and they provided a space in which to talk and share experiences. This means that discussions during workshops and between students makes students realize that their challenges are not unique, other people are experiencing the same or worse (see **Focus group** statement above). The support students receive during the workshop discussions encourages them to strive for success.

6.3 USEFULNESS OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT AIMED AT SUPPORTING ‘AT-RISK’ STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

6.3.1 Students’ reflection after intervention support

This section of the data presentation, analysis and discussion relates to students’ reflection after intervention support. The study reveals participants’ views on how effective they perceived the nature and usefulness of academic support. It emerged from the study that the Academic and Support programme experienced by participants in this study provided a revelation discourse of technical support of the disability unit, financial support, health support and language support. Academic and Support also provided comfort and hope, provided collegial and collaborative learning discourse and contributed to a sense of community.

6.3.1.1 Participants’ views on how effective they perceived the nature and usefulness of academic support

Participants claimed that intervention support programmes that were provided had a positive impact on their lives.

- **Revelation discourse**

Data shows that the intervention programme experienced by participants in this study provided physical, psychological, emotional and educational support; by providing structured support. These programmes contributed to a sense of universality, mentorship, identified problems and gaps, enhanced skills and students’ accountability, provided motivation and gave hope for the future. In support of this view, Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby and Zepke (2004) observes that provision of specific support at the start of the study or peer tutoring, mentorship, as well as various other academic support, through institutional structures may improve student success.

- **Technical support**

Some participants expressed the view that the support programme provided technical support such as scholarship guidance, physical aid and residence arrangements. This reaction shows that physical circumstances can be a barrier to learning. Some of the students who found that the programme provided physical support had this to say:

“I had a hearing problem. When I spoke to Academic and Support programme coordinator about my challenges she contacted disability office which helped me a lot; now I have hearing aids and also got disability bursary. Now everything is OK I can hear the lectures well”.

Nokuthula

*I use to stay at university residence which is off campus and travel by bus which is a problem because if I don't catch a bus on time from university to our residence it means I have to take a taxi. Sometimes it is not safe in the evenings and sometimes that become a challenge if you still want to use the library. I told my mentor about my problem now I stay on-campus. **Khethiwe***

In this case the findings revealed that some students did not voluntarily disclose their challenges initially. This is more likely to prevent them from achieving good results in institutions of higher education unless probed. It shows that having a structure where students are free to voice concerns about their barriers to learning contributes to student's success. According to Quinn, Bennett, Humphreys, Nelson and Clarke (2011), peer mentors and advisors provide social and emotional support and they are also able to communicate effectively information that are necessary for 'at-risk' students in order to improve their chances of success.

- **Comfort and hope**

Data from this study show that some participants felt that the intervention programme provided them with emotional and psychological support. Some claimed that sharing challenges with other students in the programme and peer mentors made them feel that they were not on their own and

that experience brought resilience, comfort and hope. Ntakana (2011) confirms this view in that a student's emotional instability may result in thoughts of students quitting their studies.

It feels comfortable to know that you are not on your own; there are other students who have problems like you. **Focus group.**

“The Academic and Support programme makes me feel a whole again; it gives me hope that I can still make it” **Zodwa**

“As much as I didn't want to go to the programme, when I got there I realised that it is good to have someone to talk to” **Zodwa**

During my first year I was pretending to be fine but now I am seeing the counsellor because my mentor referred me to her”. **Nozizwe**

As one may notice from the above quotes, in this case the findings revealed that when students experienced failure they tended to lose hope. It shows that the support programme and counselling makes students feel that they are not on their own and that the experience brings resilience, comfort and hope. Literature indicates that the significance of using students in the role of peer advisor is important in enabling the success of intervention programme because peer advisors or peer mentors may be able to communicate more applicably and successfully with students on some issues. Equally, making use of a peer mentor provide socio-emotional support (Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby & Zepke, 2004) .

Collegial and Collaborative learning discourse

Data from this study show that some participants felt that the intervention programme enhanced their academic performance. Workshops provided them with academic skills. In line with this view, Ntakana (2011) observes that student support programmes assist students to cope with a number of academic challenges such as writing and study skills, simplifying key concepts and providing a safe space for addressing their learning difficulties.

Some of the students who indicated that the program provided enhanced their academic performance said:

My performance was not good, during workshops they advised us how to study, how to organise myself, time management the following semester I passed all my modules. I tried to follow all methods they were teaching us, it came at the right time for me” **Focus group**

Workshops made me change my attitude completely; you need this programme when you arrive at the university, when you need a direction and how to do things”. **Nevan**

In this case it shows that some students were empowered with academic skills and life skills that contributed to their success. Some students suggested that this support was needed from first year level and some thought it came at the right time, when they were struggling academically.

- **Physical support**

Institutional intervention and a support system like monitoring is experienced positively by some of the participants but some students feel they should have had this support from first year level. One of the students from the focus group claimed that the programme provided a platform whereby students shared their challenges and their ways of coping. This is shown in the selection of statements that follow:

*“I felt supported, I wish I had this support in my first year level, having monitoring chart made me feel like I have something concrete that makes me go and speak to my lecturers. I feel comfortable talking to support programme staff about my challenges”***Sabrina**

Some participants revealed that through the intervention programme their challenges were resolved. This is shown in the following statement:

“My mentor structured my work out for me to do on certain days. **Luke**

“I feel comfortable to be able to talk to other students in the programme because they understand the programme better than other students. When they share their experiences you feel that you are not on your own”. **Focus group**

Most participants confided that the monitoring chart provided tangible support and it motivated them to consult with lecturers regarding their academic progress. Participants also alluded to support that was provided by mentors on time management. Some participants expressed the view that attending the programme makes them feel part of the group and they were encouraged by sharing experiences with other members of the programme. In support of this view, Kuh (2001) observes that structured interventions can contribute to the increase of a positive culture.

- **Contributed to a sense of community**

Data from interviews and focus group reveal that the name of the support programme makes students comfortable about being part of the group because it did not make them feel inferior to other students. Participants felt that the programme contributed to a sense of community. This is shown in the following statements:

*“The Academic and Support programme makes me feel a whole again, it gives me hope that I can still make it. I just feel as if some people still believe in me and when my friends ask me about this Academic and Support meeting they don’t know what this is about”***Zodwa**

The name STAR doesn’t make us feel that we are anything, any less than other students; it’s a very confidential. **Focus group**

The positive name given to the support programme de-stigmatises the programme and creates a positive attitude towards attendance and commitment to the support programme. The programme is seen by some as support and they feel protected from being stigmatised .Some students described the positive value of feeling normal and having a sense of being cared for.

- **Evaluatory discourse**

Some participants confided that the programme had assisted them mainly by providing a space to talk, identify problems and refer them to relevant sectors for students to be further assisted in order to alleviate personal issues. One participant stated:

My mentor organized for me to meet my lecturer and discuss my progress and get advice. I thought I am not going to pass this module because I had to attend my usual hospital appointment and miss lectures **Luke, Focus group**

“During first year I was pretending to be fine but now I am seeing the counsellor because my mentor referred me”. **Nozizwe**

The participants claimed that intervention programme that provided one-on-one sessions offered an opportunity to talk freely to their peer-mentors about any psycho-social, academic and personal issues. Some students needed an extra hand to take responsibility or to seek appropriate help. Data show that if students do not have someone to talk to they can end up failing simply because they do not know where to seek help. In line with this view, Dobizl (2002) observes that providing formal programme using mentors or group counselling sessions, and providing an environment where help is always available to assist leads students toward a more fruitful and healthy lifestyle.

- **Enhanced skills and students’ accountability**

Data collected from interviews for this research indicated that participants valued the assistance that they received from workshops. This is shown in the following statement:

“My performance was not good, but during workshops they advised us on how to study, how to organise myself and how to implement time management. I followed the recommendation and the following semester I had passed all my modules. I still try to follow all the methods that they were teaching us. It came at the right time for me” **Nokuthula**

“When I was told I was part of the programme I didn’t like it at all but when I got there I was astonished about the assistance I got from the programme; it actually assisted me with the way I was doing things **Musa**

“Workshops made me change my attitude completely; you need this programme when you arrive at the university, when you need a direction and how to do things”. **Focus group**

When I got to the meeting I was assigned a mentor; am lucky that she is a female. She reminds me of my deadlines. **Focus group**

From participants’ responses it was noted that the students benefited from the support programme in terms of time management skills and adhering to deadlines. Another participant indicated that as much as he did not want to attend the programme it made him reflect on how he was doing things. One participant confided that being assisted by a mentor who was a female made her comfortable. In support of this view, Zajacova & Espenshade (2005) point out that a gap in study skills and practices, self-management capability or academic ability may be open to early intervention and improvement.

- **Motivation and hope for the future**

Participants both from interviews and the focus group claimed that attending a programme reminded them of what they should be doing and it motivated them to do well. This is shown in statements below:

Yes, I do attend; I was motivated when I came to the meeting; mentor programme is helping me at first I was not sure about attending but now I am attending and feeling comfortable with that.

Focus group

“I wouldn’t say that it makes me feel like I am a low-performing student but at the same time it makes me to pull up my socks , it is developing me, reminding me what I should be doing” **Sizwe**

“The programme always pushed me to work hard.” **Busisiwe**

“The Academic and Support programme makes me feel a whole again, it gives me hope that I can still make it. I just feel as if some people still believe in me” **Zodwa**

Data shows that a positive attitude towards ‘at-risk’ students contributes towards the change of behaviour. By showing that one believes in them, makes them believe in themselves. Participants claimed that they felt empowered and motivated by attending the programme. The information above shows that using a positive lens, focusing on students’ strengths and talents and encouraging them to work hard boosts their self-esteem and gives them hope for the future. Student with self-esteem are motivated and that makes learning a rewarding experience (Kirkham & Ringelstein, 2008)

6.3.2 WHAT PARTICIPANTS CONSIDER AS A NECESSARY RESPONSE TO SUPPORTING STUDENTS ‘AT RISK’

- **Timing of the support programme**

Within this category of data presentation and analysis, the participants commented on the timing of the support programme they experienced. Both focus group discussion and participants’ interviews reflect contradictory statements about the timing of the programme. Most students felt that the programme was reactive and some felt it came at the right time. This is shown by statements below:

‘I think this programme came at the right time in my academic career; before you give up. **Focus group**

“I think this programme should be in the first year because you will know there is something like failure, how to prevent failure like this programme is doing. Before students become ‘at risk’, it should be introduced at a first year level” **Focus group**

“the problem is in the first year, as a foundation year, once you fail in the first year it means that everything is messed up, but the programme is supporting you when you have already failed”

Zodumo

“It has helped me face my problems and it came at the right time for me” **Nozizwe**

“I felt supported, wish I had this support in my first year level” Sabrina

Most participants suggested that the timing of the intervention programme missed the crucial part of prevention. They highlighted the view that they should have received this support when they were feeling very anxious, vulnerable and during the transition stage in order to avoid failure at a later stage. This is a call for a pro-active approach regarding an intervention programme for first years.

6.4 Concluding comments relating to the value of the Academic and Support programme offer to students ‘at risk’

Students highlighted both benefits and shortfall of attending intervention support. These are the benefits: (i) breaking the isolation barrier – meaning that students had come to realize that they need not work in isolation – that there were benefits and tangible support that they could get by attending support programmes and did not just have to rely on their own strengths; (ii) forced exposure to support services offered at the institutional level – without this forced exposure through the Academic and Support programme students would assume that there was no or little assistance to students outside of their lectures to assist them cope with the demands of academic life; (iii) regulated compliance – a means to get students on track by consciously accessing the support services available to all students; (iv) monitoring progress – meaning that students were under positive surveillance to encourage them to continue receiving support and ultimately leading to student improvement – something that they may not realize if they were not monitored.

As much as some participants realized the value of attending the support programme, the comments highlighted shortfalls of the programme which includes: (i) programme being reactive which means students were formally informed about their status after they failed a first-semester exam. This reactive approach might have missed the “great moment of need”, by not offering immediate help to students. (ii) Stigma which means some students targeted ‘at-risk’ attended intervention programmes and some did not because some feel stigmatized and they feel embarrassed to consult with their lecturers because of labelling. (iii) Timing which means

workshops took place during the forum period and some students did not attend these programmes because of other commitments, group sessions and social activities.

6.5 Data Analysis Summary

This chapter presented and analysed and interpreted second section of data. In the overall analysis, using a combination of document analysis, focus group discussion and individual interview methods, the data for this study was triangulated. Participants were purposively selected. Students' files, as well as information from DMI (Data Management Information) were used to obtain participants' biographical information from the Admissions Office. The biographical information was validated with information the students gave during the individual interview. Documents on biographical information were analysed for reliability and consistency with data on the student from each individual interview source. The information elicited included information on students' background as documented with the CAO (Central Application Office). Details of this information indicate the student's socio-economic status, gender, age, home address and school address, and Matric (entry level) results. Other source of information from documents was the student fee statement which shows the participant's funding status; whether the student resides off campus or use university residences. Information given in this document is also validated and triangulated with individual interview data from the participant.

Participants comprised of students considered as "at risk" at the beginning of the academic session. At the end of the academic session, their performance was accessed. Their academic records were requested from Admissions Office. Details of information contained in academic records documents included student number and name, indicators of student's progress, the student's level of risk, (i.e. whether the student remained at same level of risk 1 or risk 2 or if that is changed), the student year of study and phase specialization. This document was analysed for reliability and consistency and for congruence with the information given by the student during the individual interview as well as emerging information on students' experiences at the focus group discussion. Narratives of their experiences of academic support and intervention, their understandings of the "at-risk" status and how they navigate and associate their academic performance as 'at risk' students were juxtaposed with data obtaining in the academic records.

Data shows participants claimed that they felt empowered and motivated by attending the intervention programme and that positive attitude towards understanding and accepting 'at-risk' student status contributed to the change of behaviour by way of believing in themselves. Participants claimed that their experiences of the intervention support programmes that were provided had a positive impact on their lives. Thus, participants felt that their participation in the intervention programme enhanced their academic performance. The documents analysed collaborated in part the participants' claim. Whereas, from analysis it can be said that those student who participated in the intervention programme made progresses and advances in their academic performance, it is not equally possible to say same for those who were identified, targeted and were not able to access the intervention programmes. The reason for this perhaps remains beyond speculative domains and is a gap that must draw our attention.

The next chapter discusses the key findings from the data presentation and analysis on academic and non-academic challenges that impacted on students' university work, students' experiences of academic monitoring and support and other relevant issues, as reviewed in the literature.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the key findings from the previous chapters of data presentation and analysis. These key findings relate to academic and non-academic challenges that impacted on students' university work and how participants dealt with those challenges. Key theoretical concepts from the Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Attribution Theory by Weiner (1992), Vygotsky's Social development theory (1978) and Chickering's Theory of Student Development (1969) informed the discussion of the findings leading to my theorisation that explains the key findings. These models served as a framework that examines interrelated factors that contribute to students' failure and makes it possible in this qualitative study, to analyse effectively the contributing factors relating to 'at risks' students' experiences and the students' environment. The complex nature of student academic support related to student academic performance, which was presented in the previous chapters, require a multiple approach, hence the use of four theoretical frameworks. Each of these frameworks presents different scopes, acknowledging that there are a multitude of scopes beyond these four when discussing the key findings. The ecological systems framework provides a relational understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, while the attribution theory provides a framework to understand how students account for their underperformance. Social development theory provides a framework to understand how collaborative learning occurs within zones of proximal development, including that of school education, account for students' performance within higher education. The last one, student development theory, provides an understanding of students' issues as their lives progress.

7.2 Discussion of results

Key findings from the data presentation and analysis chapters are presented in this section with a view to making explicit its relation to our current knowledge of these findings and to show areas in which extensions to our current knowledge are made. The key findings are largely discussed in relation to the aims of the study.

The study intended to establish academic and non-academic challenges that impact on students' university work. Results show that academic as well as non-academic factors, are complex in nature; many are rooted in the school experience and they surface when students enter higher education. The results also reveal that students experience academic and non-academic challenges throughout their period of study; some dominate at each level. When students show poor performance they attribute their failure to a combination of many factors, including themselves as individuals, the institution, as well as the family and outside environment. This combination of factors fits appropriately within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model as a framework in this study as it examines interrelated factors (both internal and external) that contribute to students' failure. The multiple play of causal factors is in line with literature which states that children are located in the centre of their nested structures therefore they are endlessly affected in one way or another by changes that occur in the environment that surrounds them (Howard & Johnson, 2000). Changes that occur within themselves, at home, the university environment, school environment and society have an impact on their academic life. According to participants in this study, academic factors that compromised their performance can be categorized as follows: lack of support for translation of medium of instruction to mother tongue in higher education, lack of readiness for higher education and lack of career guidance. These students also alluded to non-academic factors that compromised their performance such as environmental factors being a challenge.

7.2.1 Academic factors that compromise students' performance

Findings revealed that some academic factors that compromised students' performance in higher education did not only emanate from higher learning institutions; they were also rooted in secondary education. These findings suggest that while these factors are rooted in secondary school experiences they manifest themselves at university when students are being challenged by expectations of higher learning education. The implication of this finding is that from secondary school students have to be taught to take responsibility for their own studies, be introduced to self-directed learning to prepare them for higher learning demands. The following, more specific discussions on root causes and implications for higher education are presented below:

- **Lack of support for translation from medium of instruction to mother tongue in higher education**

This finding suggests that students have become accustomed to being supported in lessons and regarding key concepts through translation in IsiZulu while in school but when they enter higher learning institutions, that support is no longer there. This suggests that translation is seen as positive and reinforcing at secondary school level but the discontinuation of language support in higher learning is a negative feature and an inhibiting experience for students. This translation support received at school did not prepare students for higher education in a language that is not their mother tongue. Students are challenged when trying to understand lecturers and content taught as well as afraid to participate and ask questions because of their lack of confidence in their participation through an English-medium lecture engagement. Using the ideal of Vygotsky's social learning theory, the school education processes provided a context of learning through instructions and translations that formed the norm in that zone of proximal development. With the shift of the site of education to the higher education environment, the zone of proximal learning changed (to the higher education site) and this new site of learning for the student has its own social learning process. A single, mother-tongue language is not common across the student population, hence learning through instruction and translation is absent and this absence characterise the new zone of proximal development. The students in this study found it difficult to cope with the changes in their zone of proximal learning, partly accounting for the poor academic performance.

This finding is not out of sync with literature on language, learning and medium of instruction across first and second-language speakers, which broadly suggest that the cognitive abilities of the students are not in question. Rather the access to epistemology is compromised by their language differences between lecturer and student caused largely by non-participating in class or students being hesitant to speak up in the classroom (Steyn, 2009). They are not used to express themselves in English, speaking in the classroom and prefer to ask their friends. The support that was offered by the school (to interpret for the student) learning was positive in the short term but this support contributed negatively as students progressed to higher education institution. This outcome highlighted the disconnection in the use of the medium of instruction between two

microsystems that are interacting such as the school and higher institution. Findings of a similar nature were also discussed by Leibowitz (2004) in that students are not only dealing with the challenges of adapting to a new academic environment but with challenges of using the language at university which is not their first language. Other scholars who is in agreement with the finding of that study argue that one of the contributing factors for students performing poorly at university in South Africa is that, for many, their language of learning, usually English, is not their mother tongue (Leibowitz 2005; Niven 2005; Pretorius 2005; Van der Walt & Brink 2006). Research has identified the fact that the use of English as the medium of instruction has some limitations for second language speakers as well as the community. That is the reason why UKZN policy aims at confirming that the English language should not create a hurdle to success in higher education by giving isiZulu-speaking students a chance of an alternative medium of instruction (Kamwendo, Hlongwa & Mkhize, 2013).

From this finding, the study confirms that language is still a major barrier to academic performance, but this study goes further by indicating the nature of the language barrier experienced; one which is related to school cultural practices (school ecology) and that is different from the higher education culture experience (higher education ecology). In other words, although secondary school education for participants was in the medium of English, the on-going support that these learners were given in terms of translation and making cognitive sense through this translation is now missing in their higher education studies. It therefore seems that translation for cognitive sense is an area that needs greater engagement both at the level of school as well as at higher education institutions. The language cultural practices are different and there needs to be more focused introspection on how the translation support for epistemological access is gradually minimised through schooling into higher education so that students take on the responsibility of developing their language competence in the medium of instruction (socialisation into higher education). In some international contexts, students are required to take language courses to develop their language competence needed to participate in learning in a language different from that of previous learning instruction. This course of action is a complex and political one, especially in a land where multiple languages are constitutionally enshrined. Perhaps other action steps are needed, with a view to developing in students' alternative ways of developing this cognitive sense-making that will support their higher

education studies. Hence, a more nuanced understanding of language issues relating to translation and cognition is needed.

Blame discourse (attribution) is another issue that this finding illuminates. At first the students shift the blame to the university as they find it difficult to engage with lecturers and content because they use English throughout the lecture but later realise that as much as the translation was helpful at school level, it did not prepare them for higher learning. At a recent conference held in Johannesburg (5th-6th of August 2013) on student development, success, and retention at universities and FET colleges, the poor schooling system was blamed for the poor quality of students entering higher education indicating that they lacked foundational competences such as literacy and numeracy. This blame claim is of concern because, in this study, and in this case study institution, students were admitted into their degree programme through a selection process based on national matriculation (Grade 12) results. There have been broad claims of poor literacy amongst learners in South Africa schools which compromises their success in higher education (Deller, 2010). The limited number of students entering higher education institutions suggests that they were deemed to be capable of succeeding in higher education studies; hence these broad-blame discourses do not resonate with its rationality related to poor schooling. Rather epistemological access to the field of study seems to be the challenge, and from the accounts of these students “at risk” in this study, it seems that translation for cognitive access is at the heart of the challenge, and not their abilities or capabilities. This study therefore points out that we need to shift our discourses on poor academic performance away from blame discourses to intervention discourses that will facilitate epistemological access to learning, like that of the Academic and Support programme institutionalised where this study is located.

- **Lack of readiness for higher education and the transition challenge**

Adjusting to university could be regarded as a crucial factor in student success. For most students, the ways of doing things differ from that which they have been accustomed to at school. Nevertheless, many students enter university with the ability to adapt their approaches and methods in order to effectively participate in the different disciplinary discourses or communities of practice that they encounter. The literature suggests, however, that this is not

equally straightforward for all students and that underprepared students will, for example, experience the gap between school and university more acutely (Niven, 2005). Findings from the participants revealed that students felt unprepared for higher learning because of the demand and customary gap between secondary school and higher learning institutions which contributed to their poor performance. There is a mismatch of expectations between secondary school and university in terms of the level of responsibility, teaching style, life skills, academic expectation; discipline, conduct and maturity, all of which comes as a culture shock in higher institutions.

Research over the last three decades indicates that student under-preparedness is a complex phenomenon, in at least two key respects. Firstly, it is multi-faceted, involving not only subject knowledge but cognitive, epistemological, affective and socio-cultural dimensions. Secondly, attributing causality is not simple, given the range of dimensions that affect student performance, compounded by the (inherited) racially determined social and economic inequalities that continue to characterise South Africa (CHE, 2013). Under-preparedness manifests itself in a range of ways, from struggling in the formal curriculum to difficulty with adjusting to independent study and a university environment. It takes different forms in different subject areas but the common feature in all settings is that what the students know and can do – attainments that were good enough to gain them entry to higher education – do not match the expectations of the institution (CHE, 2013). As a result some students take time to adjust to the new setting where expectations are different.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory allows one to understand the nature of ecological relationships between the elements that constitutes the system. In this case, adjustment into an existing ecological system of higher education, with each element in its stable relationship with other elements of that system, was seen as a potential problem for the students of this study. The longer one takes to adjust to the system, the more marginalised that element (in this case the student) becomes, affecting not just her/himself, but his/her relationship with other elements that constitute this ecological system. The implications for the student therefore manifest themselves through his/her academic performance.

The key finding regarding transition and adjustment is in agreement with researchers such as Horn, Kojaku and Carroll (2001), Martinez and Klopott (2003) as well as Warburton, Bugarin and Nunez (2001) who state that the intensity of the school curriculum, the quality of academic

experience and teaching and learning style all have a direct impact on a student's readiness for higher education; this affects almost every aspect of success in post-secondary education. Similar findings were discussed by Vakalisa, (2008) who states that students who receive poor quality schooling tend to lack the range of academic skills such as study skills and time management demanded by higher education. On the other hand, Fraser & Killen (2005) suggest that it is not only restricted to South African but is also noted in developed countries. The impact of globalisation on higher education and the resultant "radical diversification of students" have been attested to by Northedge (2003) from the UK, the USA and Australia (Grimes, 1997 & Maloney, 2004).

Findings reveal that students felt that they were not ready for higher learning as they consider it a big jump from high school to university. The amount of work they are given at present is more than what they are used to and they feel overwhelmed. All participants related to the transition between secondary school and university, the challenges they faced and how they dealt with the situation and various support they received either from friends, peers, guardians and the institution. The challenges they experienced had a wide variety of variables from having to take ownership of their studies, to self-discipline, to adjusting to teaching style to the way they now had to engage with academic writing.

Participants alluded to the school environment and school background as factors that contributed to their poor performance. The lack of electricity affected their scientific skills as they were unable to do scientific experiments, or technology practical work. Ushie, Emeka, Ononga, and Owolabi (2012), speak of how the degrees of complexity of the students' background could influence, for example, their ability to deal with academic language and engage with the content, with students from a less sophisticated background encountering more difficulty in effectively employing skills and the language of academia. As much as all students are challenged by the transition to higher education in terms of skills required, those that come from disadvantaged schools and under-resourced schools face even greater challenges. Some students who are living away from home find it more difficult to deal with the transition as compared to those that are living with their parents but some felt that living at home contributed to their failure in terms of family chores, responsibility and getting involved with all family issues which negatively affected their concentration. Ajila and Olutola (2000) speak of home as the environment that has

a great influence on the child's psychological, emotional, social and economic state since the parents are the first socializing agents in an individual's life. It is true that the home environment influences children, whether it is bad or good influence. For an example, some students who stayed at home benefitted from the parental involvement such as using fathers' internet access from his office but one had the responsibility at home to look after siblings because of the death of a mother. This home environment influence emphasises that there are other hidden factors that may contribute to students performing poorly in higher learning and which make it difficult to adapt to academic discourse. It is argued that viewing disadvantaged students as being under-prepared for higher education is a deficit approach, elitist and unhelpful; the view is that preparedness for higher education institutions of these students should be considered (Ajila and Olutola, 2000).

- **Lack of career guidance**

Most participants alluded to lack of guidance as a contributing factor to their performance. Literature suggests that making wrong choices before entering higher education is a key factor in withdrawal and non-completion. Career choices therefore have a significant role in a student's performance and interest during the undergraduate programme at university and could be regarded as a critical factor in student success. Literature suggests that "many students are seriously under-informed on key issues about their choice of an institution" as they rely on word of mouth, hearsay and vague impressions of institutions rather than well-founded, adequate information (McInnis et al. 2000). Most students in the study spoke of career choices as their biggest challenge, and attested to various ways of how they were informed about choosing their careers and modules. Some were informed by friends, some by family, some by teachers and through some hearsay. Some students alluded to the fact that teaching was never their first choice and that made them struggle to accept that they were studying to become teachers see. Attribution Theory allows one to understand why and on whom students shift the blame. It provides insight into different explanations that participants give when explaining the reasons for selecting inappropriate career choices. They lay the blame on others for poor or inappropriate career decisions as they lack proper skills to make choices. In this case they lay the blame on the external factor (school) by saying that they were not properly guided. They relied on those in their community which included family, friends and other people. Some realised this when they

already started the career and changed to careers they felt suitable. The self-discovery of wrong career choices has a negative impact in terms of time-frame. The longer students take to realise they are on the wrong career path the longer they take to complete their degrees. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory mentions that adolescents do not develop in a vacuum but rather develop with the multiple contexts of their families, communities and countries. Students are influenced by their friends, family and community with whom they are in contact. This influence can have a negative or positive repercussion.

The education the students receive should make them aware about the expectations and requirements of basic personal qualities to succeed in any occupation (Maree & Beck 2004). The literature further suggests that integration of the induction process into the subject-specific curriculum helps students to learn in the context of their discipline (Warren, 1998). Some settled for a teaching career because of their matric points which prevented them from taking up their dream career. This suggests that both institutions as well as schools should play larger important role in guiding students when choosing careers before enrolment. Literature suggests that the problem lies with the schools in South Africa which are under-utilizing Life Orientation periods (Maree & Beck 2004). Some schools use it to cover the syllabus for other subjects and other schools do not have qualified teachers to teach Life Orientation as a subject (Chireshe, 2012). Jayasinghe (2001) commented that career guidance and counselling is a process which assists an individual to gain skills they need to make choices. As learners do not receive proper guidance and counselling in South African schools they will not have a clear sense of suitable potential careers (Maree, 2007). The lack of knowledge results in students transferring to another degree after a semester or a year which negatively affects the graduation period.

7.2.2 Non-academic factors that compromise students' performance

The study also intended to establish non-academic factors that compromised students' performance. Data suggest that such factors could be grouped into two categories: environmental and personal factors.

7.2.2.1 Environmental factors as challenges

Environmental factors are those that one finds in the surrounding of the individual. According to Bronfenbrenner (1995), environmental factors are found in the home environment (microsystem) and in the other systems in which the life of the individual is nested. The findings of the study highlight administrative procedures and institutional support as some of the common challenges that students have to face during their professional training. From the data, environmental factors play out as inadequate time management, incorrect registration of modules, difficulty in adjusting to university life, insufficient financial resources, and poor living conditions. All the above that can be looked at as sub-factors prove to affect students' performance negatively. Environmental factors are found both within the university and the home environment.

i) Challenges from the university environment

- Curriculum advice

A key finding emerging from the data is that curriculum advice to students in their first year of registration is absent. There are several possible reasons for this absence. The first is that students do not attend orientation programmes where such advice is given. Their non-attendance either relates to their having no interest in attending such orientation or that the orientation programmes are held at times when students are not available. Their unavailability could be related to late registrations, other registration issues that the student has to attend to at the expense of the orientation programme, or other factors like finance, accommodation, and travel from their home town. The second could be related to students who find that the orientation programmes do not assist them as first entry students and therefore they do not attend, thereby missing out on crucial inputs. Other reasons could be that the institution does not provide appropriate curriculum advice, rather the curriculum engagement is about filling in the

registration forms for correctness, rather than advising the student on what would be the most appropriate career for the student. Literature suggests that student success is promoted by significant and progressive contact with curriculum advisors (Kuh, 2001). I am in agreement with the statement because when students receive academic advice, they monitor and keep track of their progress which ultimately gives them a clear direction regarding their career and degree completion rules.

- Module registration hurdles

Correct registration and the administrative aspect of modules is one of the important factors that contribute towards student performance and degree completion. The study found that some first year students had incorrectly registered for modules, due either to confusion about the technical details of modules or the registration process was incomplete. First year students are challenged by new module names, codes, timetable and completion of registration forms and other registration processes. Failure to follow correct registration procedures results in students enrolling for the wrong modules and /or having insufficient credits which ultimately will result in student being categorised as ‘at risk’ of not completing a degree within minimum period. This finding is in line with literature in that first year students experience challenges sorting out the administrative part of academic life which contributes negatively towards their performance (Terenzini et al., 1996). “Massification” is here to stay therefore institutions could respond to this concern by training registration teams to ensure that students have inserted the correct codes when completing registration forms and that a computer system be developed to pick up errors (wrong codes); for example, the system can be developed in such a way that students do not register less or more modules per semester or the system should identify module that belongs to each semester. One could suggest that, to eliminate administration hurdles, institutions should train a team of senior students in such a way that they understand the first-year curriculum and are able to assist junior students during the registration period. Mentors could assist first years during registration; this was done by the Academic Monitoring and Support mentorship programme so that new students have a peer support and someone to walk them to the relevant offices.

- Financial constraints

A financial difficulty is another sub-factor that impacts negatively on student's success within the university environment. As much as access increased the number of students in higher education, finance remains a challenge within the university environment. Access has brought students from different socio-economic backgrounds, some of whom depend on social grants for survival. In some cases, this study noted that students who received scholarships in higher education ended up using funds to support their families. In South Africa some learners receive free education at a school level in public schools and some receive free lunch at school. When students enter university they are expected to provide themselves with the basic means of living yet their economic status remains the same. As a result, self-funded students who aspire to study further are faced with the challenge of balancing part-time work and full-time study. The time factor and physical strength become a challenge when students are expected to attend lectures, meet assessment deadlines and accommodate work schedules (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh and Wilss, 2008). Due to lack of financial resources students end suffer anxiety and stress which is an emotional matter noted in Chickering's theory of Identity Development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Chickering theory of Identity Development helps in understanding that when students fail to manage their emotions it impacts negatively on their performance. This suggests that lack of funding contributes negatively to students' well-being in higher education and what is noted in this study is that while students struggle to get registration fees, lack of funding continues to be a barrier in degree completion. This means that their poor performance may not be as a result of their cognitive ability but environmental factors such as financial constraints. This finding is similar to findings in literature which state that students' financial problems can lead to academic challenges once they take on employment (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause, & McInnis, 2004). Students often end up not attending all classes, come home tired and this negatively affect their performance once they are employed.

- Living conditions

In relation to this issue, the study found that living conditions were related to academic progress; for example, the data suggest, and this is well documented in the literature, that noisy on-campus residences and living far away from campus are the two extremes that have a major impact on students' academic progress. There are several implications of non-conducive living conditions

which negatively affect students' academic progress. Firstly a noisy environment which in this case refers to noisy residences makes the learning environment unsuitable.

This results in students having difficulty studying in their rooms; this ultimately affects students' performance. Secondly, living far from campus refers to living at home or in private accommodation that is a long distance from campus. Living away from campus compromises students' attendance at late group sessions; limits access to university resources such as the library, other university activities and of course lectures. Thirdly, the transport issue in this case refers to buses leaving campus at inconvenient times to off-campus residence; this limits access to the use of university resources because of a lack of convenient public transport. This means that poor performance is not necessarily compromised by individual ability but by external factors in this case (living environment). Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, Kuh (2008) suggest that for students a conducive living environment is one of the keys to academic success.

- Adjustment to a university environment and poor sense of prioritising

Environmental adjustment and a poor sense of prioritising (time management) being one of the sub-factors, was a challenge faced by several of the participants suggesting that it was a major concern for students' transition from school education settings to higher education. Students were accustomed to respond to a bell and teachers giving many reminders at school level, while at university, students were expected to keep time and manage their responsibilities within the time available to them, thereby shifting the responsibility of time and task management from an external element to an internal control system within the student. The participants in this study found it a challenge to plan and manage their time independently and this challenge manifested itself in their poor academic performance.

The longer one takes to get accustomed to the way of doing things in a new environment the more marginalised one becomes. The build-up affects other settings and ultimately students disengage from university (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001); for example, when a student registers late she/he doesn't only miss academic guidance but is also too late to secure convenient accommodation and too late to apply for funding. This has a snow-balling effect; administrative mistakes, result in the build-up of cumulative effects.

- **Institutional support**

Institutional support is one of the challenges that were experienced by participants in this study. The study found that institutional support was one of the key elements that impacted on students' success. Some students in this study experienced the use of computers for the first time at university, some ended up with heavy workloads and some did not understand Duly Performance (course mark) rules and how to use Moodle (the module management system which is software based). In the case of using computers for the first time, students experiencing difficulty to engage with their studies because they lacked computer literacy skills. These development issues in preparing students for operating within a higher-education learning environment can result in poor performance as students struggled to master basic computer skills. In the case of heavy load, students sometimes register for more modules than the norm (usually the modules that they failed in the previous year and which are taken simultaneously with the current module load for the year). Heavy module load results in a challenge of trying to master all tasks and assessment schedule. The use of Moodle by lecturers and tutors without support contributes to poor academic progress; for example, lecturers may post documents on Moodle but if students do not know how to access Moodle then teaching and learning is compromised. Yorke and Longden (2008) claim that students who lack basic skills, fail to adjust to the unfamiliar approaches to learning and this may result in poor academic standing. This suggests that institutional support, such as effective strategies at the point of entry which encourage participative learning, may elicit academic success. Considering the transition period that students go through the at the point of entry, institutions should have strategies in place and be prepared to assist students through the developmental stage. Early introduction of basic computer skills and technical concepts may ease the transition period, and academic engagement may be enhanced.

ii) Challenges from the home environment

- **Family support**

Family support is a crucial factor indicated by participants in this study and one which contributes to poor academic performance. The study revealed that family support develops

persistence in students. This persistence has two possible outcomes. The first outcome, as suggested by the data, is that students continue to struggle in their academic programme, because they have been encouraged to continue with their studies despite the difficulties the student is experiencing. In this instance, the family support is damaging to the student's academic progress, largely because of the problems that the student is experiencing and which have not been resolved; however, the student feels compelled to continue. The second possible outcome of this persistence to continue is that of encouragement to overcome hurdles. In this scenario, students persist, with positive results, due to this encouragement, despite the obstacles that the student may experience. This finding is in line with the literature which suggests that the family has a great influence on one's psychological, emotional, social and economic state since the parents are the first socializing agents in an individual's life (Ajila & Olutola, 2000). Schwanz et al. (2014) maintain that that parental support is considerably and positively interrelated with a variety of academic consequences such as academic adjustment, persistence, and achievement. Family support usually keeps students motivated, eager to do well and they become resilient despite all odds.

7.2.2.2 Personal factors

A number of participants in this study attributed their failure to personal factors. It is clear from this study that addressing and eliminating these factors could result in academic success. Personal factors mentioned by participants that contributed to their poor academic performance included a lazy attitude, self-distractions, unplanned/unwanted pregnancy, poor relationships, misuse of scholarship funds and poor decision making.

- Lazy attitude

A lazy attitude is one of the sub-factors under personal factors that seem to be of concern regarding students' performance. What is noted in this study is that in some instances students fail to own responsibility and attribute their failure to external factors; for example, the issue of students who miss important due dates because they do not read the university handbook or course packs. The issue of students who miss lectures or fail to study because of laziness also ultimately impacts negatively on their performance but may not necessarily relate to their ability to cope academically.

- Self- distraction

It is also noted from this study that students become distracted and lose concentration; they often waste time on surfing the internet, facebook, chatting to friends using their mobile phones and watching television (Edinyang & Ubi, 2013). When students are distracted from their studies the issue of time management and the amount of time lost and valuable information missed becomes a concern. It is the students' responsibility to prioritise and realign their focus. In practice, students who are distracted tend to run around close to the due dates for tasks or assessment resulting in their performance being compromised.

- Unplanned / unwanted pregnancy

Unplanned pregnancy is one of the sub-factors under personal factors to which some participants attributed their failure. Freedom could be one of the factors that some students misuse or abuse in higher education. Most students in higher education experience living on their own for the first time and some engage in intimate relationships for the first time. They engage in intimate relationships without proper guidance or knowledge such as prevention that result in various negative circumstances. Some end up opting for adoption of the child, some become young single parents and some opt for abortion. It is evident that all these choices have an impact on students' emotional well-being. Another balancing act by students, suggested through this study is that students may find it difficult to deal with both studies as well as parental responsibility. This non-cognitive feature should also be considered as one of the predictors of academic success or lack of success.

- Negative influence

Some students in this study attributed their poor performance to bad relationships they had in higher education. In this case bad relationships meant development of connections inside or outside campus life with both same and /or different genders. These relationships resulted in their shifting of the main focus from their studies and had unintended, undesirable consequences; for an example: students attend parties with friends and become involved in drugs. Left unchecked, this negatively affects their academic performance. In practice, the consequences are not only students failing and repeating modules but also standing a chance of losing scholarships which are merit based. Ultimately this can result in students dropping out of university, not

because they fail to engage with epistemological knowledge but because of non-academic factors such as making bad choices regarding friends. It is not unusual in the literature to come across challenges such as the above in other modern institutions. This finding is in-line with literature in that first year students are faced with the challenge of handling choices in relationships and social engagement (Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). Hartley et al., (2005) further explains that making choices goes hand in hand with consequences and failure to make appropriate choices invariably compromises academic performance.

- Mishandling of scholarship funds

Mishandling of scholarship funds seems to be one of the elements putting students ‘at-risk’ when it comes to personal factors that compromise academic success in this study. Mishandling of scholarship funds in this case mean the usage of scholarship funds for non-academic purposes; often students compromise their benefits and use the money to support their families. As much as supporting families is a good cause, when it impedes academic success expedient and there is no long term gain. Another concern is that there is lack a of financial literacy in higher education and as a result students tend to conform and want to fit in, resulting in them focusing on material things which ultimately compromise their studies. The majority of students especially from disadvantaged backgrounds become exposed to money handling when they start higher learning education. This implies that there is a need for higher education institutions to incorporate financial literacy into the orientation to cater for personal development needs.

From the findings above, it is evident that factors that affect students are interlinked; for example, students being awarded funding and having to manage these scholarship funds. All factors at play should therefore be considered when factors that affect their learning are addressed. While all the above factors are known to have implications on students’ academic progress within higher education, how students deal with these issues is of concern this relates to their academic progress.

7.2.3 Students' approach to personal challenges

Students' approach to challenges can be regarded as a critical factor in student success. Students deal with challenges differently depending on the nature of the problem and students' personalities and environment. The central concern, throughout this study, is how one minimises the impact of these factors of students' lives and their academic progress. On the positive side however, many students adapt and develop survival skills. This is what emerged regarding how students dealt with their problems:

- Dealing with lack of academic resources

Purchasing of text books was noted as an aid to support students learning. Students were not able to purchase their own text books due to lack of financial resources. Some students borrowed books from their fellow students, while others relied on library resources. Two issues emerged from this finding that could be related to student academic progress. The first one relates to having unhindered access to learning-support materials, which in the case of some students was not possible as they could not purchase these resources. The second was not borrowing learning-support materials due to embarrassment and self-pity thus resulting in them not having access to these vital support materials. In both instances, students' academic progress is compromised. Higher education is perceived as a gateway to financial and personal success. University studies are expensive as it involves tuition fees, study material, travel, subsistence and accommodation. Steyn and Kamper (2011) identified the primary cause of withdrawal amongst full-time students as being caused by financial difficulties.

Borrowing of books, due to financial constraints, can therefore be seen as a psychological matter because it affects students' self-esteem and creates great embarrassment for those who need to borrow.

- Dealing with the career affirmation stage

This study shows that students experience challenges during the affirmation stage of their career of choice. During the transition stage from high school to higher education institution, students go through stages of career choices and affirmation. Students complete secondary school education with a career of interest in mind. During the affirmation stage, post decisional conflict develops. At this stage they seek advice either through their friends, get exposed to the intended career or become aware of an alternate career path. Firstly, in relation to seeking advice from friends, post decisional conflict arises when they change their minds for the wrong reasons; for example, when they receive advice from peers about how easy/difficult the course is, some register for a module because they followed their friends' advice and some make a decision based on an attitude towards the course. Secondly, in relation to exposure to the alternative career path, students end up transferring to another phase of specialization or changing to another degree because of post-decisional conflict. At this stage, students end up losing focus and interest on their current study, resulting in poor academic performance. Chickering's theory of Identity Development allows one to understand that when students enter higher education they experience a "Developing purpose" vector whereby they make commitments to personal interest and seek advice. This finding shows that as much as participants in this study had reached a developing purpose stage appropriate guidance was a concern.

- Dealing with lack of basic needs

Some participants, who lacked basic needs such as food, went through psychological and physical suffering. This experience resulted in loss of hope and ultimately thoughts of quitting their studies. This finding shows that poverty remains a barrier to degree completion in higher education. It is not surprising that Steyn, (2009) suggests that the relationship between finances and academic success cannot be underestimated.

Dealing with lack of basic needs therefore can be seen as predictor of emotional, psychological and physical problems because it creates anxiety, stress and despondency which often lead to giving up on studies. Support strategies like provision of food for desperately needy students could be implemented to alleviate poverty as the Academic and Support programme provides such intervention which assists most students.

Findings based on the above show that participants in this study dealt with personal problems differently. Some talked about them and some kept quiet. Some sought help from friends and family members and some used relevant university support sectors. Chickering and Reisser (1993) mention that it is important that students find suitable channels for releasing these irritations before they explode; they should deal with fears before they mobilize and healing wounds before they infect other relationships. These findings suggest that there is a very close relationship between how students react to personal challenges and academic success.

7.2.4 Emotional and psychological experiences caused by identification and notification of ‘at-risk’ status

It emerged from the study that notification of change in students’ academic progress to ‘at-risk’ status caused a flurry of emotional and psychological reactions from students. These emotional and psychological reactions ranged from shock, disbelief, demotivation and anger. Students have several points at which they know their academic status, including accessing their academic profile through the student central database, formal notification by letters sent to them and their academic record presented at the time of subsequent registration. In addition, students do have an inkling of how they may have performed in their examination through their experience of writing their examination as well as their knowledge of their performance within the semester through the continuous assessment process of the modules that they take for that semester. Reaction towards labelling as presented in the literature within the field of emotional psychology in Attribution theory (Weiner, 1986), is a common response, however, within the support programmes, this labelling follows a pattern of alarm (at disclosure), imagined concealment, forced compliance and finally acceptance.

Firstly a student’s surprise is brought about by the seriousness and impact of their failure regarding degree completion when they are informed and advised to attend the intervention programme. They enter the withdrawal stage which moves from being embarrassed to thoughts of quitting their studies. From the point when they are told about compulsory meetings they then comply; this finally leads to realization that the intervention support is there to assist them. Once

they benefit from the support programme they then accept, comply and can admit to an increase in performance after receiving help. This suggests that as much as students have an idea of how they are progressing during the course of the year, the realization of its significance becomes apparent when they receive notification from the university. Currently, notification takes place after the students have failed the semester, therefore timeous notification soon after the student fails the first assessment should be considered to improve throughput rate.

7.2.4.1 Psychological stages through which the students experience when identified as ‘at-risk’

In conceptualising a stage development model that shows the psychological stages through which students go in student intervention programmes, this study provides, through abstraction, theoretical constructs that form the elements (stages) of the conceptualised model. These elements include alarm (at disclosure), imagined concealment, forced compliance and acceptance. The next in the conceptualisation of this model is how these elements build on from each other, and the sequence of experience. This conceptualisation then forms the stages indicated in the development model that students go through before acceptance and realisation of the benefits of academic intervention. “Managing emotion vector” in Chickering’s Identity theory proposes that emotions be recognized, faced, acknowledged, expressed appropriately and accommodated in such a way that they are not allowed to impinge on the student’s emotional wellbeing (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This study shows that since students go through a concealment stage they struggle to face the truth of being identified as students ‘at risk’. This means that the acceptance process is delayed by the concealment stage which becomes a concern.

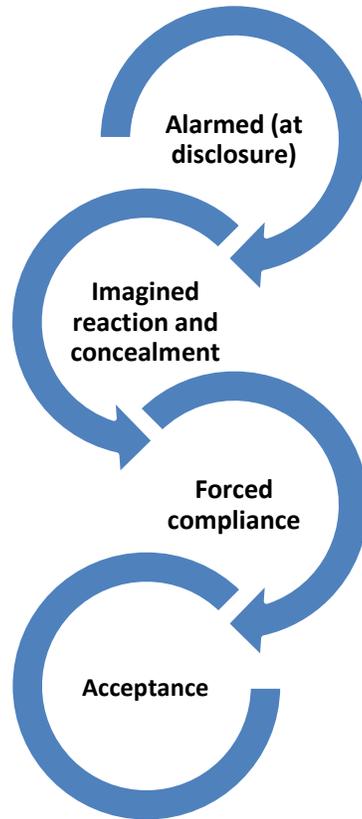


Figure: 3 Illustration of psychological stages through which the students experience when identified as ‘at- risk’

- Alarmed surprise/shock stage

The first psychological stage students go through is the alarmed/shock stage. When students are notified about their ‘at- risk’ status it makes them feel categorised as failures and as students who will not ‘make it’. All participants in this study felt surprised by the status. After the surprise/shock, students experienced different negative emotions; some were angry, some hurt, some were in denial and some felt guilt. Weiner’s model in Attribution Theory suggests that this negative reaction is common and the next process will be the causal search (search for the perceived causes of the outcome). Because of cognitive limitations, this search is not undertaken following every event, but is very likely when the outcome is negative, unexpected and/or important (Schunk, 2008; Weiner, 1985; 2000). In this case the causal search of emotional

reaction is elicited by exam results which are negative. The result of the causal search is influenced by many sources, including personal and environmental factors. In the next process, a cause is selected, for example lack of ability, lack of effort or lack of luck (Weiner, 2000). In attribution theory, the motivational drive of attributions branches from their classification along causal dimensions, which have implications for the individuals' expectancies, emotions and motivated behaviour (Schunk, 2008); for example, participants who feel anger because they do not expect failure (psychological consequence) or they think the module was easy. They then attribute their failure to ignorance which could ultimately lead them to become angry with themselves. The feeling of hurt and denial could emanate from unexpected results considering their effort and hard work. In this case students attribute failure to an external factor such as the examination being difficult (McClure, Meyer, Garisch, Fischer, Weir & Walkey, 2011). The feeling of guilt could emanate from less effort and a lazy attitude. Guiltiness could imply that they realize they should have done better if they had taken their work seriously. Upon realisation that they have performed poorly they don't want to reveal their status.

- Imagined concealment stage

The second psychological stage is imagined concealment, the hiding and withdrawal stage which could lead to dropping out because they do not feel capable enough of succeeding at the university. This is a stage whereby students do not want other people to know their academic status (concealment), thinking that by not sharing this information, others will not know (imagined). Reasons for such actions are largely related to their imagination of how others may react to this information (the 'at-risk' status), as well as what they imagine will happen if they conceal this information from others. They assume that they will be stigmatised by their lecturers and they suppose that they are not going to succeed (imagine) resulting in them shying away from support (concealment). This stage, the imagined concealment stage, is a critical period as it may result in some students quitting their studies, which is a concern. Weiner's model in Attribution Theory suggests that psychological processes lead to behavioural consequences such as feelings about quitting studies. Students who believe that failure is due to uncontrollable causes such as lack of ability are more likely to experience shame (Weiner 1986). This critical stage implies a point where the student is at the cross roads about his/her academic future. At the

time when asked to come and consult with the Academic Monitoring and Support office, students feel forced to participate in the intervention support programme.

- Forced compliance stage

The third psychological stage is forced compliance; this happens when students are sent messages through emails, phones and in their academic records to consult with the Academic Monitoring and Support office, the Dean and Academic Leader regarding their academic performance. Some feel they don't need support and don't want to participate in intervention support. *“When I was told I was the part of the programme I didn't like it because I thought I was working hard enough to be able to pass my modules without the help of the programme. (Musa and Nozizwe).* As much as they are identified as ‘at-risk’ because of their poor performance, they deny that they need support. With implications for not attending to their “at-risk” status, student now feel compelled to consult the identified persons and structures and to participate in the academic support programme. This compulsion is what can be referred to as forced compliance. Throughout this study it was found that students who did comply after coercion, felt encouraged, and engaged with the process, suggesting that this forced compliance stage is a crucial stage in the academic support process.

- Acceptance stage

The last stage is when students begin to accept support *“When I was told to attend the meeting of the support programme ,I didn't know what it was about so I was confused at first, then when you're in there you realize that you're not alone in this situation and feel better”* **Focus group.** The realisation that they are not alone results in change of attitude. Seeing other students being part of the support programme motivates them to attend. Students begin to accept consequences of their performance and consequently see benefits of attending intervention support programmes. This indicates that after going through phases of surprise, withdrawal, forced compliance and, finally, acceptance, students begin to realise that it's not only about shifting the blame to the external environment but accepting that a positive attitude and behaviour contributes to academic performance.

7.2.5 Negative and positive impact of academic intervention programmes

The study intended to establish common negative and positive impacts that academic intervention programmes had on students. The results revealed that all students experienced a positive impact but some revealed some drawbacks of the support programme, as discussed below.

7.2.5.1 Positive impact of the academic intervention programme

- **Support as a revelation discourse**

It emerged from the study that through the support programme, students began to realise the availability of institutional support sectors available for them. Some of the respondents reported that they often kept quiet, were confused and not sure what to do when faced with challenges. After notification, interviews and meetings with the support programme office, students began to understand the meaning of their academic status that appeared on student-central system and to know about the support programme itself. After attending support programme meetings, some started realising about other support sectors across campus such as university counselling services, the clinic, the disability unit, financial aid, lecturer consultation times, mentorship and academic counselling. As much as these structures exist, some participants did not know that they could access them. Some students alluded to mentors opening doors they never knew existed by making referrals to relevant university structures. As much as they were reluctant at the beginning to attend intervention programme, as they participated in the programme they realised that they needed this support to improve their results. As they had an inkling of their unsatisfactory progress they did not come up and speak to their lecturers or relevant structures about their challenges. This finding implies that students needed to go through this revelation stage in order to voluntarily access these support structures offered to them. The awareness of support structures through intervention programme lightened their challenges. Feeling unsupported and not knowing what to do in a new environment can affect resilience. A prolonged period of not knowing what support structures are available when confronted with

challenges could even lead to some dropping out of university. Clearly, students need to know at the outset that the university has various support structures.

- **Academic support providing a sense of community**

Another positive impact highlighted in this study is the intervention support experienced by participants that provided a sense of community. Sense of community is closely related to academic success because it provides a sense of belonging and it alleviates alienation. When students attended intervention workshops and mentorship programme they realised that they were not on their own. Similar to the findings of this study, another study conducted by Kirkham and Ringelstein (2008) found that peer mentoring created a sense of community. When students interact with one another as a mentor and mentee, the interaction enhances networking which leads to the formation of study groups; this provides a non-threatening atmosphere which is conducive to learning; providing study and learning strategies can then be applied in other areas of study thus avoiding the creation of a remedial programme that may carry negative connotations. After seeing their peers during workshops, participants in this study felt encouraged, they began to open up and talk about their challenges moving from concealment to openness and realisation that they were not on their own and they could still succeed. Attending the intervention programme made them realise that obstacles could be overcome. This shows that sharing of experiences with peers brings out strength and survival strategies. Psychological, emotional and educational challenges are not only experienced by students' targeted 'at-risk'. Healthy forums are recommended for all students to allow a space in which to talk in an unthreatening and safe environment.

- **Peer support**

It emerged from the study that social space and perceived power dynamics enhanced the sharing of pedagogical knowledge, as participants found it easier to talk to mentors and their peers. Participants revealed that mentors provided support in their moments of need as they could easily access them from the social network. The mentorship programmes provide opportunity for mentees to meet in groups and individual meetings with their mentors. They also have access to

a face book page, sms and what's-up means of communication. The availability of these social spaces provides convenient times for peer engagement. Peer engagement diffuses the perceived power dynamics as students are able to ask questions without fear of being embarrassed or having to follow a certain protocol to consult their lecturers. This resonates well with Vygotsky's Social Development Theory which stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978) (3.2), The finding in this study is in line with Steyn's (2009) in that higher learning institutions can be isolating in many ways therefore mentorship programmes contribute to the success of students from deprived socio-economic backgrounds (especially those from the rural areas). Adams (2006) states that support offered to students, addresses identified need such as academic under-preparedness and social and emotional needs. This is also shown by the survey as addressed in Chapter one that motivated this study in that students attribute their failure not only to academic under-preparedness but also to psycho-social needs as well as physical needs. This means that some student lose interest in seeking support because of inaccessibility and the order of the procedures they have to follow when they want to consult with lecturers. The longer it takes for support availability, the less the eagerness is to of seek help. It is recommended that structures of higher education institutions accommodate such students in terms of lecturers and other support structures becoming reachable at the moment of need for students by having other communication channels rather than students having to appear at offices. This may improve accessibility, take away the fear of embarrassment, and provides students with a confidential space in which to ask about academic work. Fear of consultation might be brought by the absence of confidentiality when students are consulting in a room that is full of tutors. Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh and Wilss (2008) suggest that mentoring fulfills *Psycho-social functions* such as:

- being accessible for mentees,
- providing mentees with support and affirmation of their worth,
- being intentional role models,
- providing socialisation for the inculcation of professional values

Falchikov (2001), cited in Tariq (2005:1-2), defines four main categories of peer tutoring, namely:

- same-level peer tutoring, where participants within a cohort have equal status, e.g. in terms of their experience, skills and/or attainment levels;
- same-level peer tutoring, where unequal status is identified and introduced by the coordinator; for example, students may be selected to assume the role of tutor on the basis of their higher level of skills and/or academic attainment;
- cross-level peer tutoring, involving a single institution, where unequal status derives from existing differences between student tutors and tutees (e.g. second- or third-year undergraduates tutoring first-year students).
- cross-level peer tutoring, involving two institutions, such as the UK's Community Service Volunteers (CSV) 'Learning Together' programme, in which volunteer undergraduate student tutors support pupils' learning by assisting teaching staff in local schools and colleges.

7.2.5.2 Drawbacks of the programme

7.2.5.2.1 Timing of the intervention

Findings revealed that students attributed their failure to support they received after they had already failed exams. They shifted the blame to warnings that arrived late when the damage was already done. They wished they had this support at their first entry because that might have prevented failure. This finding is in line with Porter & Swing (2006) who argues that facilitating beginning students' engagement with, performance on, and response to feedback from their early assessment, is a justified priority on both theoretical and practical grounds. It is recommended that academic interventions should accommodate all students especially at the entry level of their degree. As much as they had an idea of their progress, warnings and identification prove to have more meanings. This speaks to an ignorance and dependency culture. Whether through denial, pride or ignorance, students who need help the most are least likely to request it. This finding suggests that the integration approach should be adopted. This model of intervention recognizes the importance of cognitive and social processes in learning and thus prepares students for specific demands of Higher Education (HE). This recommendation is in line with Adams (2006) who suggests that the integrated intervention's considerable strength lies in the fact that it

represents a shift from viewing student intervention as a means of supporting students to viewing it rather as 'a means of developing students'. When students are developed, the focus ought to be at the beginning before they start by engaging with intellectual and academic discourse. In this approach students are not perceived as "patients in need of care" but as individuals capable of caring for themselves from a level of strength rather than weakness (Adams, 2006). Participants in this study started to benefit from support programme when they had already shown weakness instead of empowering them before they failed.

7.2.5.2.2 Stigma

Findings suggest that students alluded to stigma as a controversial issue in this study in the sense that some were demotivated and embarrassed to be part of the programme because it came with the humiliation. These findings suggest that students perceived intervention support negatively; this is confirmed by similar findings in literature by Latino and Unite (2012). In their study of students' views about academic support, they found that students displayed resentment about the way in which academic support singled out students and made them feel stigmatised. They did not want their friends to know that they are targeted as 'at-risk' of failure; some felt embarrassed to carry the monitoring chart and consult with lecturers and academic coordinators because they felt that they would be seen as failures. In contrast, some saw the monitoring chart as a tool that could assist in having something concrete when consulting with their lecturers and some alluded to the fact that it motivated them to work hard and graduate from the programme as not to carry this chart again. Porter & Swing (2006) state that the whole-cohort preparatory programme may not be realistic in many degree contexts; in that students often most in need of assistance do not seek it. They feel there is a pressing need to consider alternative, strategically-focused, time-effective and context-relevant interventions. As a researcher and personnel involved in intervention support, I agree with Porter & Swing (2006) to a certain extent. The whole-cohort programme may not be specific but the inclusion of more capable students in support sessions has proven to encourage less-capable students to participate without the anxiety of the stigma. This implies that intervention support should be inclusive but differentiated to suit individual need and that these programmes lead to development that is holistic.

7.3 Summary

This chapter presented key findings of academic and non-academic challenges that impacted on students' university work identified by the 'at-risk' students and how these participants dealt with those challenges. It also deliberated on psychological and emotional stages through which the students went and how students responded to identification and notification of the 'at-risk' status. Key theoretical concepts from the Ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979), Attribution theory by Weiner (1992), Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978) and Chickering's Theory of Student Development (1969) were used as a lens to explain the key findings. Chapter eight will present responses to the research questions and concludes with recommendations for, both, future practice and for future research.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter seven, the interpretations of findings were discussed. Chapter 8 presents a summary of the study, recommendations and concludes with a thesis. In this chapter, the focus of the study, objectives and rationale are articulated and summarised. The key research questions were reviewed along the line of key findings of the study. Finally, conclusions were drawn from the review of key research questions and the findings.

The White Paper of 1997 set the basis for the envisaged transformation of Higher Education. It states: South Africa's transition from apartheid and minority rule requires that, existing practices and values are viewed afresh and reconsidered in terms of their fitness for a new era...In South Africa today, the challenge is to redress past inequities 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 (DoE, 1997).

Positioned in this context, this study is considered important because higher education institutions in South Africa, as explained in Chapter one, have increased access to university education. Increasing access is seen and adopted as a strategy to respond to the challenge of redressing past inequities and to transform the higher education system which the DoE White paper 1997 demands. However, within this approach to responding to new realities and opportunities presented with the opening up of access, the mechanism for supporting academic progression and enhancing students' success seem to be inadequate in terms of matching the nuanced academic and non-academic challenges and needs of the now highly divergent and stratified student population of South African higher institutions. There are today within South African higher institutions students with different socio-economic status and who comes from low school quintiles (Downs, 2010). This in part explains why increased student access to university education is yet to translate commensurate numbers in students' success. Letseka and Maile (2008) contend that access has not been equated with students' success.

Nevertheless, the issue of student access to higher education is of global concern. The UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in 1998 called for 'equality of access' (UNESCO, 1998; Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). However, championing equitable access and enhancing success for

all students who have been granted access to higher institutions should be targeted together. Currently, what has been seen is a position whereby satisfying the demand for increasing access to higher education has tended to equally erase the gains realised by increased access for disadvantaged students who are unable to successfully complete their studies because they remain 'at risk' of academic failure. Higher institutions are therefore challenged with increasing demand on how to respond to the issues pertinent to student dropout and throughput rates defined by Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr and Godler (2001) as the major concerns in the Higher Education experience. Having noted these emerging trends, Higher Education institutions in South Africa has equally been responding in terms of developing and implementing intervention programmes to support students through their studies so that they achieve success in completing their degrees and diplomas. The appropriateness of these initiatives needs to be assessed in the context of institutional transformation. Some of these interventions are of a personal nature while some are academic.

The reason why students 'at-risk' are not graduating on time have been identified tracked and monitored. Several mechanisms have been used to promote throughput towards completion. Thus far, much of the emphasis in supporting these 'at-risk' students has come from institutional initiatives. There is an abundance of literature on student support within Higher Education, but this focuses mainly on institutional support in the form of programmes, management, structures and processes, and the outcomes of such interventions, largely using case studies. There are very few studies, especially within a transformational context, on the actual experiences of students who have been identified as 'at risk' and who have been subjected to intervention programmes. Likewise, there are little known, in terms of studies that have researched with a focus, on how these students identified as 'at risk' respond to interventions.

This research therefore recognises this gap and takes off from a perspective informed by a need for myself as a researcher to identify theoretical frameworks for understanding who these students are, what challenges they encounter and how they experience intervention programmes that are put in place for them. These frameworks included Attribution Theory; which assumes that people try to determine why people do what they do, that is, they attribute possible causes to an event or behaviour (Weiner, 1992). Ecosystem Perspective; Bronfenbrenner's Ecological

Systems Theory which postulates that organisms (including human beings) are interdependent and have relationships between themselves and their physical environment (Kramer & Tyler, 1995). Vygotsky's Social Development Theory; which emphasises the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978), and Chickering's Theory of Identity Development; which provides an understanding of how students develop intellectual competence and what barriers to intellectual competence compromise academic performance (Chickering, 1969). This study attempts to contribute to the theoretical discourse on students' experiences of Higher Education studies. Therefore as a research study, particularly from a developmental education perspective, the significance of the study is seen in the contribution it makes towards understanding who these students are, what their experiences of academic support interventions are, and how these experiences might be explained.

'At-risk' students are not being fully understood and the one-size-fits-all approach to academic interventions for students considered to be 'at-risk' of academic failure necessitated this study. Students 'at risk' are individuals with specific and special issues that need to be understood and redressed immediately or at the moment of need.

Guided by theoretical framework and literature, and using a qualitative case study design methodology, this researcher adopted a multi-method approach to collect data. The data collection process involved me in conducting semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 'at-risk' students chosen from those students studying in their first year of study (second semester) at higher institution to fourth year of study. I also studied and reviewed relevant documents.

The following research questions guided the research inquiry:

- i) What do individual students identify as their challenges and academic support needs?
- ii) How do these students understand and deal with their identified challenges and academic support need?
- iii) In what way(s) is/are students identified and categorised as 'at risk' of academic failure at a School of Education in a South African university?

- iv) How do students identified as ‘at risk’ of academic failure react to their identification and notification at a School of Education in a South African university?
- v) How do students identified as ‘at risk’ experience academic support intervention programmes at a School of Education in a South African university and why?

8.2 Responses to the research questions

This study sought to answer five questions. In an attempt to answer these five questions, I conducted a literature review of the major concepts that shaped this study. Academic and non-academic factors that compromise students’ success in both secondary and higher education were major drivers of the study. The responses to the questions have been presented to give an understanding of what the ‘at-risk’ students’ experiences of academic intervention strategies implemented by Academic and Support programme in the School of Education are. The study also inquired on what are the academic and non-academic factors that contribute to their failure. These responses do not claim to be the only “cure” nor can they be too generalised. These responses serve to provide us with understanding of who these students are; what challenges they encounter accessing and using academic support intervention and what impact the intervention programme has on their studies. This section synthesises the research findings in answer to the five research questions.

8.2.1 Research question one

What do individual students identify as their challenges and academic support needs?

The study found that participants’ academic performances were tested by both academic and non-academic challenges. Some of these challenges are rooted in secondary school problems. The study established the following:

8.2.1.1 Lack of support for translation of medium of instruction to mother tongue in higher education.

The majority of participants highlighted the lack of support for translation of medium of instruction to mother tongue in higher education as a factor that compromised their performance. This is in line with the view of Van Schalkwyk (2007), cited in Hlalele (2008), who has shown

that universities are now faced with challenges such as under-preparedness of first year students and medium of instruction as a barrier for some students as they were taught subjects at school in their home languages. From this finding the study confirms that language is still a major barrier to good academic performance. However, this study further indicates the nature of the language barrier experienced which is related to school cultural practices (school ecology) that are different from higher education culture experience (higher education ecology).

What this finding means is that while secondary school education was in the medium of English, the on-going support that these learners were given in terms of translation to mother tongue and making cognitive sense through this translation is now missing in their higher education experience and studies. Therefore, this translation gap within the transitional phase between secondary school and higher education implies that translation for cognitive use is an area that needs particular attention both at the level of school and at higher education institutions.

8.2.1.2 Lack of readiness for higher education and the transition challenge.

The study found that nearly all participants in the study felt that they did not feel prepared for higher education in terms of epistemological access, personal adjustments as well as the environmental transition from school to higher education. This is in line with Horn, Kojaku and Carroll (2001), Martinez & Klopott (2003), Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001) who argue that the intensity of school curriculum, quality of academic experience and teaching and learning style play a direct impact on students' readiness for higher education and affects almost every paths to success in postsecondary education. Students attribute their failure to a wide limp that the transition from secondary school to university was for them. This speaks to ecological systems (both school and higher education) which are working independently from each other while trying to achieve one goal. To close the gap, the Academic Monitoring and Support offers a range of on-going academic skills workshops such as academic writing workshop, study skills, time management, life skills and focus and concentration workshop etc. to assist first years during transition period.

What this finding signifies is that despite having expanded access to students from diverse backgrounds into higher education, students' unpreparedness seems to be a challenge to epistemological access. Underprepared students' characterise in different noticeable ways; struggling to cope academically, taking responsibility for their student life on campus, managing their own time, coping with life demands and becoming accountable young adults. This implies that both school (ecology) and higher education (ecology) have to take fundamental steps beyond reactive responses to address students' academic readiness. It also implies that there is a need to understand and adapt to the changes and demands generation shift. This may involve for example, resourcing teaching styles and delivery to fit current generation of students. It may also imply resourceful applications and use of social media which is the tool used by current students' generation.

8.2.1.3 Career choices and affirmation as a challenge

The study found that most students attributed their failure to lack of proper guidance for career choices. Participants also highlighted factors such as matric score, university entry requirements as well as financial constraints that compromised their career choices.

McInnis et al. (2000:27) observe that "many students are seriously under-informed on key issues about their choice of an institution" as they rely on word of mouth, hearsay and vague impressions of institutions rather than well-founded, adequate information. This study confirms the finding from the literature, however, about choice of institution the difference in this study is that it goes a bit further in looking at how choice of career impacts on their studies. It also highlights how students deal with their choices psychologically. This study found that since participants did not get proper career guidance, some struggled to cope psychologically, some accepted their mistakes easily, some failed to progress in their first career choices and transferred to a teaching qualification because they thought teaching courses were easy.

What this finding implies is that school and higher education need to look at a number of issues such career guidance; how career guidance is offered, where it is offered and who offers career guidance. Higher education institutions in South Africa expect students to apply through CAO

and students are expected to make choices and select universities. Some students do not know what implications there are when making a particular university their first or last choices. There is a need to enhance the traditional method of career awareness such as using technology as a tool enhances wider readability. The information could easily be disseminated to students as early as when they are at secondary school.

8.2.1.4 Environmental factors as a challenge.

The study found that environmental factors impacted negatively on students' performance. Environmental factors identified include lack of time management skills, incorrect registration of modules, difficulty adjusting to university life, lack of financial resources, poverty and poor living conditions. Students' descriptions of poor socio-economic status and poor financial literacy as compromising their academic success (Zappala & Considine, 2001) were thick. Also reported in the findings are problems and challenges of inadequacy of social support (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004), accommodation, and the mode and quality of teaching. Students' living conditions also featured as contributing to poor academic performance. For example, mentions were made of the problems of unreliable transport for off-campus students and noisy residences for on-campus students. It was also found that students' academic performance was impacted by the pressure of the economic and financial status of their homes.

For example, it was found that students use their scholarship finances to support their families (microsystem). Steyn (2009) recognises that the prime and most obvious reasons for students' early withdrawal from higher education programmes hinge on financial difficulties.

What these findings mean is that lack of financial literacy and pressure to misdirect scholarship money and financial support are concerns that should receive attention in terms of intervention for students. Therefore, interventions should engage support structures that can connect different layers of social ecology system that impacts on the students' life. This implies that students' attainment depends on the effective functioning of each support structure.

8.2.1.5 Personal factors

This study found that students recognise that their personal decisions also played a role in their academic failure. It revealed that students' attitudes, lack of effort, pregnancy issues, poor relationships management, lack of understanding of university regulations and systems and lack of budgeting skills impacted negatively on their studies. Findings also corroborated other studies of university students that indicate personal issues as contributing significantly to emotional distress impacting on their studies (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004). Fraser and Killen (2005) maintain that personal adjustment and integration into the social fabric of campus life also have an impact on students' academic performance and is a factor in student retention.

What this finding means is that students realize that they also have a responsibility for their studies and their academic success did not only depend on external factors (mesosystem). Lack of control of personal affairs; decisions and poor attitudes (microsystem) has an impact on students' academic progress implying that it is a factor that has to be recognised in deciding for interventions for students considered 'at risk' of academic failure.

8.2.2 Research question two

How do these students understand and deal with their identified challenges and academic support need?

Findings suggest that students dealt with challenges differently. How students deal with their identified challenges depend on the nature of the challenge, the resiliency of the individual and on the willingness to seek or receive support. Some students for example showed resilience and seek support from family. Findings revealed that some students faced with psychological dilemma shared with family and friends (microsystem). Some students explain that they did not want to share their problems and did not tell lecturers for fear of being stigmatised. They explained that they were unsure of what the reactions of lecturers will be did not want to be seen as failures. Findings further show that for some students, their physical challenges such as

hunger and lack of basic provisions were seen as a form of embarrassment; often resulting in thoughts of quitting studies.

The study furthermore found that for some other students, they understood and deal with their identified challenges by confiding in their mentors and seeking to receive support. It also emerged preference to seek support was from their mentors or friends if they did not understand something in class instead of asking their lecturers. The reasons for the preference were explained to include the problem of language barrier and lack of confidence.

What this finding means is that the way students deal with academic and non-academic challenges depended on both internal and external factors. In terms of dealing with academic challenge it suggests that students develop resiliency where there was no perceived fear of embarrassment and when in a less-threatening environment as they were able to ask for help and support from their peers (see illustration below).

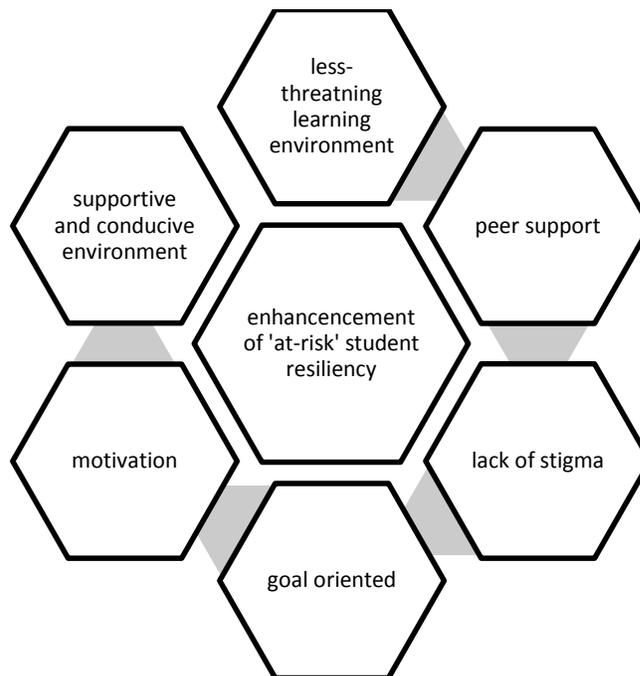


Figure: 3 Illustration of what enhanced resiliency in 'at-risk' students

8.2.3 Research question three

In what way(s), is/are students identified and categorized as ‘at risk’ of academic failure at a School of Education in a South African university?

The University where this study was located proposed a three-colour academic standing system, to be visible on the central Student Management System. This system alerts students (and support staff) of their need to take action supposedly timely. The three colours are: green = indicating good academic standing which means the student has passed $\geq 70\%$ of the normal credit load for the semester and has passed $\geq 75\%$ of the credits expected for regular progression into the selected degree (for completion in the minimum time). Orange = indicating that the student is ‘at risk’ which means either because he or she has passed less than 70% of the normal credit load for that semester or because he or she has passed less than 75% of the credits expected for normal progression in the selected degree. Red = indicating that student is having serious under-performance which means the student’s progress is below minimum progression requirements. This system is otherwise known as the robot system – metaphor for passing and progression as in the traffic light code. Upon identification and categorization as ‘at risk’ student is provided a compulsory academic and personal/career counseling. Should the student wish to persevere with the degree, he or she may continue in the School for one further semester on strict probation with specific and realistic conditions to be met at the end of the semester. The robot system as a support policy is applied and implemented across all Schools within the university.

This study found that students were aware of this identification and categorisation procedure; they understood the robot system and what ‘green, orange and red’ colours stood for. What this finding means is that students are able to access and be notified of their identification and categorisation even if they may or may not respond to it.

8.2.4 Research question four

How do students identified as ‘at risk’ of academic failure react to their identification and notification at a School of Education in a South African university?

Findings indicate that the warning signs of ‘at-risk’ status caused emotional and psychological reaction from students. The findings further indicate that using the labelling “at risk” for identification of students categorised as such in the support programme produces a response pattern of alarm (surprise), withdrawal, forced compliance and, finally, acceptance. This trajectory of acceptance of academic support can be explained by understanding that failures are most often blamed on external factors, including that of others. The findings also indicate that when informed about compulsory support some students felt like quitting and some saw it as an added responsibility, and eventually accepted that they needed support. This finding is consistent with the views by Weiner’s (1985) model in Attribution Theory: that psychological processes lead to behavioural consequences such as wanting to quit studies. Students who believe that failure is due to uncontrollable causes such as lack of ability are more likely to experience shame (Weiner, 1985). Furthermore, the controllability dimension in Attribution Theory is related to feelings such as shame, guilt, anger, gratitude and pity (Weiner 1985). Students who believe that their poor performance is due to controllable attribution such as lack of effort, underestimation of module or degree may experience guilt and realise they need to improve.

What this finding means is that students have different ways of reacting to their identification and notification of being considered as ‘at risk’ of academic failure. Literature suggests that students who need help the most are least likely to request it and that factors that influence non-participation of students to support programmes include non-cognitive factors such as denial, pride, or ignorance and (Porter & Swing, 2006).

8.2.5 Research question five

How do students identified as ‘at risk’ experience academic support intervention programmes at a School of Education in a South African university and why?

The study found that students valued the intervention programme as it opened up a number of methods that encouraged collaborative learning to support students such as peer support (Vygotsky 1978). The findings in this study show that participants highlighted both positive and negative impact they experienced from the intervention programme. Participants highlighted the following categories as positive impact they experienced through academic support intervention: i) Revelation discourse, ii) provided technical support, iii) provided comfort and hope, iv) collegial and collaborative learning discourse, v) provided structured support, vi) provided a sense of community, vii) evaluatory discourse, viii) enhanced skills ix) student’s accountability, x) provided motivation and gave hope for the future.

The study also revealed that participants benefitted from the mentorship programme as mentors were helpful, easily available and easy to talk to. This finding is consistent with views by Adams (2006) in that academically-related, peer-support programmes supplement the formal academic teaching and learning. The study further reveals that collaborations of some university support services such as counselling, housing, financial aid services benefits the majority of students which is consistent with assertions by Prebble et al. (2004) maintains that an integrated and collaborative provision of a student support model influences learning outcomes.

As much as some participants realized the value of attending the support programme certain comments highlighted shortfalls of the programme which included: (i) *Programme being reactive* - which means students were formally informed about their status after they had failed their first semester exam. This reactive approach might have missed the “great moment of need”, as it did not offer immediate help to students. (ii) *Stigma*-which means some students targeted as being ‘at risk’ attended intervention programmes and some did not because some felt stigmatized and too embarrassed to consult with their lecturers because of labelling. (iii) *Timing of intervention* – which means intervention support, happened after students had already failed.

In case of identification and monitoring, participants revealed the following: (i) Emotional stages during notification period- stages students went through which the students experienced when notified about the ‘at-risk’ status (ii) *Forced exposure to support services offered at the institutional level* – without this forced exposure through the Academic Monitoring and Support programme, students would assume that there was no or little assistance to students outside of their lectures to assist them cope with the demands of academic life; (iii) *Regulated compliance* – a means to get students on track by consciously accessing the support services available to all students; (iv) *Monitoring progress* – meaning that students were under positive surveillance to encourage them to continue receiving support which would ultimately lead to student improvement – something that they may not have realized if they were not monitored.

This implies that the zone of proximal development as described by Vygotsky (1979), where learning takes place in discussions between students who have reached different levels in their individual learning and who can benefit from each other’s experience and knowledge could depend on the timing of support and guidance. In this instance, participants preferred receiving intervention support at the point of entry where this intervention could have closed the academic transition gap.

8.3 Limitation of the study

This study has a limited time, financial and other resources scope. These limitations impacted on the extent the study was able to obtain information and data regarding the phenomenon being studied. In categories, the following are the limitations of the study:

The study only focused on the students ‘at-risk’ who are monitored and supported by the Academic Monitoring and Support programme in the School of Education. Future studies may look at other intervention programmes in place to support students ‘at risk’.

Given time and financial considerations, this study focused on students ‘at-risk’ at a School of Education in a South African university. Future studies could include other schools in this university and in South Africa as a whole, particularly if the aim is to get a sample population for generalization of research findings.

The study used interviews as the main data collection instrument and this was complemented by focus group interviews and document analysis. The use of other methods of data collection perhaps would enhance the quality of findings in terms of better understanding of the issues under microscope and explication of the phenomenon under study.

8.4 Recommendations

In view of discussions of key findings of this study and their theoretical expositions, the study proposes a recommendation of the following model of managing academic support in a holistic manner. This is not a fixed model but a reflective thought from the study that may contribute towards developing a profound model.

8.4.1 HOLISTIC AND DEVELOPMENTAL ACADEMIC SUPPORT MODEL

A holistic approach to student support proposed in this model will largely be data driven and includes and will include all registered undergraduate students. Students have needs that can be complex and multi-faceted but interwoven. For students to succeed, the academic aspects should not be treated in isolation from other aspects of their personal development and well-being as whole person. Each aspect is interdependent on other parts; for example, academic success is dependent on the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being of the student and conversely the well-being of the student is impacted by academic success or failure. Therefore developing a holistic academic support mechanism should improve student success in higher education.

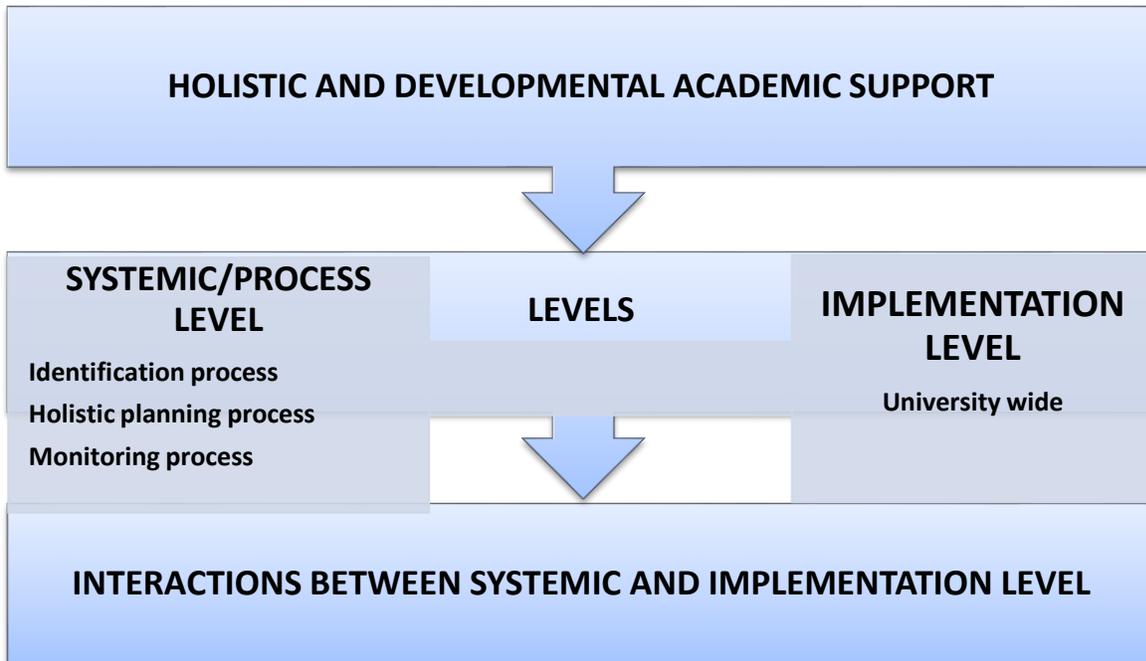


Figure 5: Proposed model of academic intervention support within higher degrees

In the context of highly-sophisticated information processing and data-handling systems in place, it is not inconceivable to connect university data to students' hand-held devices, such as smart phones, ipads and computers. With early warning detection systems built into the data handling systems, students, staff and the intervention student support services could then respond appropriately and timeously to potential distractors to students' academic progress; hence this proposed model would be an ideal model to record, monitor, intervene and track students' progress across their study programmes. Recognising that there are transition points across students' study programmes within the undergraduate qualifications (CHE, 2013), this holistic model would then have the potential to identify these transitional points in the students' progress across their study programme. The specific needs of students to transcend these transition points with minimal distractions can then be facilitated through the early detection and attendant support. The efficiency of this model is highly dependent upon good and real-time data, which the university level has to generically develop.

8.4.1.1 SYSTEMIC/PROCESS LEVEL

This is the level where data about each student regardless of their academic status are generated, accessed and used for implementation of intervention strategies. This level entails the identification process, the holistic planning process and monitoring process.

Identification process

Identification and support should be for all students to take away the stigmatisation that emerged through the findings. Students with different needs should be identified at the point of entry to avoid reactive approach. On-going needs of students can then be obtained through early detection and transfer of warning signals to students via their electronic hand-held devices, and simultaneously to academic development support co-ordinators.

Holistic planning process

After identification, all stake holders such as lecturers and university support sectors should use information that is fed on to the system to implement early intervention strategies; for example lecturers may use student information to identify students in their subject-specific areas that are likely to struggle with modules, or possible ‘at-risk’ students, particularly those with low performance scores at matric level. Each department/cluster/lecturer may design methods to better support students and work in collaboration with academic and support office. Referral to other student support services can also be made, depending on the issues that students are dealing with at that time in their academic study programme. Referrals then become the responsibility of the academic development support co-coordinators.

Monitoring process

This is the process whereby both the institution and the student are able to track and monitor progress. The monitoring process should be for all students, regardless of their academic status; for example, the system should show how the student is progressing so that early interventions can be identified for implementation. This will also give students an inkling of where they are in order to avoid the shock or surprise at the end of the semester that emerges. This monitoring process could also be done at a module level to observe and track students that are failing assessment tasks such as assignments, tests and classwork. The monitoring process is also crucial

for other support sectors such as the mentorship programme, counselling services, clinic, funding and housing office to track the progress of their referrals.

8.4.1.2 IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL

The implementation level should be university wide to remove the stigma of attending the support programme, as indicated by the participants in this study. The implementation process should feed into the systemic and process level to continue the dialogical engagement of holistic support.

University wide

Implementation of intervention support university wide, could benefit all students and remove the stigma that is associated with students targeted as being 'at risk' of academic failure; for example, first-year experience workshops should be made compulsory for all first year students at the point of entry. Tutorials for each module or the high-failure rate modules should be open to all students regardless of their performance. Other support interventions, such as peer mentorship, should be accessible to all students, particularly at the first-year level.

8.4.1.3 INTERACTION BETWEEN SYSTEMIC AND INTERACTION LEVEL

For the whole system to work together there must be interaction between the system and implementation process. The system process must be able to generate the data and the implementation should be able to feed into the data for a dialogical engagement of holistic support.

8.5 Conclusion

The qualitative, interpretive study of academic intervention experiences of ‘at-risk’ students, and academic and non-academic challenges that impacted on their studies yielded interesting and significant results that may have implication on intervention programmes in Higher Education. It emerged from the study that ‘at- risk’ students’ performance was negatively affected by factors that were in and beyond their immediate environment. Academic, social, personal and psychological challenges seriously affected their academic pursuits in a negative way. Students ‘at risk’ were identified, notified about their poor performance and advised to attend intervention support programmes and problems were being patched up as they emerged. ‘At-risk’ students’ experienced a plethora of psychological challenges after being identified, and notified about their ‘at -risk’ status. Academic support was beneficial to their success, however support they received was reactive rather than pro-active. Nonetheless, emerging from the findings in this research work are narratives of students’ considered to be ‘at risk’ of academic failure of their experiences of the support intervention being provided through the Academic Monitoring and Support system at the School of Education in a higher institution in South Africa. Perhaps, in fashioning programmes of support interventions for these students, these emerging narratives are yet to be adequately explored. Juxtaposed to accounts of these experiences are their own understanding of what they considered to be their academic support needs (as students’ considered to be ‘at risk’ of academic failure). These narratives are synthesised and can be interpreted as the following explications of students’ ‘at risk’ experiences:

- I) Students are aware of a transitional gap between secondary school and higher education and the cognitive disconnect that results from this gap between the two levels of study
- II) Students are also aware of their unpreparedness for their student life on campus, however same cannot be said about their academic readiness and what that demands in terms of their epistemological access
- III) Students are aware of the existence of academic support systems and its identification notification procedure of students’ status. However, mere awareness is not enough incentive for them to access and make use of the support interventions being provided

- IV) Students develop apathy towards the intervention programme because they tended to retain their comfort zone; avoiding what is considered as embarrassment of discussion or opening up about their academic problems with the lecturers or staff preferring instead to be content with peer-support
- V) Students are not adequately prepared to take responsibility and control of their own personal affairs, particularly in taking decisions that impact on their academic progress. The intricate complexities of adult life and external pressures weigh heavily on students management of their personal affairs including choices regarding their career as students
- VI) Even though students are made aware of the identification and notification procedure of the Academic Monitoring and Support intervention as being ‘at risk’, they do not adequately connect with the message due to medium of such identification and notification system. Students tend to have a generational allergy to orthodox means of communication in preference to hand-held electronic and mobile communication devices
- VII) Students detests being labelled and categorised negatively; particularly the foreseen stigmatisation that they tend to perceive as following the ‘at risk’ status
- VII) Students considered as ‘at risk’ of academic failure tend to believe that their academic support needs are not after all understood or even targeted
- IX) Students merely comply with the compulsory requirement of the support programme
- X) Students are able to access, attend and benefit from the AMS support intervention.

Understanding how students considered as being ‘at risk’ of academic failure experience the academic support interventions provided for them at the School of Education in a South African university is important. Perhaps even more important is to understand what the students themselves consider their academic support needs to be. This is so because of possible discord between what the students themselves consider as their need and what they are being provided for as what they need to succeed academically, and its implications for the way they access and use academic support interventions. However, in order to evidentially know what students ‘at

risk' considers as constituting their academic support needs, this research study deems it a requisite condition, the need to know who exactly these "at risk" students are. This study explored through the contextual background and extensive review of literature on the phenomenon of 'being at risk of academic failure' in higher institutions; attempting to provide an understanding of the nature, challenges, and characteristic of the student considered to be 'at risk' from global and local perspective. However, such understanding is bound to be fluid and limited. At best, it can only be a mere metaphor, if proper cognisance is not taken of the divergence and complex nature of individual student's needs. Then again, it can only be a mere metaphor if proper cognisance is not taken of the unique personality that defines each student even within the fold - the category of students considered as 'at risk'.

The value of the methodology and design of this study is to achieve a research inquiry that can bring out the individual student's perspectives and experiences; giving us a window into their personality, the complexities that impact their individual academic challenges and inform what they consider as their academic support needs. In this manner, it is possible to understand and interpret what these needs are. In this study, students' understandings of their academic support needs are summarily interpreted to be:

- Academic and non-academic support mechanism to bridge the transitional gap between secondary school and university level experiences. This has to be such that it can prepare and make them ready for the demands of higher education
- Support interventions to prepare them to manage and take control of their personal lives and decisions with the new responsibility that is university education; its regulations and rules.

In view of the above, the usefulness and efficacy of already existing interventions that mostly target post-enrolment student performance at entry level are not being contested. What becomes clear from the findings of this study is the inadequacy of support interventions to address the yet unknown needs of perhaps the 'unknown' student considered to be 'at risk' of academic failure. It is possible therefore to argue that the voice of the students; their own understandings and perspective to what their academic support needs are brings a new knowledge which is particularly useful; in first of all knowing the students, and knowing beyond a generic

prescriptive response to their support needs, what is being overlooked as constituting their support needs.

From the students' 'at risk' at the School of Education in a South African University understanding of their academic support needs, it can therefore be suggested that:

1. In addition to targeting interventions to mediate the shortfalls in course and module performance and general life on campus, pre-enrolment interventions that can prepare students to be effective managers of their personal life and responsibility, and take control over and of their student life and career with its entails is deemed necessary.
2. This implies a double-barrel approach to support intervention; on the one barrel, support intervention provision pre-entry level, and on the other a holistic entry level support intervention provision that takes into account the recommended model as above.

Further research on the practicability, modalities and practical and resource demand implications of the double-barrel support interventions and the holistic model as recommended is suggested.

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20 June 2011

Mrs SD Mngomezulu
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Dear Mrs Mngomezulu,

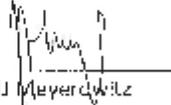
RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal towards your PhD in the following project, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained via the Research Office:

- 1) Academic intervention experiences of "at-risk" students in undergraduate university programmes.

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

Yours sincerely,



Prof JJ Meyerowitz
Registrar

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