



Student Engagement in the First Year of Study in Undergraduate Programmes in Higher Education

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SUPERVISOR'S AUTHORIZATION

I, **Professor Labby Ramrathan**, the candidate's supervisor **I agree / do not agree** to the submission of this thesis for examination.

Professor Labby Ramrathan

Date

DECLARATION

I, **Jeffrey Sipiwe Mkhize**, hereby declare that this study represents my original work and has not been submitted in any form to another university. Where use has been made of the work of others, this has been duly acknowledged in the text.

Jeffrey Sipiwe Mkhize

15 April 2017

Date

DEDICATION

I thank God the Almighty who gave me the courage, wisdom, perseverance, judgement and the mind to carry out such an important scholarly work.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

I thank all my ancestors in their order of kindness: Ngithi thokozani mathonga: Nina bakaKhabazela kaMavovo. I dedicate this thesis to:

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ABSTRACT

Student retention and throughput is a major concern across higher education within South African universities, with statistics suggesting that almost a third of students drop out of universities in their first year of study. Research in the field of student retention and throughput suggests that student engagement is regarded as the single best predictor of students' retention, learning and personal development within higher education. Drawing from this research finding, this thesis focuses its attention to first year student engagement within a South African university.

Using the University of Zululand as a case study, this thesis presents the results of a student engagement survey that was conducted across first year students enrolled in the Faculty of Education. The study followed a mixed method approach where both quantitative and qualitative methods of data generation were used. The South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE), adapted by the University of the Free State (UFS) for the South African contexts from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) developed in the United States of America (USA), was used to obtain information from 62% of first year students registered in the Faculty of Education in 2015. In addition, interviews were conducted with a sample of academic staff members who taught some of the first year modules in the same faculty. Interviews with students of varying academic achievements were also held to obtain explanations of why students were engaged in the ways they were. Further, documents analysis was done to find out the students' academic performance. The final set of data was generated through focus group discussions. In investigating the nature of and levels of student engagement, I delimited the focus of the survey on the role played by the first year students, the academic staff and the institution in promoting student engagement. Specific focus was on exploring how students engage in academic work in their first year of study of their qualification. The purpose for the exploration and the investigation was to establish the nature of the relationship between student engagement and academic performance.

Firstly, this study found that students tend to use their own creativity and initiatives to navigate around challenging academic and social activities, circumstances and practices. Secondly, the phenomenon of student-self-engagement emerged as a novel feature that seeks to extend the understanding on how students engaged academic activities. Thirdly, the study revealed that there is relationship between how students engage, the extent in which they engage and their levels of academic performance. Finally, the academic staff members' attempts in engaging students are constrained by several factors, including large class sizes and lecture styles.

In this thesis, I argue that student engagement is an individual student's responsibility and that the nature and the level of student engagement within the first year of study have a direct relation to student academic performance. I further argue that students bring to university, aptitudes necessary for access and not necessarily sufficient for success and survival or to meet the academic demands in order to survive at university. Notably, the students' cultural orientations showed cultural signals that proved to be limiting the nature, level and the manner in which students engage.

This thesis contributes to the knowledge domain of student engagement, retention, throughput, and success as well as dropout rates in the higher education using a linear approach to student engagement.

Key words: Student engagement, student self-engagement, nature of student engagement, level of student engagement, academic performance, academic access, academic success

ACRONYMS

AIDS: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

ANA: Annual National Assessment

B.Ed.: Bachelor of Education

BUSSE: Beginning University Survey of Student Engagement

CAO: Central Applications Office

CD: Compact Disc

CHE: Council on Higher Education

CTL: Centre for Teaching and Learning

DBE: Department of Basic Education

DoE: Department of Education

DHET: Department of Higher Education

DUT: Durban University of Technology

EBDFT4: Code for Bachelor of Education Specialization in Accounting / Business
Economics / Economics

EBDIS1: Code for Bachelor of Education Specialization in and Economic Management
Sciences (EMS) and Language Education

ECHS 112: Module code for Historical Studies

EFIT 111: Module code for Ideologies and Trends

ELG 112: Module code for English Language 1B

ELGN 112: Module code for English Language

ELLL111: Module code for Academic Literacy (Language)

FET: Further Education and Training

GET: General Education and Training

HEMIS: Higher Education Management Information System

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus

KZN: KwaZulu Natal

NSSE: National Survey of Student Engagement

PhD: Doctor of Philosophy

QEP: Quality Enhancement Project

SADC: (The) Southern African Development Community

SASSE: South African Survey of Student Engagement

UFS: University of Free State

UKZN: University of KwaZulu Natal

UNISA: University of South Africa

UNIZULU: University of Zululand

USA: United States of America

Table of Content

Table of Contents

SUPERVISOR’S AUTHORIZATION	ii
DECLARATION	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vi
ACRONYMS	ix
List of Figures	xx
CHAPTER 1.....	1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	1
1.1 Student engagement in context	1
1.2 Background to the problem	4
1.3 Location of the Study	7
1.4 Purpose of the study	8
1.5 The research design	9
1.6 Assumptions and limitations of the study	10
1.6.1 Assumptions	10
1.6.2 Limitations	11
1.6.3 Structure of the thesis and the preview of the study	11
CHAPTER 2.....	14
LITERATURE REVIEW	14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Access to University environment and issues of success	15
2.3 The focus of the study: Setting the tone of student engagement	17

2.4	The origin of student engagement as an area of educational research.....	18
2.5	Student engagement in Higher Education Institutions	20
2.6	The National Survey of Student Engagement and the South African Survey of Student Engagement	23
2.7	Role of academics in promoting Student Engagement	27
2.8	The historical lineage of South Africa's Higher Education system	30
2.9	Issues of access and success in South African universities.....	33
2.10	The effects of secondary schooling to university education	38
2.11	Academic performance: The effects of family background and culture.	41
2.12	Significance of class attendance	42
2.13	Concluding the review of relevant literature	45
	CHAPTER 3.....	49
	THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	49
3.1	Setting up the scene for the theoretical and conceptual framework	49
3.2	Bourdieu's social theory on cultural capital and cultural reproduction.....	53
3.2.1	Bourdieu's notion of habitus	55
3.2.2	Bourdieu's notion of field	57
3.2.3	Bourdieu's notion of capital	58
3.2.3.1	Embodied cultural capital.....	60
3.2.3.2	Objectified cultural capital.....	61
3.2.3.3	Institutionalized cultural capital	62
3.3	Astin's Student Involvement Theory	63
3.4	Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure	65
3.5	Conclusion.....	69
	CHAPTER 4.....	72
	RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	72

4.1	Introduction	72
4.2	Research paradigm	73
4.3	The research approach	74
4.3.1	The rationale for the mixed method approach.....	76
4.4	Research methodology	76
4.4.1	The case study design.....	76
4.4.2	The research instruments.....	78
4.4.2.1	Interviews.....	78
4.4.2.2	Focus groups	79
4.4.2.3	Document analysis.....	79
4.5	Survey.....	80
4.6	Participants in the study	81
4.7	Data sources.....	82
4.8	The data generation process	83
4.8.1	Quantitative data generation using the South African Survey of Student Engagement instrument.....	83
4.8.2	Quantitative data generation through document analysis.....	85
4.8.3	Qualitative data generation from first –year students	86
4.8.3	Qualitative data generation from academic staff members.....	86
4.9	Data analysis	87
4.9.1	Analysis of quantitative data of student engagement.....	88
4.9.2	Analysis of qualitative data of student engagement.....	89
4.10	Reliability and Validity of the study	91
4.11	Methodological limitations of the study	92
4.12	Ethical Consideration	94
4.13	Concluding remarks	95

CHAPTER 5.....	96
QUANTITATIVE DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS PHASE	96
5.1 Introduction	96
5.2 Faculty of education first year students' and respondents' profiles.....	97
5.3 Key Facts about the first year students	97
5.4 Summary of SASSE participants' profiles.....	100
5.4.1 Age distribution of the respondents	101
5.4.2 Gender distribution of the respondents	102
5.5 First year students' academic performance	103
5.6 First year students' academic performance in B.Ed. (Further Education and Training phase)	104
5.7 First year students' academic performance in B.Ed. (Senior and Intermediate Phase as well as Early Childhood Development and foundation)	106
5.8 Bachelor of Education highest passed modules across all programmes.....	108
5.9 Bachelor of Education least passed modules across all programmes.....	109
5.10 Students' experience in higher education	110
5.11 First year students aspirations to stay at the current university.....	110
5.12 Students' ability to form relations with the current university.....	111
5.13 Students' mark category	112
5.14 Students experiences of the first year of higher education	113
5.15 Students' rating of their first year educational experience.....	114
5.16 Students' rating of the quality of the academic advice	115
5.17 First year students' use of technology to communicate	115
5.18 The extent in which modules demand first year students to do their best	117
5.19 The aspects in which institution puts emphasis on.....	118

5.19.1	Studying and Academic work	118
5.19.2	Provision of technology to help students.....	119
5.20	The extent in which learning emphasizes memory	120
5.21	The extent in which the Institution contributes to knowledge and skills	122
5.21.1	Working effect effectively with others.....	122
5.21.2	Think critically and analytically.....	123
5.21.3	Write clearly and effectively.....	123
5.22	First year students' engagement practices.....	125
5.23	Students' social engagement	125
5.23.1	Amount of time students spend on social activities	126
5.24	Students' academic engagement.....	128
5.24.1	Attendance of time tabled academic experiences.....	128
5.24.2	Amount of time students spend on reading	129
5.24.3	Students' involvement in academic activities	130
5.24.4	Students' contribution in module discussion.....	130
5.24.5	Students' preparation of assignments	131
5.24.6	Students' attendance of extra-curricular activities.....	131
5.24.7	Students' presentation skills	131
5.24.8	Length of written tasks that students completed	132
5.24.9	Amount of time students spend on academic activities.....	134
5.25	The outcomes of student engagement.....	136
5.25.1	High impact practices	136
5.26	Summary of student engagement	137
5.26.1	Engagement indicators.....	137
5.26.1.1	Learning with peers.....	137
5.26.1.2	Experiences with staff	138

5.26.1.3	Campus environment	138
5.26.1.4	Academic Challenge	139
5.27	Conclusion.....	140
CHAPTER 6.....		142
QUALITATIVE DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS PHASE.....		142
6.1	Introduction	142
6.2	On becoming a first-year Bachelor of Education student	143
6.3	The effects of friend choices and initial associations at university	145
6.4	The students' perspectives on engagement practises	147
6.5	First-year student orientation programme	148
6.6	First-year students' view of the first lecture	150
6.7	Students' first assignment: Doing it right the first time	152
6.8	First-year students' academic performance: Implications on Student engagement.....	154
6.8.1	Students' poor academic performance: Implications of (dis)engagement.....	154
6.8.2	Students reasons for poor academic performance.....	156
6.8.3	High academic performance: Implications of student engagement.....	157
6.8.4	Students' concerted efforts towards academic excellence: Students' narratives	158
6.9	"We" versus the "I: What counts for high academic performance?	159
6.10	High risk modules: Students' views and challenges	160
6.11	Student support initiatives and university resources.....	161
6.12	Students' low reading levels: Implications on student engagement	164
6.13	Students' poor attendance of time tabled academic activities.....	166
6.14	The Academic staffs' perspectives on student engagement.....	169
6.15	First year students cultural orientations: Implications of cultural signals on student engagement	174

6.16	Conclusion.....	180
CHAPTER 7.....		182
DISCUSSION OF THE KEY FINDINGS		182
7.1	Introduction	182
7.2	The key finding of the student engagement phenomenon.....	183
7.2.1	Student engagement – an individual student’s responsibility.....	184
7.2.2	The nature of student engagement	185
7.2.3	The levels of student engagement and its implications for academic success...188	
7.2.3	Student engagement and cultural heritage	191
7.2.5	Student academic performance: the facts and figures	195
7.2.6	Academic staff members.....	199
7.3	Summary of the key findings	200
7.4	The key findings and the theoretical explanations.....	201
7.6	The contextual understating of student engagement.....	204
7.7	Concluding remarks	206
CHAPTER 8.....		208
CONCLUSION.....		208
8.1	Introduction	208
8.2	The background of the study	208
8.3	Reviewing the focus of the study.....	209
8.4	The concluding remarks on student engagement.....	210
8.4.1	The role of academic staff members in promoting student engagement	211
8.4.2	How do students engage themselves in academic work	212
8.4.3	The nature and the level of student engagement.....	213
8.5	Recommendations	214
8.6	Significance of the study	214

8.7	Limitations of the study	215
8.8	The contribution in the research gaze on student engagement	216
8.9	The autobiographical reflection.....	217
	REFERENCES.....	219
	Annexure A: Provisional ethical approval.....	234
	Annexure B: Final Ethical Approval.....	235
	Annexure C: Gatekeeper’s permission	236
	Annexure D: South African Survey of Student Engagement (Instrument)	237
	Annexure E: Informed Consent letter: Academic Staff Members.....	238
	Annexure F: Informed consent letter: Students	240
	Annexure: G Students Semi-structured interview questions	244
	Annexure: H Semi structured questions -Academic staff members	250
	Annexure I: Document Analysis guidelines	253
	Annexure J: Editing	
	Certificate.....	344

List of Tables

Table 5.1: Bachelor of education programmes and areas of specialization.....	98
Table 5.2: Summary of participants' profiles	101
Table 5.3: Percentage of [further education and training phase (fet)] results per bachelor of education qualification 2015	105
Table 5.4: Percentage of [intermediate and senior phase (s&ip)] results per bachelor of education qualification 2015	107
Table 5.5: Highest passed modules.....	108
Table 5.6: High impact practices in the descending order.....	136
Table 5.7: the rearview mirror of student engagement.....	140

List of Figures

Figure 2.1: The four areas of student's access.....	35
Figure 2.2: Student success indicators	37
Figure 3.1: A longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1993).....	68
Figure 5.1: Nationality of the respondents.....	99
Figure 5.2: Age distribution of the respondents.....	102
Figure 5.3: Gender distributions of the respondents.....	103
Figure 5.4: Faculty of education high risk modules	110
Figure 5.5: Highest level of education students plan to achieve.....	111
Figure 5.6: Attachment to the institution	112
Figure 5.7: Students' mark category	113
Figure 5.8: Quality of educational experience	114
Figure 5.9: Students' perceptions of the quality of academic advice	115
Figure 5.10: Students' frequency in using technology for communication purposes.....	117
Figure 5.11: Extent in which modules demand students to do the best.....	118
Figure 5.12: Aspects in which the institution puts aspects on	120
Figure 5.13: Extent in which academic work puts emphasis on memory	121
Figure 5.14: Extent in which students experience the institution's contribution to knowledge, skill and development	124
Figure 5.15: Time students spend on various social aspects per week.....	127
Figure 5.16: Frequency of attendance of timetabled academic activities	129
Figure 5.17: Amount of time students spend on reading	130
Figure 5.18: Notable frequencies of involvement.....	132
Figure 5.19: Length of written tasks completed	133
Figure 5.20: Time students spend on various academic aspects per week	135
Figure 7.1: The relationship of the nature and the levels of student engagement	185
Figure 7.2 : Frequency response chart on student engagement	189
Figure 7.3: Levels of student engagement	190
Figure 7.4: Components of student engagement.....	205
Figure 7.5: The Linear Model of Student Engagement	206

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Student engagement in context

Higher education is grappling with issues related to access, retention, throughput and dropout, nationally and globally. In South Africa, these issues have a special significance as they attempt to transform almost every fabric of the country from the ills of apartheid. The higher education transformation agenda had commenced as far back as 1996 with the establishment of the National Commission of Higher Education. A specific focus on widening access through several mechanisms, including the introduction of access and foundation programmes, had seen the national demographics of higher education student population change substantially, both in terms of head count as well as in terms of race groups (CHE, 2014).

The population of higher education students has almost doubled since 2004 with greater participation of Black African students across most public university institutions. While the success of widening of access into higher education has been noted, there has been a growing concern with throughput and dropout of students, with some studies suggesting that more or less a third of students complete their undergraduate qualifications within minimum time (CHE, 2013; Letseka & Maile, 2008). More concerning is that there is an unacceptably high dropout rate in the first year of enrolment (CHE, 2013; Ramrathan, 2013).

Several studies have been conducted to establish reasons for the high dropout of students, including that of first year students. Interventions to address these reasons have been implemented but with little success of improving retention and throughput. One of the reasons identified both within South Africa and in the international context is that of student engagement. In the United States of America (USA), a student engagement survey was developed to investigate issues related to student retention and academic achievement with a view to retain university students and their completion of the study programmes. Student engagement was seen as a key

issue in student retention and concomitant student completion rates. This instrument was imported into South Africa and has been adapted to the South African context for use in South Africa universities. With licence agreement from their USA counterparts, the University of Free State (UFS) researchers have called this survey the South African Survey on Student Engagement (SASSE). This survey is conducted with first year students registering at public universities in South Africa to investigate factors related to student engagement and academic performance of first year students.

Student engagement has been directly linked to academic achievement. The high levels of student engagement are associated with a wide range of educational practices and conditions, including purposeful student-staff contact, active and collaborative learning, and institutional environments perceived by students as inclusive and affirming and where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at reasonably high levels (Astin, 1991; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991; Pascarella, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Trowler (2010) summarizes student engagement as that which is:

.... concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution. (p. 3)

Student engagement is not or should not be limited to time spent by students on academic related activities like consultations with lecturers as Trowler (2010), has alluded to. Student engagement encompasses three other elements; the behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements as Axelson and Flick (2011) suggest. Kuh (2006) views student engagement as what represents both time and energy which students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the efforts institutions devote to using effective educational practices. The previous definition suggests that students '*invest*', which denotes very critical economical elements: an expectation to get a return, an activity that is purposeful, planned and intentional. In the same definition, it is stated that institutions '*devote*' efforts. The term devote signifies effects, purpose, results or outcomes. The previous definition and the short descriptive analysis, concurs with what Strydom and Mentz (2010), that student engagement has two components: what institutions do, and what students do. This study sought to investigate the role of

university in promoting student engagement as well the extent to which universities are prepared to deal with students that come to the university for the first time.

Axelsson and Flick (2011) have correctly encapsulated in their clarification of what they have termed the deeper meaning of student engagement by providing the following two rudiments. Firstly, that student engagement is an accountability measure that provides a general index of student involvement with their learning environment. Secondly, that student engagement is a variable in educational research that aimed at understanding, explaining and predicting student behaviour in learning environments.

It has emerged from the previous paragraphs that student engagement as a discourse in the domain of higher education has been a long standing issue. Axelsson and Flick (2011) attest to this claim as they trace the origin of student engagement theory to Ralph Tyler in the 1930's who explored the relationship between secondary school curriculum requirements and subsequent college success. They narrate that the educational psychologist Ralph Tyler conducted an investigation in the 1930s, first at Ohio State University and later at the University of Chicago. The purpose of Ralph's investigation was to determine how much time students spent on their work. In doing this he tried to show the effects of time spent on academic work to learning. McCormick, Kinzie and Gonyea (2013) attest that Taylor was tasked by The Ohio State University to assist the faculty in improving teaching and also to increase student retention. It was this task, among others, that prompted Taylor to design services studies that included the report on how much time students spent on their academic work and how that amount of time spent had an effect on students' learning. Student engagement, according to Axelsson and Flick (2011), refers to, "how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their class, institutions and each other" (p. 38). The research conducted by Axelsson and Flick (2011) found that the level of student engagement at a particular university or college is seen as a valid indicator of institutional excellence. This study sought to investigate how students engage in purposeful academic activities and how their engagement relates to performance.

More recently, Vincent Tinto has spent decades of work from the early 1970's to 2014, on student engagement and has produced several theoretical frames that help to understand student engagement. Govender (2014) also established that outcome of Tinto's work produced theories like the student integration model in 1975. The academic and social engagement theory in 1993 was another exposé (Tinto, 1993). This study also focuses its attention on this continuing research agenda, with the purpose of contributing to the discourse of student engagement from an institutional perspective.

1.2 Background to the problem

The task team report by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2013) alludes to the notion that student engagement is regarded as the single best predictor of student learning and personal development. The report further claims that there are various complexities to South African Higher Education which are regarded as major fault lines. One of those fault lines is the discontinuity between school and undergraduate studies, the task team report by the CHE (2013) concludes. This particular fault line results in other insurmountable challenges to first entry students in their formative years at university and subsequent levels of study. The challenges include students' slow academic progress, low throughput rates, student retention and poor schooling. Trowler (2010) argues that for some students, engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle or a conflict. Specific reference is made to those students for whom the culture of the university is foreign, alienating and uninviting.

In an effort to address the challenges facing first entry study in South African universities, the Council on Higher Education proposed a flexible curriculum structure which aims at responding to the disjuncture between access and success (CHE, 2013). A comprehensive and multifaceted approach is suggested as the possible intervention to the claims made in the preceding paragraph. The CHE (2013) further notes the mismatch between the demands of higher education and the preparedness of school-leavers for academic study or academic integration and raises the following questions:

- a) Is it the students that are coming to university with a deficit?

- b) To what extent are the universities prepared to deal with the students who come into the University environment for the first time?

This study meticulously engaged with these questions through the qualitative dimension of this research, with a specific focus on first year students as new entrants in the Higher Education system; exploring their first year university experience.

McGregor (2007) in the article published in the University World News of October 2007, claims that most research concludes that between 30% and 40% of South African students drop-out of university during their first year of study. The article further argued that the most likely group of students to drop out of university is the first generation students from the low-income, less educated families and sub-standard schools. There are various other reasons that may be attributed to university drop-out as well. The reasons could be poor career choices, domestic problems, early pregnancy, too much partying, and so on, McGregor (2007) concludes. While these factors have been identified as possible causes of first year dropout, the list provided in McGregor (2007) is not exhaustive. In this study, the causes or the reasons of student dropout, poor academic performance and student engagement have been looked at from an institutional and external perspective. This study shifted the lens on to the students to explore the nature and the level of student engagement that the first entry students experience in their first year of study.

Letseka and Maile (2008) state that in 2005 the Department of Education (DoE) reported that of the 120 000 students who enrolled in higher education in the year 2000, a total of 36 000 (30%) dropped out in their first year of study. A further 24 000 (20%) dropped out during their second and third years. Of the remaining 60 000 (22%) graduated within the specified three years duration for a generic Bachelor's degree. These figures are alarming and are a cause for concern to all those involved in higher education. Over the past decade, universities have introduced academic support for students that come from sub-standard schools; many universities have called on government to raise the student loans and bursaries (McGregor, 2007). These intervention initiatives have not yet yielded any noticeable changes in the profile of student throughput (CHE, 2013). While the term used in McGregor (2007) carries an offensive term of sub-standard, it is well received in the context in which it is used. The result

of such terminology is analogous to terms like ‘at-risk-students’; which is a label used to mark a certain class of students from certain categories of schools as unlikely to succeed at university or rather bound to fail. This study, therefore, shifts the focus from a statistical analysis of student throughput to a fine grained, qualitative analysis of students’ first year experience of higher education through the lens of the students, rather than that of the higher education systemic analysis.

Recent literature, government documents and various internet sources discuss students’ access to universities, not only in South Africa, but across the globe. Universities are still faced with a task of assisting underprepared students to make successful transition into university, noting that student engagement is directly linked to academic achievement as previously stated. The CHE (2014) in their Quality Enhancement Project document cites Tinto (2012) who claims that:

Student success does not arise by chance, nor does substantial improvement in institutional rates of student retention and graduation. It is the result of intentional and proactive actions and policies directed towards the success of all students. (p.14)

Hence, the need for a sustained research engagement on student throughput issues and this study contributes to this sustained engagement discourse.

More than a decade of higher education research indicates that the three best predictors of student success are academic preparation, motivation and student engagement (Kuh, Gonyea & Williams, 2005). This study understands, the current debates, discussions by various authors on student access and success in South African Universities. Subsequent to discussions on access follow discussions on drop-out rates, student retention, poor academic progress, student failure rates, and low graduate throughput. This study sought to explore how modern students expend their time and energy towards educationally purposeful activities. The purpose of this study is to explore student engagement in the academic work in the first year of study of their university qualification. Current discussions and dominant discourses have been noted and these will be further utilized on deliberations on student engagement in the subsequent literature review chapter.

It has been mentioned earlier in this chapter that Strydom and Mentz (2010) have broken down and set apart two distinct student engagement components; namely: what students do and what universities do. Students put in effort to develop their knowledge and universities provide environments that are both appropriate and conducive to learning. The institutional provision includes the adequate and equitable deployment of institutional resources. However, universities need to further provide and implement policies that promote student engagement and learning. It can be argued that student engagement cannot be left to happen on its own nor be treated as a techno-rational process in which students become involved in discreet activities that quantify time on task without consideration being given to quality experience (Harper and Quaye, 2010). Student engagement is a legitimate and a valuable academic activity. It is both an academic and a social integration activity that is geared towards desirable educational outcomes. Tinto's theory of student integration model attests to this claim.

1.3 Location of the Study

This study is located at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU). UNIZULU is one of the four public universities in the province of KwaZulu Natal. It is located within the uMhlathuze Municipality which falls within the uThungulu District. The blurb in the University of Zululand's webpage states that the uMhlathuze Municipality is the fastest growing industrial hub and employer in northern KwaZulu-Natal. UNIZULU is the only university north of the uThukela River. University of Zululand was officially opened in 1960 and is built in the Tribal land of the Mkhwanazi clan. The University is firmly embedded in the local context and dedicated to developing local talents. The KwaDlangezwa Campus is the main campus and is home to the University's four Faculties and Academic Support Departments. This is where this study will be located, in the Faculty of Education. There is another urban Richards Bay Campus, which was completed in 2009 and is intended to further the University's entrepreneurial and vocational agenda in conjunction with local industry partnerships and the maritime sector.

The description further states that UNIZULU is a comprehensive University offering approximately 252 accredited degrees, diplomas and certificate courses across its Faculties of Arts; Education; Science and Agriculture; and Commerce, Administration and Law. The student population is 16 118 inclusive of 14 819 undergraduates and 1 299 postgraduate students. UNIZULU is accorded a status of a rural university and a historically disadvantaged institution.

1.4 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the nature and the level of student engagement in their first year of study using the students registered for a Bachelor's degree in Education at the UNIZULU as participants. The study focused on students that had registered for a university degree for the first time, i.e., the students who had not registered for any university degree before. In exploring the nature and the level of student engagement, I focused on what students do, the role played by both the academic staff and the institution in promoting student engagement. The exploration of student engagement amongst first year students included engagement with their academic work to establish the relationship, if any, between their academic engagement and academic performance in the first year of study.

Whilst the primary focus was on student engagement, I was also keen to understand why students perform in the manner in which they do (What explains the nature of student engagement?). Of particular interest were the first year student's pre-university attributes and the University's planning to provide for students that come to the university for the first time. Four research questions guided this study process. These questions are:

- a) How do academics engage the first year students?
- b) How do students engage themselves in academic work?
- c) What explains the nature and the level of student engagement within the first year of study in an undergraduate programme, and if any, their relations to student performance?
- d) How does student engagement relate to student performance?

1.5 The research design

This study adopted a mixed method approach to explore student engagement in the first year of study in an undergraduate programme in an institution of higher learning. Creswell (2012) defines the mixed methods research design as a procedure for collecting, analysing, and “mixing” both quantitative and qualitative research as methods in a single study in order to understand a research problem. An explanatory mixed methods design was used, and it involved collecting qualitative data after a quantitative phase in order to explain or follow up on the quantitative data in more depth (Creswell, 2012). The set of quantitative data was collected using the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE). This survey instrument was sourced and used with the permission from the UFS. Further details about this instrument are provided in Chapter 4 of this thesis. The SASSE instrument was used to collect data from the first year students selected across the Bachelor of Education students at the University of Zululand’s Faculty of Education. The survey was administered to 782 of the 1255 registered first year students.

The second phase of data collection was qualitative. This was conducted to investigate and understand why students engage in academic work, in the way they do. In this explanatory follow-up, the student academic engagement exploration took the form of interviews with first year undergraduate students that are performing well and those students that are not performing so well. In addition, interviews were held with a sample of academic staff who taught first year students. To complete the exploration and to establish some links with student academic performance, assessment documents were analysed.

Using the mixed methods research design helped to overcome the limitations of a single design. In this particular study, the qualitative data was used to explain and interpret the quantitative data. Klassen, Creswell, Plano, Clark, Smith and Meissner (2012), claim that the use of mixed methods is most suitable when a quantitative or qualitative approach, by itself, is inadequate to develop multiple perspectives and a complete understanding about the research problem and or a research question. It is upon the background given above that mixed methods in this study were used. The purpose to use both methods was the intentional collection of both quantitative

and qualitative data and the combination of the strengths of each to answer the research questions. The study, therefore, necessitated an explanatory sequential design, beginning with quantitative data collection, followed by the analysis of the quantitative data.

The study was conducted at the University of Zululand which served as the case study Higher Education Institution. The methodology was a case study methodology. I explored the phenomenon of student engagement within a bounded system of a particular institution informed by its way of life and contextual influences. The participants were the first year lecturers and the first year students registered in an undergraduate programme in the faculty of education. The SASSE survey was conducted on-line and face-to-face interviews were held with selected participants through a purposive sampling process.

1.6 Assumptions and limitations of the study

The University of Zululand has several faculties that have first-year undergraduate students. This particular study focused in the Faculty of Education with specific reference to first year student teachers and lecturers that teach pre-service teachers.

1.6.1 Assumptions

There were assumptions that I had believed to be true based on logic and the statements about UNIZULU; its history, geographic location and the possible type of students the university registered in this institution. The first assumption was that all students at UNIZULU come from the similar backgrounds, that is, previously disadvantaged communities. Interaction with students and academic staff members dispelled this assumption. Secondly, I had assumed that the population under investigation was a homogeneous group, that is, black students speak the same language. This was also proved incorrect as the university also admits international students mainly from the SADC region. Lastly, my assumption was that all students enrolled at UNIZULU come from previously disadvantaged or substandard schools; this too was rejected during interaction with the data and the participants in the study.

1.6.2 Limitations

During the data generation phase, the following emerged as limitations. Firstly, the computer literacy levels of some of the respondents were quite low: some students needed assistance in responding to the SASSE instrument in particular as it was an online survey. Some of the students' computer literacy levels were low or non-existing. This situation created a problem as students could not easily say things that may appear to be negative experiences e.g. low marks. Secondly, I work within one of the first year modules; my presence and my role as the researcher had to be explained in advance and repeatedly. Students may have wanted to impress me with their "good and positive" answers. Thirdly, as previously stated, I am a Writing Centre Coordinator in this university; I interact with the first year students as an advisor in their writing. I am aware of some of their challenges that I sometimes observe during consultations; this could have been my potential bias.

1.6.3 Structure of the thesis and the preview of the study

Chapter two presents the review of literature that seeks to explain the student engagement phenomenon. In this chapter, I highlight the historical lineage of the South African higher education system. I also provide the history and the evolution of the student engagement experience as an area in educational research. The literature review also focuses attention on other student engagement discourses like student access, participation, retention, performance, dropout and graduate throughput. There is also engagement on students' socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural orientations as additional constructs that inform the student engagement phenomenon and academic performance. The chapter concludes by focusing discussion on the role of academic staff members in promoting student engagement. Finally, the student attendance or non-attendance of structured academic activities is interrogated.

Chapter three presents the theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins this study. The chapter begins by highlighting a wide range of student engagement related theories. The

highlights are followed by narrowing the focus to theories and constructs that are closely related to student engagement in the context of this study. In the process, I provide reasons for eliminating some of the theories while acknowledging that a single theory may not be sufficient to fully explain and conceptualize the phenomenon under investigation. Three theorists are widely cited in this chapter; these are Astin's theory of involvement, Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure and Bourdieu's social theory on cultural capital and cultural reproduction, focusing attention on the three interrelated concepts of habitus, field and capital.

Chapter four presents the research design and methodology. Research design is carefully outlined as the blue print and the overall strategy that this study followed to interrogate intensely the various components under exploration. In this chapter, full details of the how the data was generated, analysed and presented are given. The research paradigm is presented detailing the ontological and epistemological assumptions that inform this study. Further, the socio-constructivist view that underpins this study is given credence.

In chapter four, I give reasons to elucidate the choices that were made for the preference of the mixed method approach that was followed. I further give an account on why the case study design was deemed appropriate. The chapter also presents details on the individual research instruments that were used, followed by the data collection processes, data analyses stages and presentation. The latter sections of the research design and methodology chapter present in details how the issues of ethics were dealt with, as well as matters of validity and reliability. The issues of data sources are explained in details. Finally, the choice of participants and methodological limitations are discussed.

Chapter five of this thesis presents the quantitative data presentation and analysis; focusing primarily on the data that was generated through document analysis as well as the SASSE survey. In this chapter, I present and analyse the student academic performance statistics, areas of specialization. Secondly, the student profiles are presented and analysed followed by the presentation and analyses of first year modules looking specifically on modules with highest and lowest pass rates. Finally, I present and analyse data from the survey illuminating trends and patterns of student engagement, which are subsequently used in the next chapter six to

further interrogate the reasons why students perform and engage in the manner in which the results portray them.

Chapter six presents the second phase of data analysis and presentation, the qualitative data that was produced through the interviews with academic staff members, high performing students, and low performing students as well as through the focus groups.

Chapter seven presents the key findings and the discussions of the findings indicating the extent to which the study responded to the research questions.

Chapter eight presents the recommendations for further studies and conclusions that this study arrived at.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has presented the background and aims of this study and has also argued for its purpose. Furthermore, I have presented the key research questions that this study is responding to. In addition, I have outlined the research process that study has followed, including how data was generated, analysed and presented; thus providing the roadmap for the entire thesis. In this chapter, I present literature that seeks to explain the student engagement phenomenon within the context of both the major and the minor discourses in higher education.

I first present an analysis of literature highlighting the three pillars within which student engagement is understood in this study. The second part of this literature review chapter engages with the debates and discussions that are fundamental towards understanding the student engagement phenomenon and the predictors of student success. Subsequent sections discuss the origin of student engagement phenomenon as an area of educational research in higher education. Student engagement in higher education institutions is discussed paying more attention to the role of academic staff members in promoting student engagement, how students engage in academic activities as well as role of the institutions as the sites of intellectual engagement. Academic staff members assume the central role in the academic integration of students; the students are the participants in the integration process; while the institutions provide policies and resources that enable, guide and inform the teaching, learning and the academic and the social integration process of students.

It was necessary also to present the historical lineage of the South African Higher Education system as it evolved over the years; highlighting how some laws deliberately excluded certain segments of the South African population and the effects of that segregation in the current higher education context. The effects of secondary schooling and how it impacts on students as they enter the university education system is discussed. The allied aspects of student engagement, viz. issues of student access, participation, drop-out, performance and success at

universities forms the penultimate component of this literature review chapter as student engagement as a major discourse has emerged because of these issues that are impacting on the efficiency of higher education studies. In this chapter, I also discuss the students' cultural background focusing attention on how students' cultural capital as well as cultural heritage impact on their academic performance as well as the social and academic integration in higher education.

2.2 Access to University environment and issues of success

Macgregor (2007) in the article published in the University World News of October 2007, claims that most research concludes that between 30% and 40% of South African students drop-out of university during their first year of study. It is further argued that the most likely group of students to drop out of university is the first generation students from the low-income, less educated families and sub-standard schools. There are various other reasons that may be attributed to university drop-out as well, these could be; poor career choices, domestic problems, pregnancy and too much partying, Macgregor (2007) concludes. While these factors have been identified as possible causes of first year dropout, the causes have been looked at from an institutional and external perspective. This study shifts the lens on to the students to explore the nature of student engagement that they experience during their first year of study. It is du Plooy and Zilindile (2014) who further expand the context within which access could be better understood: "Access for whom (equity), access for how long (retention), access to what (curriculum) and access for what (achievement)?" (p. 11).

Letseka and Maile (2008) state that in 2005 the DoE reported that of the 120 000 students who enrolled in higher education in the year 2000, 36 000 (30%) dropped out in their first year of study. A further 24 000 (20%) dropped out during their second and third years. Of the remaining 60 000, 22% graduated within the specified three years duration for a generic Bachelor's degree. Over the past decade, universities have introduced academic support for students that come from sub-standard schools; many universities have called on government to raise the student loans and bursaries (Macgregor, 2007). These intervention initiatives have not yet yielded any noticeable changes in the profile of student throughput (CHE, 2013). This study, therefore, shifts the focus from a statistical analysis of student throughput to a more fine-

grained, qualitative analysis of student experience of higher education through the lens of the students, rather than that of the higher education systemic analysis.

The most recent statistics published on VitalStats, CHE (2014) official document on Public Higher Education in South Africa has published data that revealed that only 969 154 of the 52 million South African population were students in South African institutions of Higher Education; suggesting that 1.8 % of the South Africans were registered in Public Higher Education. Further, CHE (2016) illustrates that of the total student population; 679 800 were Black South African students; and 166 172, were White South Africans, the Coloured populations accounts for 60 716, and the Indian Students accounted for 53 611. The throughput rates of students who completed their four year degrees in regulation time; that is, student who registered for their four-year degrees for the first time in 2009 is recorded as follows:

- Black South African students: 59 % (323 135) of the 547 686 Black South African enrolment graduated and 41 % dropped-out: A total headcount of 224 551 Black South African students that dropped out.
- Coloured: 54 % (29 755) of the 55 101 Coloured enrolment graduated and 46 % dropped-out: A total headcount of 25 346 Coloured students dropped out.
- Indian: 56 % of the 53 629 Indian enrolment graduated and 44 % dropped out: a total headcount of 23 596 Indian students dropped out.
- White South Africans: 65 % of the 179 232 White South African enrolment graduated and 35 % dropped out: a total headcount of 62 731 White South African students dropped out.

The statistics presented above reflect that while the student access into public universities in South Africa has increased to over 900 000, the student drop-out rates still remain unabated and increasing, statistics above show an average of 41.5% drop-out rate. The total number of Black South African students is 224 551 which is more than double the total of 111 673 of the combined three races (Whites, Coloureds and Indians) that dropped out. While access to South African Universities shows remarkable increase over the past two decades since 1994; the challenge of student dropouts, failure rates, and low graduate throughputs particularly of the Black South Africans still remain unabated and proportionally increasing.

2.3 The focus of the study: Setting the tone of student engagement

This study focusses its attention on how modern first-year students at a university expend their time and energy towards educationally purposeful activities, and how that relates to students' academic performance. In this exploratory study, I looked at what I conceptualised as three interrelated pillars of a first-year university student's learning, development and growth. The first pillar is the academic staff members as the front desk and face of the university and also as key agents in the teaching and learning process in general and knowledge transmission in particular. The second pillar is the university as the environment, site and context of teaching, learning, assessment as well as intellectual engagement. The third pillar is the first-year student as both the recipient of knowledge and active participant in the process. All these pillars were seen as the important role players or major contributors to students' first-year experience at an institution of higher education. Kuh (2006) argues that what students bring to higher education environment or where they study matters less to their success and development than what they do during their time as a student. Students' schooling background, socio-economic background and the extent to which the first-year students engage in academic and social university activities are noted taking into account the uniqueness of the students enrolled at the site that was chosen to conduct this particular study; a comprehensive rural university.

Kuh et al., (2005) claim that higher education research indicates that the three best predictors of student success are academic preparation, motivation and student engagement. There are numerous past and current debates presented in literature in South Africa and elsewhere in the world on students' academic and social integration as well as their success (Tinto, 1993; Kuh et al., 2005; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). These debates on student access to higher education environment are analogous with debates and discussions on student drop-out rates (Ramrathan, 2013) at universities particularly in the first year of study. Further, debates on student retention (Tinto, 2006) and attrition (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008) also feature prominently in the higher education research agenda. Some studies focus on student academic progress (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Melius, 2011), student failure rates, and low graduate throughput rates (Strydom & Mentz, 2010), while others focus on secondary or pre-university schooling (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Some debates and discussions focus on the role of universities in dealing with or welcoming first-year students into academic fraternity (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Strydom & Mentz, 2008). There are other studies as well that focus

on students' socio-economic backgrounds and how these impact on first-year students' academic experiences (Kuh, 2006; Trowler, 2010).

2.4 The origin of student engagement as an area of educational research

Student engagement has been a long standing issue and has an educational history of more than eight decades. Axelson and Flick (2011), McCormick, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2013), present concurring views that the historical roots of student engagement as an educational research phenomenon began in the 1930s. These scholars cite Ralph Tyler; an educational psychologist as the first scholar who began earlier works that ought to explore the relationship between secondary school curriculum requirements and subsequent college success. It can be said that from the very beginning, the aim was to enhance student performance and improve student success. McCormick, et.al (2013) cite Merwin (1969) who writes further on Tyler's work at The Ohio State University where Tyler was tasked with assisting the faculty in improving teaching and increasing student retention. In doing this task, Tyler designed a number of path-breaking "service studies" including a report on how much time students spent on their academic work and its effects on learning, Merwin (1969) concludes.

McCormick, et.al (2013), further identify another renowned scholar, C. Robert Pace who made further contribution to Tyler's later works and together became the major contributors of expertise in "*educational evaluation and the study of higher education environments to the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Personality Development in Youth (1957–1963), which furthered the study of college outcomes by turning attention to the total college environment*" (p.51). Common to Pace's and Tyler's works is that the following seem to be central purposes of their projects; to focus their attention to activities and experiences that have been empirically linked to desired college outcomes. The practical evaluations of the college environment and the quality of students' learning feature dominantly in their works.

In the current and most recent times, there still seem to be mounting pressure for institutions to be accountable for educational quality and to assess educational quality. It can also be inferred there were mounting concerns about student persistence and attainment and the scholarship of teaching and learning at the time in which Pace and Tyler's works were done. This study

continues that research agenda and attempts to understand the student engagement as one of the critical research areas that contributes to the desired university outcomes. Tyler's studies produced the positive effects on learning and the outcomes of Tyler's work in the academic fraternity was called *the time on task*; which later on Pace built onto other studies and produced the key results that showed "*that the outcomes do not result from courses exclusively, but rather from the full panoply of college life*" (McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013, p.51). Further, there were results that also pointed at the influence of student and academic subcultures, programs, policies, and facilities, among other factors, and how these factors vary from one university to the other.

It can be said that these were the initial findings from earlier studies that show how the student engagement research agenda has evolved over the years, from the work of Tyler in the 1930s to Pace in the 1950s and 1960s. The most recent work by Kuh (2009), on the evolution of student engagement, also states that in the 1930s Ralph Tyler research produced a student engagement construct showing the positive effects of *time on task* on learning. Secondly, Kuh (2009) also states that research by C. Robert Pace between the 1950s and the 1960s produced another student engagement construct termed "*quality of effort*". Thirdly, Kuh (2009) brings forth Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of *involvement*. Since the emergence of the theory of involvement in 1984; Pascarella (1985) introduces the construct of *outcomes*, Chickering and Gamson (1987) introduce another student engagement construct; *good practices in undergraduate education*.

The emergence and the evolution of student engagement as an educational construct finds traction in other studies. Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (1991) argue from the premise that students learn from what they do in college or at the university. Also Pike and Kuh (2005) argue that engagement is positively related to both the objective and subjective measures of gains in general abilities and critical thinking of students. While the work of Astin (1984), Kuh (2009) as well as Pace (1984) show that, even though the focus is on student engagement, institutional policies and practices influence levels of engagement on campus. More recently, Vincent Tinto has spent decades of work from the early 1970's to 2014, on student engagement and has produced several theoretical frames that help to understand student engagement. The outcome of Tinto's work produced theories like the student integration model in 1975, the academic and social engagement theories in 1993. This study also focuses its attention in this

continuing research agenda with the purpose of contributing to the student engagement discourse from an institutional perspective.

2.5 Student engagement in Higher Education Institutions

The previous section has highlighted that student engagement has been directly linked to student academic achievement, university outcomes and what students do at the university as well as the amount of time they spend on academic activities. The high levels of student engagement are associated with a wide range of educational practices and conditions including purposeful student-staff contact, active and collaborative learning, and institutional environments perceived by students as inclusive and affirming and where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set out at reasonably high levels (Astin, 1991; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Kuh et al. 1991; Pascarella, 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Trowler (2010) summarizes student engagement as that which:

...is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution (p. 3).

Based on earlier studies and literature as indicated in section 2.3 above, the concept of student engagement has been understood to encompass various constructs like “*time on task*” as originated by Tyler, “*quality of effort*” as found in Pace, “*theory of involvement*” as mentioned in Astin, “*outcomes*” as found the work of Pascarella, “*good practices in undergraduate education*” cited in Chickering and Gamson (1987) and lastly “*integration*” in the work of Tinto. These constructs are understood based on varying context and outcomes and are not only limited to time spent by students on academic related activities like consultations with lecturers and so on as the most superficial definitions would conclude.

Student engagement encompasses three critical elements which are: behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements as Axelson and Flick (2011) states. This suggests that the manner in which a student behaves contributes to the manner in which a student engages with academic

work. Another contributing factor is the extent to which a student is motivated to succeed and do well. . Finally, the cognitive element of individual students contributes to the outcome of student engagement. Kuh (2006) views student engagement as what represents both time and energy which students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the efforts institutions devote to using effective educational practices. The previous definition suggests that students make an investment, which symbolises very critical elements: an expectation to get a return, an activity that is purposeful, planned and intentional. The same definition also points out that the institutions devote efforts, suggesting that institutions are expected to give all their resources and time in an effort to enhance and promote student engagement. Kuh's (2006) conceptualization of student engagement resonates with what Strydom & Mentz (2010) have claimed that student engagement has two components; namely, what institutions do, and what students do.

Borrowing from the myriads of literature where various authors have defined student engagement from various contexts, this paragraph presents how some of those definitions have been used and understood. Kuh et al. (2008) assert that student engagement encompasses two critical features. The first feature is the amount of time and effort students put into the educationally purposeful activity. The second feature is understood to be how the institution uses its resources and organizes the activity to encourage or entice students to participate in experiences that lead to the desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation. Along the same line of thought, Strydom and Mentz (2010) have understood student engagement as being characterized by two key components and these are further discussed in the paragraph below.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Strydom and Mentz (2010) have broken down the construct of student engagement and identified student engagement as having two components: (a) what students do, (b) and what universities or institutions do.. It is herein inferred that these two components are equally important in an effort to improve students' undergraduate education. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argue that *"the impact of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on a campus"* (p. 602). The previous claim puts the responsibility on the individual student, an assertion that has been put forward in Astin (1984) who argues that

“the more the student’s involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development” (p. 529). Ordinarily students put in efforts to develop their knowledge and universities provide environments that are both appropriate and conducive to learning including the adequate and equitable deployment of institutional educational resources.

Astin (1984) describes student involvement as that which refers *“to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience”* (p. 518). The implication of the above definition as Astin (1984) further argues is that there are two types of students. The first type refers to students that are highly involved and the second type refers to those students that are that are uninvolved. The difference between the two categories or types of students is that the former *“devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students”* (Astin, 1984, p.518); whilst the latter refers to students that neglect studies, spend little time on campus, abstain from extracurricular activities, and have infrequent contact with faculty members or other students (Astin, 1984); signifying the role played by students’ behaviour as Axelson and Flick (2011) indicated.

Axelson and Flick (2011) have correctly encapsulated in their clarification of what they have termed the deeper meaning of student engagement by providing the following two additional elements. Firstly, they argue that student engagement is an accountability measure that provides a general index of student involvement with their learning environment. Secondly, student engagement is understood to be a variable in educational research that is aimed at understanding, explaining and predicting student behaviour in learning environments. To further extend the deeper understanding of student engagement, Harper and Quaye (2009) offer a much more operational understanding of the student engagement phenomenon as that which contextualizes student engagement as *“participation in educationally effective practice, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes”* (p. 7). Consequently, student engagement is an accountability measure aimed at explaining students’ behaviour in learning environments inside and outside the classroom environments leading to measurable outcomes of educational practices. This understanding resonates with Astin (1984)

who offers insight on how institutions may benefit from both the contextual and operational meanings of the student engagement phenomenon as it is further articulated hereunder.

Astin (1984) distinctly offers student involvement as a theoretical construct that is meant to help and guide universities to design more effective learning environments. Astin further suggests student involvement to be both a psychological and physical phenomenon providing academic staff with possibilities of how to motivate students and how to get students involved. Further, it is highlighted in Astin (1984) that:

Administrators and faculty members must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice (e.g. class schedules; regulations on class attendance, academic probation, and participation in honours courses; policies on office hours for faculty, student orientation, and advising) can affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits (Astin, 1984, p. 523).

In concluding the notion of effective learning environments as a theoretical construct of student involvement, I borrow from Tinto (2012) who further concedes that “*student success does not arise by chance, nor does substantial improvement in institutional rates of student retention and graduation; it is the result of intentional and proactive actions and policies directed towards the success of all students*” (p.14). Hence, the sustained research engagement on student throughput issues, student engagement, and students’ academic and social integration. This study contributes to this sustained engagement.

2.6 The National Survey of Student Engagement and the South African Survey of Student Engagement

Kuh (2009) states that the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is an instrument that was developed “to assess the extent to which students take part in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience” (p. 7). In providing the abridged history and the evolution of the NSSE, Kuh (2009) observes that in the early 1970’s the instruments that were available in the USA were mainly used for the purposes of research rather “an organizing construct for institutional assessment, accountability, and improvement efforts”(p.5). It was until the 1990’s where the USA’s DoE set out call to design tools that would provide institutions with valid and reliable information about student experiences. Kuh

(2009) further substantiates that there was a need for good data that would guide the improvement of teaching and learning using authentic evidence of student learning and effective educational practices.

The NSSE in the main as Kuh (2009) illustrates, had three purposes. The first purpose was to provide high quality and actionable data which institutions could use to improve undergraduate experiences. Secondly, institutions could use data produced by the NSSE instrument to discover and document effective educational practices in postsecondary settings. Finally, institutions could advocate for public acceptance and use of empirically derived conceptions of collegiate quality. These purposes of philosophical origins that underpin the NSSE instruments gave rise to five most important categories that measure the extent of student engagement namely; the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, enriched educational experience and finally the supportive campus environment.

Most recently the data available from the NSSE institute has produced data from participating institutions made up of 560 colleges and universities in 2016. The NSSE institute claims that since the year 2000, over 1600 institutions have participated. The total of 322,582 students completed NSSE in 2016 and an approximately 5.5 million students have completed the survey since the year 2000. The data that has been recently produced by the NSSE Institute in 2016 based on the number of participants; suggest that more colleges and universities are increasingly beginning to prioritize interventions that promote success for all students. The survey produced data that indicates that:

- About one in five first-year students had difficulty with both learning course material and getting help with coursework.
- The vast majority of undergraduates felt safe and comfortable being themselves at their institution, and at least three-quarters felt valued and part of a campus community.
- Black or African American men and women faculty interacted with students most often, while White and Asian men did so the least, on average.

These are just the few of the findings that the NSSE survey has recently produced, after decades of research and institutional attempts to devise interventions that seek to address student

engagement, participation, success, and throughput. In the executive summary of the NSSE institutes results it is stated that:

These findings offer valuable insights into how colleges and universities and high schools, too can help their students succeed. They also call attention to the continuing need to make our institutions hospitable and welcoming places for traditionally underserved populations, and suggest that a diverse faculty confers educational benefits that go beyond mere representation (p. 4).

The above statement resonates with the philosophy of the NSSE as previously stated, and further the NSSE Institute still states that: “NSSE’s aim is not merely to survey undergraduates, but to promote evidence informed improvement of the undergraduate experience by providing rich diagnostic information that includes results from comparison institutions” (p. 4). The previous citation suggests that the NSSE is more than just a research instrument, but an instrument designed to provide accountability measure, authentic evidence about student experience with the aim of improving and guiding the practice of teaching and learning. The abridged narrative presented above about the NSSE is a precursor to the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE). The following paragraph presents the SASSE as it was adapted for use in the South African context.

The SASSE is based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) developed in the USA (Strydom and Mentz, 2010); also more information about the SASSE is available on the University of Free State’s webpage. In acknowledging the contextualization of the SASSE to the South African context the UFS webpage states that:

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was developed by the NSSE Institute at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA, partly in reaction to inaccurate measures of “quality” used by the media in the USA to rank higher education institutions. Based on decades of research, the NSSE aimed to refer discussions about quality in higher education back to students and their learning. (No page number).

The UFS’s homepage to the SASSE further presents the protocol on the adaptation and contextualization of the SASSE from the NSSE acknowledging that

In 2006, the division of Student Development and Success (now incorporated in the Centre for Teaching and Learning, or CTL) at the University of the Free State (UFS) requested permission from the NSSE Institute to adapt the NSSE for use in South Africa. This version, the South African Survey of Student

Engagement (SASSE), was administered for the first time for field testing in 2007. A revised edition of SASSE was piloted in 2013 (no page number).

The SASSE instrument also measures student engagement using the similar categories used in NSSE. These themes or categories measured are the level academic challenge. Secondly, the SASSE measures the extent to which students collaborate in learning with peers. Thirdly, the students' experiences with staff are also measured. Fourthly, the extent to which the university environment supports students' learning is measured. Finally, the high-impact practices are measured. In order to ensure its acceptability of its psychometric properties, the SASSE was piloted at the UFS (Strydom, Kuh & Mentz, 2010). The SASSE contributed to this particular study by providing responses to some of the research questions that this study attempts to answer.

CHE (2010) document titled "*Focusing the Student Experience on Success through Student engagement,*" the executive summary present what the SASSE aims to do:

A focus on student engagement offers institutions the opportunity to enhance the prospects for a diverse range of students, especially underprepared students, to survive and thrive in higher education. Data obtained using the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) has the potential to help identify those conditions and drivers of success over which institutions have control; these can be used to improve the positive outcomes of higher education, such as improved throughput and success rates (p. viii).

Some of the initial findings from the year 2009 SASSE pilot programme with 13 636 students that participated from seven universities revealed the following key findings. The majority of students (82%) who participated in the pilot study indicated that their institution places significant emphasis on spending time studying and on academic work. Further it was found that students reported spending only 2 hours per week on co-curricular activities and an average of 11 hours per week socialising. The findings also revealed that, overall, students in the sample (both first-years and seniors) participate in significantly more collaborative learning than active learning experiences. Findings on student-staff-interaction pointed out that students interact with staff more frequently for course-related matters than for activities outside of the classroom environment. Also, overall results showed that the students at the universities reported significantly higher levels of participation in enriching educational activities than all the other students. Finally, the first-year students reported higher levels of overall satisfaction with the

institution and higher levels of support for student success; with just more than three-quarters of the overall sample indicated that their relationships with other students were friendly and supportive.

The SASSE 2009 pilot project produced several findings as listed above and the following recommendations: the design of a four-year-undergraduate-curriculum, the improvement of Higher education outcomes, and the enhancement of quality assurance in teaching and learning as well as furthering social cohesion in the South African Higher Education. The conclusions drawn from the year 2009 SASSE pilot project provided the catalyst for constructive academic engagements in the South African Higher Education research agenda that will enable universities “to refocus institutional conversations on quality of education” (CHE, 2010, p. 33). The SASSE provides institutions with rich data that could be used to inform practice and enhance the institutional attempts in teaching and learning. Hence this study attempts to contribute in the research gaze that mobilizes institutional actions towards student success.

2.7 Role of academics in promoting Student Engagement

The role of academic staff members in promoting student engagement is clearly highlighted in Mann (2001); Trowler (2010); Makondo (2010); and Ramrathan (2013). These scholars have mutually highlighted that academic staff members are central to student engagement and or disengagement. Academic staff members have been regarded as one of the three pillars of student engagement in this study. The role played by academic staff members can either promote student high academic performance or indirectly, or with unintended motives, promote student poor academic performance. Mann (2001) outlines several strategies that academic staff members can adopt to make alienated students become more engaged in both social and academic spheres of their university lives. Mann’s (2001) strategies are more towards equipping academic staff members on how to make the academic environment more enabling to students. Mann’s strategies include four basic elements. Firstly, academic staff members have a duty to dissolve the estrangement through empathy and removing the separation between lecturers and students. Secondly, academic staff members have a responsibility to welcome new members to academic community by making the academic discourse more accessible. Thirdly, provide safe spaces where creativity is nurtured. Finally, allow students to exercise power over their own learning and development (Mann, 2001). The basic elements in

Mann's (2001) strategies suggest that academic staff members should provide safe spaces for academic and intellectual engagement thus making learning and development accessible, less challenging and not threatening to new members of the academic community.

Mann's (2001) strategies are useful for academic staff members in creating an enabling environment. Ramrathan (2013) states that the role of the academic staff members is to nurture students and play a mentoring role while being involved in establishing learning communities and ensuring students' retention. The strategies outlined in Mann (2001) as well as what the academic staff members are expected to do accordingly argued in Ramrathan (2013) are twofold. The first assumption is that all academic staff members are adequately skilled and professionally trained to adhere to these good practices. The second assumption is that the institutional resources are fairly equitable in institutions of higher learning to cater for academic staff members' innovative teaching strategies.

The above sets of assumptions are also argued in Makondo (2010) who claims that some academic staff members contribute to the students' academic underperformance citing the academic staff members' failure to effectively deliver their lectures. Still on the first assumption, Ramrathan (2013) cites negative lecturer experiences as one of the factors that lead to drop-out. Mann (2001) and Ramrathan (2013) are clear on what the academic staff members' roles are understood to be. However; universities need to be guided to further provide and effectively implement policies that promote student engagement and learning. Tinto's (1999) view is that students are more likely to stay in institutions or educational settings that are seen to be involving them as valued members of the institutional community; citing frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students as draw cards.

Student engagement cannot be left to happen on its own nor be treated as a techno-rational process (Zyngier, 2008) in which students become involved in discreet activities that quantify time on task without consideration being given to quality experience (Harper & Quaye, 2010). Student engagement is both a legitimate and a valuable academic activity. It is both an academic and a social integration activity that is geared towards desirable educational outcomes. Chickering and Gamson (1987) offer seven principles for good teaching and

learning in universities, particularly at undergraduate levels. It has been mentioned in this section that Chickering and Gamson (1987) contributed a construct of good practice in undergraduate education as an extension in the expansion and understanding of the student engagement agenda.

Further to the contributions on student engagement made in Strydom and Mentz (2010), the arguments made in Makondo (2010, 2012) on the role of academic staff members as well as the proposition on student dropout in higher education made in Ramrathan (2013); there is substance in Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. The seven principles below provide guidance and frameworks within which the institutions and academic staff members could devise strategies aimed at both enhancing and improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices. Chickering and Gamson (1987) argue for seven teaching and learning principles that: (a) communicate high expectations, (b) develop reciprocity and cooperation among students (c) emphasize time on task, (d) encourage active learning, (e) encourage contact between students and faculty, (f) give prompt feedback, and finally (g) respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

Tinto (1999) further puts emphasis on the institutional imperatives aimed at sensitizing institutions on how student retention could be maintained as well as the benefits it has on the development of the first year students. Tinto (1999) argues that *"students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide clear and consistent information about institutional requirements. Students need to understand the road map to completion and know how to use it to decide upon and achieve personal goals"* (p. 5).

The above seven principles inform and suggest institutional essentials that seek to incorporate students into the university environment, moving students from the peripheries of academic environments into the centre of the academic circles. There is substance in Tinto's (1993) claim which states that:

Students are more likely to succeed when they find themselves in settings that are committed to their success, hold high expectations for their success, provide needed academic, social, and financial support, frequent feedback, and actively involve them, especially with other students and faculty in learning (p. 6).

Of the seven principle outlined in Chickering and Gamson (1987), one of the principles promote the development of reciprocity and cooperation amongst students. Noguera (2003) supports peer group as a component that plays a significant role in shaping student identity. Secondly, peer groups assume a great influence over the orientation young people adopt toward achievement. Thirdly, peer groups shape the way identities are constituted and that peer groups shape the social construction of identity within the site of learning. Finally, Tinto (1999) puts emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning as a one of the mechanisms that foster student retention. In support of the previous claim, Tinto (1999) states that: *“Students who learn are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate (their) students are institutions that are successful in retaining (their) students”* (p. 6).

Makondo (2010), urges the stakeholders in higher education sector to ensure that academic staff members are trained to handle diverse teaching and learning environments. Ramrathan (2013) argues for the relevancy and the correctness of the course materials as well as its quality in terms of its fitness for the purpose. This assertion is further highlighted in Makondo (2012) where he accounts for diverse factors that result in student underperformance, claiming that Academic Development Centres, Centres for Academic Excellence and Centres for Higher Education have strategic supportive roles that has the potential to enhance, empower and develop academic staff members to execute their core functions which are teaching, research and community engagement. The similar argument is highlighted in Tinto (1999) who also states that *“institutions that provide academic, social and personal support encourage persistence. Support that is readily available and connected to other parts of student collegiate experience leads to retention”* (p. 5).

2.8 The historical lineage of South Africa’s Higher Education system

The previous sections in this chapter presented a historical lineage of research work in the field of educational research dating back from the 1930s. In this section, I present the brief history of the South African Higher education system. I do so in order to contextualize this study within the historical lineage, and in the process illuminate the origin of the current educational challenges in Higher Education; in which this study is located. Online searches found in history online state that the University of Good Hope was the first university in South Africa that was

established in 1873 by an act of parliament. The University of Good Hope was later renamed the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 1918 and moved to the administrative capital of the Republic of South Africa Tshwane (previously known as Pretoria).

UNISA, too, was established through the act of parliament; the University Act of South Africa (Act 12 of 1916). During the period of 1916, the Union of South Africa was tied closely to the British Empire. Another key era in evolution of the South African Higher Education was in 1959, where the Extension of University Education Act 45 of 1959 was promulgated and gave universities neither power nor autonomy giving rise to an education system that was complex and discriminatory. Google Search on South African History produced a history of notes “Notes from Underground” and cite Lapping (1986) who further expounds the atrocities of the Extension of University Education Act 45 of 1959; stating that the aforementioned act made it *“a criminal offence for a non-white student to register at a hitherto open university without the written consent of the Minister of Internal Affairs”* (Lapping, 1986, p. 184 cited in “notes from underground). The same act that Jansen (2003) claims brought the traumatic reorganization of the South African Higher education arguing that since the enactment of the Extension of University Education Act 45 of 1959; university education has since stood at precarious crossroads.

Under the Act 45 of 1959, the main functions of the universities were to disseminate knowledge through institutions to students in various academic disciplines and to advance knowledge through research. These roles or main functions were carried out in a manner that was relative to the cultural and value framework of specific population or ethnic groups. The said Act 45 of 1959 provided for the establishment of ethnically-based universities for Whites, Coloureds, Blacks and Indians. The implications of this Act were the further separation of institutions based on the medium of instructions, where some universities used Afrikaans and some used English. Further notes from two historians: Lapping (1986) and Davenport (1987) state that Ongoye in Zululand was for the Zulu speaking Nationals in Natal (now called KwaZulu-Natal), Durban-Westville in Natal for Indians, Turfloop in the then Transvaal for the Sotho-Tswana speaking population, while Fort Hare (formerly, Lovedale Mission College) became restricted for Xhosas in the former Transkei Homeland now called the Eastern Cape.

The reason for this brief historical lineage of the South African higher education sector is to illuminate the extent to which the discriminatory laws affected the sector in the past and purposely promoted inequality. I do so in order to indicate that the current challenges in the higher education sector in South Africa have a long standing history. With the dawn of democracy in the Republic of South Africa in 1994, the state had to begin the process of de-racializing the universities in order to redress the inequalities in the higher education sector that governed the university education system under apartheid laws for over 120 years. One of the first priorities of the post-apartheid government was to open the doors of learning to all its citizens regardless of: race, gender, age, creed, geographic location, language and ethnic groups; the right for all the citizens of the Republic of South Africa that is enshrined in the Constitution.

The widening of access to higher education after the new political dispensation in 1994 did not come without challenges in the transformation of the higher education sector. The challenges range from responding to political directives to operational and hard core issues at institutional level. Bawa (2001) makes a case through an argument presenting that *“the higher education sector should engage in a process which leads to the development and adoption of a social contract between itself and the people of South Africa as it engages with the local and global challenges that face it”* (p. 3). This contention comes with challenges in that the higher education sector had to expedite the process by making available human capital that had the capacity to carry out the mandate of widening access and fulfilling the social contract. Jansen (2013) claims that while it was a legitimate exercise to widen access to higher education, the Higher education sector first had to succumb to political pressure and be seen to be redressing the past inequalities, and that in the process could not adequately respond to operational pressures.

Jansen (2013) states that:

...reaction to pressure to advance to professorial status a class of young black academics without any record of scholarship, without any track record in research, and without any credibility in the competitive world of research journals, research conferences and research programmes (p. 1).

This was done in reaction to political pressure and also in the face of the ageing White academics. Also there was a need to widen student access for historically deprived South African communities to institutions of higher education particularly the institutions that were

historically reserved for the privileged White South Africans. Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) in extending the discussions on widening access and redress of the past inequalities, argue that *“in South Africa, as elsewhere, access and success are profoundly linked to the social and political context within which universities operate, and must be understood in historical terms”* (p. 23). In the context of the historically racially skewed access to the South African higher education, where the majority black students mainly from poor backgrounds were severely limited and differentiated to access higher education that privileged the white minority. Three critical challenges emerge, firstly the advancement of professional status of young academics, secondly the ageing of seasoned white academics, and finally the increasing number of black students entering universities.

2.9 Issues of access and success in South African universities

Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) argue that the issue of student access and success in South African universities dominates the higher education policy landscape. In support of the previous argument, the two authors highlight the student throughput rates as *“arguably the biggest challenge facing the South African Higher Education system”* (p. 12). The challenges of low graduation and throughput rates are attributed to a struggling and growing post-school system; thus escalating the student access and success challenge to a political level. In order to contextualize access and success further; Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) put distinctions and levels of analysis of each of these also noting that *“universities are social institutions that operate within a particular social-political-economic context”* (p”13); further acknowledging the universities’ envisaged impact on this context through the community engagement activities. Access allows students to participate fully and effectively in higher education. The outcome of the students’ successful access to university, be it academic and social and most appropriately the integration of the latter and the former is bound to yield student success.

The diagram below; Fig. 2.1 illustrates the four key areas of student access illuminating student access to the social environment of the university which leads to academic access then to the content or the goods that the university sells to the student. Academic and social integration have been declared as essential elements in Tinto’s (1975) student integration model. The student integration model suggests as McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) point out; that the

“match between the academic ability and motivation of the student with the social and academic qualities of the institution foster academic and social integration into the university system” (p. 23).

Morrow (1994) argues that learning how to become a participant in an academic practice might also be described in terms of ‘gaining access to the practice in question; further arguing that:

Epistemological access is not a product that could be bought or sold, given to someone or stolen; nor is it some kind of natural growth, such as the growth of plants or bodies. Epistemological access cannot be supplied or ‘delivered’ or ‘done’ to the learner; nor can it be ‘automatically’ transmitted to those who pay their fees, or even to those who also collect the hand-outs and attend classes regularly. The reason for this is that epistemological access is learning how to become a successful participant in an academic practice. In the same way in which no one else can do my running for me, no one else can do my learning for me (p.78).

In an attempt to further contextualize and appropriate meaning to Figure 2.1 below; Stephenson, Anderson, Millward and Rio (2009) claim that Tinto’s earlier work identified academic and social engagement as the critical factors in understanding attrition. Krause and Coates (2008) argue that engagement is a broad phenomenon that encompasses academic as well as selected non-academic and social aspects of the student experience. Melius (2011) argues that *“it (engagement) is important that the transition from high school to a college environment becomes a seamless process that encourages the likelihood of student persistence and academic gains” (p.621).*

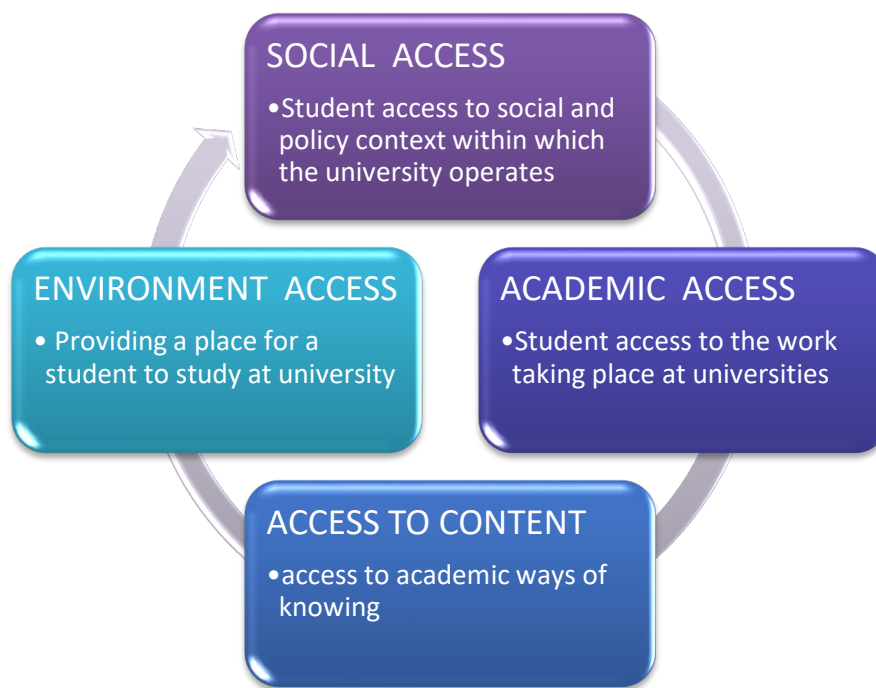


Figure 2.1: The four areas of student's access

McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001), Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) suggest various forms of what could be possible predictors or indicators of students' academic success at the university. Mackenzie and Schweitzer (2001) conducted an investigative study on the academic, psychosocial, cognitive and demographic predictors that relate to academic performance and academic success of university students in an Australian context. The elements of what the study sought out to investigate are summarised in the work of Axelson and Flick (2011) as three critical elements of student engagement; the behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements of student engagement. Also, Astin (1984) identified two elements that are critical in understanding student engagement, which were physical and psychological elements. The study conducted by McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) found that students with high university entry scores are more likely to continue this high academic achievement in university, meaning that previous academic performance and achievement is a critical predictor of academic success at university, suggesting that secondary schooling and students' background have an effect on university performance of students at university.

Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) distinguish between academic and non-academic factors that affect students' academic success at the university. They cite financing higher education studies, living conditions, socio-cultural, systemic factors and institutional cultures as the five non-academic factors that impact on students' performance at the university. Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) claim that the academic factors that affect student performance can be two-fold, i.e., student related and staff related. On the student related factors, Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) identified four non-academic factors that affect student performance, namely: the articulation gap, pedagogical challenges, language challenges and large classes. The three staff related factors that affect student performance were understood to be: privileged knowledge, diversity and large classes. It is worth noting that the issue of large class sizes at the universities affect both students and academic staff members.

The South African Council on Higher Education has conducted several studies and produced numerous reports that sought to understand and explain the South African Higher Education Landscape. These documents include CHE (2010), CHE (2013) and CHE (2014) to mention just a few that have been used and referred to at different stages of this particular study in general and this literature review section in particular. These documents and reports bring together some common threads that could be analysed and brought together as indicators that inform student success. One of these documents, the CHE's (2010) document by Strydom and Mentz titled: *Focusing the student experience on success through student engagement*, where in the context of this document student success is understood to be a complex phenomenon. In its complex nature, student success is categorized into three predictors which are also cited in Kuh et al., (2005) incorporating: academic preparation, motivation and student engagement.

CHE's (2013) document titled: *Report of the task team on undergraduate curriculum structure*, articulates that socio-economic factors and poor schooling greatly influence student access to higher education and success in higher education further acknowledging the shortcomings and inequalities in South Africa's public schooling system as the major contributors to the poor and racially skewed academic performance in public higher education. Also, the CHE's (2014) Institutional Audits Directorate's Quality Enhancement Project Report (QEP) titled: *Framework for institutional quality enhancement in the second period quality assurance*; in the context of QEP report, student success is understood to be: "enhanced student learning with the view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable" (p. 13).

I present an inference that is made based on the documents mentioned above as an attempt to illustrate through the diagram below (Figure 2.2) that students' success is both the culmination and a combination of various institutional policies and strategic imperatives. Figure 2.2 illustrates various extracts of indicators from various articles and documents of students' success at the university focusing on the quality of programmes, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, skills transfer, graduation and eventually students' employability.

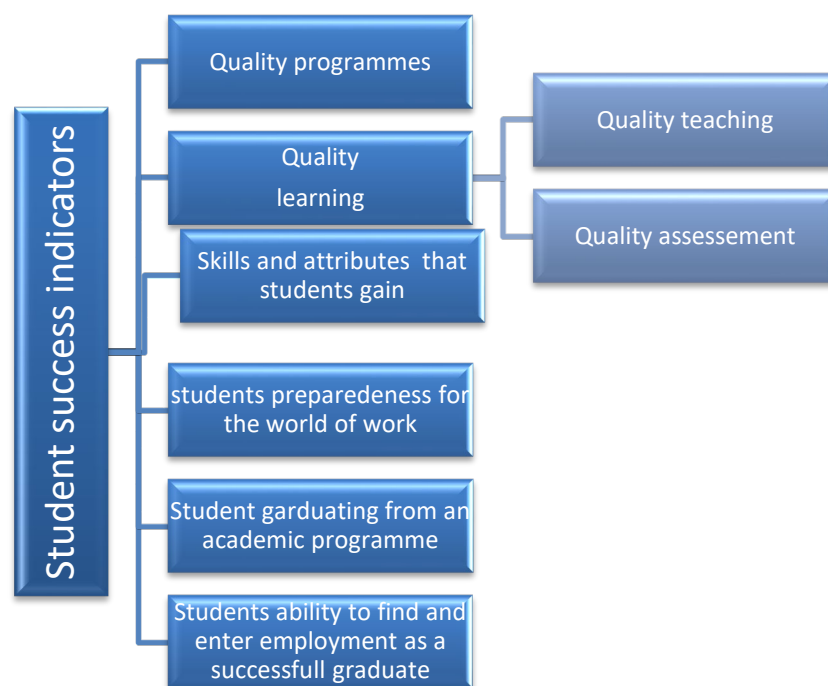


Figure 2.2: Student success indicators

McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) claim that Australian higher education has also seen a shift in focus from the elite class sector to a more mass oriented higher education. McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) further claim that the shift was made to address the issue of equity and access in Australian institutions of higher education. The situation of open access, while it is widely accepted to redress inequality, it comes with challenges. The implication of equity is that universities need to deal with heavily diverse needs of the heterogeneous university population that has become the order of the day in higher education institutions due to open

access. The challenge for Australian universities is to recognise, accept and deal with the diversity.

McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) state in the words of Power, Robertson and Baker (1987) that *“the stress should not only be on admitting a wider range of students, but also on giving them the support and help needed to ensure a reasonable chance of success”* (p. 22-23). It can be said that in order to realize the actualization of student success, it is appropriate that one begins to look closely at the institutional interventions; institutional prerogatives that are aimed at supporting the new university students taking into account the new student’s background. It is equally significant to know who the first year students are, where they come from and how they became students at the university. Students ought to be understood in the context of their background as well as what they bring with them to the university. The CHE (2014) in their Quality Enhancement Project document cites Tinto (2012) who claims that *“Student success does not arise by chance, nor does substantial improvement in institutional rates of student retention and graduation; it is the result of intentional and proactive actions and policies directed towards the success of all students”* (p. 14). It is believed that students can be subsequently understood in relation to the social and academic engagement as well as the extent of their academic preparation, participation and performance.

2.10 The effects of secondary schooling to university education

It has been a challenge to find literature that attempts to discuss the direct link between secondary school curriculum and university education. Searchers using various databases and academic search engines like Google Scholar, Sabinet, JSTOR, ProQuest and EBSCO, yielded minimum results on how schools prepare or should prepare children for university education. There are clear guidelines, legislations, policies and mandates that regulate Umalusi (a Council for quality assurance in General Education and Training in South Africa).

Umalusi; as the council for quality assurance in the GET in South Africa as set out its webpage; it is mandated to *“set and monitor standards for general and further education and training in South Africa in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework Act No 67 of 2008*

and the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act No 58 of 2001.” (No page number). In further clarification of the roles, functions and mandates, the webpage for the Department of Basic Education on the National Curriculum statement for Grades R to 12, states that the National Curriculum Statement for Grades R-12 aims to produce learners that are able to (a) identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking; (b) work effectively as individuals and with others as members of a team; (c) organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively; (d) collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information; (e) communicate effectively using visual, symbolic and/or language skills in various modes; (f) use science and technology effectively and critically showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others; and finally (g) demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation

I outline these aims to highlight that the DBE in the South African context does not directly aim to prepare learners that will directly cope with university work. It is only inferred in the skills that the DBE hopes to provide learners with what may be applicable for the survival of learners as students in the university environments. Hence to consistently blame the schooling and schools on learners that are underprepared for higher education needs to be revisited soon as there are no prospects any time soon that the status may change. The focus could better yield results if university make adequate provision to support the first entry students. Noguera (2003) argues that schools are the most important sites of socialization. Noguera’ s (2003) claim further purports schools to be places where children learn how to follow instructions and obey rules and also citing that schools teach children how to deal with authority.

The schools, Noguera (2003) concludes, are primary sites for instructions about values and norms associated with citizenship. There has been numerous arguments and claims made on the failure of the schooling system in preparing learners for university in the South African context in particular. There is no evidence in literature which suggests that schools are policy bound to prepare learners for university. However, there is literature which suggests educational provision disparities based on racial grounds and economic privileges. On transition from school to university and places of work Spaul (2013) states that:

Poor quality schooling at the primary and secondary level in South Africa severely limit the youth's capacity to exploit further training opportunities. As a result, existing skills deficiencies among those who are the product of an underperforming school system (predominantly black youth) are likely to persist. (p. 6)

Further, Spaull (2013) argues that poor school performance in South African schools reinforces social inequalities and *"leads to a situation where children inherit the social station of their parents, irrespective of their motivation or ability"* (p.9). Spaull further suggests that the rhetoric of poor school performance requires a political solution, the argument put forth to these educational problems is that *"until such a time as the DBE and the ruling administration are willing to seriously address the underlying issues in South African education, at whatever political or economic cost, the existing patterns of underperformance and inequality will remain unabated"* (p.9).

The task team report by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2013) also alludes to the notion that student engagement is regarded as the single best predictor of students learning and personal development as other authors have argued. There are various complexities to South African Higher Education which are regarded as major fault lines. One of those is the discontinuity between school and undergraduate studies, the task team report by the CHE (2013) concludes. Spaull (2013) presents that *"available evidence suggests that many South African children are acquiring debilitating learning deficits early on in their schooling careers and that this is the root cause of underperformance in later years"* (p.39). The fault lines referred to in the CHE (2013) document; result in other insurmountable challenges such as: students' slow academic progress, low throughput rates, student retention and poor schooling.

It is articulated in Spaull's (2013) that the *"South African education system is grossly inefficient, severely underperforming and egregiously unfair"* (p.10). Trowler (2010) argues that for some students, engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle or a conflict. Specific reference is made to those students for whom the culture of the university is foreign, alienating and or uninviting. In pursuing the claim on an inefficient education system in South Africa, Spaull (2013) further cautions against prioritizing the concerns of a politically organized minority in the form of teacher unions over those of politically atomised majority which are the parents and the children. On the same caution, Spaull (2013) points out that there is a lack of accountability for student learning outcomes.

The wholesale lack of accountability for student learning outcomes in South Africa is arguably one of the major impediments to quality education for the poor. The substandard education offered to the poor in South Africa does not develop their capabilities or expand their economic opportunities; instead, it denies them dignified employment and undermines their sense of self-worth. Until there is an increase in both accountability and capacity, there is little reason to believe that there should be any measurable improvement in student learning outcomes in South Africa (Spaull, 2013, p. 63).

The CHE (2013) in the document on the proposed flexible curriculum structure has noted disjuncture between academic access and success. Comprehensive and multifaceted approaches are suggested as the solution to the latter claim. This document further notes and highlights the mismatch between the demands of higher education and the preparedness of school-leavers for academic study or academic integration and raises a number of questions. The first question to be posed is: is it the students that are coming to university with a deficit? The second question is: to what extent are the universities prepared and or equipped to deal with the students who come into the university environment for the first time? This study hopes to engage with these questions through the qualitative dimension of this research, with a specific focus on first year students and their experience of being engaged in higher education.

2.11 Academic performance: The effects of family background and culture

Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) have made several claims signalling the students' family background as crucial to the patterning of student achievement. Amongst the many claims made is that family background is informed by the family's socio-economic status and that family backgrounds vary considerably by racial groups. Some family backgrounds are characterized by single parents, stepparents. Currently in South Africa there is an emergence of child-headed-household as well as households with grandparents as heads of the families. The latter being common amongst Black South Africans; the major contributor was the scourge of HIV and AIDS deaths in the 1990's. Roscigno (1995) argued that black students are nearly twice as much likely compared to their white counterpart to live in non-traditional household.

Notwithstanding, the previous claim, Noguera (2003) conducted a study that sought to understand the role and the influence of the environmental and cultural factors on the academic performance of African American male students. The findings suggest that it is still possible to

educate all children, including black males at high levels even though environmental and cultural factors are seen to possess profound influence on human behaviour and academic performance. Further, Noguera (2003) found that there is a connection between the educational performance of students and the hardships that the students endure within the larger society.

Roscigno (1995) also observed that the relationship between family structure and achievement has profound consequences. Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) conducted a study that sought to examine the extent to which black and white students differ in cultural capital and educational resources and whether educational returns vary by racial group and the mediating roles played by family background and racial disparities in achievement. The findings of the study conducted by Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) suggest that racial variations in cultural capital and household educational items and resources are a function of disparities in family socio-economic status. The findings further suggest that household educational resources and cultural capital have a small mediating effect on the gap in black-white achievement. Further, in their discussion it emerged that family background has an influence on resources that parents can or are able to provide to their children e.g. household educational resources such as books, computers and newspaper. Modern society is characterized by the use of technologies that include cellular telephones and network data bundles that are quite a significant educational resource. All these household educational resources are essential elements that shape the student's orientations to educational institutions and levels of achievements as well as educational attainment. Noguera (2003) concede that "*although it is perceived that many Black males are confronted with an array of risks, obstacles, and social pressures; the majority manages to navigate these with some degree of success*" (p.435).

2.12 Significance of class attendance

Class attendance is seen as one of the significant predictor of academic performance. In one of the studies conducted by McCarey, Barr and Rattray (2007), it emerged that there are three predictors of academic performance, namely; entry qualifications, early academic performance

as well as class attendance. Noting that *“increasing non-attendance was consistently associated with poorer marks, and emerged as a statistically significant predictor of performance”* (p.362). Previous study conducted by Gatherer and Manning (1998) that sought to investigate the correlation of examination performance with lecture attendance had yielded similar results suggesting that *“there is a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between lecture attendance and examination performance”* (p.121). In the discussions, the authors acknowledge that in tertiary institutions, traditional lecture has persistently become the principal means of teaching at undergraduate levels.

Notwithstanding the findings that suggest that modern students *“have access to a wide range of learning facilities including audio-visual aids and computer-assisted learning, in addition to the traditional library”* (p.121), there are various factors that could be attributed to non-attendance of lectures, which is a universal phenomenon amongst many institutions of higher education. Gatherer and Manning (1998) argue for the importance of lectures to undergraduate students stating that lectures provide the means of directing learning to students who may somewhat find the first year of their study to be difficult. They further argue that the lecturers may use the lectures to highlight the core of the syllabus as well as the expected learning outcomes in a way in which reading lists, tables, course outlines cannot. Finally, Gatherer and Manning (1998) conclude that lectures provide an accessible source of verbal assistance to first-entry students. Bati, Mandiracioglu, Orgun and Govsa (2013) state that there are sufficient reasons to place value on lectures arguing that:

Lectures, in which the main teaching method is the transfer of information by an educator, constitute the most economical and productive way of transmitting knowledge. Lectures afford the opportunity to introduce a difficult subject, to describe different points of view on a given topic, or to sum up individual clinical or laboratory experiences. They encourage reflection on a subject, aid understanding, and develop scientific and clinical thought about it (p. 576).

In their investigation, Gatherer & Manning (1998) concluded that ethnic minority students are more likely to benefit from lecture attendance. Further, they conclude that *“ethnic minority students should therefore be encouraged to attend lectures, since they are more likely to suffer individual deterioration in examination performance from failure to attend”* (p.122). Later studies conducted to investigate the relationship between attendance examination performance by Sharma, Mendez and O’Byrne (2005) found that students who attended more than one-half

of the tutorials showed a significant improvement on performance on their assessment tasks. Findings further suggest that students with greater attendance performed better in examination, citing that students working together in the same groups and had a stable plus a consistent class attendance performed better in examinations than their counterparts. Cohn and Johnson (2006) in their study that sought to investigate the academic value of class attendance and whether class attendance helps learning or improves performance, observed that there is a strong correlation between academic performance and class attendance.

Massingham and Herrington (2006) in their study that sought to investigate reasons for students' non-attendance of lectures and tutorials, found non-attendance to be a growing trend and identified the reasons for attendance to be either in the control of students or lecturers. Massingham and Herrington (2006) cite students' changing lifestyle, attitudes, teaching and technology as contributory factors to non-attendance of lectures. The study also, as many other studies have found (Cohn & Johnson, 2006; Gatherer & Manning, 1998; Bati, Mandiracioglu, Orgun and Govsa, 2013), identified a strong correlation between attendance, participation and performance and the benefits of attendance are clearly articulated; including improved examination performance, academic performance, establishing relationships with academic staff members and that attendance is the most important aspect of first year student experience. Massingham and Herrington (2006) conclude that *"the reality is that the majority of students will attend lectures only if they perceive 'value' in them"* (p.84).

In line with the findings presented above, Shannon and Smith (2006) provide some of the reasons given by students as to why they do not attend lectures. Some of the most prominent reasons are stated hereunder: Family and personal issues, illness, lack of motivation, paid employment, their ability to listen to online lectures, the provision of alternative means for getting the information from lectures, the manner in which timetables are structured as well as the generally heavy university workload.

It is worth noting that most universities in the current era have open access to internet and wireless connections that enable students to download educational videos on YouTube. There is a shift in universities to use Moodle which is a learning platform or course management

system meant to enhance teaching and learning; it enables academic staff members to supplement the face-to-face teaching.

Massingham and Herrington (2006) attest that non-attendance is slowly gaining new momentum, and reasons for lecture attendance are beginning to be more of information sharing sessions in which students believe in seeing quicker returns. Massingham and Herrington (2006) claim that: *“a more recent phenomenon is attendance purely for access to information for assessment purposes. Students are particularly interested in information that will help them with assessment tasks or exam questions...; and students only attend classes for these reasons”* (p. 85). It has been argued in McCarey, et al. (2007) that non-attendance of lectures is strongly associated with general poor academic performance of students and low examination scores.

2.13 Concluding the review of relevant literature

In this chapter, I have discussed and argued for the crucial role that students, lecturers and the university play in the first-year student experience focusing attention on student engagement in particular. I have argued that students' behaviour is the major predictor of student performance. It has been highlighted that the psychological orientation and motivation of individual students play a major role in academic performance including shaping of the students' cognitive abilities. While students are seen as the recipients and players in the field of intellectual engagement, there is an equally significant role played by the academic staff. The academic staff members have a responsibility to pull the students from the academic periphery to the centre of the academic sphere. This is done by making the content accessible and understandable to students. The arguments that developed in the discussions in this chapter also touched base on the role played by the academic staff members either intentionally or unintentionally in promoting and fostering student engagement or sometimes disengagement.

I reiterate that the university as an institution or a site of social construction has the role and the responsibility of making the environment welcoming and conducive to students through provision of facilities and policies that induce the new students into ways of learning. Further,

academic staff members require some form of development so that they can be able to deal with the diversity of students that come to the university for the first. These include developing capacity in preparing educational resources that seek to promote student engagement. Institutions need to be seen as attempting to work towards understanding the modern generation of students who are technologically inclined and computer oriented and begin to explore ways that will match up with the students' technological orientations.

Fundamental debates and discussions around the student engagement phenomenon and the predictors of student success have been developed, explored and extended using various literatures. These debates developed from understanding the origin of student engagement focusing on how student engagement has evolved as a critical research area over the past eight decades. The argument presented revolved around the point of entry that previous and seminal work on student was based on the premise that sought to improve student engagement and improved retention rates, throughput and graduation of students within minimum time.

The interrelated issues that form part of the student engagement discourse were discussed focusing student access, participation, performance; success and drop-out were also discussed including graduate throughput. There is sufficient evidence from literature that suggests that student access to institutions of higher education has increased in the South African Higher Education system. The access is widely accepted and there is also matching evidence that point to the fact that the success rate of students is nowhere near or proportional to the graduation rate; stating that at least 41% of students drop out in their first year of study. It has been argued that there are racial disparities and racial skewed completion rates, showing that the White South African university students perform better than their Black counterparts.

It has emerged in the discussions in this chapter that singling out one of the interrelated issues mentioned in the topic sentence of the previous paragraph could render global understanding of student engagement incomplete. Henceforth, the discussions also involved student attendance of structured academic activities like lectures. It was argued that student attendance is one of the predictors of student success. Noting that there is value in class attendance and that class attendance is closely related to student performance. Students that attend most of

their structured and time-tabled academic activities perform better than students that do not. Attendance was discussed with the view of understanding perceptions of lecturers and students using findings from previous studies.

Two other issues that have not been fully explored were the students' cultural background and how it relates to student academic performance. Literature suggests that students' cultural background plays a role in how the student navigates academically in the first year of study. It further notes that students' socio-economic background affect their academic and social integration, including academic performance.

The other issue was the historical lineage of the South African Higher Education system on how it has evolved focusing attention on the apartheid unjust laws and the implications of the history that sought to give educational privilege to certain segments of the South African population at the expense of the other. The historical lineage of the education system was meant to illuminate the complexity and challenges in the current context of the higher education transformation.

The subsequent chapter (Chapter 3) focuses more attention primarily on the theoretical constructs that underpin the student engagement phenomenon. I begin by setting the scene of the theoretical framework chapter, and then present the myriads of relevant theories that explain student engagement. I will then channel discussion towards the most relevant constructs that help to explain and understand student engagement within the context of this study giving reasons for the decisions and the choices that I made.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Setting up the scene for the theoretical and conceptual framework

In this study, I discuss student engagement in the first year of study in an undergraduate programme in higher education. In doing so, I investigate and discuss the role played by academic staff in promoting student engagement. Secondly, I discuss how students engage themselves in academic work. Thirdly, I relate all discussions to learner performance. Finally, the institutional role is also put under scrutiny, looking at the extent to which a university is prepared to deal with students who have come to the university for the first time.

In framing this particular study, I have read widely on theories that exist in the domain of student engagement that explain academic and social engagement in the field of higher education. Some of the dominant theories include student involvement theory, theory of andragogy, longitudinal interactionist model of student departure, social learning theory, cultural capital and cultural reproduction theory and many others. A synopsis of each of these theories is given hereunder.

Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy refers to the art and science of helping adults learn, contrary to pedagogy, which is the art and science of teaching children. Knowles (1980) further posits a set of five assumptions to explain adult learning. Adult learners move from dependency to increasing self-directedness as the adult matures and can direct own learning. Another assumption is that adult learners draw on their accumulated reservoir of life experiences to aid learning. Thirdly, the adult learner is ready to learn when he/she assumes new social or life roles. Fourthly, adult learners are problem-centred and try to seek ways to apply new learning immediately. Finally, the adult learner is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.

While the set of five assumptions about andragogy could have been tested, the study was unable to identify who qualifies to be an adult and who is the child within the context of this study. The respondents and the participants in this study did not fall within the same age group, and subsequently age was not a major determinant on understanding student engagement and learner performance in the first year of study at a university. On the basis of the general assumption that andragogy holds, that children's learning and adult learning have different theoretical and philosophical underpinnings and perhaps teaching approaches, it was appropriate to exclude this theory as the assertion raised in Knowles (1984) presents little evidence to warrant his claims.

Bandura's (1986) social learning theory is an integrative approach to learning that combines cognitive learning theory and behavioural learning theory. Cognitive learning theory posits that learning is influenced by psychological factors. On the other hand, behavioural learning theory assumes that learning is based on responses to environmental stimuli. The integration of these two theories entails four requirements for learning: observation, retention, reproduction and motivation.

Bandura's social learning theory posits that portions of an individual's knowledge acquisition can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside influences. While this assumption could be slightly tested in this study, social learning theory was not sufficient to be used as a major theory on its own because it assumes that all learning can be directly observed. Consequently, it was not easy to measure or quantify the effect of the social learning theory on learning in general and student engagement in particular within the context of this study.

I concur with the notion that no single theory is sufficient to explain a phenomenon in isolation. The five theories listed in the preceding paragraphs are not exhaustive and not all of them were fully applicable to my study. Having explored all of them, I found that some fell short in adequately addressing student engagement within the framework of this study. Some of them were not appropriate to respond to the research questions that this study is attempting to answer.

However, three theories from the list above were more appropriate to this study. In the next section I give a detailed explanation of the most appropriate theories and an account of why and how they were used in the study.

In presenting these three theories I begin by giving an account of why each these three theories were deemed appropriate and their methodological influence in my study. Astin's (1984) student involvement theory, Tinto's (1993) longitudinal interactionist theory, and Pierre Bourdieu's social theory on cultural capital and cultural reproduction are the major theories that underpin this particular study. These theories were most appropriate for the study in terms of understanding the nature of students' interactions or engagement in their first year of study.

Astin's theory of student involvement provides an explanation on how an institution of higher education is viewed in relation to how the student changes and develops. This is done by looking at how the curriculum attends to the change and the development of a student. There are three critical concepts that arise from this relationship: 1) student's input, 2) the environment and, 3) the outcomes. Astin's theory is regarded as one of the appropriate theories in this study as it provides vital constructs that articulate the relationship amongst; firstly, student inputs in terms academic and social engagement. The second construct is the university environment as the domain of interaction; the university as the site of intellectual engagement and the students interact in a quest for knowledge exchange. The third construct is the outcomes; the results on the students' input and the student-university interaction yielding the results. These constructs were tested against the students' background, demographics and previous social and academic or educational experiences.

The student's output was not directly measured in this study; however, document analysis produced statistics of students' academic performance. The interviews conducted with students also produced reasons in mitigation of poor academic performance as well as the reasons that informed high academic performance. The student's output deals with the student's characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after a student has graduated from a university. The latter characteristics or attributes were measured and tested as and when they become evident in the student's first year of study. Further explanation will be given in

the next sections of this chapter. The explanation shall further provide the five basic postulates of Astin's theory of involvement.

Tinto's (1975) longitudinal interactionist model of student departure is another theory that supports the positive role that increased student involvement plays in improving rates of student persistence. Tinto (1993) argues that:

There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence. (p. 71)

Tinto's interactionist model of student departure is one of the three theories that underpin this study and is discussed in detail in this chapter.

Bourdieu (2003) claims that: *"the role of the sociology of education is assumed once it establishes itself as the science of relations between cultural reproduction and social reproduction"* (p.63). His cultural capital and cultural reproduction theories are discussed in detail in this chapter.

Thomas (2011) argues that student engagement lies at the heart of retention and success and therefore offers institutions the answer to their efforts aimed at the improvement of academic performance, graduate throughput and student success. Thomas (2011) cautions against attending to the number and range of interventions or services institutions provide, but attention should also be given to the quality and extent of the students' interactions with those interventions as well as the institution more broadly. A successful higher education system, it could be argued, depends largely on a structured partnership between a student and the institution they attend. The partnership between the student and the institution is also referred to as an intentional collaboration. To advance the student engagement discourse as a partnership and collaboration, I put forward that there are various theoretical frames that have been used in the past and present to explain the nature of student engagement in academic work at tertiary institutions and how students learn.

Student engagement in their first year of study, as most literature suggests in various ways, is seen as a collaborative effort of students, staff and the university. It could further be inferred that the collaboration amongst students, staff and the institution is meaningful, purposeful, structured and aimed at enhancing students' epistemological access, their performance, their retention and their ultimate success. Student involvement theory refers to "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p.297). This theory is discussed in details in this section as one of the major theories that underpin this study.

Student engagement as an educational theory refers to "how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their class, institutions and each other" (Axelson & Flick, 2011, p. 38): that is; the amount of time spent by students on education related activities, and the effect that amount of time has on learning. Over the past two decades, student engagement has been one of the major and dominant discourses in higher education. Findings from various studies, conference presentations and seminars suggest that the level of student engagement at a particular university or college is seen as a valid indicator of institutional excellence.

3.2 Bourdieu's social theory on cultural capital and cultural reproduction

Careful thought has been given to reading and writing about Pierre Bourdieu, one of the greatest sociologists and the most frequently cited author in the field of higher education in recent times. Wacquant (2008) presents Bourdieu's sociology as critical of inherited categories, accepted ways of thinking, subtle forms of rule, and established patterns of power and privilege. I begin by eliciting critical information about Pierre Bourdieu as presented in Frank (2012). Frank claims that Bourdieu was not an inheritor of academic capital, but was distinctly positioned to be able to generate capital and he seized the possibilities in the social tradition more specifically a place in the field of sociology.

I present the above short narrative in an attempt to acknowledge Bourdieu's own entry into the field of sociology. Frank (2012) offers two significant points that seek to validate Bourdieu's concepts. The first is that Bourdieu's concepts seek to provide an appropriate vocabulary that directs the social science research gaze. The second is that Bourdieu's concepts still remain open to new specifications, over and above that openness; they require new specification and remain open to reflecting local circumstances, environments and settings. Wacquant (2008) emphasizes that Bourdieu's oeuvre is a science of human practice, and a critique of domination. Bourdieu's work portrays him as a sociologist who sought to make social science both an effective countervailing symbolic power and the midwife of social forces dedicated to social justice and civic morality. Wacquant (2008) stresses that Bourdieu was vehemently opposed to the subtle imposition of systems of meaning that legitimize, reinforce, promote and solidify structures of inequality, understood in Bourdieu's vocabulary as symbolic violence.

Bourdieu's concepts invite researchers to observe situations, identify foci and discuss phenomena differently. This particular study hopes to contribute in reshaping the dialogue of academic engagement of first-year students in an institution of higher education. It has been mentioned in various literature that Pierre Bourdieu was influenced by Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, to mention just a few. Wacquant (2001) gives a synthesis of Pierre Bourdieu's, Karl Marx's and Max Weber's relationships as real or alleged. Though there are no claims and evidence of convergence in most cases, Wacquant (2001) argues that:

Marx, Durkheim and Bourdieu are thus close to each other in the project of a total socio-historical science capable of embracing the whole of human phenomena, including those that appear the most refractory to social analysis, such as consciousness, suicide and taste. (p.106)

In respect of common influence and another point of conjunction, Wacquant (2001) augments the claim by stating that every social universe is thus the site of competition without an end and without limits, a competition by and in which the stakes are determined by the differences that provide the mainspring and the stakes of social existence. Wacquant (2001) further strengthens the latter claim, epitomized by Bourdieu, Marx and Weber in stating that every sphere of social action is profoundly influenced by structures of dominance.

In framing this study, I look at Bourdieu's three interrelated concepts which have become compelling culminations of most social science research in recent times: the habitus, the field and the capital. I view these concepts as interrelated because in different fields that are informed by habitus, one has interminable opportunities to accrue capital. The reverse of this argument is also possible and there are possible critiques that could arise.

Bourdieu's theory of sociology draws from Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigms which conceives the truth as "error rectified" Wacquant (2008). Lessons that Bourdieu drew from Kuhn's theory hold at least four fundamental and identifiable certainties. The theory holds that the facts are necessarily suffused with theory. Secondly, the laws are always but momentarily stabilized hypotheses. Thirdly, rational knowledge progresses through a process of collective argumentation and mutual control. Lastly, the concepts are characterized, not by static definitions, but by their actual uses, interrelations and effects in the research enterprise (Wacquant, 2008). Informed by Wacquant (2008) I concur in totality with the assertions made that Bourdieu adapts applied rationalism to the study of society. Applied rationalism posits that sociological facts are not given ready made in social reality; the sociological facts ought to follow some form of conquering, construction and contestation and to certain extent verification and finally affirmation or verification.

The next three subheadings discuss Bourdieu's three critical concepts that I used to frame this study. Bourdieu's analytical theory will be used to understand the practice and the logic of student engagement in their first year of study in an institution of higher learning.

3.2.1 Bourdieu's notion of habitus

In this section, I give analyses of habitus as a concept in social science research and how it is used to construe the interplay between past and present that is created through socialization into education. Habitus describes the ways of feeling, acting and being. Habitus also captures how one carries history, and how that particular load of innate history transcends into new circumstances. Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus to explain the relationship between the

individual and the social world. According to an analysis by Swartz (2013), Bourdieu puts power at the heart of the functioning and structure of habitus, since “habitus involves an unconscious calculation of what is possible, impossible, and probable for people in their specific locations in the stratified social order” (p.90).

Conclusions that could be drawn from Bourdieu’s assertion that habitus operates largely as durable patterns of thought, behaviour, practice and taste that people acquire; holds ground. According to Wainwright, Williams and Turner (2007), these patterns link to social structures like class positions; they also link to action like the choices that people make or beliefs people hold that are tied to particular practices. Central to the understanding of habitus is that: habitus represents a kind of embodied culture where ideas, practices and ways of being in the world are at play.

According to Lee and Kramer (2013) habitus highlights the role of unconsciousness and internalized cultural signals that perpetuate the power impact of cultural differences that are structured by one’s history and class positions in society. In advancing their claim on habitus, Lee and Kramer (2013) further articulate another emphasis about habitus and argue that habitus is a critical component of the perpetuation of inequality: meaning; individuals internalize their class status and social positions into their taste, behaviour, practice and worldviews. It is this internalization which then reinforces the very social position and unconsciously reproduces one’s status.

Habitus is the internalization and enacting of social structures through movement, gestures, bodily shape, physique, and size which reveals the social location of people and values that are generated from locations (Wainwright, Williams, & Turner, 2007). Habitus is a set of learned dispositions that provide an orientation to the world and are acquired through childhood training (Burkitt, 1999). Burkitt (1999) argues that the sets of dispositions are:

- structured because they reflect the relations and material contexts that they are developed in and that they reproduce; and
- not inevitable, but develop through interaction with contexts.

Dispositions carry the sense that people have internalized and an idea of what is expected of them in a particular habitus. The university has its rituals of communication, language, academic writing, presentations and assessment. However, there is no evidence in Bourdieu's theory to suggest how students with limited educational and social capital survive and thrive in the new environment called the university. There are complex relations and structures in universities that operate amongst students, lecturers and courses. Bourdieu negates the notion of homogeneity of any given society and argue that a society is a system of interrelated fields with clear orientations such as power, lifestyle and education. Inherent in the understanding and illustration of the notion of habitus are: social locations, class dispositions and embodiment. In this study, cultural signals or cultural orientations of students were found to be a factor that impacts on the first year students' academic performance and effective academic participation. The notion of habitus is used to unpack the complex relations between the first year students and the university environment, taking into account the rigid structures of the university and the vulnerability of the new students based on their poor cultural background and socio-economical orientations.

3.2.2 Bourdieu's notion of field

In understanding the concept of a field, it is important to know that the direct producer-client relationship is mediated by relationship between the producers (Bourdieu, 2005). A field may represent a market for any form of capital. It is a structured space of positions. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) account for the field as a distinctive social microcosm that carries its own characteristics practices, rules, forms of authority and standards of evaluation. Social agents in a particular field happen to possess or bring to it, or otherwise be in a position to benefit from cultural fields (Fantasia, 2010). Bourdieu (2005) defines the field as:

Forces within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field. These position-takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field. (p.30)

Bourdieu further warns that to cross the barrier of entry and to attain autonomy with respect to the crass social demands (into any field), one would need a lot of capital. The two definitions confirm that a field is a site of actions and counter-actions exerted by the social agents endowed with permanent dispositions, which are partly or relatively acquired in the same social agents

in their experience of these social fields. Using the definition and the latter synthesis one can therefore claim that fields can account for the scientific construction of social objects.

Bourdieu (2005) claims that fields are not clustered with structures, agents, discourses, subjects or objects, but rather comprise habits, unconscious and bodily practices and categories of the unthought. He contends that fields are relatively autonomous and independent. The view that a field is filled with neither structures nor agents receives further clarity from Bourdieu (2005) who argues that agents are visible and perceptible, and that fields are designated by proper names, thus giving them the determination to meet one another, battle with one another and also compete with one another. The extended thought is that a field can take the form of a person. Designation by proper names could further be exemplified as follows: journalists in the journalistic field, politicians in the political field, sociologists in the field of social science, academics in the academic field, and so on. *“Cultural fields, for example exert, a force upon those who enter them, and they represent sites of contestation between those with a stake in preserving the existing arrangements and those predisposed to transformation”* (Fantasia, 2010, p. 42). In this study, the notion of field is used to illustrate the extent to which those that enter the previously defined space, which has its own rules, structures and authority, are challenged to break the barriers because as new entrants, they lack the necessary capital to challenge the status quo.

3.2.3 Bourdieu’s notion of capital

The Bourdieuan concept of capital can present itself in various forms. Capital can take the form of an approach, a resource and a mediator. The forms mentioned in this paragraph connect capital to usable economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources. Secondly, the concept of capital can refer to a functioning mediator. Lastly, capital can take the form of a nuanced approach to resources. It is worth mentioning that capital is an organizing principle: Bourdieu (1984) argues that a command of capital enables one to exercise or resist domination. DiMaggio (1982) admits Bourdieu’s claim that schools reward students on the basis of their cultural capital, defined as an *“instrument for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially*

designated as worthy of being sought and possessed” (p.190). This is an assertion that merely indicates that it takes more than measured ability to do well academically.

Bourdieu (1977) emphasized that any competence becomes capital in so far as it facilitates the appropriation of a society’s cultural heritage. An inference could be drawn that if capital is unequally distributed it creates opportunities for exclusive advantages. The assertion that arises from the warning is that the exclusive advantage(s) stem(s) from institutionalization.

Lareau (2003), Winkle-Wagner (2010) allude to Bourdieu’s three distinct forms of cultural capital as outlined in Bourdieu (1986), namely the embodied form of cultural capital, the objectified form and the institutionalized form. These three forms resonate with this study as I investigate student engagement in academic work at a university. These forms of cultural capital are further discussed in more details in the subsections that follow. It is argued in Bourdieu (1977) that exclusive advantages that stem from the criteria for evaluation in schools mean that the standards of assessment tend to be favourable to children from a class or classes that possess a certain amount of cultural heritage.

DiMaggio’s (1982) claim is that teachers: *“communicate more easily with students who participate in elite status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack cultural capital”* (p.190). This claim is an affirmation that the family socio-economic status has an effect on students’ success at school. It is the same status that gives a student a cultural resource that is taken to schools as a form of cultural capital. One could reasonably make an assumption that cultural capital is closely predicted by social origins. Wacquant (2008) argues that the cultural capital or educational credentials or familiarity with the bourgeois culture is the major determinant of life chances under the cloak of individual talent and academic meritocracy. In an effort to construct reality in this study, I attest that the command of a capital resource further enables one to maintain a position of status in the hierarchy of society. It is these social hierarchies that can be easily conserved by unequal distribution of cultural capital.

Cultural capital can be summarized as the cultural knowledge that serves as a currency that helps one to navigate a culture, alter one's experiences and the opportunities that are available. Material objects like clothing, cars, areas of residence, are some of the elements that further illustrate cultural capital. Further synthesis of cultural capital includes symbolic elements that embody cultural capital such as taste, skills, type of food and credentials. It has been argued in the previous section that Bourdieu claims that cultural capital is a source of inequality too. A university student that comes from a poor family background is likely to perform poorly academically compared to a student that comes from a middle-class to upper-class background. This is precisely because the latter has more cultural capital and consequently is accorded more prestige than the former. This could mean that more capital equals to more rewards. It could be said that society rewards, punishes or classifies people based on the amount of cultural capital they possess or do not possess. The next section discusses the three forms that cultural capital assumes. In this study, I explore how students navigate their academic journey at the university, taking into account their limited university experiences and exposures as the majority of them are first generation students. It is found that students in this study lack survival skills at the university and some of them do not read as frequently as one would expect a university student would do. Further discussions show that students lack orientation in reading as they come from families that have low reading capacity.

3.2.3.1 Embodied cultural capital

I have discussed cultural capital and Bourdieu (1986) claims that most of the properties of cultural capital can be deduced from the fact that, in its fundamental state, it is linked to the body and presupposes embodiment. I have further argued that cultural capital is accumulated over time. Bourdieu (1986) states that:

The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of what is called culture, cultivation, presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labour of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor. Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done at second hand; so that all effects of delegation are ruled out (p.48).

Bourdieu (1977, 1986), Lareau (2003) and Winkle-Wagner (2010) qualify embodied capital as a competence or skill that cannot be separated from the holder. It is the form knowledge that

resides within individuals. The acquisition of this embodied cultural capital presupposes the investment of time devoted to learning. Embodied cultural capital is the type of knowledge that one seeks out on his or her own. This construct carries more relevance to this study. This study focuses on student engagement and aims to understand the relationship between student engagement and academic performance and why students perform (academically) in the manner in which they do. I used this construct (embodied capital) to explain the relationship between background and academic achievement. Also, in this I look at what strengths or weaknesses students bring to university and the preparedness of the university to deal with diverse students that come to its campus for the first time. In this study, I shall argue that students bring to university aptitudes necessary for access and not necessarily sufficient for success and the survival or to meet the academic demands of studying at the university.

3.2.3.2 Objectified cultural capital

Cultural capital can take an objectified form. This state or form can be better defined through its relationship with the cultural capital in its embodied form. The objectified state of cultural capital has a number of properties. Bourdieu (1986) claims that cultural capital in its objectified state:

Presents itself with all the appearances of an autonomous, coherent universe which, although the product of its historical action; has its own laws, transcending wills, and which, as the example of language well illustrates, therefore remains irreducible to that which each agent, or even the aggregate of the agents, can appropriate. (p.50)

The cultural goods can be appropriated both materially and symbolically (Bourdieu, 1986). Objectified cultural capital refers to books, computers and artwork. The use of or the consumption of objectified goods presupposes a certain amount of acquired embodied cultural capital (Lareau, 2003). A philosophy text, for an example, is an “objectified” form of cultural capital since it requires prior training in philosophy to understand. In this study, it was found that students perform better in subjects that require them to regurgitate content during examinations, and perform poorly in subjects that require critical thinking and application of knowledge. The objectified cultural capital construct is used understand and explain how students that come from poor schooling backgrounds are challenged in academic contents that assume students to be in possession of or have acquired embodied cultural capital.

3.2.3.3 Institutionalized cultural capital

Lareau (2003) equates the institutionalised cultural capital to economical capital in that institutionalisation performs a function for cultural capital analogous to that performed by money in the case of economic capital. In formal education, Lareau (2003) and Winkle-Wagner (2010) further synthesize that an educational institution certifies individual's competencies and skills by issuing credentials in the form of certificates, degrees and so on. It is in these credentials that the individual student's embodied cultural capital takes an objective value. The objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications is one way to neutralize some of the properties it derives from the fact that, being embodied, it has the same biological limits as its bearer, Bourdieu (1986). I relate this particular construct (institutionalized cultural capital) to students' attachment to a university and students that are willing to stay and study further. It is inferred that students would like to be identified as the alumni of this particular university.

3.3 Astin's Student Involvement Theory

Astin (1984) defines student involvement as what refers to “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to academic experience” (p. 297). In explaining Astin's (1984) concept of student involvement, Milem and Berger (1997) point out that student involvement involves behaviour where the emphasis is more on what the student does and how he/she behaves. While most definitions of student engagement refer to the amount of time that the student devotes to educational activities, it is important to note that Astin (1984) consciously opts to use the scientific term “energy”. According to the electronic Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2016); “energy”: refers to the vigorous exertion of power, or a fundamental entity of nature, that is transferred between parts of a system in the production of physical change within the system, and usually this physical change is regarded as the capacity for doing work.

Although there are many forms of energy like light, chemical and mechanical, the above definition refers to physical change within the system. The change within the system will be referred to in some specific sections of this study.

Astin conducted a longitudinal study of college student persistence and found that there are two factors that contribute to student persistence. The study found that one of the factors that contribute to student persistence was associated with students' involvement in college life. The second factor that contributed to students' departure from college was associated with students' non-involvement.

Milem and Berger (1997) highlight five basic postulates or constructs of Astin's student involvement theory, and these are listed hereunder:

- The first postulate states that involvement means the investment of physical and psychological energy in different objects that range in the degree of their specificity.
- The second postulate perceives involvement as what occurs along a continuum, with different students investing different amounts of energy in various objects at various times.
- The third postulate states that involvement includes quantitative and qualitative components.

- The fourth postulate states that the amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement.
- The fifth and final postulate states that the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement.

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement is rather static or silent in its constructs or postulates when it comes to the institutional role in promoting student involvement. Looking at one of the many definitions around the discourse of student involvement Kuh (2003) claims that student involvement is "*the time and energy that students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities*" (p. 25). One of the fundamental points in Kuh's (2003) claim is making reference to the policies and practices that the institutions use to induce students to participate and perform in purposeful and educationally sound learning experiences. The institutional role will further be elaborated in the next section that discusses engagement from Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure.

It could be inferred from the five postulates or key constructs of Astin's (1984) theory and Kuh's (2003) definition that student involvement is when a student invests physical and psychological energy as well as time, coupled with both qualitative and quantitative components in a continuum whereby the investment is directly proportional to any educational practice aimed at the students' learning and personal development within an educationally sound environment. The definition above encapsulates all that student involvement means, what it includes, where it occurs, the proportions or degrees of involvement, and its assumed effectiveness.

There is a certain level of similar understanding on the critical role that can be played by institutions in promoting and influencing the levels of student engagement. Students make choices of institutions in which they prefer to study, as well as the programmes or fields of study to pursue. Institutions provide meaningful learning opportunities to meet the students'

choices. The demand and supply narrative that has been given could be further supported in Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005), who identify two key interrelated components of student engagement that seek to contribute to student success. Firstly, the amount of time and effort students put forth in their studies, activities and learning experiences that have success-based outcomes. Secondly, the ways in which institutions provide learning opportunities and services that encourage students to participate and benefit from such participation. The two factors mentioned in the previous paragraph are summarized hereunder.

The students' input refers to invested time and energy in learning, and the institutional role or the context provides sound learning opportunities and educational practices, which are the process. The economic term "invest", in this context, denotes an activity that is intended, purposeful and planned with the sole purpose of benefiting or getting reasonable returns, thus making the concept of student engagement a planned educational experience. The student's learning and personal development become output. Finally, student success is the product. The institutional role is overarching and provides the foundation for engagement, supporting the primary notion that universities possess goods in the form of knowledge that they sell to students. Astin's theory is used to explain the students' nature and level of engagement. It also explains the relationship between students' input and the output.

3.4 Tinto's interactionist theory of student departure

In the previous sections of this chapter, I have discussed and illustrated Bourdieu's social theory and Astin's student's involvement theory. This section looks at another distinguished theorist in recent times in the field of higher education around the discourse of student retention in particular and learning communities in general: Vincent Tinto. Vincent Tinto is an education theorists and a sociologist who developed and argued for two forms of student engagement, the academic and social.

Tinto has spent decades of work from the early 1970s to 2014, on student engagement, and has produced several theoretical frames that help to understand what determines whether students stay or drop out of universities. The outcome of Tinto's work produced the student retention model, the student integration model, longitudinal interactionist theory and many more models. Tinto's work has been cited by many researchers, and is gaining ground in the field of higher education. His work has influenced authors like Forbes (2009), Ramrathan (2013), Van Zyl (2013), Govender (2014), Strydom and Mentz (2014) and many others. This study focuses its attention on this continuing research agenda, with the purpose of contributing to the discourse from an institutional perspective.

Tinto's theoretical model was derived from Spady (1970) who presented a conceptual model of student attrition in higher education institutions. Spady's model was founded on Durkheim's theory of suicide. Spady (1970) theorized that suicide is more probable when individuals are poorly integrated into a shared structure; and that, social integration of students increases their (students') institutional commitment; ultimately reducing the likelihood of students' attrition. According Spady (1970), interaction between the students and the university is realised in the assimilation into the academic and social systems of the university and this determines whether the student will be retained in the university.

Tinto (1975) expanded Spady's (1970) theory of student attrition to that of student integration into academic and social systems of higher education institution. In expanding the attrition theory to integration theory, Tinto wanted to clarify the effects of multifaceted interactions within the system on student persistence. Tinto (1975) argues for this multifaceted interaction as the interplay between the individual student's commitment to both the goal of university completion and commitment to stay at the institution. It is the same interplay which determines whether or not the individual will consciously decide to drop out or commit to stay at the university.

Tinto (1993) claims that there is a strong relationship between student involvement in learning and the impact it has on student persistence. This claim is consistent with the findings in Astin's (1975) study, which found that factors contributing to student persistence were associated with

students' involvement in university (college) life. In further elaborating this view, Tinto (1993) states that:

There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence (p.71).

Tinto claims that student integration or departure arises from: *"A longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution"* (Tinto, 1993, p.113).

Tinto (1993) accentuates that an interactional system, which is also referred to as the persistence model is in operation when both students and institutions are continually interacting with one another in a variety of purposeful educational practices which occur either formally or informally (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Key to the interactionist model or view is that persistence is dependent on the extent to which students have become incorporated or integrated into the social and academic communities of the university (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). This incorporation signifies cultural adaptation where individual students break away from their traditions (separation) in order gain full membership (acculturation) at universities. Acculturation occurs when there is a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact. Swail (2003) highlights Tinto's key concepts that have been developed around the area of student integration over the years:

- Integration has an impact on students' development of goals and commitments resulting in students' decision to either persist at university or depart.
- Increased integration into academic and social campus communities causes greater institutional commitment and persistence.
- Successful integration of a student is dependent on the match between the student's characteristics and the institution. It is this match that shapes the individual student's goal commitment. Once achieved; the match influences the student's level of persistence.
- Persistence is the outcome of the interaction between the student and his or her experiences in the campus environment.

Student engagement involves active and collaborative learning which includes intense involvement in class; this may take a form of an academic challenge. Kuh et al. (2005) claim that no matter what form the academic challenge may take, it has to be active and collaborative; and the key participants are the student and the university whether they are involved in tutoring, in community based projects and engaged in out-of-class discussion with others. Tinto's student integration model which consists of six key characteristics is provided hereunder. The illustration below (Fig. 3.1) shows interconnectedness of the critical characteristics as fundamental in explaining the Tinto's longitudinal model of student departure.

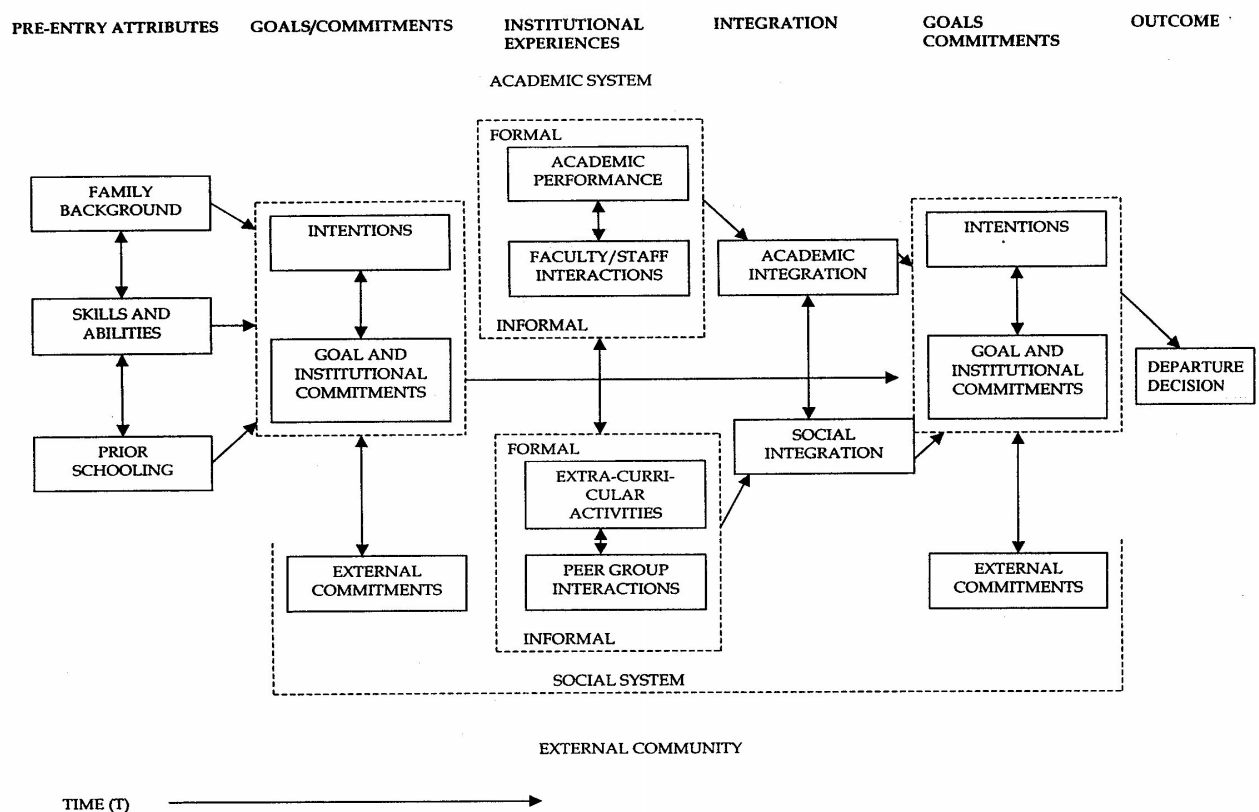


Figure 3.1: A longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1993)

Longitudinal model, as alluded to earlier in this section is done by repeated observing or examining a group of people (the correlation) over a period of time to study how one or two particular aspects change. Central to Tinto's model is the interactionist nature, which is a theoretical perspective that descends from the social processes of human interaction. The social process seeks to understand how individuals act within society. The interactionist theory

generally regards the society as the product of individual interactions thus emphasizing the process character of society.

This study seeks to understand the nature of student engagement in the first year of study in an undergraduate programme in higher education. In order to understand the nature of student engagement using relevant theory, I set out the following objectives and I have italicized and highlighted in bold the two variables in each objective under investigation in order to illuminate where the interplay was sought:

- To determine the role played by *academics* in promoting *student engagement*.
- To explore *student engagement* in the academic work in the *first year of study* of their qualification.
- To investigate the extent in which *students* engage themselves in *academic work*.
- To establish the relationship between *student engagement* and *academic performance*.
- To establish the role played by the *institution* in promoting *student engagement*.

3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted the important theoretical frames that have been used in this study. These theories which exist in the domain of student engagement seek to explain the academic and the social nature of engagement in the field of higher education. There is a reasonably high level of consensus that points out that the level of student engagement at a particular university or college is seen as a valid indicator of institutional excellence. Whilst there is a plethora of theories that have been used in the past to explain student engagement, involvement and leaning; some proved to be more appropriate than others. This study focused on three theories that have been more appropriate to understand this study within the context of the set objectives.

Tinto's longitudinal interactionist model of student departure has been one theory that supports the positive role that increased student involvement plays in improving rates of student persistence. In this theory, Tinto concedes that there is an important link between learning and

persistence that arise from interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Student engagement has been capped in this chapter because it has been discussed and understood to be central across all theoretical frames that have been valued in this study. Student engagement lies in the heart of retention and success and offers institutions answers to all relevant efforts aimed at improving academic performance, graduate throughputs and student success. While it was not easy to pin student engagement to one definition, there were common constructs that emerged from what each of the three theorists had appropriated to each of their definitions. Student engagement was seen as the collaborative effort of students, staff and the institution. The collaboration was best understood as one that is purposeful, structured meaningful and aimed toward enhancing students' epistemological access and epistemological advantage.

Bourdieu's theory was significant in that it adapts applied rationalism to the study of society which (rationalism) posits that sociological facts are not given ready-made in social reality; they (sociological facts) must be conquered, constructed, and contested. Bourdieu's theory has three interrelated constructs of habitus, field and capital. Habitus was used to construe the interplay between the past and the present that is created through socialization in education. Inherent in the understanding and illustration of the notion of habitus are social locations, class dispositions and embodiment. The concept of field has been understood as a distinctive social microcosm that carries its own characteristic practices, rules, forms of authority and standards of evaluations. Capital takes the form of an approach, a resource and a mediator. Capital is an organizing principle. The command of capital enables one to exercise or resist domination.

Astin's theory provides a platform to understand factors that contribute to student persistence. Astin's understanding of student involvement was also encompassing in that it encapsulates all that student involvement means, what student involvement includes, where it occurs, the degrees of involvement and its assumed effectiveness. I have conceded that no single theory is sufficient to fully explain a phenomenon in isolation. Some theories were more appropriate to explain the central aspects of this study than others. In this chapter, I have accounted for choices of theories and their related constructs, how they were appropriate to this study.

The next chapter is a description of the research methodology that was used in this study. The geographical area where the study was conducted, the study design, the population and sample will be described. The instruments used to collect the data, including methods implemented to maintain validity and reliability of the instruments are described. The next chapter is concerned with methodological choice and its impact on the processes and outcome of this research. The main stages related to deciding the research approach, identifying data requirements and the techniques by which data were gathered and analysed will be examined and discussed.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a detailed account of the research design and methodologies that were used to generate, present and analyse both the quantitative and the qualitative data. It presents the research design showing how the plan of study was executed to ensure that the evidence obtained enabled the researcher to effectively address the research problem logically in an unambiguous manner. I present the mixed methods approach that enabled the researcher to collect the qualitative data after the quantitative data were collected, presented and analysed.

In giving an account of the research design and the methodology, I first give the detailed description of the research paradigm that underpins this study followed by an expansive description of the case that was under investigation. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the research methods and sampling. I also give an account on the data generation process based on the mixed method approach that was chosen for this study. In giving an account, I give details of each instrument and how it was used to generate data and which data it produced and how. The data generation instruments that were used: document analysis, the face-to-face interviews, focus group interviews and the survey, are described and I give reasons on why these instruments were seen as most appropriate for this particular study. I give a detailed description of the research evaluation of both the qualitative and the quantitative aspects of the study focusing on: the validity and of the data collection instruments that were used. Lastly, I allude to the data analysis and the ethical issues that were followed to give credence to the findings and the entire research process.

4.2 Research paradigm

There are basically three known major dimensions that inform the research process. Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (1999) point out these major dimensions as: ontology, epistemology and methodology. Further, these authors briefly describe each of the three dimensions of the research process as follows: Ontology; as that which specifies the nature of reality to be studied and what needs to be known about it. Secondly; epistemology, as that which specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher and what can be known. Lastly; the methodology; as that which specifies how the researcher goes about practically studying whatever the researcher believes can be known. Zou, Sunindijo and Dainty (2014) claim that ontology and epistemology are two main philosophical considerations in social research and further state that “*ontological questions are concerned with the very essence of the phenomena under investigation*” (p.318). The above claim on ontological stance extends to further argue that the central question is whether the reality of social entities is external to the individual or it is the product of individual perceptions and actions.

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and what there is to know about the world. Ormston, Spencer, Barnard and Snape (2014) claim that the “*key ontological questions concern whether or not there is a social reality that exists independently of human conceptions and interpretations and, closely related to this whether there is a shared social reality or only multiple, context-specific ones*” (p.4). So, qualitative researchers in pursuit of this social reality, as Creswell (1998) argues “*approach their studies with a certain paradigm or worldview, a basic set of assumptions that guide their inquiries*” (p.74). In extending the understanding about the importance of the paradigmatic orientation of the research study; Plano, Clark and Creswell (2008) allude to paradigms as “*worldviews or all-encompassing ways of experiencing and thinking about the world, including beliefs about morals values and aesthetics*” (p. 33).

The study in the main was broadly located within the social constructivism paradigm (other scholars and literature; Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006), Creswell (2014), Plan, Clark and Creswell (2008) refer to this paradigm as the interpretivist paradigm) has an epistemological

view of knowledge as a social construction, based on subjective beliefs that people have about the world they live in and the world they want to live in (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). The paradigm, as Creswell (2013) puts it, also has an epistemological view of knowledge as a social construction based on the way people think or make meaning about their natural setting or the phenomenon. The epistemological assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm were also relevant to this study in that the communal process was duly informed by the participants (Creswell, 2013); the first-year students and the academic staff members in their natural habitats.

Creswell (2013) posits that the research which follows the social constructivism view relies on the participants' views of the situation. Within the social constructivism world view, the individuals seek understanding of the world they live as they begin to develop subjective meanings about their experiences thus leading the researcher to look for the complexity of the views rather than to narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas, Creswell (2013) concludes.

The implications of the social constructivism view as a preferred and most appropriate ontological stance was that the multiple and varied realities are constructed through the participants' lived experiences and interactions with others (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2010). Creswell (2013) claims that through the social constructivism view, the researcher addresses the process of interaction amongst individuals focusing on the context in which people live in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. Also; Flick (2009) claims that *"for social constructionism, the process of social interchange in the genesis of knowledge take on a special significance"* (p.71). Knowledge, therefore as Flick (2009) concludes, is constructed in the process of social interchange; citing the role of language as central in the process of such interchange.

4.3 The research approach

The study followed the mixed method approach as it sought to explore student engagement in their first year of study in undergraduate programmes in Higher Education and how student

engagement relates to student performance. Mixed methods were used to give credence to the intentional collection of both quantitative and qualitative data and the combination of the strengths of each to answer the research questions. Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann and Hanson (2003) contribute to the further understanding of mixed method approach as they state that:

A mixed method study involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially and are given a priority and involve the integration of data at one or more stages in the process of research (p. 212).

This study involved collecting qualitative data after a quantitative phase in order to explain or follow up on the quantitative data in more depth. The study followed an explanatory sequential design (Creswell, 2014), beginning with quantitative data collection using a SASSE survey in the first phase, followed by the analysis of the quantitative data. The purpose of this methodological choice was to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the quantitative results. The next step was to collect the qualitative data to explain the SASSE responses, followed by the analysis and finally the interpretation thereof.

Creswell (2012) defines the mixed methods research approach as a procedure for collecting, analysing, and “mixing” both quantitative and qualitative research as methods in a single study in order to understand a research problem. It was envisaged that using the mixed methods research design in this study would help to overcome the limitations of a single design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008). In this particular study, the qualitative data were used to explain and interpret the quantitative data. Klassen, Creswell, Plano, Clark, Smith and Meissner (2012), claim that the use of mixed methods is most suitable when a quantitative or qualitative approach, by itself, is inadequate to develop multiple perspectives and a complete understanding about the research problem and or a research question.

This study was concerned with the understanding of the student engagement as a social reality from two perspectives. The first was the objectivity (Flick, 2009), measurability, predictability and controllability of the manner in which first year students engage in academic and social university activities using quantitative means (Durrheim & Painter, 2006). The second part was

the understanding and the interpretation of the student engagement phenomenon based on the findings from the quantitative data as well as making the meaning out of this process using the qualitative means (Terre Blanche, Kelly, and Durrheim, 2006).

4.3.1 The rationale for the mixed method approach

The purpose of approaching this study using a two pronged approach was motivated by using the different strength of each the two perspectives for complementary reasons (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989); where one method contributed to the performance of the other as an additional coverage (Bryman, 2006); where each method was assigned a distinct set of purposes within the study as a whole. The other purpose was for the convergent findings (Greene, et.al., 1989); where each of the methods was used to investigate the same phenomenon and comparing the results with the aim of understanding the phenomenon in more depth (Greene, et.al., 1989).

4.4 Research methodology

Research methodology is based on some underlying philosophical assumptions about what constitutes valid research and which research method is appropriate for the development of knowledge in a study (Mertens, 2014). Further, research methodology refers to the ways in which data were collected and analysed, presented as well as the generalizations that were made emanating from the data (Kumar, 2011). The research methodology adopted as a strategy of investigation informed by the research design and data collection is described in details hereunder. The strategy included both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

4.4.1 The case study design

The study was conducted at the University of Zululand which served as the Higher Education Institution site. This was a case study methodology. The phenomenon under exploration was

the student engagement within a bounded system (Creswell, 2013) of a particular institution informed by its way of life and contextual influences (Flyvbjerg, 2013). The participants were the first year lecturers in the Faculty of Education as well as the first year students who volunteered to participate in the study and were registered across various undergraduate programmes.

Rule and John (2011) refer to a case study as that which has four elements; the unit, the process, product and the genre which are critical elements to understand case study research. These authors further contextualize the case study as that which refers to “*the process of conducting an investigation (studying the case), the unit of the study (the case that is studied) and the product of this type of investigation (the final written document)*” (p. 5). The unit of this study was the first-year students, registered for the first-year Bachelor of Education programme at the University of Zululand. The unit of analysis also included the interviews with academic staff that taught these first year students. The unity of analysis was further broken down to include the interviews with first-year students that performed well academically and those that did not perform so well. Using the SASSE all 1255 registered students in the B.Ed. first year programme were invited to participate in the survey and 782 responded. The focus group interviews were conducted with three groups of students who had volunteered to participate in this study.

The rationale for a case study approach was that it: “*can generate an understanding of and insight into a particular instance by providing a thick, rich description of the case and illuminating its relations to its broader contexts*” (Rule and John, 2011, p.7). Rule and John (2011) argue for another advantage of the case study and say they (case studies) “*can be used to explore a general problem or issue within a limited and focused setting*” (p.7). In further illuminating the advantage of the case study, Merriam (1998) states that a case study has a descriptive characteristic connotation, meaning that case studies single out the richness of data, extensive set of details relating to the phenomenon with the aim of advancing the understanding of the phenomenon.

The case study as Yin (2014) puts it is guided by the scope. Yin (2014) further defines the case study as an empirical inquiry aimed to *“investigate a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident”* (p. 16). Yin (2014) explains that the case study has distinct methodological characteristics or features in that the case study *“copes with technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points.”* (p. 17). Finally; Yin (2014) states, the case study *“relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion”* (p.17). It has been discussed in earlier paragraphs how the mixed method approach has been ideal for this study. The next sections will also highlight the significance and the advantages of the multiple sources of data in this study.

4.4.2 The research instruments

The research instruments that were used to collect and generate data were the individual interviews, focus groups, document analysis and the survey.

4.4.2.1 Interviews

One of the ways that were used to generate the data for this study was the interviews. Interviews are a commonly used method in social science research to collect information from people (Kumar, 2011). Most literature describes interviews as verbal interchange in which the interviewer tries to elicit information, beliefs, or opinions from another person (Burns, 1997). Kelly (2012) describes interviews to simply mean conversations. The most appropriate description of an interview for the purpose of this study is that, it is an arena within which particular linguistic patterns (such as typical phrases, metaphors, arguments, or stories) can come to the fore (Kelly, 2012, p, 297). I present that most of the interviews were predominantly conducted in isiZulu, a dominant language spoken by and understood by the majority of students in this University. This was done to enable the students to express themselves freely using the home language. It was during these interviews and focus group discussions that certain linguistic patterns, expressions, metaphors, idioms and proverbs began to emerge as

they were used by the participants. These linguistic patterns that were used by students during interview sessions and focus group discussion later produced themes that were critical to highlight the cultural signals of students. These linguistic patterns and expressions became a relevant avenue for exploration in understanding the first year experience of students in a university setting. This was one of the greatest outcomes of the interviews in the context of this particular study.

4.4.2.2 Focus groups

Focus group is a term in social science research that refers to a research interview conducted within a group with an intention to access the group's intersubjective experience (Kelly (2012). Further, Kelly (2012) states that a focus group is: "*a group of people who share a similar type of experience, but a group that is not naturally constituted as an existing social group*" (p. 305). There is a distinct advantage of using focus group interviews, Kumar (2011) claims that focus groups allow the researcher to: "*explore the perceptions, experiences and understandings of group of people that have the same experience in common with regard to a situation or an event*" (p. 160). First-year students were used as participants in the focus group discussions. They shared the similar first-year experience, doing the same field of study and the same qualification, taught by the same lecturers in the similar environment under the same contextual factors. Some students had similar background experiences like socio-economic, education and cultural orientations. The participants indeed possessed similar experiences that were most relevant to understand the student engagement phenomenon.

4.4.2.3 Document analysis

Document analysis is a process of collecting data using secondary sources that has been collected for a purpose different from the aims of a research study (Kumar, 2011). The secondary sources that were used to collect information for this study were the HEMIS data looking at students' academic performance records. These were analysed, interpreted and findings were made which were then presented in the quantitative data analysis chapter. The type of quantitative data that had already been collected by the university for its own purposes was used to further the objectives of this study. The inference that could be drawn from Kumar

(2011) is that using secondary sources of data is like analysing and interpreting someone else's primary data, meaning that as a researcher, I did not produce the data presented in the documents that were analysed. The document analysis process saved time as it would have been a tedious and a cumbersome activity to generate the same set of data using other means.

4.5 Survey

This study collected quantitative data using the SASSE survey. This particular type of survey can be classified as a cross-sectional study design. The reason why it is classified as such is that in the cross-sectional study design, either the entire population or a subset thereof is selected and from these individuals, data are collected to help answer the research questions of interest. In this study, I wanted to know how the first-year students engage in academic work. The cross-sectional study is used interchangeably with: cross-sectional survey, questionnaire, survey instrument, survey questionnaire, survey tool and survey. While these terms may be used interchangeably, they are not at all synonymous. For the purpose of this study, I used the cross-sectional survey as a term to contextualize the SASSE instrument within the prescriptions of literature.

Cross-sectional surveys offer the researcher an opportunity to assess relations between variables and to determine the differences between sub-groups in a population. Visser, Visser, Krosnick, and Lavrakas (2000) define cross-sectional as that which involves: *"The collection of data at a single point in time from a sample drawn from a specified population. This design is most often used to document the prevalence of particular characteristics in a population"* (p. 225). On the basis of the above benefits on what cross-sectional surveys do, this study opted for the SASSE survey because it had the advantage of producing data that were required on student engagement practices, impact practices and frequency statistics. Data were collected from students during the third quarter of their first academic year. Data were collected at regular intervals from students who came in groups of between 50 and 100 at a time over a two week period.

4.6 Participants in the study

The University of Zululand has four Faculties, namely the Faculty of Science and Agriculture, the Faculty of Commerce Administration and Law, the Faculty of Arts as well as the Faculty of Education. For the purpose of this study I chose the Faculty of Education because it is the largest of the four faculties. Secondly, the sample was sufficient to be regarded as representative of the first year student.

There were two major categories of participants in this study. The first category of the participants was made of first year students in Faculty of Education that were enrolled for any Bachelor of Education programme at the University of Zululand. The second category was made of academic staff members that were involved in the teaching of various first year undergraduate modules within various Bachelor of Education areas of specialization.

The sampling technique that was adopted was the purposive sampling. I became aware that sampling decisions were not easy and could not be made in isolation. I had to make careful considerations on how this study could produce data that was rich and produce findings that would effectively contribute depth in the student engagement research agenda. I therefore made the following decisions: Students that participated in the face-to-face or one-on-one interviews were purposively selected on the basis of their academic performance. Two students had an exceptionally high level of academic performance and the other two were on the lowest end of the academic performance continuum. The focus groups were made up of students who volunteered to participate in the study. The three focus groups were made up of students specializing in Science and Mathematics, Commerce and Social Sciences. Students grouped themselves according to their areas of specialization; each group had a maximum of ten students and a minimum of six. Academic staff members had to be involved in the teaching of the first year undergraduate students, and teaching specifically in the high risk modules. This was significant to have these academic staff members as participants in the study as this would enable the study to understand the role played by staff in promoting student engagement,

particularly within modules that are historical high risk in the context of this university. Three academic staff members who are involved in teaching these high risk modules agreed to participate in the interviews. Kumar (2011) further claims that, on the contrary, the qualitative sample is influenced by many considerations like access to potential respondents as well as the researcher's judgment about the participants' potential to possess extensive knowledge about the phenomenon.

The study also looked at the students' documents like the first-year students' test marks, assignment marks and examination marks in the Faculty of Education at the University of Zululand. The reason for the document analysis was to help to further contextualize the correlation between student engagement practices and students' academic performance. This was seen to augur well with the study's objectives and would further build upon initial quantitative results to explain the nature and the level of student engagement. The next paragraph presents literature that supports the sampling decisions that were made.

Kumar (2011), states that the selection of a sample in quantitative research should be unbiased and representative of the population from where it is selected. This study followed a mixed method approach where the SASSE was administered. The intention was to reach all 1255 registered first-year students in the Bachelor of Education programme in 2015. Only 782 (62%) of the students participated in the survey, making the sample fairly representative and unbiased because all students were given an equal chance to participate and an option not to participate if they felt they did not want to. This sample size was large enough to draw inferences about the group from which I had drawn the sample.

4.7 Data sources

Data is one of the critical areas of research and so are the sources of data. Mason (2002) states that data sources could be places or phenomenon from or through which the researcher believes data can be generated. Mason (2002) further makes an example of people as a typical data sources in that they could be the repositories of knowledge, experiences and feelings that may be relevant to the research. Other examples of data include institutions, texts, records and

settings to mention a few. This study used three sources of data. These three sources were: the students, the academic staff members and the documents that contained student records. These sources are further placed into two distinct categories; the primary and the secondary data sources. The primary sources of data were made up of students enrolled as first years in the Bachelor of Education programmes at the University of Zululand. Another primary source of data included academic staff members that taught these first year students. The secondary sources of data were the University's Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS), student records like tests examination marks, and module outlines.

4.8 The data generation process

The previous section has highlighted the sources of data that were used in this study. Having identified the sources of data, the respondents as well as the participants in the study, I now present how data were generated from these sources and which instruments were used to generate the data. I also present the rationale for the choices and the decisions that I made during the data collection process. Durrheim (2012) describes data as the raw materials of research. This section of the chapter presents how these raw materials have been mined and brought to the surface for further purification.

4.8.1 Quantitative data generation using the South African Survey of Student Engagement instrument

The quantitative data was generated using the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE). The survey, as Creswell (2014) suggests: *“provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes or opinions of a population by studying a sample of the population. From the sample results, the researcher generalizes or draws inferences to the population”* (p. 155-156).

The SASSE is based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) developed in the USA (Strydom and Mentz, 2010). This instrument (SASSE instrument) measures student engagement on the basis of five themes, namely: academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with staff, campus environment as well as high-impact practices. In order to ensure its acceptability of its psychometric properties, the SASSE was piloted at the University of Free State in 2007 (Strydom, Kuh & Mentz, 2010). The University of Free State's Centre for Teaching and Learning, produced a document titled: "Promoting quality for success: *Using deeply contextualized and globally benchmarked measures of student engagement*. This document highlights that:

Administration of the SASSE and related surveys in South Africa took the form of national research project for the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in 2009-2010 involving 13 636 students from 7 institutions in 2009, and 9 442 students from 7 institutions and 290 lecturers from 3 institutions in 2010. The original versions of the measures had been contextualized and piloted for two years at the University of Free State prior to being administered nationally. (p. 2)

UNIZULU was not part of the National Research Project and the seven institutions mentioned above. The SASSE was administered in this rural university for the first time during this research project. All first-year students registered in the B.Ed. programme were requested to participate in the survey. The survey was administered at the UNIZULU's computer laboratories where students filled in the survey in groups of 20 to 100 at a given time and the process took about 14 days to be completed. I was present during all the administration sessions of the survey to attend to all the stipulated ethical considerations. I was assisted by UNIZULU Computer Laboratory Technician who attended to computer technical problems and network issues that occurred from time to time.

This was an online survey that I conducted in consultation with UFS who received the raw data. The UFS main frame consolidated all the responses and provided me with the snapshot of the survey, frequencies and statistical comparisons, as well as the respondents' profiles. These then became the data that I analyzed. The survey was administered to 782 students from a total of 1255 of the targeted population.

I am aware that every method of scientific inquiry is subject to some forms of limitations. Surveys generally present two primary limitations; they are costly and time consuming. However, choosing a particular method for a scientific inquiry involves some form of trade-offs and careful considerations on the extent in which it will substantively assist in reaching conclusions. It is for this reason and many others that multiple methods (triangulation) were employed in this study to ensure that there was no overlapping in strengths and weaknesses of a single method. In this section, I acknowledge the limitations of the use of a survey as a method of data generation in this particular study. In this study as mentioned in various sections of this report, I used the SASSE to generate the quantitative data. One major limitation about the use of this data generation tool is that as a researcher, I did not have control over the technical and technological aspects of how the raw data were controlled to arrive at the set of results that were produced. The students' responses were done online and the raw data was controlled by the host institution (UFS), which also produced the set of results that I analysed to arrive at the set of findings for the quantitative study.

4.8.2 Quantitative data generation through document analysis

The next phase in the data generation process was to obtain class assessment and examination results for all the registered students in the first year B.Ed. programme. These were obtained from the Faculty Academic Coordinator and the Manager University's Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS). The documents that were collected from these two holders were critical in understanding the academic performance trends and levels of the first year students. It was from these documents that the general academic performance of students was established. Firstly, the students with high academic scores were identified. Secondly, the students with low academic scores were identified. Thirdly, the documents were used to produce data of modules where the pass rates were extremely high, and lastly, the high risk modules.

4.8.3 Qualitative data generation from first –year students

Students' interviews: Through the qualitative aspect of this study, I wanted to further understand why students engage in their academic work the way they do. The key participants in this qualitative analysis were first year students that were enrolled in the B.Ed.

The initial plan was to generate data using interviews from two students from each of the seven chosen B.Ed. areas of specialization. This would have allowed the study to understand student engagement in the context of different areas of specialization. This aspect of data collection was done closer to the time of examination; hence cognizance was taken about the impact of time on their study programmes. As this study was not specifically asking questions about the influence of subject specializations, choosing alternate participants for the interviews based on academic performance was more beneficial to the study outcomes. However, in attempting to explore any subject specialization influence in the analysis, the focus group interviews which were once off, were held per broad subject categorization. The focus group interviews will be expanded in its section later. I subsequently settled for four students. The students were selected based on their academic performance; the first-year undergraduate students that were performing well and those students that were not performing so well. Two students with low overall performance were selected for face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The other two students had a high overall performance making the total number of students four instead of the total of fourteen first year students that were initially targeted. The number of students was rather supplemented with three focus group interviews. This was part of the explanatory follow-up building on the initial quantitative results on student academic performance to explain the nature and the level of student academic engagement.

Students' focus group discussions were conducted with three groups using semi-structured interviews with students who were selected based on their areas of specialization. The reason was to enable students to give an account of the nature of their academic engagement and what accounts for this level of engagement, which may include subject specialization variations.

4.8.3 Qualitative data generation from academic staff members

Further qualitative data was gleaned from a sample of lecturers who each taught some of the first year programme offered within the selected programs. Seven lecturers were initially selected for semi-structured interviews based on students' responses during interviews as well as HEMIS data. The number was subsequently reduced to three as some lectures could not avail themselves for interviews, citing work commitments and lack of free time to participate in the study. The reduced number did not affect the research findings as most of the lecturers taught the high risk modules where the discussions were critical in establishing the reasons behind students' poor performance. The focus of the interviews was on how these lecturers engage their students, why they engage the students in the way they did and what were some of the concerns that they had noted in their practice which related to student engagement.

4.9 Data analysis

The previous sections of this chapter have given the detailed procedures that were followed during the data generation process. I have also provided a section that highlighted the data sources that were critical in the data generation process. The tools for data generation have also been discussed and the rationale for choosing those tools as most appropriate for the study has been accounted for. This section presents two segments of the data analysis process; the first section presents the quantitative data analysis process and the next section presents the qualitative data analysis process. In this section, I first provide a description of what data analysis is, how the data analysis was done, and finally present reasons why certain data analysis procedures were deemed appropriate.

Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly (2006) describe data analysis is that which *"involves reading through your data repeatedly, and engaging in activities of breaking the data down (thematizing and categorizing) and building it up again in novel ways (elaborating and interpreting)"* (p. 320). These authors point out the data analysis to be a reiterative process, which is aimed towards the emergence of patterns, themes and meaning. The above definition suggests that the researcher starts off by looking at the whole raw data as whole, then takes it apart or reconstructs the sets of data in a much more meaningful manner (Silverman, 2000).

This data reconstruction process is given clarity in the next two sub-sections as the thematization, categorization, elaboration and interpretation of data was done differently for each of the methods that were used.

4.9.1 Analysis of quantitative data of student engagement

In this chapter I have provided details of the quantitative data generation procedures and related protocol. What was not explained was that the SASSE is a standardized tool that was adapted by the UFS for the South African context. Secondly, it is an online tool. I extend the quantitative data generation part to this section where I discuss how the quantitative data was analysed. This decision was informed by the procedures or steps that are followed in the quantitative data analysis section as dictated to by the literature. Because of the nature of the tool that was used, and the fact that it was an online survey, most of the steps discussed in the data analysis sections of most theses will not be discussed because of the following reasons.

The survey targeted all the 1255 registered students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Zululand; and only 782 responded making a total of 62% response rate. The online SASSE was captured at the UFS. The online survey was coded, entered and cleaned by the UFS online systems. While the raw data was returned to me, the UFS also presented cleaned data which presented me with the snapshot of the survey indicating the student engagement indicators, the high-impact practices and the administration summary. Secondly, the respondent profiles were presented. Finally, the frequencies and statistical comparisons were presented.

The data analysis for this study commenced after the electronic data base was cleaned. Two types of data analysis procedures were performed; the descriptive and inferential analysis. The descriptive data analysis involved the description of the data through the investigation of the *“distribution of scores on each variable, and by determining whether the scores on different variables are related to each other”* (Durrheim, 2006, p. 193). Secondly, the inferential data analysis where conclusions about the population of students that responded were drawn from

the sample data, Durrheim (2006), concludes. Tables and figures were used to illustrate data. The document analysis formed another section of drawing data from secondary sources. Further, these were also analysed and presented in the forms of tables and figures.

4.9.2 Analysis of qualitative data of student engagement

Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2010) provide the framework for qualitative data analysis process. These authors argue that the data analysis process begins with a process of data immersion followed by a process of discovery which brings the researcher a step closer to the data as well as the evidence based understanding of the issues under investigation. The data immersion and discovery process is the starting point of identifying the uniqueness of the participants, providing the understanding of the social and the cultural meanings attached to the behaviour of the participants (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Kelly, 2006).

The process that was adopted in this study was as follows: The interview sessions were voice recorded. The student interviews were conducted in isiZulu and later translated into English and transcribed in English. The interview session with one of the academic staff members was in English, while the other two interviews with staff used both isiZulu and English. The students were allowed to use their mother tongue because I wanted them to express themselves in a language that they were comfortable in so that I could access the richness of their knowledge and experiences around the phenomenon. These processes were acceptable to me as the researcher as I am fully conversant in both languages. The translation and transcription phases were the initial phases of data immersion and the discovery process. Though not initially planned and intended, these processes enabled me to familiarize myself with data even more.

In this case study, open ended questions were posed for both one-on-one interviews and focus groups. The questions encouraged the participants to respond orally and in the process of responding they produced textual data that I analysed, followed by translation and ending up with the transcription process. Once these processes were finalized, the responses were analysed, compared and categorized. The final processes involved triangulation, interpretation

and then conclusions were drawn. This procedure is well nested within what Flick (2009) names the conversational analysis of data. In further elucidation, conversational analysis places more emphasis on the formal procedures through which the contents are communicated and certain situations are produced, Flick (2009) concludes. Within the same discussion, Flick (2009) posits that *“conversational analysis is less interested in interpreting the content texts that have been explicitly produced for research purposes, for instance interview responses. Rather it is interested in the formal analysis of everyday situations”* (p. 334).

In the analysis of the qualitative data, elements of discourse analysis were also applied, as it (discourse analysis) suggests that texts do not operate in isolation but through being embedded in context as Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly (2006) attest. Further, they argue, that *“discourse analysis involves a way of reading that is made possible by our immersion in a particular culture, which provides us with rich tapestry of ‘way of speaking’ that we can recognise, ‘read’, and dialogue with”* (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Kelly, 2006, p. 330). It is through discourse analysis that the theme of students cultural signals emerged during the data analysis process. It is Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly (2006) who claim that *“by identifying what binary oppositions, recurrent terms, phrases, and metaphors are present in the text, we begin to see how text is the product of particular discourses”* (p. 331).

The methodological stance underpinned by the conversational analysis added value in the data produced in this study as it provided the explanatory strength of the analysis of natural settings and how *“a strictly sequential analysis can provide findings which accord with and take into account the compositional logic of social interactions”* (Flick, 2009, p. 338). The discourse analytic stance analyses issues that are closer to the topic and combine the language analytic proceedings with the analysis of processes of knowledge and constructions without restricting themselves to the formal aspects of linguistic presentations and processes Flick (2009) concludes.

The study operated within an interpretivist paradigm. Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2010) suggest that social constructionist researchers are interested in ways in which language, speech or spoken word, verbal data is used to construct experiences, feelings, meanings and other

social facts. The focus was on the very same experiences, interested in how students and academic staff members appropriate meaning to students' experiences in their first year of study at a university.

4.10 Reliability and Validity of the study

Reliability and validity refer to research that is credible, dependable and trustworthy. Validity was ensured by engaging in multiple methods of data collection. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) support the use of multiple sources of data collection arguing that it may be a powerful way of demonstrating validity and reliability in qualitative studies by means of triangulation. The similar argument is raised in Bell (1999) where he describes triangulation as gathering data from a number of informants and a number of sources with the aim of cross-checking information thus producing a properly balanced study. It has been stated in previous sections of this thesis that in this study a survey was used as one of the methods of data collection, documentary analysis, one-on-one semi-structured interviews as well as focus group discussions as means of data generation.

Reliability implies that research instruments are dependable and consistent (Maree, 2007). To ensure that this was adhered to, questions were piloted with a few participants in the same research site and it emerged during the pilot phase that discussions were rich and engaging. As a result, there was no need to adjust any of the instruments before the actual data gathering phase. However, the SASSE is dependable tool that has been tried, tested and used in other similar studies; there was no need for it to be piloted. However, as the researcher, I filled the questionnaire to check the amount time needed by respondents to complete. The time taken to fill in the online SASSE tool had implications on the availability of the computer laboratories in terms of bookings and times.

Validity was ensured by using three strategies as proposed by Maree (2007). These were peer examination, member checks and researcher bias. Peer examination was done through allowing peers who are members of a PhD cohort that I am part of to review the research instruments particularly the interview questions. All the instruments were also submitted to the supervisor

for feedback before the commencement of the data collection process. Member checks (Flick, 2009) were implemented by allowing participants (students and lecturers) to view transcribed data so that they ascertain whether their experiences have been reliably recorded as their true narratives. The researcher bias (Flick, 2009) that I was aware of was clarified upfront by stating the researcher's baggage, assumptions, bias and views, and any other circumstances that could have affected data generation process in any way (Kumar, 2011). For an example, I work in the Faculty of Education at UNIZULU. My role as researcher was further clarified upfront, so that data collection would not be affected.

The broad aspects of trustworthiness of the qualitative data were ensured in various ways namely. The first step was ensuring on the credibility of the qualitative data. This was ensured by using a combination of data collection methods. In this case I used focus group discussions with students, one-on-one interviews with academic staff members as well as one-one-one interviews with students. Also, member checking was done, wherein the data that had been analyzed into themes was taken back to participants because I was working with real people. There was peer examination of the data analyses which was done by fellow members of the cohort in which I was part of. This happened when each member of the cohort shared data, findings and the strategies employed to arrive at certain decisions about the data. There were rigorous peer engagement discussions which assisted to widen my horizon on understanding the qualitative data that I produced and findings meaning from it. Lastly the interviewing techniques that I used allowed participants to respond in mother-tongue which in this study it was isiZulu. This made participants to freely engage in discussions in a language that they feel comfortable with.

4.11 Methodological limitations of the study

The UNIZULU has several other faculties that have first-year undergraduate students. This particular study focused solely on first-year students enrolled for the B.Ed. programme as well as some of the lecturers that teach these pre-service teachers. The findings of this study may not be generalized to describe student engagement practices at UNIZULU because, for an

example, there could be varying factors such as admission requirements and areas of specialization that may affect the findings of student engagement per faculty.

The study had initially intended to generate data related to the first-year students' pre-university attributes using the Beginning of University Survey of Student Engagement (BUSSE). The data was generated using BUSSE for the 2016 cohort of first-year students and could not be used in this study as the subsequent data of the same cohort using the SASSE in 2016 could not be collected during the same year. I had wished to use the same cohort of students in the same year. The SASSE data used in this study were collected from the 2015 cohort of students while the BUSSE data were collected from the 2016 student cohort. The reasons for being unable to match the two instruments during the same year were both administrative and technical in nature. Guided by the timeframes to complete this degree, it became necessary to decide on using only the SASSE data generated from the 2015 student cohort. Future studies should attempt to use the combination of these tools to explore student engagement using the same cohort in the same year of study.

This decision did not compromise the quality of data as the study managed to further produce rich data. However, it would have been ideal to use the students' pre-university experiences as well, and discuss findings from the same students as they enter university and after eight months at the university and then engage them through interviews to better understand the student engagement phenomenon in totality.

I presented also in the earlier parts of this chapter that the number of students that were initially targeted for on-on-one interviews was reduced from fourteen to four. The focus groups were used as an additional method to further generate data around the student engagement phenomenon and academic performance. Also the number of academic staff members was reduced to three as other staff members who taught the high risk modules could not be available for interviews citing work related commitments as the reason.

4.12 Ethical Consideration

Kumar (2011) cautions that most professions are guided by a code ethics to accommodate the changing ethos, values, needs and expectations of all who hold stake in the professions. The dominant issues of ethics in research focus on establishing securities that protect the rights of participants. Creswell (2014), Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) as well as Flick (2009) state that these rights; amongst others include obtaining their informed consent, protecting them from harm and ensuring confidentiality. In ensuring compliance with the code of ethics for this study the following was attended to:

- a) Written permission to conduct research amongst the students, and academic staff members was obtained from the University of KwaZulu Natal as the institution which sanctioned this study. The copy of the ethical clearance is attached.
- b) Subsequently, the gate keeper's permission was sought and obtained from the University of Zululand's Research and Innovations office.
- c) Individuals that participated in the interview sessions were given the informed consent form to read and sign before the interview began.
- d) Permission was sought from students and academic staff members to record the interviews.
- e) Students who did not want to participate in the interviews were allowed exercise their rights not participate.

Where large groups of students participated (like in the survey), the informed consent was read to the groups, while the contents were projected on the data screen and the potential respondents were given an option to participate fully, partially or not to participate at all in responding to the survey. Students had to use their authentic student numbers, so it was very important to inform them that the details of their responses would only be used for the purposes of this study. This was achieved by reading to the groups of students during their lectures when the study was introduced to them. I personally informed respondents, and the participants of the aims and purpose of the research project. The respondents were afforded an opportunity to obtain greater clarity from the researcher in these respects.

Kumar (2011) cautions researchers that sharing information about a respondent with others for the purposes other than the research is unethical. Further, confidentiality implies that the dignity of a respondent should be respected. In this study, the respondents were informed that their confidential information would only be accessed by the researcher and the supervisor. Therefore, it was important that respondents had no doubt that any identifying information provided would be treated as confidential. The purpose behind this exercise was to emphasize to the participants that their participation in the research project would not be prejudicial to them in any manner. The researcher guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality to the respondents. I gave the respondents the undertaking that a copy of the dissertation would be made available to the UNIZULU library upon completion of the project. Further, there were no incentives that were promised or given to the participants and the respondents. There was no information or details about the study that was deliberately withheld from the respondents and the participants.

4.13 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have presented the detailed account of the research design that guided the data generation, presentation and analysis. I have also outlined the methodology that underpinned this study. Methods and instruments of data generation have been discussed in detail giving reasons why these have been preferred for this particular study. I have also acknowledged methodological limitations, biases and ethical issues and presented discussions how each of these emerged and provided reason in mitigation. The study in the main was broadly located within the social constructivism paradigm. Moving from the methodology and research design chapter, the next two chapters will present and analyse data that were generated using strategies presented in this chapter. The next chapter presents the quantitative data which will be followed by the qualitative data based on the principles of the explanatory sequential data generation process was discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 5

QUANTITATIVE DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS PHASE

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the first of two chapters of data presentation and analysis. Data produced through the SASSE survey and document analysis of selected documents constitutes the basis for this chapter. The next chapter presents data and analysis based on a qualitative exploration and understanding of first year students' engagement. The separation of the survey analysis and the qualitative exploration is based largely on process issues in managing the data. The SASSE survey is managed by the South Africa license holder of this research instrument. While the data were collected at the case study institution, the data were electronically managed by the license holders at the UFS. As this survey is digitally completed, the processing of the data in terms of each of the items of the survey are done by the license holders as this is generically done for all participating higher education institutions in South Africa. Hence, initial data processing is done descriptive and forwarded to me as the researcher within my institution. Further processing of the survey data is required and was done deductively to form themes under which relevant data has been presented to support the various arguments developed through this thesis.

The SASSE was administered to 782 of the 1255 registered first-year students in the Faculty of Education at the UNIZULU, constituting a response rate of 62%. In identifying the themes for this chapter, it was necessary to include institutional data to form complete information that informed the analysis process. Hence this chapter is supported by data generated from relevant documents through a document analysis process. The relevant documents analyzed are identified and explained for its inclusion within each of the themes in this chapter. The nature of analysis proceeds from a biographic analysis of the participants through to issues of academic and social engagement as seen against a background of student academic performance in this case study institution and student throughput within a national gaze.

5.2 Faculty of education first year students' and respondents' profiles

This section of data presentation highlights the dynamics within the Faculty of Education. It contextualizes the arena in which the students perform and the institutional conditions in which they are exposed to across the various forms of engagement. It emerged from the SASSE and university student records (document analysis) that the group of students that participated in this study is fairly homogenous in terms of home language, race and ethnicity. In this section, I present data analyses in various sub-sections illuminating first, the students, the areas of specialization and campus location. Thereafter, the residential status of students is presented, the students' registration status, faculty enrollment figures, and students' nationality. I present students' race, home language, medium of instruction, first generation status and admission quotas. The purpose of highlighting these areas is critical in effectively engaging with the data as these factors have been illuminated as critical in previous longitudinal studies that also sought to contribute to the discourses of student engagement.

5.3 Key Facts about the first year students

All students in the Faculty of Education at the UNIZULU are based at the main campus in KwaDlangezwa. The Faculty of Education at the University of Zululand enrolled a total of 1255 first year students in 2015. UNIZULU is a contact university and all students are registered full-time. The terminology that is used to differentiate enrolled students (within the context of this study) in their first-year of study is as follows: First entry students: these are students who are registered at this university for the first time. Returning students: these are students that are either repeating the first year of study or have migrated from other degree courses within the UNIZULU or elsewhere.

Areas of specialization: The Faculty of Education has three broad areas or phases in which students specialize as indicated in the Table 5.1 below. These areas of specialization include The Early Childhood Education which enrolled 265 students, the Further Education and Training phase which enrolled 490 students and the Intermediate & Senior Phase which enrolled 500 students. The figures and areas of specialized are further presented and analyzed

in Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 of Sections 3.1 and Section 3.2 respectively as we further analyze student performance in all three broad areas of Bachelor of education qualifications.

Table 5.1: Bachelor of Education programmes and areas of specialization

Phase	Area of Specialization	Number enrolled
Early Childhood Education	Early Childhood Education	265
Further Education and Training	Life Orientation and Language	70
	History and Language	70
	Geography and Language	70
	Accounting / Business Management	120
	History / Geography	70
	Mathematics and Computer Science	40
	Mathematics and Physical Science	50
Intermediate and Senior Phase	Economic and Management Sciences and Language	100
	Economic and Management Sciences and Life Orientation	100
	Mathematics Science and Technology	200
	Social Sciences and Language	100
Total of all first year students		1255

Residential statuses: There are two forms of residential statuses that emerged from the SASSE survey. It was found that only 29% of the students stay on-campus. The other 71% stays off-campus. Off-campus accommodation also has its sub-categories, though the survey did not provide these sub-categories. From the terminology that has been used lately in most universities, there is university subsidized accommodation and private accommodation. I bring these two categories to illuminate the fact that different types of student accommodation have

certain effects on students' learning, academic performance as well as academic and social integration at university. Off-campus residents travel to university by university subsidized transport. Students from private accommodation use public transport to travel to university or they walk. The effects of off-campus accommodation is presented in more details in the following chapter of qualitative data analysis; presenting students' perspectives on how off-campus residence impacts on the amount of time that students spend on both the academic and social related activities.

Nationality of the respondents: Figure 5.1 above presents the nationality of the respondents as obtained from the SASSE. It was found that 16% of the First-Years and 21% of the seniors were international students while 84% and 79% respectively were South Africans.

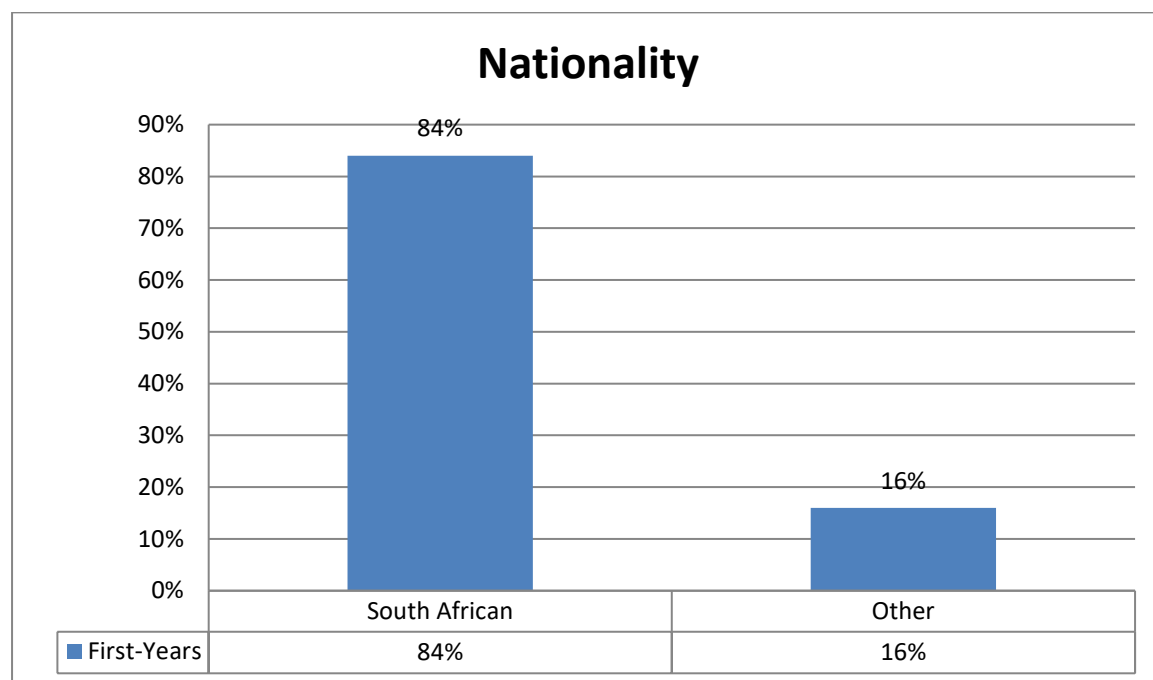


Figure 5.1: Nationality of the respondents

It was also found that only 98% of the senior students and 98% of the First-Years were Black Africans, and 95% and 96% (respectively) used isiZulu as a home language. University of Zululand uses English as the medium of instruction for its teaching, learning and examination.

First Generation status: It is worth noting that 90% of the First-Year students and 91% of the seniors were First generation status students, meaning that these students are from families where no one prior to them had accessed higher education. They are the first from their families to enter into university study. This is in line with the commitment to widen access into higher education as part of the transformation agenda of higher education in South Africa (Department of Education, 1997)

Disability status: 3% reported sensory impairment, 1% learning impairment, 1% other forms of disability, while 6% preferred not to disclose their disability status and 89% do not have disabilities.

5.4 Summary of SASSE participants' profiles

The Faculty of Education at the University of Zululand enrolled a total of 1255 first year students in 2015. The study targeted all first year students that were enrolled for an education degree for the first time. When the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) was administered; a total of 782 students responded to the survey. It is noted the total number of respondents to the survey constitutes 62% of the total enrollment in the faculty of education. A total of 327, which constitutes 42% were male students, and 455 were females; which is 58% of the total number of the respondents. There were more females than males (See Table 5.2 below).

Table 5.2 further breaks down the same total of 782 to senior students and first-year students. Senior students are those students that have been at an institution of higher education for more than one year. These senior students account for a total of 314 which is 40% of the total number of respondents, 131 males and 183 females. This category presents that the number of female students is significantly higher than that of their male counterparts. First-year students are those students who are enrolled at the university for the first time. New first years account for 60% of the total number of respondents. There were 272 females and 196 males. There were 76

females more than males. The data shows that in both first year categories females constitute a higher percentage than males.

This breakdown is significant as the study illuminates varying engagement practices that are related to this breakdown of first year students. The data, therefore, are presented throughout this chapter in terms of this breakdown to present the nature of student engagement under various themes that have been developed.

Table 5. 2: Summary of participants' profiles

	Total	Total	Male	Male	Female	Female
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
First-year students	468	60%	196	42%	272	58%
Senior students	314	40%	131	42%	183	58%
GRAND TOTAL	782	100%	327	42%	455	58%

5.4.1 Age distribution of the respondents

The Faculty of Education students' age distribution is consistent with the university's policy guidelines on admission of the first years. The policy allows for up to 75% of first year enrollment to be from Matriculants (meaning: direct progress from school education into Higher Education), 15%, are for students that have taken gap years (have completed schooling and taken time off from further studies), the balance is made up of students who have accessed other forms of further education including mature age students. Though the study does not primarily focus on how age impacts on student engagement and performance, the survey illuminates various age categories; which can form the basis for future studies. It is worth noting that the majority of participants (26%) had an average age of 19 irrespective of whether they were new entrants or senior students (see Figure 5.2). It is important to note that these students (the 19-year-old category) are most unlikely to have repeated a grade while they were in school. The category of 20 years and above could be fairly interpreted as students that may

have started school late, or have had extended stay at school, or had attended another institution or had had a break for various reasons.

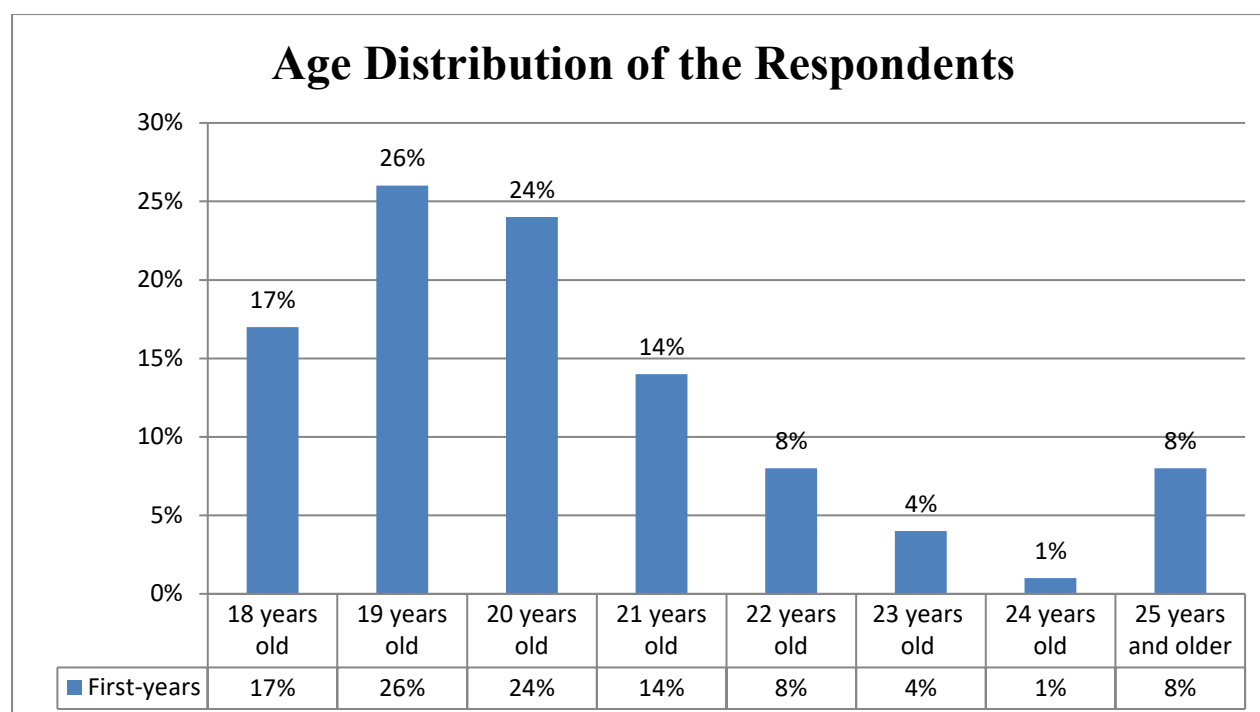


Figure 1.2: Age distribution of the respondents

5.4.2 Gender distribution of the respondents

Department of Higher Education, through CHE (2014) presents 2012 HEMIS database which suggests that generally there are more females than males that are enrolled in South African Institutions of higher education. HEMIS 2012 showed that there were 54% female students registered for contact University qualifications and 64% registered for distance education courses. Figure 5.3 below supports that assertion. Both categories, which are both the first years and senior students, show that there are females than males that were enrolled for the Bachelor of Education programme in 2015. Based on the SASSE results; Table 5.2 showed the numeric composition of the percentages displayed in Figure 5.3. The performance and the levels of engagement by gender is another area for further exploration by in future studies. Future studies could explore student engagement looking at student performance, and gender

differences with the view to understand whether gender is a contributing factor to student engagement and student performance.

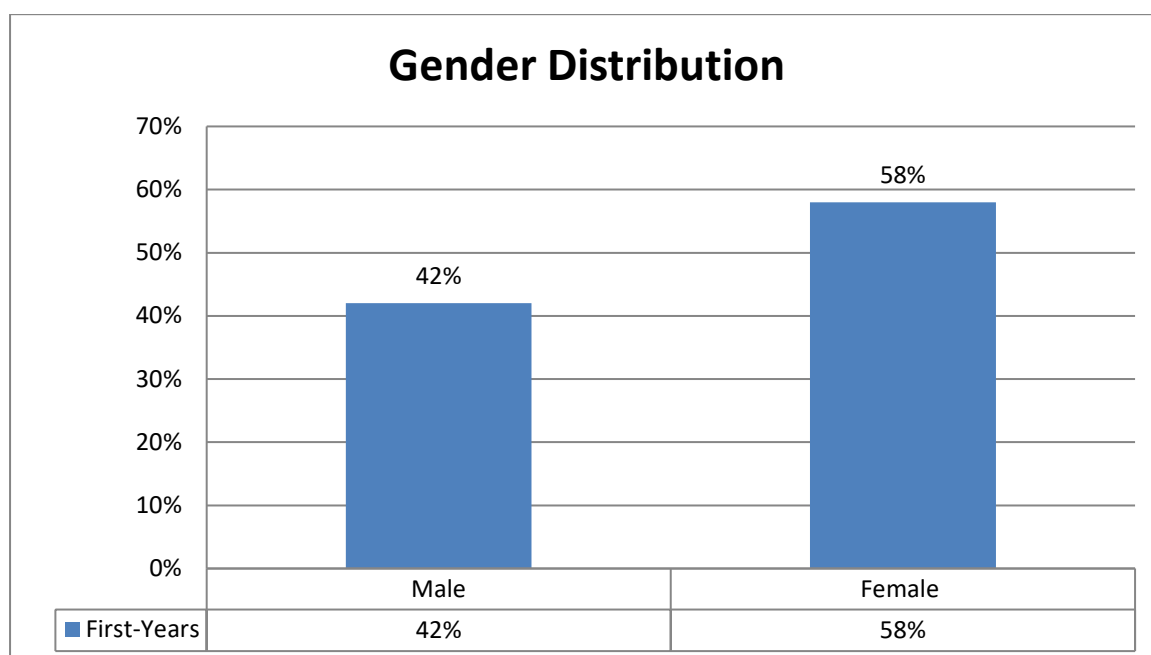


Figure 5.3: Gender distributions of the respondents

5.5 First year students' academic performance

Axelsson and Flick (2011) have encapsulated in their clarification of what they have termed the deeper meaning of student engagement by providing the following two critical elements. Firstly, student engagement is an accountability measure that provides a general index of student involvement with their learning environment. Secondly, student engagement is a variable in educational research that is aimed at understanding, explaining and predicting student behaviour in learning environments. At the centre of understanding the dominant discourse of student engagement, a focus on academic performance and student success is a necessary component within the student engagement discourse.

Retention, throughput and success are measured by the extent in which students perform. I, therefore, present first year students' academic performance per programme in the Bachelor of Education programme. The presentation also includes an analysis of the modules that have

high pass rates and low pass rates. This analysis allows one to explore if module types have an influence on student performance. I use the data and statistics found on students results and matched it against the results of the SASSE and produced a set combined set of findings that were further interrogated through interviews as I attempted to understand the relationship between academic performance and student engagement.

5.6 First year students' academic performance in B.Ed. (Further Education and Training phase)

Academic performance of first year students specializing in programmes in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase shows an above average performance. The FET phase students recorded a 77, 7% pass rate with close to 10% distinctions and just over 20% merit passes. The results further showed that 13% of the students qualified for reassessment, even though this category of students may pass after reassessment, but for the purpose of this study they have failed to meet the pass requirements during their first examination sitting. Those who failed outright account for only 8%.

It was also found that there were more students failing in Accounting, Business Management and Economics: a recording of a 29 % failure rate was revealed. Computer Science and Mathematics had 13% passes with distinctions. Physical Science and Mathematics specialization recorded a 73% pass rate which is contrary to traditional beliefs that this specialization is difficult to most students.

These results were further interrogated during focus groups and interview sessions. It was discovered that students in these programmes, Mathematics, Physical Science, were top students at high schools and had intended to register for high end careers like engineering, accounting and medicine but were rejected. They then chose education as the option. More details are provided in the next chapter on how students made a teaching career as an optional qualification.

Table 5. 3: PERCENTAGE OF [FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING PHASE (FET)] RESULTS PER BACHELOR OF EDUCATION QUALIFICATION 2015

	Life Orientation and Language Education (EBDFT1)	History and Language Education (EBDFT2)	Geography and Language Education (EBDFT3)	Accounting, Business Management and Economics (EBDFT4)	History and Geography (EBDFT5)	Computer Science and Mathematics (EBDFT6)	Physical Science and Mathematics (EBDFT7)	Average
KEY								
Lowest mark Captured	1	1	0.4	1	0.2	0	1	
Fail	8	6	5	13	2	8	14	8%
Qualify to reassess	13	14	14	15	10	17	12	13,6%
Pass	48	46	49	43	46	46	41	45,6%
Pass with Merit	24	25	23	20	30	17	25	23,4%
Pass with Distinction	6	8	8	8	11	13	7	8,7%
No Results captured	1	1	7	4	6	4	1	
Pass %	78	79	80	71	87	76	73	77,7%
Percentage failed	22	21	20	29	13	24	27	22,3%

5.7 First year students' academic performance in B.Ed. (Senior and Intermediate Phase as well as Early Childhood Development and foundation)

There is a 10% increase in the academic performance of students in the Senior, Intermediate and Early Childhood Development compared to the FET Phase. The Senior, Intermediate and Early Childhood Development phases, admit more students than the FET Phase. It is noted that the lowest pass rate was recorded in Economic and Management Sciences at 84% for EBDIS1 the same way EBDFT4 recorded the lowest in the FET phase. Again, it is noted that students perform better in Social Sciences and Language Education. The analyses in Table 5.3; Table 5.4 and Table 5.5 show that generally students do well in Social Sciences where History is one of the subjects. Most distinctions were recorded in EBDIS 1 and 2 and the lowest distinctions were recorded for students in the Early Childhood Development programme.

Table 5.4: PERCENTAGE OF [INTERMEDIATE AND SENIOR PHASE (S&IP)] RESULTS PER BACHELOR OF EDUCATION QUALIFICATION 2015

	Economic and Management Sciences & Language Education	Economic and Management Sciences & Life Orientation	Mathematics, Science & Technology Education	Life Orientation and language Education	Social Sciences and Language Education	Early Childhood Development and Foundation	Average
Key	(EBDIS1)	(EBDIS2)	(EBDIS3)	(EBDIS4)	(EBDIS5)	(EBEDEF)	
Lowest mark Captured	2	1	0	1	1	1	
Fail	7	5	4	4	5	5	5%
Qualify to reassess	10	10	8	10	10	10	9,6%
Pass	40	40	40	41	46	54	43,5%
Pass with Merit	26	28	28	29	27	24	27%
Pass with Distinction	16	15	15	14	12	6	13%
No Results captured	8	6	6	1	1	5	
Pass %	82	83	83	84	85	84	83,5%
Percentage failed	18	17	17	16	15	16	16,5%

5.8 Bachelor of Education highest passed modules across all programmes

The modules presented in Table 5.5 have the highest pass rates across all B.Ed. programmes. These pass rates were extracted from HEMIS data at UNIZULU. When analysing these modules with the highest pass rates, it emerged that the number of students registered for a module or rather large class sizes is not a major determining factor for high or low academic performance. It can be concluded that rather the intensity of the module or what the module values as important has an effect on students' academic performance. I use Academic literacy (Computer Literacy) as an example; it emphasizes the skills that enables students subtly navigate around their studies. HIV / AIDS Education is an awareness module and highlight facts around the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Language, Literacy and Communication 1A is a Home Language; it can be concluded that students perform better in a Home Language. The nexus that could be inferred is about the inculcation of multilingualism (a mandate extrapolated from the country's constitution) within teaching and learning in higher institutions.

Table 5.5: Highest passed modules

Module Name	Number wrote	Number Passed	Module Pass Percentage
Academic Literacy (computer Literacy)	1164	1033	89%
HIV/AIDS Education	1093	1032	94%
Language, Literacy and communication 1A (Home Language-isiZulu)	249	240	96%
Human & Social Sciences 1A (History)	253	242	96%

5.9 Bachelor of Education least passed modules across all programmes

The modules presented in Figure 5.4 are classified as high risk modules where the student failure rate is over 20%. The HEMIS data revealed that Academic Literacy (ELLL111) had a total of 1254 students that wrote the examinations in 2015, and 326 students failed this module. Ideologies and Trends (EFIT 111) had 1218 examination entrants of which 304 students failed this module. English Language 1B (ELG 112) had 46 failures and Introduction to Historical Studies (ECHS 112) had 55 students that failed. All these four modules combined account for a total of 731 failures.

When reading the Faculty of Education Handbook (2016), I found that EFIT 111 is a philosophy module where students in their first year of study are introduced to the nature and the field of philosophy of education which are speculative, analytic, classical philosophies including idealism, realism and pragmatism; contemporary philosophies, Reconstructionism and Africanism, value clarification; theories of moral education and its link to humanism.

Similarly, ELLL 111 aims to empower students with linguistic knowledge and communication skills that will enable students from their first year of study to facilitate their own academic learning. The analysis of these modules further showed ELGN 112 is an English language module that has a high demand of linguistic capital from the registered students.

It could be concluded that the failure rate in these four modules could be attributed to the high linguistic demand that is required to deal with to do well. The students are expected to read extensively, understand, analyze and apply relevant aspects contained in these modules. Coupled with the previous expectation, students are expected to write using appropriate academic conventions within the prescripts of respective disciplines. The assertions argued and discussed in this paragraph were also highlighted in Lillis (2002) who argued that academic writing is both a social and knowledge practice that is informed by values and academic conventions of particular disciplines and also informed by ways in which knowledge is constructed and disseminated.

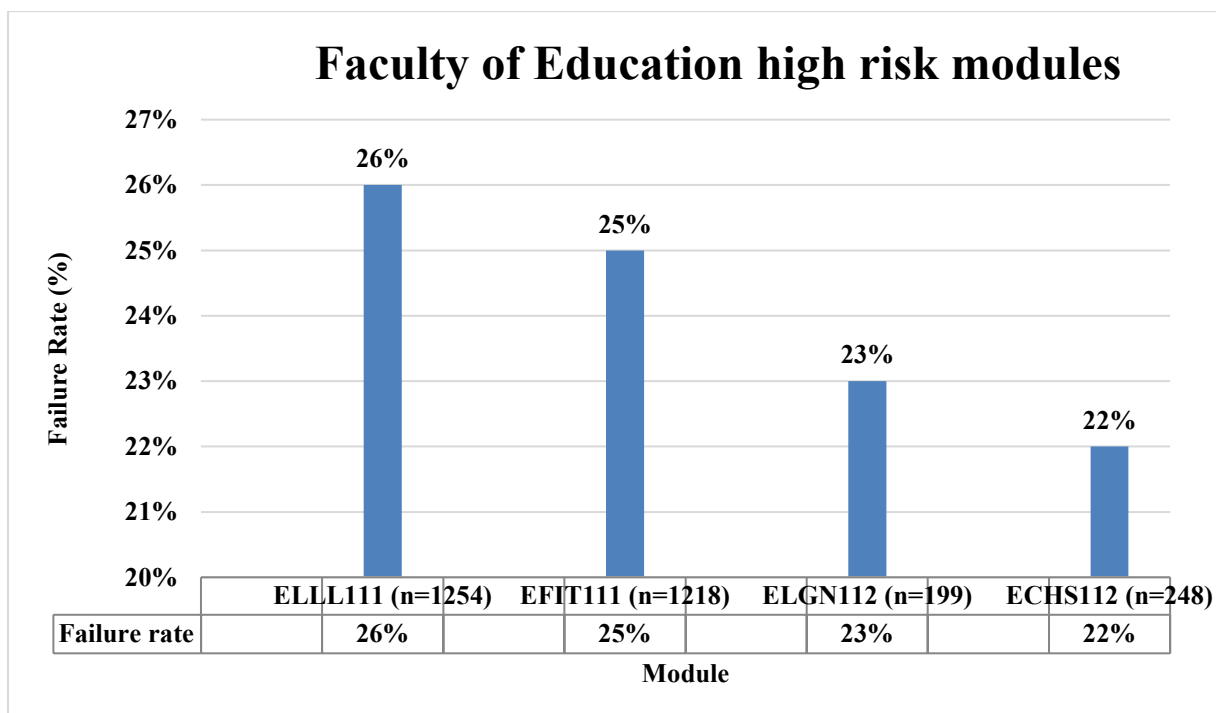


Figure 5.4: Faculty of education high risk modules

5.10 Students' experience in higher education

The focus of this study is on how first year students engage in their study, and the extent to which the universities are prepared to deal with the students who come into the University environment for the first time. The specific focus is on students registered in an undergraduate programme. This section focuses its attention on students' experience in higher education environment.

5.11 First year students' aspirations to stay at the current university

Figure 5.5 below highlights two important observations from the data that were produced by the SASSE. The first observation is that 27 % of the students plan to complete their degree first degree and exit the system immediately thereafter. This percentage is the same for both first year students and senior students. However, 37% of the first year students plan to complete a

doctoral degree as well as 34% of the senior students aspire to complete a doctoral degree. This observation could relate to the level of self-engagement in their higher education studies and be useful in understanding why students engage and perform in the manner they in which they do. The manner in which students engage with their academic activities as well as the manner in which they perform could be influenced by their future academic aspirations.

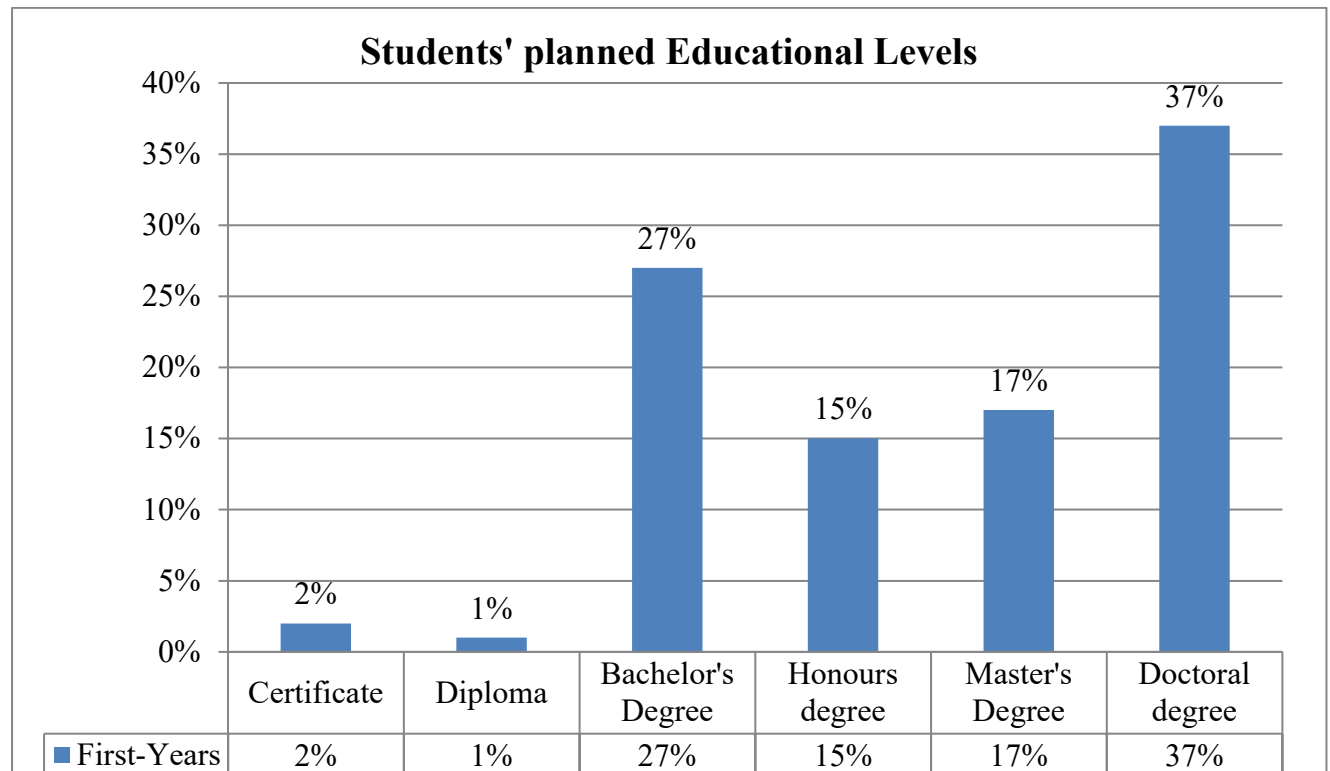


Figure 5.5: Highest level of education students plan to achieve

5.12 Students' ability to form relations with the current university

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure asserts that students who sense their norms, values, and ideologies as similar to the institution they are attending are more likely to excel academically and integrate socially into the college environment compared to students who sense dissimilarities between themselves and their institutions. Hence a measurement of the students' attachment to an institution would give an indication of the level of academic achievement and social integration.

Figure 5.6 shows that 24% of the new entrants indicated that they are not attached and probably not attached to the university they are currently enrolled in. This finding is consistent with the finding that approximately 27% of the students would leave the institution after they complete their first degree, suggesting that those who aspire for completion of first degree may not feel as attached to the institution in which they are studying at. Figure 5.6 further shows that 76% of the first-year students and 73% of the seniors feel a sense of attachment to the institution.

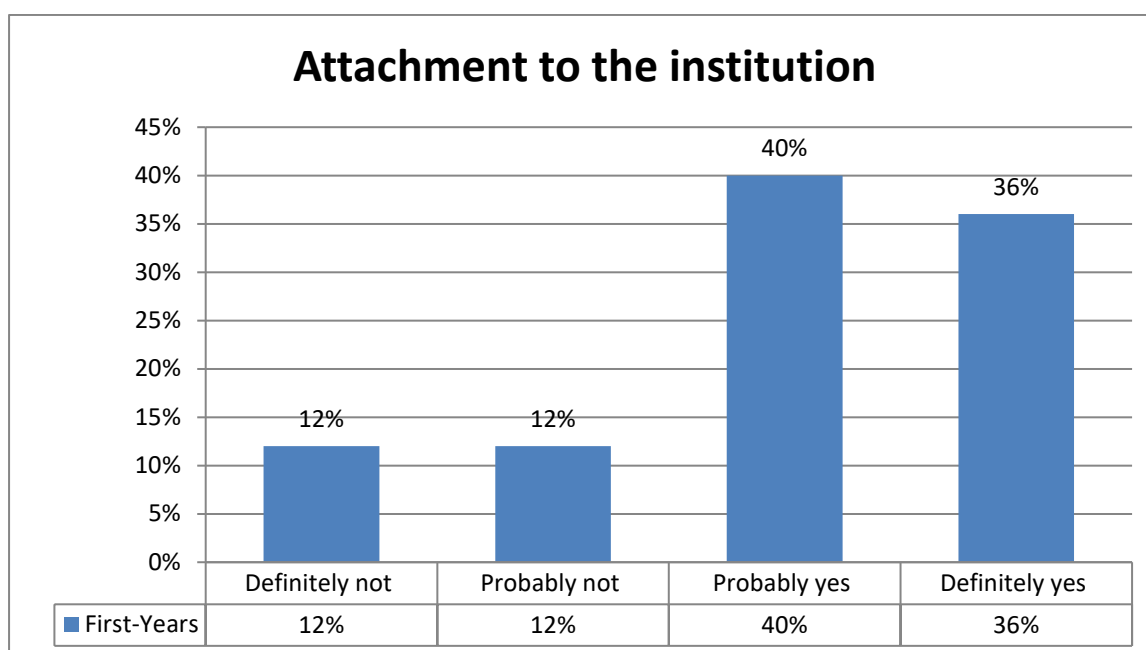


Figure 5.6: Attachment to the institution

5.13 Students' mark category

This subsection presents students' own evaluation of their academic performance. The respondents were asked to indicate the average marks category in which they range during their first year of study. Figure 5.7 presents the category of marks that students said they range at. The rating of marks in the figure may have been informed by students' knowledge of how they score in tests, projects, assignments, and all other credit bearing assessments during the course of the year under scrutiny. These ratings may also have been influenced by the first semester performance as this survey was conducted in the second semester. Students who rated their

performance below the 50%-mark range account for approximately 3% of the participants. This percentage is rather low when looked at in terms of the actual academic performance of these students (from HEMIS data produced for this cohort of students) and in terms of national progression data that suggests that approximately one third of the students drop out from university in their first year of study (CHE 2013). The self- ranking of their academic performance may also suggest that these students are optimistic of progressing into the second year of study.

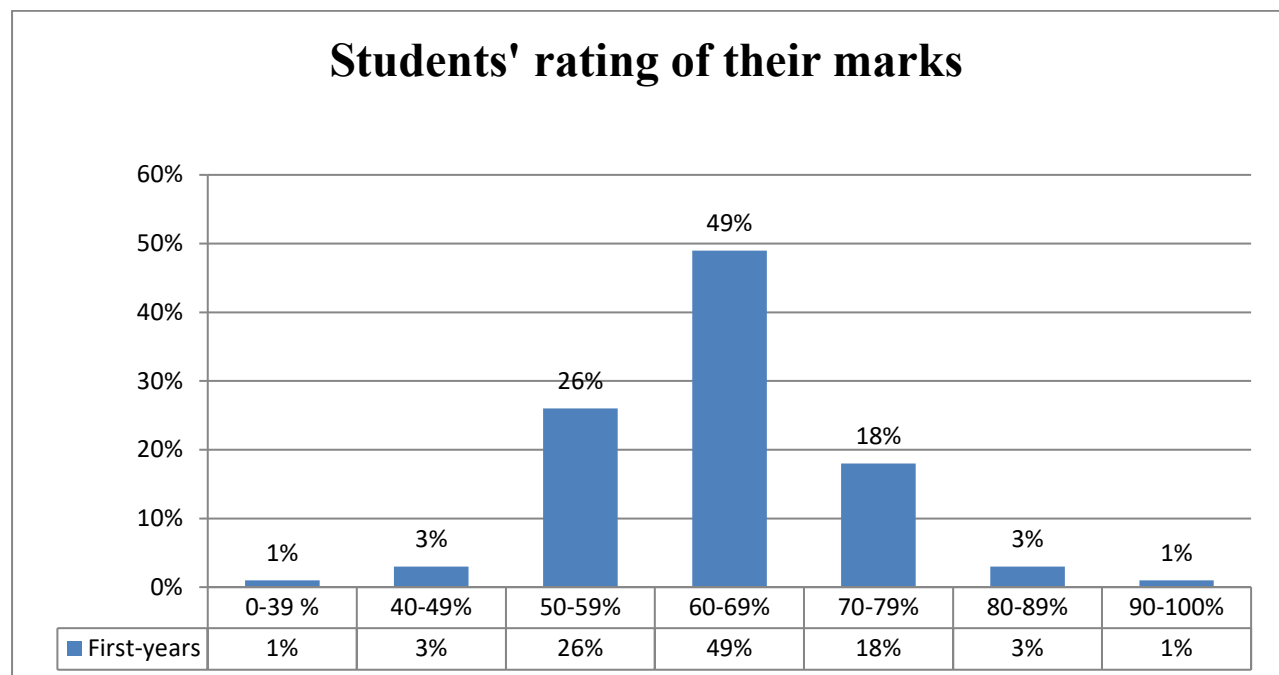


Figure 5.7: Students' mark category

5.14 Students experiences of the first year of higher education

Research in the area of first year experience has suggested that there is a correlation between students' first year experience in a university and their performance in that year; the three best predictors of student success are academic preparation, motivation and student engagement (Kuh et al., 2005). In this section, I present students' rating of their entire first-year educational experience, students' rating of the quality of the academic advice, the extent to which students use technology to communicate. The extent to which modules demand students to do their best is presented from the students' perspectives.

5.15 Students' rating of their first year educational experience

Students' self-rating of their first year in a university setting is an important consideration as this rating would give us a sense of how they view higher education studies and its relation to their overall performance in their first year of study. In this study, it was found that 62% of the new entrants and 63% of the seniors regarded their first year educational experience as positive (see Fig. 5.8). Generally, the majority of the students across both categories and types of first year students rated this first year educational experience from good to excellent. It appeared that 23 % and 26% respectively of the same group rated their experience as excellent.

In this study, it was found that a small minority rated their education experience as being fair to poor, suggesting that the majority of the first year students have had a good to excellent university experience. This could be related to their academic performances as the majority of students have performed well and would progress into the next year of study. Those that have rated themselves as fair to poor educational experience may be linked to those that have not performed academically well. Negative rating of the educational experience can be associated with poor academic performance, student dropout, low graduate throughput, slow academic progress and to a certain extent, student attrition as suggested in Mlambo (2011) and Entwistle & Ramsden (2015).

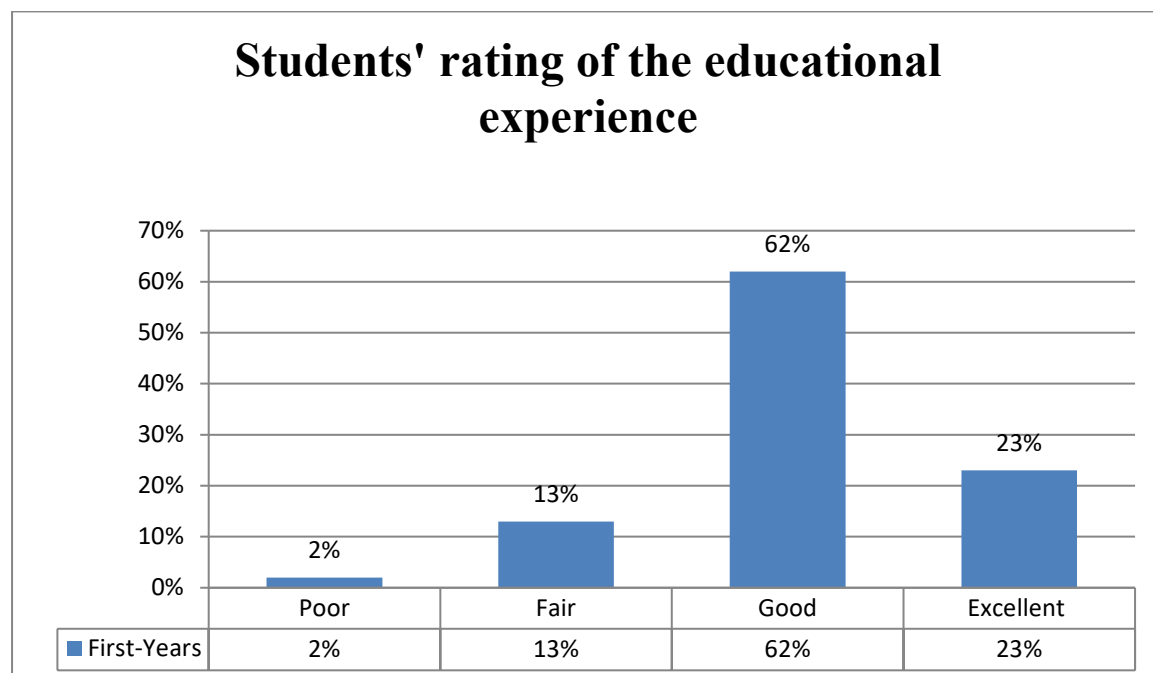


Figure 5.8: Quality of educational experience

5.16 Students' rating of the quality of the academic advice

Lizzio and Wilson (2013), argue for early intervention protocol to first year students and further claim that *“both academic performance and persistence and student satisfaction indicators appear to be positively influenced by timely student-centred academic outreach”* (p.11). There was a positive affirmation of the quality of academic advice that the first-year students obtained as can be seen in Fig 5.9. Thompson (2008) claims that academic support or advice involves the kind of assistance that first year students get to help them plan their studies and educational engagement. Most of the students rated the quality of the academic advice as good, while 25% and 29% of First-year and seniors respectively rated the quality of the academic advice as excellent. There was a 3% of the first entrants and 2% of the seniors that said they did not receive any form of academic advice at all.

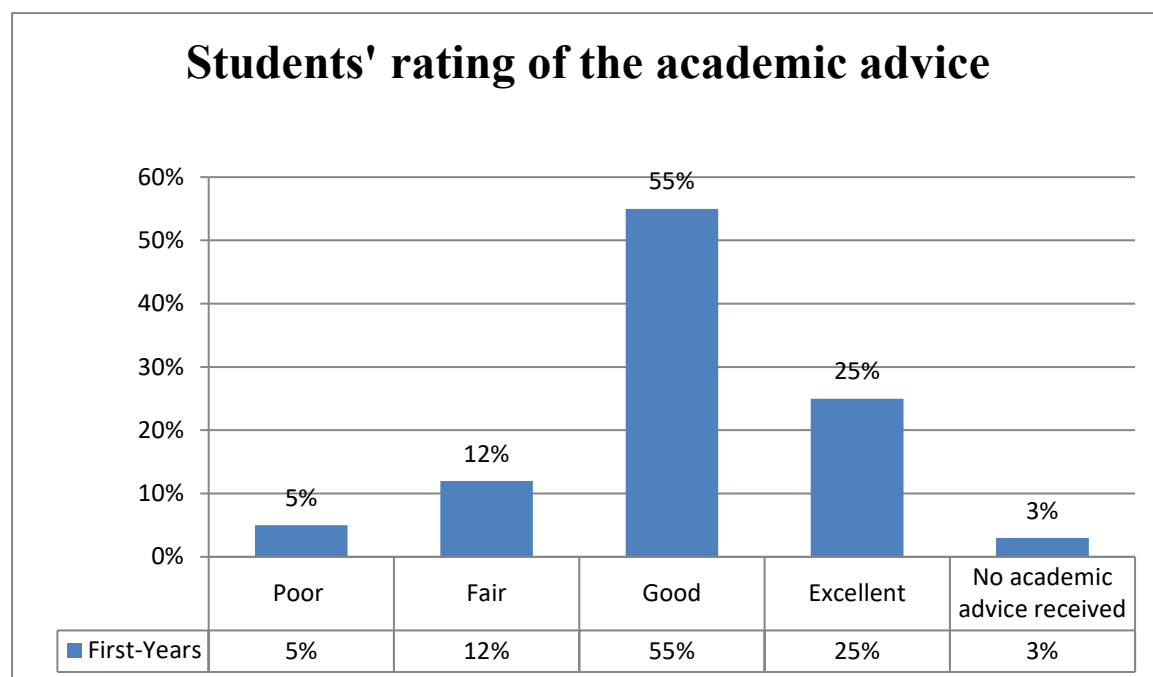


Figure 5.9: Students' perceptions of the quality of academic advice

5.17 First year students' use of technology to communicate

The significance of integrating the use of technology in higher education classroom has a high value. Henderson, Selwyn and Aston (2015) claim that technology based platforms of communication and teaching and learning allow students easy access to the subject content and sources of information. The frequency of how students use technology in this study is a cause for concern in this era of social media and easy access to technological devices like cellular phones, internet and Wi-Fi. This low use of technology could be attributed to the extent to which it was used at schools prior to entry at a university. Low use is likely to be related to low or no access to technology in the homes of students and lack of adequate skills or poor technological skills. Through effective use of technology students are better positioned to assume a more active stance in assuming responsibility for their learning. On the other hand, through the provision of technology universities are better positioned to respond to globalisation.

In this study, it emerged that 43% of the respondents use technology to communicate with other students. There were only 11% of the respondents that used technology more often to communicate for the peer learning support while 7% use technology to communicate with academic staff. The least was 3% that used technology to communicate with student support services. The majority of students are equipped with smart phones, laptops and tablets that are portable and students carry these to class all the time. The site of this research is reasonably supported with Wi-Fi in most lecture rooms. It would have been more convincing to report a higher usage of technology. Another contributing factor to low use of technology as a means of communication could be attributed to the fact that some students cannot afford to secure technological devices.

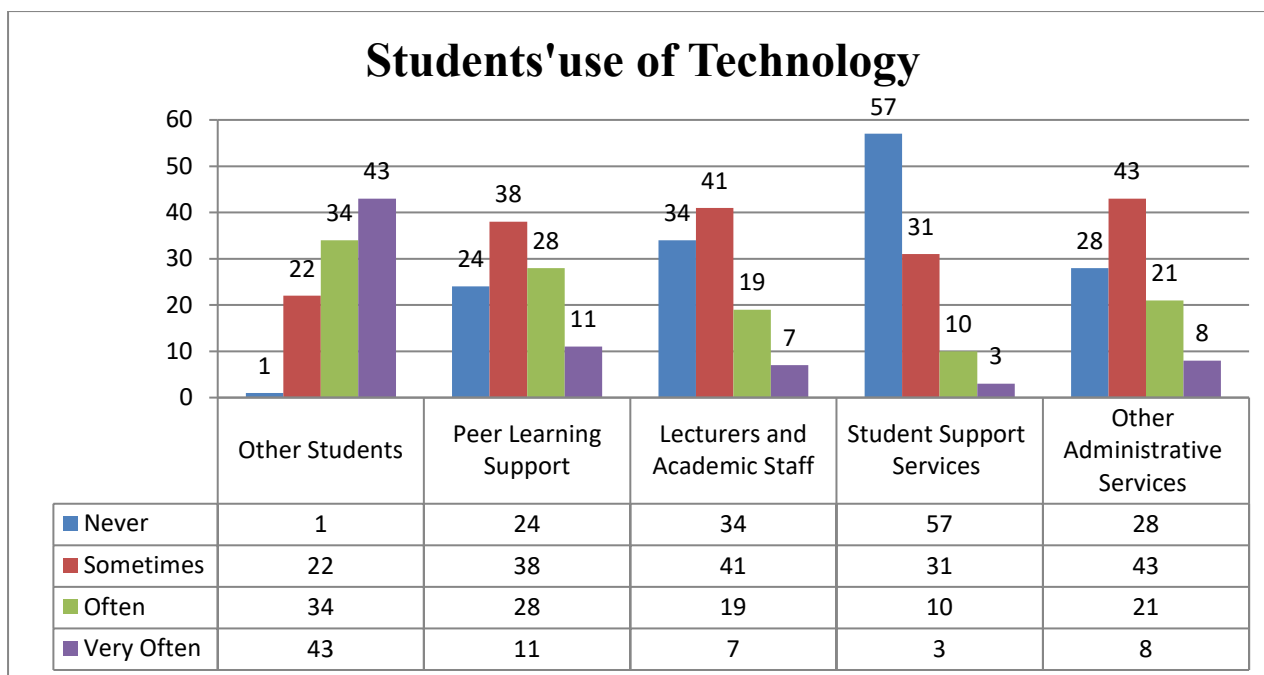


Figure 5.10: Students' frequency in using technology for communication purposes

5.18 The extent to which modules demand first year students to do their best

Students have different levels of motivation, attitudes about teaching and learning, and responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. In this study, it emerged that the larger percentage of the respondents; 70% first-years and 64% seniors (see Fig. 5.11) find the modules very demanding. It can be inferred from the responses that as the students have different family and educational backgrounds, varying strengths and weaknesses in learning, different interests, diverse ambitions, unequal senses of responsibility, varying levels of motivation and approaches to studying; it is highly probable that they may respond to similar tasks differently. Teaching or instructional approaches and individual students' learning styles can also contribute to the manner in which students weigh, carry, respond and view their academic challenges. This section will further be explored in the discussion chapter where Bourdieu's construct on cultural capital will be further discussed in relation to the students' native ability to interact with various texts and contexts as well as against the respondents' views on the extent to which modules demand students to do their best.

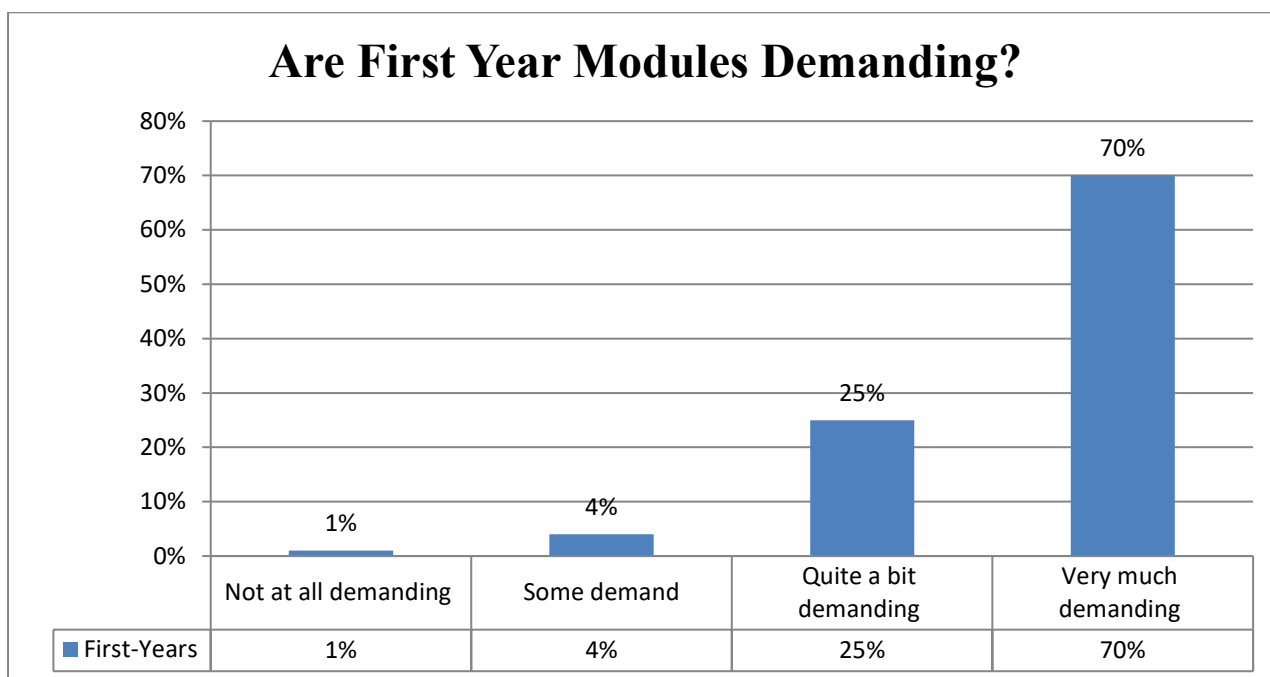


Figure 5.11: Extent to which modules demand students to do their best

5.19 The aspects in which institution puts emphasis on

It has been claimed in most literature that the central role of universities is knowledge production. Students have indicated what this particular university regards as important in their quest to provide knowledge. Students' responses are presented on a sliding scale, where student state that the university regards the following as important.

5.19.1 Studying and Academic work

This study found that 59% of the students say the UNIZULU puts more emphasis on studying and academic work. In this particular finding there is no evidence that suggests that the emphasis on studying and academic yields positive results of academic performance. A reasonable inference drawn could be that students are encouraged to give more time to academic related activities. I concede that more empirical evidence may be required to validate

the previous inference. There is a certain degree of correlation between this finding and what the academic staff said during the interviews. Academic staff members who were interviewed conceded that due to large class sizes they are compelled to teach more and allow students to work on their own to compensate for non-availability of time to effect individual attention to students' learning.

5.19.2 Provision of technology to help students

It has been mentioned earlier in this chapter that the frequency of how students use technology in this study is a cause for concern. Further, I have stated that the significance of integrating technology use in higher education classroom has high value. The data presented in Fig. 5.12 below resonates with data presented in section 3.3 Table 5.5 where academic literacy was amongst the highest passed modules as well Fig 5.10 which presented data of the students' frequency in using technology.

The responses from students are not conclusive to say that there is sufficient emphasis put on the provision of opportunities to students to use technology. However, there is sufficient evidence to prove that the University has invested in technology infrastructure. It can be inferred that not all academic staff use technology based instruction.

Evans (2010) states that:

University of Zululand has had a number of e-learning projects since 2000 ranging from basic departmental websites, which hosted “virtual classrooms” to the actual deployment of various Learning Management Systems (LMSs) including WebCT now (Blackboard) in 2000, MyCMT, which was developed in-house by Muller in the Department of Accounting and Auditing in 2002 and Moodle, which has been piloted since 2007. This comprehensive Open Source application has now been chosen to be the official LMS on campus with one instance installed for each faculty. (No page number: taken from the UNIZULU website: 20/08/2016 at 13H00)

The above blurb by Evans (2010) is indicative that UNIZULU has technology –based platforms for instruction. It is noted that half of the first year students use this technology based system

of instruction. It also emerged that putting emphasis on teaching students to use available technology accounts for 49 % whilst provision of technological support services accounts for 43%.

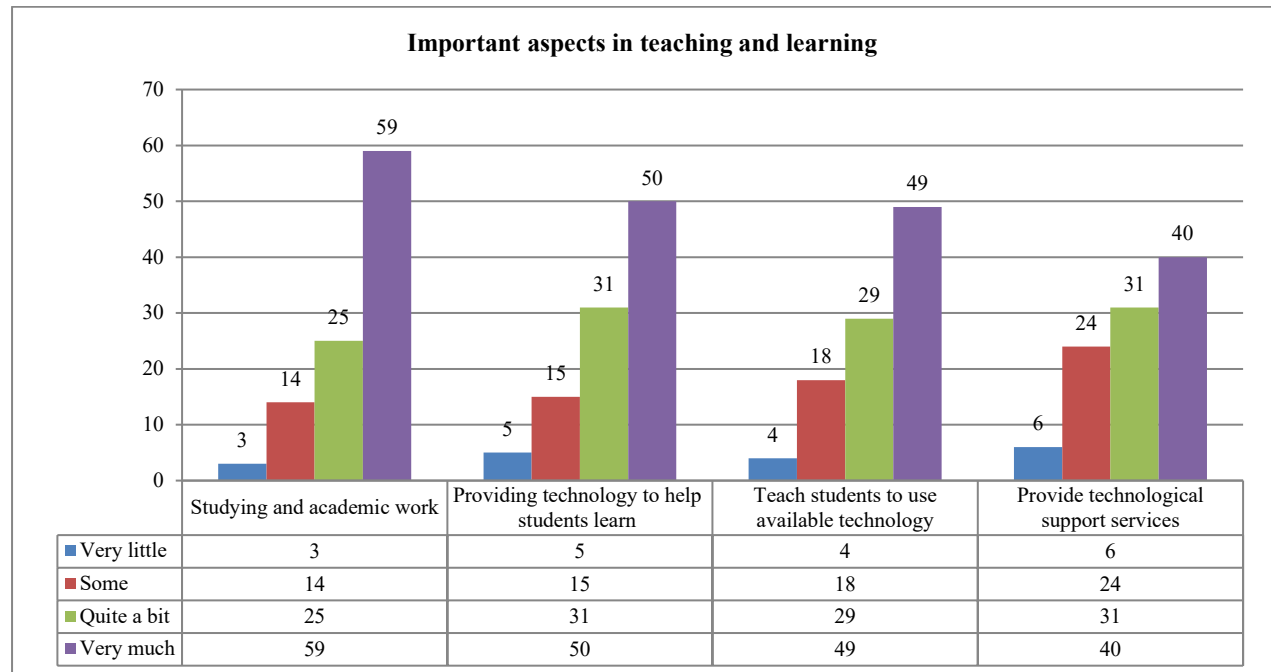


Figure 5.12: Aspects in which the institution puts emphasis on

5.20 The extent to which learning emphasizes memory

The extent to which learning emphasizes memory is quite critical in understanding the nature of student engagement. Okano, Hirano and Balaban (2000) claim that memory is regarded by most Neuroscientists as one of the most fundamental mental processes. Okano, et al. (2000), further argue that memory is best defined as a behavioral change caused by an experience, whilst learning is simply defined as a process of the acquisition of memory. These authors further claim that some memories such as those concerning events and facts, are available to our consciousness and are referred to as the declarative memory and other forms of memory are called procedural memory and are not readily available to consciousness. Procedural memory is the memory that is needed, for example, to use a previously learned skill, where skills are developed, nurtured and improved through practice and training. It is significant to note that declarative memory and procedural memory are independent (Okano, Hirano & Balaban 2000).

Fig. 5.13 shows the slight escalation on how students perceive the extent to which academic work emphasizes memory from very little emphasis to very much emphasis. This could be attributed to low frequency in the use of technology, the extent to which modules demand students to do their best and most importantly the extent to which studying and academic work is emphasized. Partly this display, Fig. 5.13 can further be attributed to large class sizes and the academic capital that students bring to university.

Perceptions of students on academic work are quite divergent to conclude the extent to which teaching contributes to this analysis on memory. It emerged that 5% of the students say there is very little emphasis put on memory and up to 38% of students view academic activities as being emphasized, aligned and presented to promote the use of memory. Again this does not necessarily suggest that teaching strategies and types of tasks or activities are meant to emphasize this type of learning only. This is more of an indication of the strengths that students bring to university. This challenges the university's preparedness to exploit this view to enhance the majority of students' learning. The students' understanding, reflection and responses on the academic work are critical on curriculum planning and pre-university schooling.

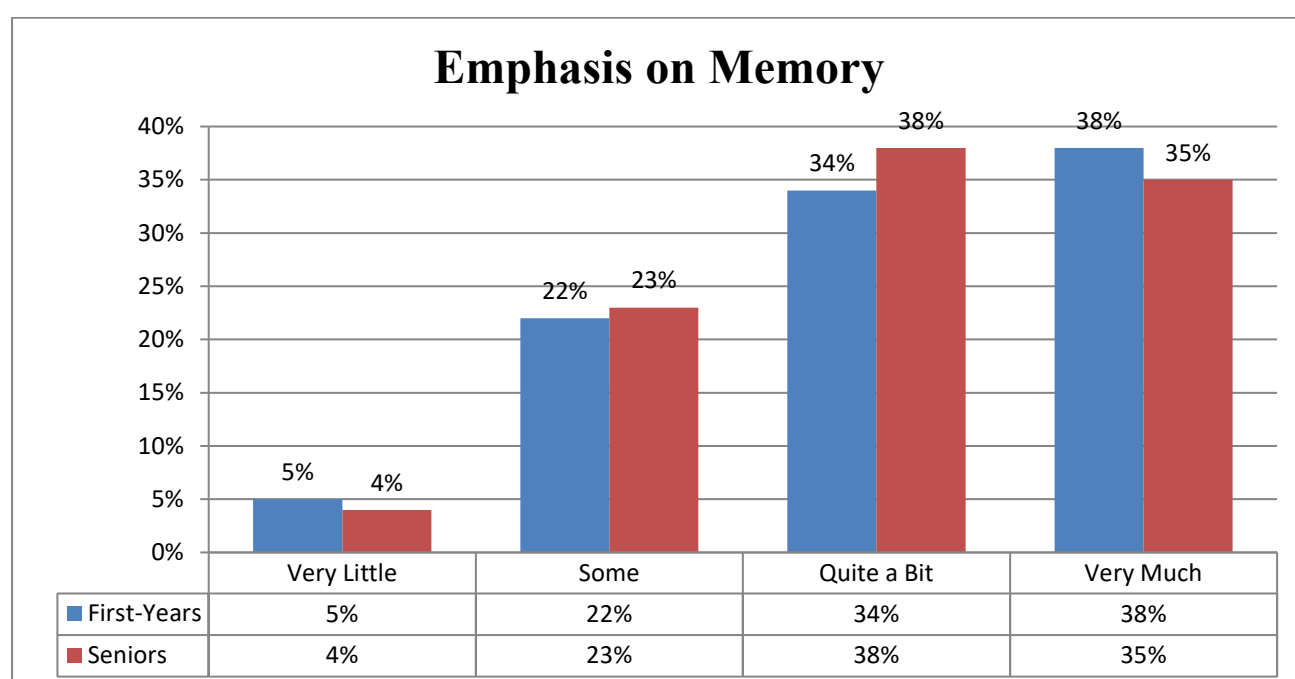


Figure 5.13: Extent to which academic work puts emphasis on memory

5.21 The extent to which the Institution contributes to knowledge and skills

The responses from the students as reflected in Fig. 5.14 begin to respond positively to some of the graduate attributes that were once articulated by one of the former Ministers of Education in the Republic of South Africa, Prof Kader Asmal during an Opening Address at a Conference on Higher Education Curriculum and Society: Relevance, Quality and Development; University of Pretoria, 1 April 2004. Minister Asmal stated that the strategic objective of the government in higher education is to:

Produce graduates who are well rounded and thoroughly grounded; who are skilled and competent; who are creative, flexible and adaptive to new challenges; who are adept in critical thinking and cultural literacy; who are enabled and empowered to participate fully in their economy, their society and their globalising world.

Institution's contribution to knowledge and skills as reflected below shows UNIZULU's attempt to contribute to this particular discourse in higher education in the South African context. On a decreasing scale, the students attest to the institutional efforts in contributing to: 1) Working effectively with others. 2) Thinking critically and analytically. 3) Writing clearly and effectively. 4) Using computing and information technology. 5) Understanding people of other backgrounds. 6) Speaking effectively and clearly. 7) Being an informed and active citizen. 8) Solving complex real-world problems. 9) Analysing numerical and statistical problems. In the next paragraphs, I select and present only the top three components that the students value as an experience that institution puts emphasis on in its quest to contribute to knowledge, skills and development.

5.21.1 Working effectively with others

This is quite a significant aspect that students have rated highly over others. The ability to work effectively with others yields various results like accepting change and working collaboratively with an aim to produce positive outcomes. The value of collaborative work involves respecting of each other's' views, roles and responsibilities, rights, cultural and physical differences.

There is natural progression to the next skill that the students confirm the institution contributes to weighing up opinions, arguments and solutions.

5.21.2 Think critically and analytically

This is one of the most important individual skills needed by a student at a university. Students also rated the university's contribution in enhancing critical and analytical skills very highly. Through engagement with a series of activities like assignments, tasks and projects students claim that they are challenged fair enough to think, and look in detail the information at their disposal, thereafter objectively evaluate such information with an aim of reaching a logical conclusion. It is upon enhancing critical and analytical thinking that students' academic literacy is developed.

5.21.3 Write clearly and effectively

Logic dictates and so have students confirmed that after critical and analytical thinking follows clear and effective writing. I attest to the students' assertion and confirmation. Writing is a critical mode of learning at university. Writing is a practice rather than a skill which happens in both the social and disciplinary space and is informed by certain values and ways of knowing and disseminating knowledge.

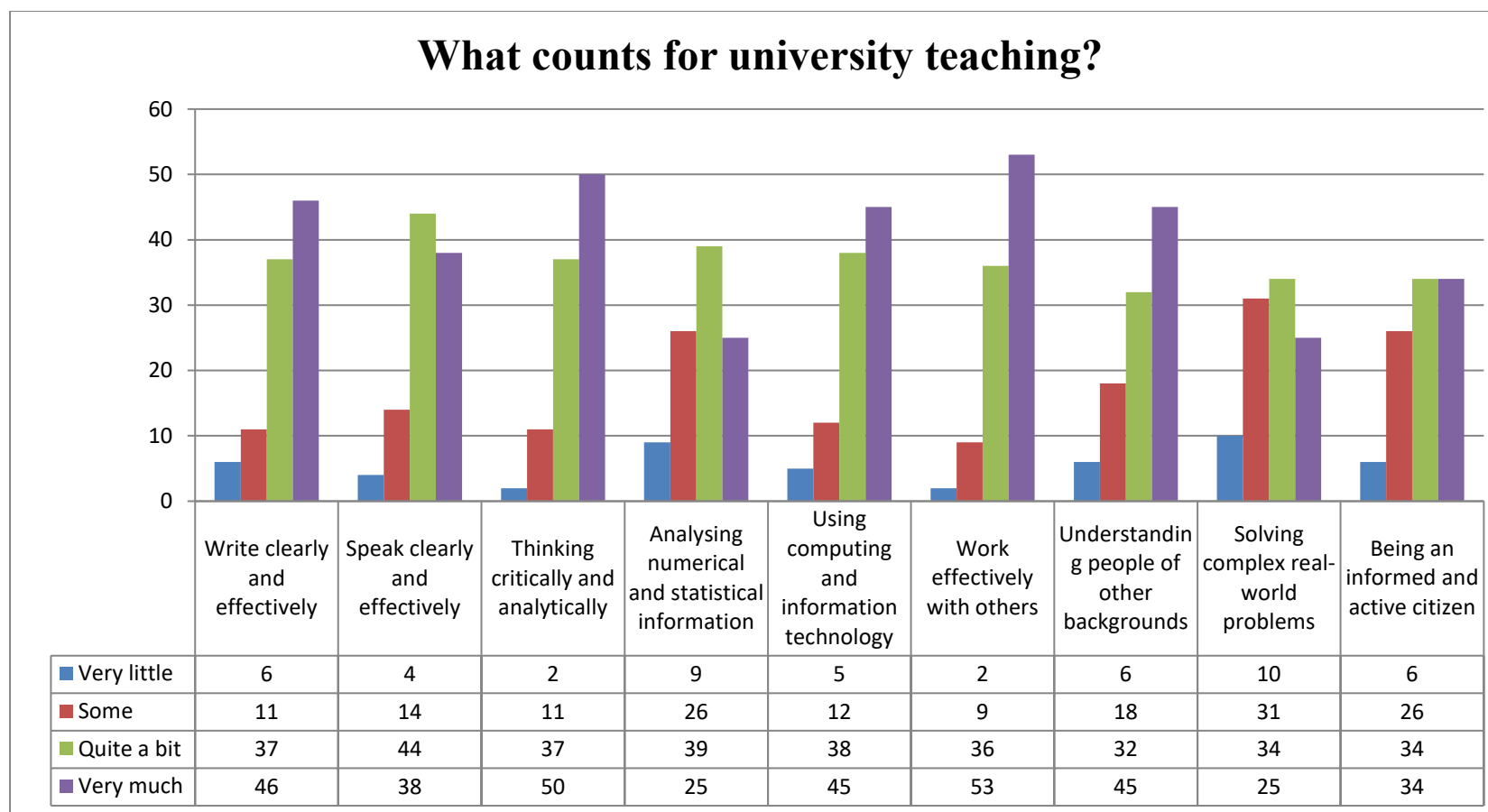


Figure 5.14: Extent to which students experience the institution's contribution to knowledge, skill and development

5.22 First year students' engagement practices

Trowler (2010), summarizes student engagement as that which “is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and the reputation of the institution”(p. 3). In this section, I present two broad categories that are aligned to first-year students' engagement practices, namely: students' social and academic engagement.

Student engagement is not or should not be limited only to time spent by students on academic related activities like consultations with lecturers as Trowler (2010) has observed. Student engagement encompasses three other elements which are behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements as Axelson and Flick (2011) suggest. Kuh (2006) views student engagement as what represents both time and energy which students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the efforts institutions devote to using effective educational practices. This notion was later supported in what Strydom & Mentz (2010) claim: student engagement has two components, what institutions do, and what students do. This section focusses on what students do. The students' perceptions on what the university does have been presented in earlier sections of this chapter.

5.23 Students' social engagement

The amount of time that students should or can spend on social activities in comparison to academic activities cannot be quantified. It is the common reality and expectations of academic society that students are expected to spend more time on academic activities. The next section illustrates what students do outside the classroom environment which may have positive or negative implications on how students perform academically.

5.23.1 Amount of time students spend on social activities

The rurality of the University does not provide students with more opportunities to be engaged in economic activities like working for pay off campus. The university is located about 30 kilometers from the economic hub of the district. This makes it extremely difficult for students to be engaged in economic activities. It is clearly illuminated that 79% of students are not economically active. While the purpose of their enrollment is to study full-time, part-time jobs still have significance in the student's life. It can lessen the burden of financial support from families who according to the demographics of the students suggest that students mainly come from families of low socio-economic-status; hence students are solely dependent on financial support from home. They will leave university without exposure to work environment which will further be a challenge as South Africa is saturated with unemployed and unemployable university graduates. Fig. 5.15 below confirms that at least 64% of the students are not even involved in community service and volunteer work.

Engagement with family signifies positive relationships or regular interactions that students have with their family. I use this prelude to acknowledge that the majority of the first year students are first generation students; they come mainly from rural backgrounds that are marred by various severe socio-economic situations. There is evidence from the data which suggests that 59% of the students provide care for their dependants. The amount of time they spend ranges from one to anytime above thirty hours per week providing care to their dependants. This care could range from taking care of their siblings, own children, parents and other members of the extended family.

It can be inferred that this type of care could be financial, emotional and physical care. It could also involve regular telephone communication, use of social media and visits to their homes or visits to the university by members of the family. The other inference that could be made is that this population of students have noticeable or measurable contact with family members while at university. This link with family needs further interrogation. Once the extent and the nature of care is determined, it should be managed to advance the agenda of first-year students' academic engagement.

Students' Social Engagement

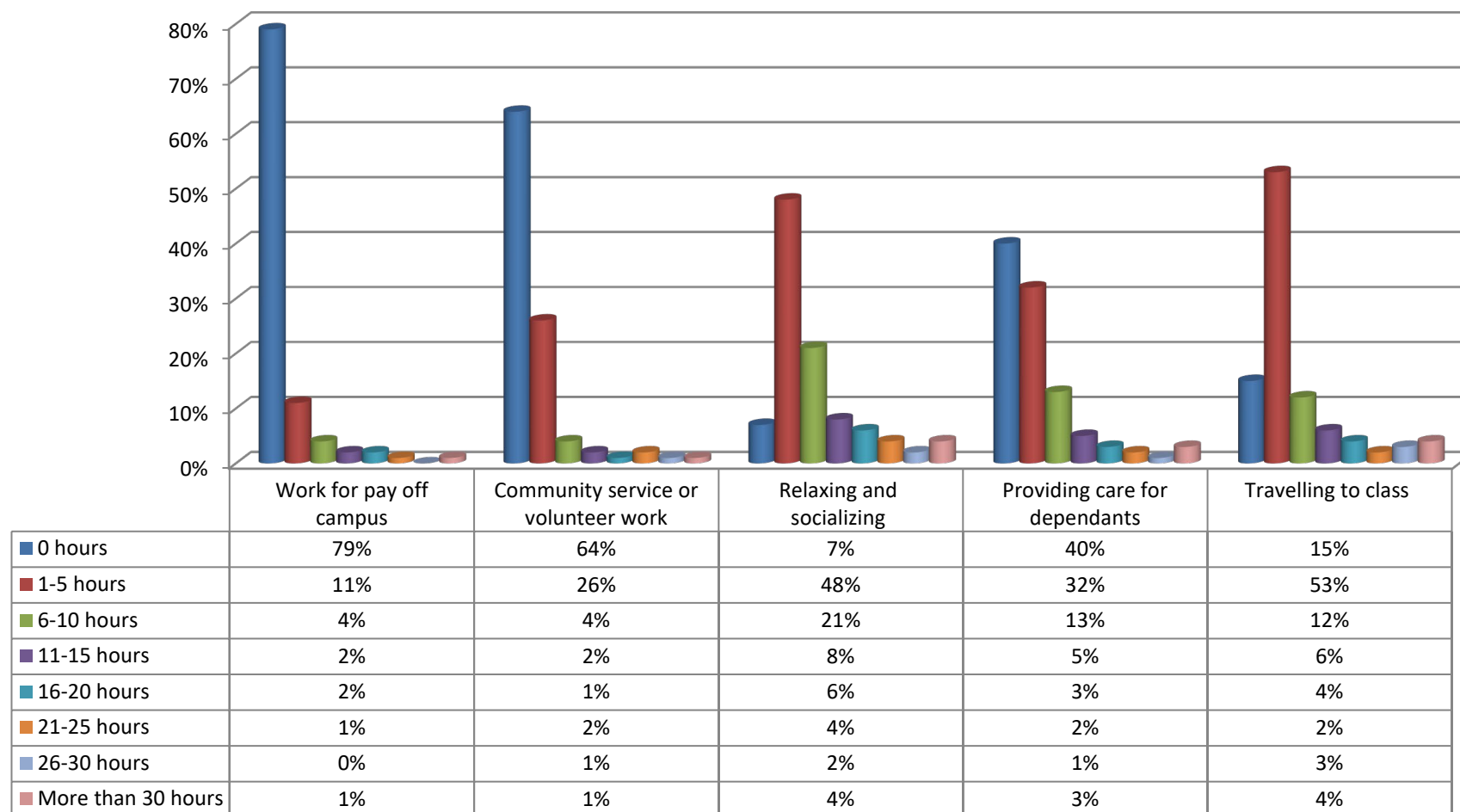


Figure 5.15: Time students spend on various social aspects per week

5.24 Students' academic engagement

The previous section has illustrated student engagement with reference to how students spend their time on socially inclined activities. This section now looks at how students expend their time on academic related activities. The study did not intend to compare the two phenomena as each one of them has its own unique role to play in promoting or enhancing academic performance and student success. Student academic engagement is unique in that it is the only phenomenon that is measured in this study. Through academic performance, students are gauged to have succeeded or failed at university. The frequency of student class attendance, reading and writing are amongst the aspects that are given attention in this section.

5.24.1 Attendance of time tabled academic experiences

This section presents evidence that shows the extent to which first year students attend timetabled academic activities like lectures, practical sessions and tutorials. The rural university that was used to conduct the study is a full-time contact institution where students attend contact sessions. The expectation is that responses should have been high to prove that. In the contrary, data show that the student attendance is below 40%. The survey did not seek reasons why students attend time-tabled activities the manner in which they do. However, a further exploration on this crucial phenomenon was interrogated during the interview sessions with both academic staff and students. Students cite, use of cellular telephone to record lectures as one way to substitute their physical presence in class, while they engage in other activities like doing assignments, visiting the library, using computer laboratories to do other academic related activities. This point to living off campus as one of the causes for low class attendance; no access to on-campus privileges like internet for example, access to the library can effectively happen during the day.

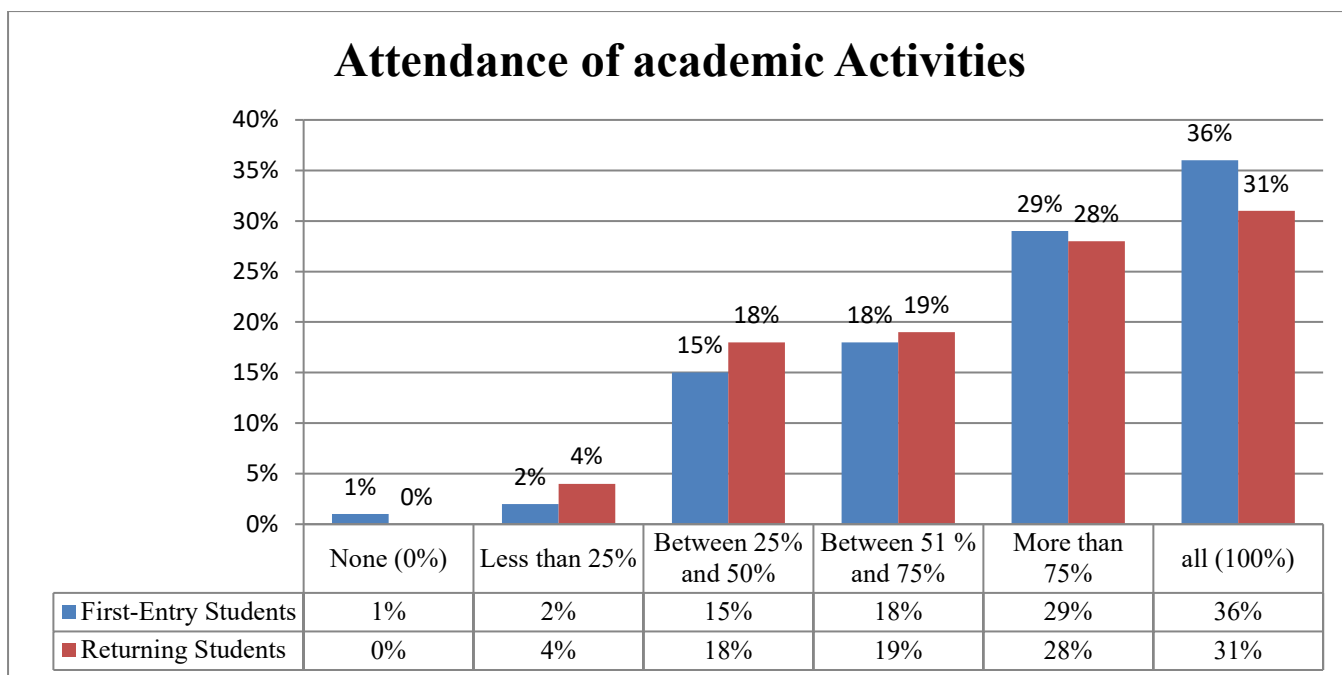


Figure 5.16: Frequency of attendance of timetabled academic activities

5.24.2 Amount of time students spend on reading

It has been mentioned in previous sections in this chapter that first year students perform poorly in subjects that involve critical engagement, deep-level thinking, analysis and application. This section reveals that levels of reading in this cohort of first year students are relatively low. There are students that account for at least 2% of the total population of the respondents who claim that they spend zero hours a week reading. It is only 4% who say they spend more than thirty hours a week reading. Academic success at university level demands students to possess and master fundamental academic skills like reading, writing and critical thinking. It is noted that these are pre-university attributes which differ tremendously from high school.

Better readers make more successful students. Students, by virtue of registration chose to become students at a university, and that means an entry into the academic life and the demand for an academic approach in all their academic activities. The low levels of engagement in reading are an indication of where first year students lack in their academic approach. This is evidence that points to why students perform in the manner in which they do.

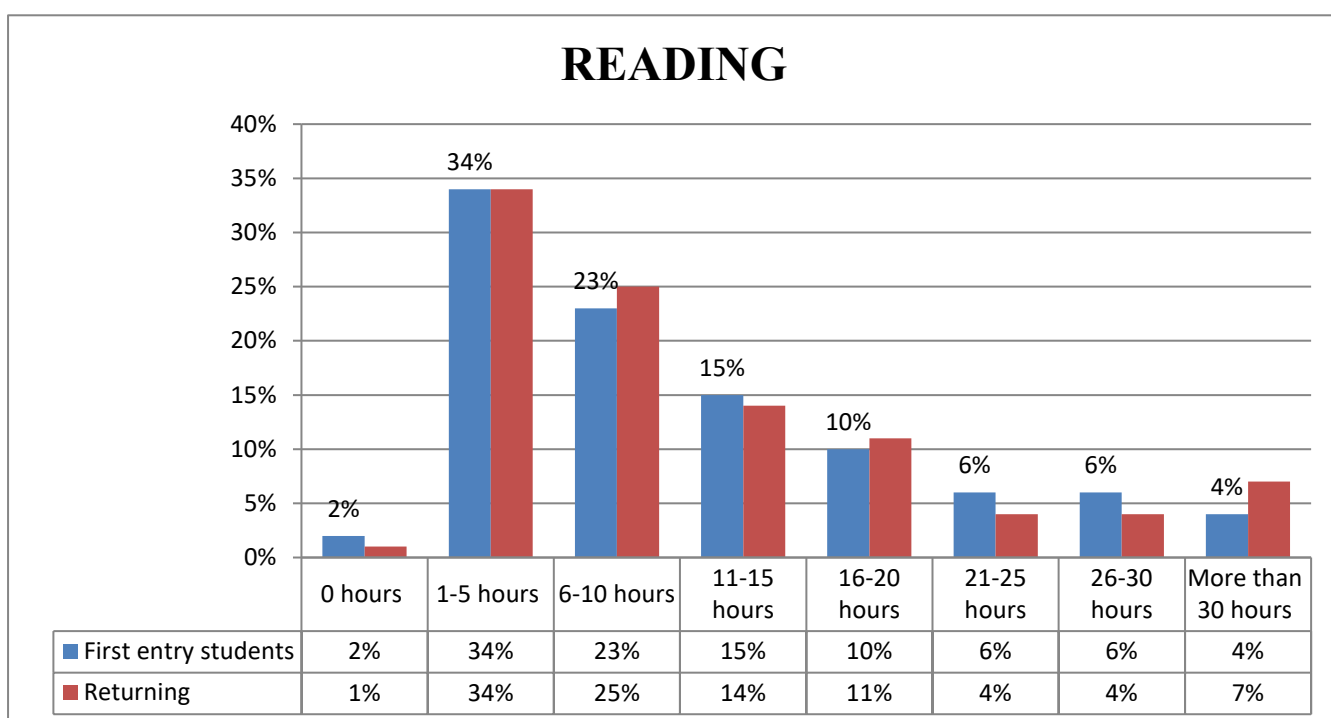


Figure 5.17: Amount of time students spend on reading

5.24.3 Students' involvement in academic activities

There are various ways in which students engage in academic activities inside and outside the classroom setting. These activities include student involvement by contributing to module discussion, preparing assignment drafts, doing presentation, attending structured academic events and preparation for class attendance. Figure 5.18 depicts notable frequencies of student involvement in academic activities based on the survey that was conducted.

5.24.4 Students' contribution in module discussion

It was found that at least 7% never contributed to module discussion either inside or outside the classroom environment. This situation can be further attributed to lack of confidence to articulate thoughts or critical engagement. Linguistic capital, lack of understanding in subject knowledge, and to a certain extent lack of confidence in general could be the contributing

factors. Attached to this particular low level of engagement is the fact that some 40% of the students attend class having not completed readings or assignments, meaning that students attend classes not fully prepared. The analysis has further demonstrated that students spend less time in readings (as previously argued in earlier sections of this chapter) which makes it impossible for first year students to actively engage on subject matter content that they lack information in. This level of analysis points to the fact that the pre-university attributes informed by the individual students' high school background, cultural capital or family orientation, and low reading levels are the possible factors that contribute to students' low level of participation in module discussion; further inference is that academic performance can be severely challenged.

5.24.5 Students' preparation of assignments

It was found that less than 40% of the students do not prepare drafts and submit to lecturers before handing in assignments. This results in students not getting feedback from lecturers on their work before the final drafts are submitted. Poor academic performance begins at this stage. This type of behavior is consistent with the findings that show that students spend more time in non-academic related activities like, socializing with friends. This behaviour is consistent with the findings that pointed out to students' low reading levels, low use of technology and poor preparation before class attendance.

5.24.6 Students' attendance of extra-curricular activities

Attending an art exhibition play and dance has a significant impact in learning. Students that come from backgrounds where art exhibitions, play and dance are not common stand to benefit from exposure to new language, through analysis and critical engagement. More than half of the student population never attended an art exhibition, play or dance.

5.24.7 Students' presentation skills

Module presentation is quite an important aspect, particularly for pre-service teachers. This gives students an opportunity to stand in front of their peers and present a module. The students that participated in this study are pre-service teachers. Involvement in class discussion and module presentation should be relatively higher. The frequency shown in Fig. 5.18 contradicts this expectation as it illustrates that 17 % of the students never gave a module presentation. This figure is 10% higher than that shown by students' non engagement in module discussion. It can be inferred that students are generally passive in their learning.

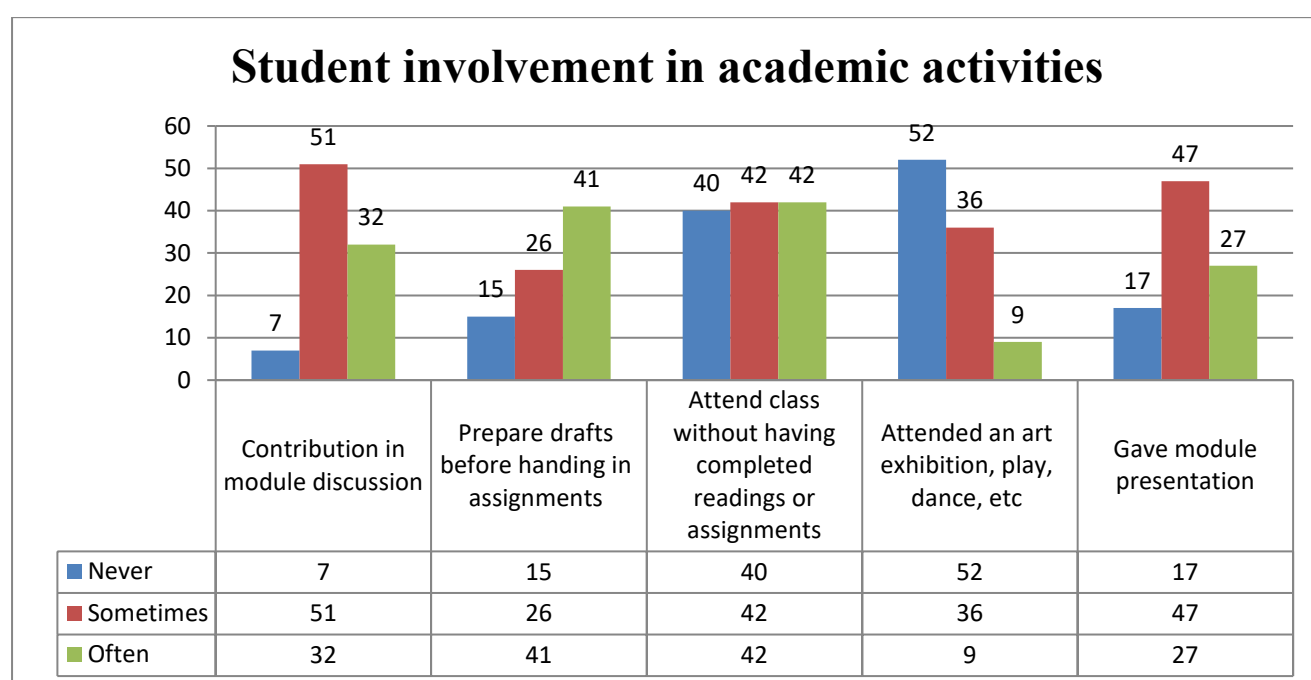


Figure 5.18: Notable frequencies of involvement

5.24.8 Length of written tasks that students completed

The majority of first entry students indicated that they had completed 39% of written tasks that are between three and five pages long. It was 47% of the senior or the returning students that had stated that they also had completed the written tasks of the similar length. Whilst the variations in written tasks that were completed were noted, it could be inferred that various Bachelor of Education programmes or areas of specialization may require varied forms of

written tasks. Mathematics, Computer Science may require different lengths of tasks from History and Geography for an example.

The central point of focus resonates with the notion that written tasks involve a number of individual learning skills and various levels of engagement to complete, such as the ability to search for relevant materials and the ability to engage in academic reading, assignment planning, processes of academic writing and use of technology. Whilst the length of the task completed may not symbolize any acceptable form of engagement or better engagement, it is the quality of the completed tasks that matter most. It is feedback from the lecturer that ascertains quality. The number of drafts and relevant feedback also account for a much focused engagement. The use of support services like the Writing Center, Academic Development, Tutors and Lecturer consultation become valuable in informing the quality of student engagement as well as the quality of the tasks that were completed. However, longer tasks may require more time than the shorter ones as well as an extended an in-depth immersion in the subject content.

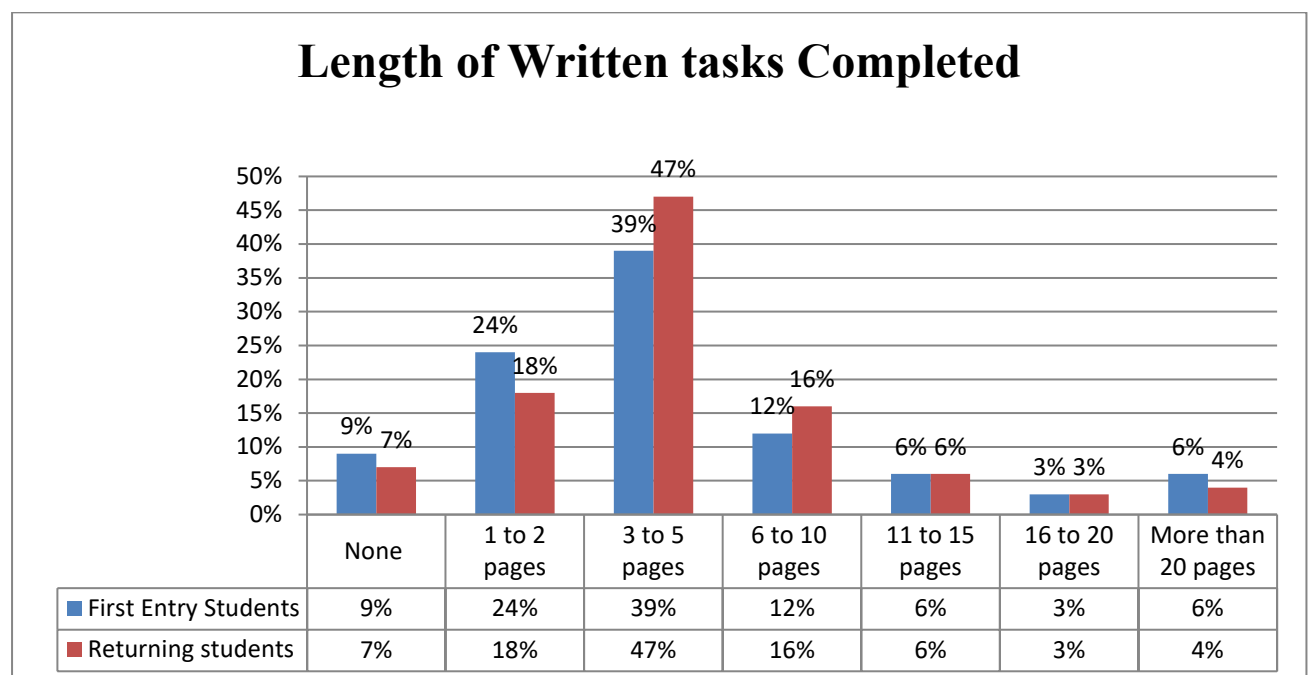


Figure 5.19: Length of written tasks completed

5.24.9 Amount of time students spend on academic activities

There seem to be a strong a correlation between the amount of time first year students spend on preparing for class and the amount of time students spend on time-tabled academic activities. There is also a noticeable correlation between the first year student participation in other university activities and working for pay on campus. It has been mentioned in other sections of this analysis chapter that the rural university under investigation is a full time contact university. The expectation, therefore is that attendance should be much higher than what was recorded, the same applies to preparation for class. While there is a high number of students that do not work for pay on campus, it is possible that as students are new at the university environment they may not qualify for such gratuity due to lack of experience and non-existence of academic records that are normally used as a measure to recruit suitable students for work for pay on campus.

The conclusion that can be drawn from Figure 5.20 is that first year students spend less than 40% of their time preparing for class and less than 30% of their time attending to time tabled academic activities. This phenomenon is further interrogated in the qualitative data generation and analysis, as this study focuses more on trying to understand these quantitative results.

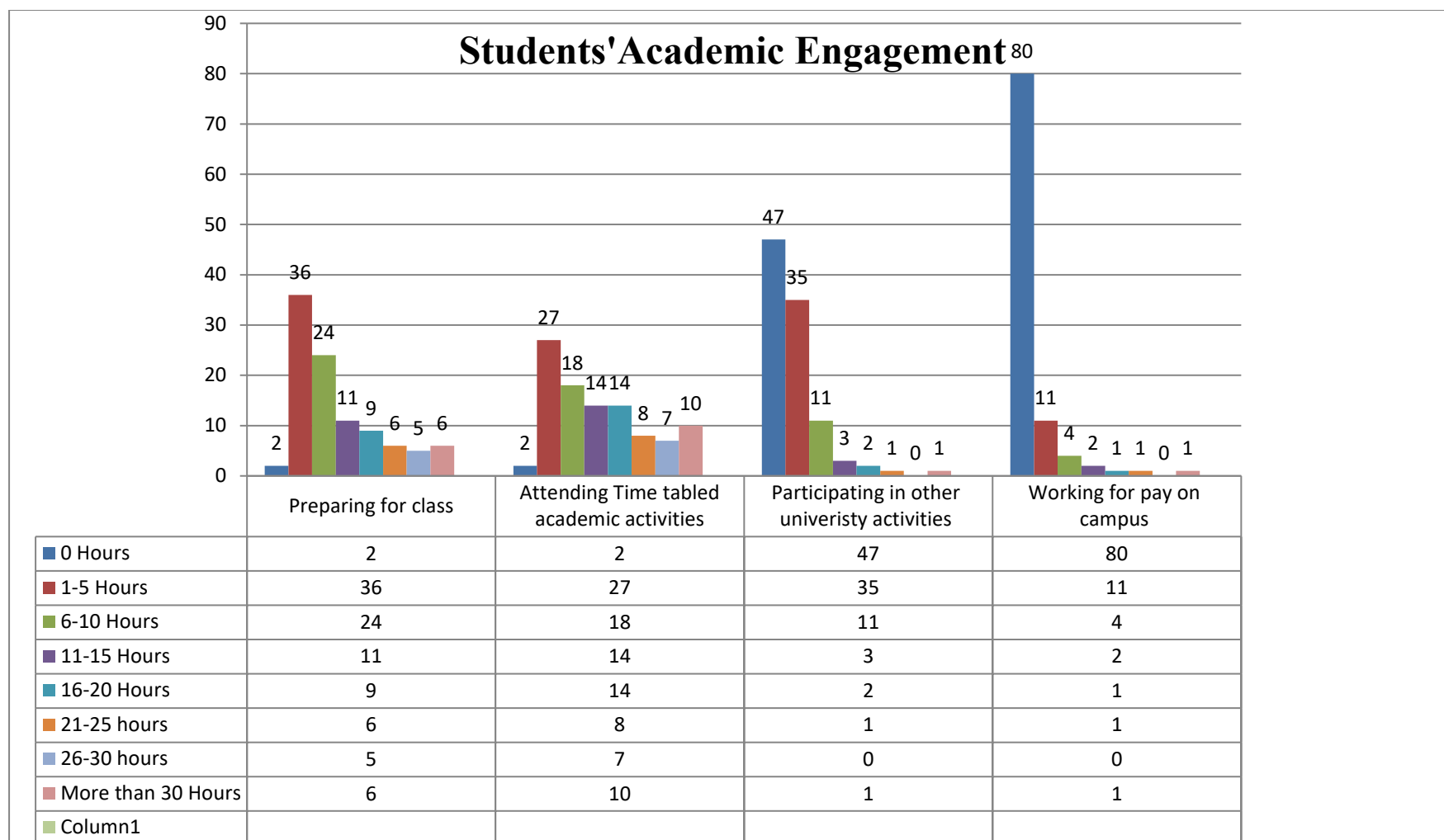


Figure 5.20: Time students spend on various academic aspects per week

5.25 The outcomes of student engagement

5.25.1 High impact practices

High impact educational practices take many forms. This particular study used the SASSE to measure High impact educational practices and their cumulative nature to students' active learning. Awareness is therefore raised that high impact educational practices depend on learner characteristics like biographical details, socio-economic factors, school background and association with the institution, to mention but a few. In order for students to align the significance of a practice as valuable to their academic engagement and active learning, the institutional priorities and institutional context plays an integral role.

Table 5.6 below shows high impact educational practices in a descending order for first-year students. Service learning accounts for 80%, work with students at 76% and peer learning support at 60%. It is on the basis of this sequence in which these practices are ranked that one can begin to make inferences and claims on the nature and the level of student engagement in educationally related activities in this particular first year educational programme at this rural university. Table 5.6 epitomizes how and where students expend their time in educational related activities, taking into account the students characteristics and institutional practices and context.

Table 5.6: High impact practices in the descending order

Sequence	High impact practice	Percentage of involvement (first-years)	Percentage of involvement (seniors)
1.	Service-learning	80 %	84 %
2.	Work with students	76 %	73 %
3.	Peer learning support	60 %	60 %
4.	Practical work	48 %	41 %
5.	First-year experience	45 %	45 %
6.	Academic literacy course	39 %	37 %
7.	Consult academic advisor	30 %	33 %
8.	Explain material as tutor	25 %	37 %
9.	Numeracy course	23 %	23 %
10.	Student societies	14 %	19 %
11.	Research with staff	14 %	19 %

5.26 Summary of student engagement

5.26.1 Engagement indicators

This chapter, in the previous sections has outlined in more details various aspects of student engagement. This section is a combination of most of the responses from the SASSE instrument. These responses are made up of a combination of key survey questions from the SASSE and these key survey questions amount to a total of 47 survey sub-questions. The results which are reflected in Table 5.7 titled the rearview mirror if student engagement is translated into ten engagement indicators, which are categorized into four themes which encapsulate the distinct aspects of student engagement in this study. The themes and corresponding engagement indicators are illustrated with means scores. Mean scores report on statistical significance of the combined responses as explained above. The engagement indicators have been re-arranged in the descending order using the mean scores and are discussed according to this order of statistical significance.

5.26.1.1 Learning with peers

Learning with peers is the combination of responses the informed the indicators collaborative learning and discussion with diverse others. Collaboration with others offers first year students an opportunity to work with others in mastering difficult material. Students collaborate with one another in understanding course material; this includes explaining course materials, preparing for examination and working on projects. The means scores on collaborative learning had a statistical significance of 41.18 for first-year students. This indicator was the second highest from all engagement indicators after learning strategies. Discussing with diverse others had a statistical significance of 32.88. This figure reveals the extent to which students had discussions with fellow students from race and ethnicity other than their own. It also covers discussions with students from different religious beliefs, political views and economic backgrounds. Learning with peers, enables students to develop self-confidence, interpersonal and social competence. Students are able to acquire skills that they will need to deal with

complex life, social and academic problems during their stay at university and after completing their studies.

5.26.1.2 Experiences with staff

Student-staff interaction had the lowest mean score of 14.16. This is concerning cause for concern because staff members are the first line of engagement. In essence, what this data shows is that students interact less with staff where they discuss academic performance, course topics, module ideas and concepts. The indication is that the students are satisfied with teaching practices which they have rated fourth amongst the engagement indicators with a mean score of 39.42. Students say the lectures clearly explained the course materials, the teaching methods are good or resonate with students' expectation and the frequency and quality of feedback contributes in their learning and development as students. The implication is that academic staff members apply student-centered practices in the manner in which prompt feedback is given.

5.26.1.3 Campus environment

Quality of interactions and supportive environment range in the middle of the table as these indicators range at 36.26 and 34.29 mean scores respectively. These engagement indicators range in fifth and sixth from the order of how the ten indicators have been ranked by students. The 36.26 mean score on the quality of interactions is informed by how first-year students interact with other students, academic advisors and student services including administrative support.

The extent to which students view the environment as supportive is ranked in the bottom five of the engagement indicators. Students view the environment as less supporting to help them achieve academically. The campus environment does not provide students with sufficient opportunities to be involved socially.

5.26.1.4 Academic Challenge

Learning strategies which include the frequency in which students identified key information reading assignments, reviewing notes after class and summarizing what was learnt in class was ranked as the highest engagement indicator with a mean score of 43.07. It has been mentioned in the introductory paragraph of this chapter that engagement indicators provide detailed useful information about students. Learning strategies are an indicator on what these students under investigation illustrate as the strength.

Quantitative reasoning within the academic challenge theme is ranked second from the bottom with a mean score of 24.69. This is an indication that students do not often reach conclusions based on their own analyses of numerical information. Students do not frequently use numerical information to examine real-world problems.

Reflective and integrative leaning as well as higher order learning produced a mean score of 31.66 and 40.47 respectively. Higher order learning is ranked third in the sequence engagement indicators. It is characterized by the extent to which first year students apply facts, theories, and methods to practical problems or new situations. Higher order learning includes the extent to which students analyse ideas, evaluate point of views and forming new ideas from various pieces of information.

Table 5.7: The rearview mirror of student engagement

Sequence	Engagement Indicators	First-entry Students (Mean Scores)	Senior Students (Mean Scores)	Main Themes of student engagement
1.	Learning Strategies (LS)	43.07	43.7	Academic Challenge
2.	Collaborative Learning (CL)	41.18	42.32	Learning with Peers
3.	Higher Order Learning (HO)	40.47	40.64	Academic Challenge
4.	Effective Teaching Practices (ET)	39.42	39.77	Experiences with Staff
5.	Quality of Interactions (QI)	36.26	37.14	Campus Environment
6.	Supportive Environment (SE)	34.29	34.41	Campus Environment
7.	Discussions with Diverse Others (DD)	32.88	32.04	Learning with Peers
8.	Reflective and Integrative Learning (RI)	31.66	31.88	Academic Challenge
9.	Quantitative Reasoning (QR)	24.69	26.12	Academic Challenge
10.	Student-Staff Interaction (SS)	14.16	17.6	Experiences With Staff

5.27 Conclusion

This chapter has presented analysed and interpreted quantitative data that were generated from the SASSE instrument. It also includes the document analysis. The study sought to explore the nature and the level of student engagement in their first year of study in the Bachelor of Education programmes in a rural based university. Further exploration was on how these

students expend their time and energy towards educationally purposeful activities and social activities; this was done in relation to student performance.

The data produced results of student engagement which were made up of High impact indicators of student engagement, ten engagement indicators that were grouped into four themes and the administrative summary. The respondent profiles and the SASSE frequencies and statistical comparisons were also produced. Other data that were generated from document analyses have highlighted how students performed in various areas of specialization in their B.Ed. programme also further illuminating modules in which students performed well and the at risk modules in which most students underperformed.

The analyses of the quantitative data produced numerous findings and some of which were further interrogated through focus group sessions, interviews with academic staff and students. They provided in-depth understanding of the student engagement phenomenon. The next chapter presents findings that were generated through a qualitative process using methods stated above.

CHAPTER 6

QUALITATIVE DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS PHASE

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is the second of the data presentation chapters, the first of which focused on the quantitative analysis of data that were produced through the SASSE survey. It focuses on the qualitative data produced through the interviews. The first series of semi-structured interviews involved three academic staff members that were involved in the teaching first-year students in 2015. The interviews with these academic staff were conducted in order to establish the manner in which academic staff members promote student engagement and to further interrogate and explore academic staffs' perspectives on student engagement. The second set of qualitative data was generated through semi-structured interviews involving four students. Two of the four students had very high overall marks at the end of their first year of study. The other two of the four students were on the lower side of the academic performance scale and had generally performed poorly throughout their first year of study.

The final set of qualitative data was generated through focus groups discussions. Three focus groups sessions were held where groups (with six students in each focus group) of students provided their own perspective on how they engage both academically and socially in their first year of study. The exploratory follow-up was to build on from the selected quantitative data findings there were produced through the analyses of SASSE data. The reason was to try and understand what informs the nature as well as the level of student engagement and its relation to academic performance from the first-year students' perspective.

The data are organised within themes that emerged through working through the data analysis of the SASSE survey. This chapter attempts to respond to the question "what explains the nature and the level of student engagement within the first year of study in an undergraduate programme, and if any, their relations to student performance?" The chapter also focuses on how academics engage first year students through their teaching. Finally, I present students'

perceptions on the university's ability to provide a learning environment that is conducive to learning and teaching. In an attempt to answer these three research questions, I use verbatim quotes from academic staff members and students that were generated during interviews (semi-structured and focus group interviews). The verbatim quotes are presented in italics.

6.2 On becoming a first-year Bachelor of Education student

Students presented their account on how they ended up becoming first year students in the Bachelor of Education programme at UNIZULU. Some registered at this university by choice, others after they had gap years and some because they did not get accepted at other universities. Noting that the application process in accessing a university in KwaZulu-Natal is through a single application through the Central Applications Office wherein students had to make degree, university and campus choices according to preferences, coming into the case study university may not necessarily be of a first choice. One focus group interview, which was mainly composed of students specializing in Mathematics and Physical Science, intimated that some of them came to this rural university by default. Their first choices were in high end careers like engineering and medicine and at the urban universities. The reasons for not gaining entry in the careers of their first choices ranged from: the saturation in the high end careers and tight competition with students from adequately resourced schools and high grade 12 scores. Some ended up opting for this rural university after failing to gain entry in their priority choices and, therefore, chose a teaching career and specialisation instead. Here are some of the statements picked up from this focus group interview:

I had applied for a degree in electrical engineering; I got rejected though I had obtained good maths marks in grade 12. I had a 5.

My English was a 3. I got rejected. When I came here I found that I qualified on the basis of my Maths marks and overall points which were 31. My dream of becoming an engineer vanished because of my poor English.

Another student in the same focus group said that:

Remember sir, for me it was different; I had finished school ten years before enrolling at this university. I had always wanted to be a teacher. I worked as part-time physics teacher for six years. I studied at a local technical college for two years. I think I had about two years idling and doing nothing. I had always wanted to become a teacher. This is my dream career.

Suggesting that while he had intentions to become a teacher, the financial means of accessing this career option was limiting, but persevered, and later accessed his choice of study programme.

There are some who accessed the study to becoming a teacher because of multiple reasons. For example, Mbuyazi (a female student) said:

“My first career choice was Emergency and Medical Rescue at Durban University of Technology (DUT), then teaching career was second. I had applied for teaching though. I got rejected at DUT and had two offers in this university (UNIZUL), one offer in Social work and the other in education. I chose Education. It was my second choice. I was a little bit confused because I was taken in both courses. At home they said I must take teaching because employment opportunities are better.”

Family concerns and employment prospects are yet other reasons why student register for a study programme.

Similar stories of coming to the case study university were noted from other students as well. MaMkhize said: *“My first choice was a Bachelor of Commerce degree at the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), an urban university.”*

KaMathenjwa: *“The choice of teaching was the last on my list. I had Social Work as my first choice UKZN.”*

Students are saying that this rural university was not their first choice; they wanted to go to other universities or enrol for other programmes, but had ended up registering at this case study institution and in the B.Ed. programme by default. While this process of registering for a university programme may suggest that students may not be committed to the university and the programme, literature on accessing university programmes (e.g. teacher education programmes) for reasons other than interest in the programme by choice, suggests that students

can develop interest as they experience the programme (MacIntyre, 2007). Hence, despite the students accessing the B.Ed. programme for various reasons, the student experience of the programme and the university would matter significantly on their decision to remain within the programme or not to remain in the programme, to perform well or not to perform well.

6.3 The effects of friend's choices and initial associations at university

Making friends and associations with others, and how these friendships and associations were formed contribute to students' new identity and sense of belonging at the university. This phenomenon was critical to interrogate with an intention of understanding the factors that influence students' academic and social integration. During the interview sessions with individual students and discussions with various focus groups, it emerged that first entry students needed a lot of support, guidance and assistance from all sectors, e.g. from family, friends, lecturers and various university structures.

The university environment appeared to be lonely and uninviting to some students while it was stimulating and inviting to others. There seemed to be no set or structured mechanism to wean students away from high school way of doing things; one student even said: *"I was surprised that there were no morning assemblies, no bell rung to begin the day or change lecture periods. Everything depended on me to decide what to do and when to do it."* De-culturation of school habits, reminders and monitoring are things that students are finding difficult to come to terms with as they enculturate themselves to a new campus lifestyle.

The study found that more often than not students were left to their own peril to take decisions. Students found themselves exposed to hazardous situations where bad choices would go on to haunt them for the rest of their first year of study or for the rest of their academic careers. One student Mbekezeli had a bad experience with friends. He said:

I had a friend from whom there were no mutual benefits; he was struggling and lacked direction. He could not use a computer, and was bad in English. I dropped him. Later I found one friend who was a hard worker, committed and willing to help others. He

made me improve. Through him I saw my marks improve from 16% to 66% through association with him. Up to today, we are still friends.

It is not often that students come into university with friends from school days. This means that they would then form campus friends amongst people that they know little of and such associations could go either in a good way or in a negative way, as experienced with Mbekezeli. New students then have a difficult task of developing friendships not knowing how such friendships will influence their lives on campus. This is further compounded by the capabilities of these students to realise friendships that have a negative effect on them and their ability to re-negotiate such friendships. Hence first year experiences are not only about academic integration. Social integration is also crucial for the health of the first year student and is equally a difficult process, judgement and call of the student.

Some first year students just get caught up in the loop of socialisation, even if it turns out to be moving towards social ills. Ayanda articulates this loop of socialisation that led to his bad habits: *“I had hoped that we shall have a professional kind of association, we ended up extending our friendship to social activities which ended up seeing us drinking (alcohol) over weekends. It was bad, very bad. I could not function properly on Mondays.”* Ayanda’s pathway to destructive behaviours at the behest of friends that he had found and his inability to get out of this toxic influence is yet another example of how socialisation of first year students can become a difficult decision making and action process that will ultimately influence first year student experience as well as their academic performances.

Not all friendship leads to negative experiences of first year students. For Sibongile, a 19-year-old female student, it was a beneficial encounter. She said: *“The first friend I saw was very active and bright in class, we happen to stay in the same residence. We became roommates. We do everything together, study together.”* In this case, the friendship had grown from being an acquaintance in the university residence and later changed to form strong bonds.

In view of the above students’ story lines, there is a strong link between students’ networking skills to form associations and how they perform. I align collaboration, networking, and choice

of friends with what predicts acceptable levels of high performance. Forming friends seems to be the first step in social integration amongst first year students. However, such friendship formation may have both, positive and negative consequences and the need to form friendships with fellow students may have unintended consequences that could influence their academic performances in the registered programme. The isiZulu idiomatic expression which says: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*; the literal English translation is “*a person is a person through other persons or a person is a person because of people*” finds resonance and expression in beginning to understand students’ association with others as the beginning of illuminating the students’ engagement phenomenon. In the next section, I present what students perceive as engagement practices and how these practices found expression in the level in which they engaged in academic activities.

6.4 The students’ perspectives on engagement practices

I have highlighted in the previous section how choices of friends can bear intended and unintended outcomes in the academic and social life of first year students. Friendships and associations can have both positive and negative consequences in the manner in which students engage in academic work. It needs to be mentioned that friendships and associations are phenomena that the university cannot control but need to understand because decisions on associations and disassociations solely depend on the individual student and their ability to act when required.

This section presents the perceptions of students on the orientation programme experience and how the orientation programme platform served the purpose of students’ social and academic integration into the university, if it did. As students leave high school and get admitted into university, most of them lack a frame of reference of what is required to succeed at university. Orientation programmes are designed to help new students to navigate their way at university. The strong emphasis on the frame of reference is noted simply because the majority of the students in this rural university are first generation students, first time entrants at university, come from rural backgrounds and poor schooling environments.

While working on a step by step strategy to understand the life of a first year student and subsequently engagement, this study interrogates all angles in the students' academic and social paths with the aim of concluding holistically on engagement practices from the time students decide on choices of programmes to study, choice of friends, orientation programmes, first lectures, first assignments to general survival at university. It is believed that a much more inclusive approach will help to fully understand the stages at which levels of student engagement commences, occurs or cease to exist.

6.5 First-year student orientation programme

Orientation is one of the most common social intervention strategies used by institutions to promote retention and increase their engagement with new college students (Brawer, 1996). I view Brawer's claim as significant in that it highlights what is common, known and practised at most universities. However, a structured orientation programme that is developmental and seeks to introduce students to the university community is vital. I say this because I see student engagement as that which begins at the time of admission and continue throughout the student's academic career. Orientation provides the springboard of choices, the platform for survival and the immersion into the university academic and social community. Students are introduced to discipline jargon, conventions and hidden treasures of the university. Students during focus group interviews said the following about what the orientation programme meant and did to them:

During orientation we were showed different classrooms, different buildings, so that when I look at the time-table and read NE6 (lecture hall number); I knew where to find it. It saved me a lot of time. I did not run around looking for lecture venues.

This is an assertion that the orientation programme provided an opportunity for students to know the houses of knowledge construction. They were made to know where to go, how to get there and when to get there and the benefit of being there on time. Whilst classrooms or lecture halls were top in the agenda of the orientation programme, from the focus group session it also emerged that:

Library orientation helped us to know how to search for books and journals. We got an idea on how to navigate our way around the library to find resources that were needed for learning. We still use it; a safe and a quiet place to study.

The orientation programme was a three day programme for all students at the University. This rural university serves students that come from rural backgrounds, the majority of them being first generation students, as previously stated. It is necessary therefore to provide orientation programmes that will assist them to integrate into a new campus life. On the orientation programme, one student said: “*Knowing the university in general, if you want something you know where to go. I would not have known student support services.*” While the primary purpose of the study was not intended to understand the impact of the orientation programme, it was necessary to interrogate the role played by the university in creating an enabling academic and social environment and a climate fit and conducive for students’ learning. Citing the registration and admission procedure as a delay, some students did not attend the orientation programme, as one student said:

I did not attend it; I heard from my friends and classmates that it was a three day programme. I lost out because I was still in the queues struggling to get admitted at this university. So I do not know. I really cannot say anything about it.

Even though the orientation programme was attended by most students, there was consensus amongst students that the programme did not go without challenges as one group said:

Those (referring to University personnel) participating or presenting during orientation in future should keep time and stick to their time slots. Some presenters did not come, others came late. It just killed my enthusiasm. Remember sir, at that time of orientation some of us had not secured accommodation. We had long trips to travel; we still had to beg other students for sharing accommodation until we had our own.

The unprofessional manner in which the orientation programmes was held speaks to how the new students would view university life – “a do as you please” situation, which is not healthy for students coming into a new environment. First impressions also influence what a student would do on campus. Some students bring to university aptitudes necessary for access and not necessarily sufficient for success and survival or to meet the academic demands in order to survive and thrive at the university. Early intervention programmes that facilitate social integration into the university are important means for the facilitation of an effective student

academic inclusion. Understanding of the university's dynamic culture at an early stage has potential benefits to affect early stages of student engagement. It has been noted from the interviews that orientation programmes focussed mostly on university support services than on students' academic orientation. While the former has value, the latter has similar or equal significance as it holds the students' initial key to unlock the university's academic commodities. The next section follows from the orientation session, and begins to look at the inside classroom activities; students' first step towards epistemological access. The students' perceptions of their first day in a university classroom setting is presented and analysed.

6.6 First-year students' view of the first lecture

It has been mentioned that the majority of the students in this study are first generation students; as a result of that they do not have a clear picture of what it is like to be in a university environment in general and a university classroom in particular. Some students have a perception that they will do well at university as they may have done at high school. There are varying expectations; and to many students, university is a completely new and challenging experience. There are some who met this experience with enthusiasm and desire as they began to set their own pace into their academic life. When asked of their first university lecture experiences one student said:

*I did not get a seat, I sat on the floor (in the aisle), then said to myself, **jah neh**, (yes indeed), this is university. The lecturer walked in. He had a laptop in his hand and connected it to that thing (projector). I remember seeing slides moving fast, I could not take notes, I could not make notes, the slides moving one way (meaning very fast or continuously). I looked around, I noticed that there were some (students) that were writing, I felt so bad, and I felt that I was not going to make it to this semester.*

The environment continued to present experiences that were unfamiliar to most students as they also said: *"The class was full, over 300 students. I am used to my school with a class size of 39 students. Some classes at high school had as little as 26 students."* It was at this stage that some students saw their identity ceasing to exist. Their names and surnames were reduced to mere statistics and student numbers. To some students, the environment presented a new way of teaching and unfamiliar ways of presenting lessons as they said:

The lecturer was far away in the front, at the bottom of the lecture hall, I was seated at the back. The teacher used a micro-phone to address us, there were slides as well (PowerPoint). At the time, I did not know what these slides were. I was used to taking notes from the board, the teacher would wait for us to finish. Here there is not time for slow learners.

The stark realization brought about by the lack of previous exposure to technology and lack of knowledge and skills of technology continued to mount threats that brought the negative interplay between the past and the present teaching and learning as well academic capital that they did not possess adequately. While technology can be a powerful educational tool in the hands of current time students, it can also become a hindrance if students do not know how to use it effectively. Khaya, one of the students who were fascinated by the PowerPoint slides said:

This experience will always stay in my mind: this thing of Moodle, the lecturer said he was going to upload these notes on Moodle. I did not know what Moodle was, where to find it. I was computer illiterate. There was no consideration given to accommodate computer illiterates like myself.

Others saw the dawning of reality coupled with excitement and an element of hope:

I must say: During my first day in class; there was happiness that I saw the first step towards the realization of my dream. I thought of my grandmother, I had tears in my eyes, excited, that it was then the beginning of what she had struggled for all the years that she raised me.

Whilst to others there was shock and dismay: “*But you find teachers’ writing on the board was terrible, very illegible, and the teachers would tell us straight: This is not high school. This is university, you will need to adapt to the situation.*” This was an indication to some students that there would be a very slow adjustment.

Student engagement or disengagement should not be limited to the results at the end of the semester, or at the time students produce low quality assignments or perform poorly in tests. Instead student engagement should be viewed as the culmination of a series of processes and

efforts from both the side of the students and the lecturers concerned. Student engagement should be viewed as that which is related to initial academic preparation at the early stages of the university life. Baby steps are essential to allow reasonably gentle, structured and student-paced progression and immersion into academia.

6.7 Students' first assignment: Doing it right the first time

The majority of students appeared to be determined to do well in their first year of study. This assertion is brought about by the responses that indicated willingness to do better, efforts to seek help and find expressions that denote strategies to overcome challenges that may impede better academic performance. Although the initial statements signify embedded challenges, later one discovered that those challenges were resolved in the process. Simtholile, a 19-year-old female whose humble beginnings hail from the poorest village of Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape said:

I remember, we were asked to work in groups of ten. At the time I did not know anyone in the class. You practically did not know who was in your class, particularly in core modules where we all (first –years) attended. I did not know how to decide in belonging to a particular group. That was the first problem. Finding a group when you did not know each other by names; you did not have each other's contact details, you could not communicate meeting dates and times to discuss and work on the assignment.

It is apparent from Simtholile's words that at this crucial time; where students did not know each other, it was left entirely upon them to navigate their own way of forming groups for that particular assignment. I do not suggest any other better way to start the formation of groups. I however would only allude to possible non-participation for some taking into account what she said in the latter part of her expression. Further, Nomandla stated that she was not sure what was expected of her: "...even in that assignment, you did not know what was expected. You could not figure out what your role or contribution should be." Giving group assignments needs clarity on the roles of individual members in a group to prevent laying a lot of burden to students who may take the initiative to lead the group and absorb the majority of the roles.

I asked students how they managed to resolve their uncertainties on what was expected of them and they pointed out to one of the university's support units, the Writing Centre. One member of one of the focus groups said: *"It became much better when we were introduced to the Writing Centre. Facilitators at the Writing Centre really helped us to find our feet. They opened our eyes."*

I further teased them on what the outcome of the first assignment and one group member said: *"We got 68%. I was so excited. My first pass at the university, I saw things happening. That was my wow moment. We worked really hard for it."* Another group commended the Writing Centre as it played a pivotal role in their initial achievement:

To achieve this much we sought help from the Writing Centre. Facilitators helped us on how to approach the assignment. We divided the assignment into small sections. Each one had a portion of work to do; specific sections to research on. We had to type. We repeatedly went to the Writing centre to seek guidance and it worked for our group.

Doing it right the first time has connections to collaborative learning, teamwork, mutual support, group-work and a host of activities that show the power of students doing it better together when working as a group. Section 3 of this chapter also indicated the power in positive associations for the purpose of doing well in purposeful academic activities. This section and others to follow in this chapter, still point towards the direction of the positive reciprocal value of collaborative learning and the power of associations as means to better performance and learning.

There were students who conceded that they did not know what was happening during the first few weeks at the university. They were in the dark. They felt being part of the university environment only by virtue of being admitted to this particular course of study. Most of the students as they said in the focus group sessions and interviews, did not know how to write their assignments in *"a university acceptable way"*; citing that they did not know how to reference, how to type and so on. One student showed me a module outline and pointed out the instructions on the format of the assignment: the font and font size, the spacing and APA referencing style. *"I honestly did not know what all this was"*. However, the student said they were not given a mark by their lecturer; instead he called their group and explained to them

what he wanted and then referred them to the Writing Centre for further assistance on the technical nature of their submission. Most students saw the failure of the first assignment as an opportunity to consult with lecturers and find out what went wrong and then work out strategies for development.

6.8 First-year students' academic performance: Implications on Student engagement

First-year students' academic performance is a strong predictor of many aspects of the students' academic life. Academic performance then becomes the student's gateway from the periphery to the hub of the academic life. These aspects could predict student's chances of progression or non-progression to the following level of study. It could predict graduating (or not graduating) on record time; the extent of students' retention; high and low throughput rates. Academic performance; whether underperformance or high performance has strong links with how students engage academically, socially and culturally at the university.

Statistics on academic performance has been presented in the various studies in the past. Such statistical analysis has presented understanding and insights related to throughput rates challenges. In this study, I raise the bar from the norm. I use the statistical data which I have presented and analysed on students' academic performance levels in the previous chapter. In this chapter, as a way of extension, I further interrogate students' academic performance by engaging students through interviews to establish the students' perspectives on poor academic performance as well as high academic performance. This section presents students' reasons on why they performed in the manner in which they did. The study sought to explore the nature and the level of student engagement and its relations to academic performance if any. The next three subsections present students' perceptions.

6.8.1 Students' poor academic performance: Implications of (dis)engagement

Students' poor academic performance is the immediate indicator that points out the direction that the students' stay at university could take; that being failure, dropout or success. Students that perform poorly are likely to: be excluded from the University, fail the level of study, dropout from university, never graduate on record time or not graduate at all. I interviewed two students that performed poorly academically. I asked them what could be the reasons for their poor performance, and what went wrong, how it went wrong and why things went wrong. Senzo, a 20-year-old male responded with his head down, and in a very low and tired voice and said:

I did not realise that my laxity will catch with me. I was not handing in assignments. I did not participate in groups. Here at university lecturers do not ask you why you did not hand in an assignment. You just get a zero. You do not get a second chance like you would at school. Things like calling in parents are not done. If you miss the first one; you are finished. I messed up and I realised very late that I can't make a U-turn.

Nomandla is a 19-year-old female who attributed her poor performance to freedom and liberty said: *"I think staying alone was my biggest down-fall. I would sleep when I felt like not going to campus and nobody would know and ask me why."* Coupled with freedom from parental guidance and monitoring there was another side from Senzo; as he said his academic underperformance was as a result of: *"...too much socializing. This contributed in a way. I met friends who were not serious about education."*

Senzo's approach to the studies was surrounded by a host of challenges that are likely to befall any young male student at a university. He is not exceptional to the normal problems of peer influence. However, central to his troubles was that he felt he was admitted into the wrong course. He said: *"I did not like this course; I did not want to be a teacher, worse of all; pre-school teacher. It would have been better if I got something for high school or even senior primary."* He alluded to the fact that he felt his dignity was stripped off by being admitted into this Bachelor of Education Programme, the specialization programme in Early Childhood Education. He felt as a male it would be difficult to teach Grade R to Grade 3 learners. He said: *"this is a women's course."* That was Senzo's strong stereotypical stance that he used to justify his poor performance.

There were views that were expressed by Nomandla which pointed out to the difference between how her high school assisted students with slow education progress. It was in her mind that she might catch up later through support or remedial programmes. She said: *“There are no more extra classes, like winter classes, afternoon sessions at the university. You miss the class, it is gone! Game over! There is no revision here.”* Both Senzo and Nomandla had obtained the following range of marks between themselves: 0%, 2% 5%, 11%, 13%, 15%, 18%, 20%, 21% and 34%.

6.8.2 Students’ reasons for poor academic performance

Students in the focus groups also stated an array of challenges that are contributing factors to their poor academic performance. The following is a summary of what some students alluded to as causes for underperformance.

- **Physiological Challenges:** One of the students stated that he had eyesight problems and could not afford medical care. *“I had a poor vision. I did not have glasses. I could not see properly on the white board with all these assortments of colours that lecturers us to write with. My problem was sorted very late when I had managed to get glasses from the local government clinic.”*
- **Concentration in class:** Other students cited dyslexia and low concentration span as the problem: *“I forget easily: My concentration span is very short. I get easily distracted and my handwriting is very bad. Teachers could not read my handwriting in my tests. I was better with assignments because those were typed.”*
- **Underpreparedness:** This phenomenon was quite prominent amongst many students citing underpreparedness as one of the factors that contributed to poor performance. *“I was not used to University ways of teaching.”*
- **Senior student experiences:** Some students cited discussions with previous years’ students as threatening in that their statements instilled fear: *“I was discouraged and threatened by senior students. “You must know that you will get a zero in physics.”* This was quite prominent amongst Mathematics and Physical Science students.

- **Ill-discipline:** There were some students who accepted full responsibility for their poor performance and blatantly stated that: *“I was not serious; I did not put enough effort. I was just sleeping in my room.”*
- **Lack of study techniques:** Study skills were also stated as aspects that students fell short of. They stated that: *“They (Lecturers) do not give the scope for the test. They just say: read from pages 1 to 30 or read chapter 1. It is too much.”*
- **Planning and Time management:** This was another survival and thriving skill that most students felt they did not have: *“Writing too many tests in the same week. You do not have time to focus on one module at a time. You read a little bit here and there. You sometimes write a test knowing that you are not fully prepared.”*
- **Delayed acclimatization:** Early adaptation to university environment was also mentioned. Most students said it took time to get used to university systems, procedures, jargon, expectations and ways of teaching, learning and assessment. I have alluded to the concept of early navigation from the periphery of the academia to the core of the academic life.

6.8.3 High academic performance: Implications of student engagement

High academic performance is the outcome of discipline, hard work dedication, consultation and planning. This assertion was however contrary to what the students that fell in the underperforming bracket alluded to as reasons for poor academic performance. The one side of academic performance continuum; which is high academic achievement had students citing motivation, determination, and support amongst the propellants that brought academic excellence. Lindelani, a 20-year-old young male student from KwaMhlanga in Mpumalanga Province, stated his highs and lows in academic performance. He said:

When I came to the university I was highly motivated because I was doing well at high school. My expectation was that I shall excel at the university as well. I thought I was going to ‘fly’. Even my teachers at high school placed high hopes on me. Everyone was saying ‘you are okay; you will pass and get bursaries. When I got here I got 15% in my first test. I literally cried and tears rolled down my face. I had never experienced such failure in my schooling. I had expected that I would fly; that did not happen.

Delayed access to higher education resulted in an increased desire to work hard and succeed, Nokwazi; a 25-year-old female student conceded that she had numerous problems. She related that:

I had a lot of family problems to deal with. I had been out of active education for a very long time. My mother did not want me to go to University, thank you to my fiancée who made it happen. Still, I struggle, I have kids to attend too and I have big problems at home. I said to myself I shall hold on, I want this degree.

The willingness to succeed and the desire to perform better was another driving factor cited by students as that which was linked to high academic performance. Students' nature and level of engagement is equally informed by students' innovative strategies to deal with challenges that impede learning. The next subsections outline a combination of extracts from students that are indicative of how high levels of academic achievement, high academic performance and integration at university was achieved despite all the common and widely claimed impediments that hinder student success.

6.8.4 Students' concerted efforts towards academic excellence: Students' narratives

The journey of students' academic success indeed begins with what students do on their own or in groups to overcome academic, social and cultural obstacles in their quest to become better students and successful graduates at university.

- **Survival strategies:** It emerged that there was a general acceptance that one of the biggest challenges that students face when they come to university was the unknown or unfamiliar ways of teaching, learning and assessment. Students realized these challenges and they began to come up with innovative ways to help themselves to survive. They said: *"We sought previous question papers. When we found previous question papers, we managed to understand the style of setting."* Students' levels of preparedness to deal with university demands appeared prominently as lacking across all spectrums of students including those who were high achievers. It can be concluded that what matters are the students' innovations and coping mechanisms.
- **Adaptation:** Survival skills inform the ways in which students adapt to high levels of academic demands: *"We had adapted to how tests were set though it took time. We*

learnt a lot from the first tests and initial assignments. The comments on tests and assignments were not always written. Because we knew the amount of effort that we put in, we understood what more needed to be done.” This statement is indicative of the extent to which early adaptation could enhance student engagement.

- **Collaboration:** Most of the students signalled that working together was the most effective way that informed the nature and the level of their high academic performance: *“We managed to see who amongst ourselves understood the concept better; we would get together and form study and discussion groups. We studied together, learnt together. We shared information.”* Collaboration increases opportunities for students to learn from one another. Collaboration has the potential to increase student’s confidence levels. Ability to work together as well as active student engagement features prominently amongst the contributing factors to student high academic performance.
- **Time management and planning:** To conclude the students’ views on what informed their high academic performance the following emerged: investing in time management and successful execution of effective study plans: *“We began to structure our study plans. Managed our work properly”* one focus group concluded.

6.9 “We” versus the “I: What counts for high academic performance?”

In attempting to understand the level and the nature of student engagement and its relations to academic performance, it has emerged from the findings that the power of “we” supersedes the isolated efforts of the “I”. Where students work together in teams and in groups, the results are positive. Students’ responses were analysed and it was found that “his story” and “her story” do not hold; but “their story” proved to be the mark that informs engagement, high academic performance. Their story indicated that students were able to achieve marks that varied from: 61%, 64%, 66%, 72%, 86%, 90% and 94%. Their stories indicated how they strategized to avoid challenges that were related to teaching, learning and assessment.

6.10 High risk modules: Students' views and challenges

Students tend to perform better in modules that require them to regurgitate and memorize facts than the modules that require students' analysis, interpretation and critical engagement. I have presented this analysis in the previous chapter. To test this analysis; I asked students if they were to be given an opportunity to drop one module, which one would it be? The response in one of the focus groups (the Maths and Science group in particular) was like singing a chorus: *"Ideologies and trends."*

I began to probe the students to provide reasons and one of the responses was:

"Ideologies and Trends is one module that is taught by three lecturers. Each has his / her style of teaching. Each lecturer has a section to teach. This is very confusing because it looks like it is three different modules. You do not get used to one style but many. It looks like it is three different modules. This is confusing."

The students felt that a module that is taught by three lecturers creates confusion in that it appears like it is three different modules. This sentiment was equally applicable to another high risk module, Academic Literacy (ELLL111), which has four lecturers that teach it to about 1255 first year students. Students say that each lecturer has his or her style of teaching; it happened in the middle of the term that lecturers changed and a new one came in at the time when they had reasonably adjusted to the old ones. Of the reasons cited for this module to be a problem is that students; particularly those specializing in Maths and Physical Science did not see how the module Ideologies and Trends related to their specialization: *"But this ideologies and trends, has nothing to do with my teaching of mathematics. I need to learn more mathematics than all this philosophy and history and theories."*

The manner in which the module was tested and examined also posed challenges to students:

The worst thing is the tests and exams. You write one paper. It does not count who taught you, who was good or who was bad as lecturer. You see, even the way examinations and tests are set is not fair. Over so much content from the thick book, you are asked to fill in the missing word. How is that possible?

The students further said: *“It does not matter how much time you spend studying; the thing is you have lot to do, a lot to learn.”* Students, in their first year of study presented multiple challenges, reasons and justifications for their performances. In this study, an effort was made to interrogate what appeared to be the norm. Students perform poorly in some modules and that has become acceptable and certain modules have been labelled as high risk modules. The implication of this classification (high risk) is that the institution has collected sufficient statistics and trends on the pass rates on all modules over the years and analysed results. The institution reached a conclusion that some modules have a failure rate of 20% and above. The conclusion that was drawn was that students perform poorly in the modules and classified those as high risk modules.

Three things seem to influence students’ performance in high risk. The first is that the module is taught by several academic staff and students find it difficult to adjust to lecturing styles and expectations from each of these academics. The second is that the nature of context and assessment are related to the module. The context is extensive, but the assessment is so technical, relying on students’ ability to memorise large amounts of texts. The third is related to historical perceptions of particular modules and students taking such modules realises the hopelessness of succeeding in that module. These issues, therefore, do not point to students’ inability to succeed; rather it is the issues related to the offering and assessment of the module that impacts on students’ performances.

6.11 Student support initiatives and university resources

In view of the comments from students on what informs the levels of their academic performance, I further analysed their transcripts with the aim of finding out the institutional role aimed at enabling student engagement and improving student performance. It emerged during the quantitative data analysis that the level of student-staff interaction was fairly low. There was very little or no evidence that pointed to effective student-lecturer consultations. The next subsection on students’ cultural orientations highlights how students’ cultural repertoires affect effective student-lecturer interactions. The academic staff members also

provided their perspectives on student staff interactions. There was also no evidence of successful mentoring and tutorial programmes and extra classes as strategies to enhance academic performance. Instead individual students and focus groups sessions produced the following narratives to indicate intentional institutional interventions towards their learning.

Most students were of the view that the Writing Centre had been an effective university support initiative aimed at enhancing learner performance, improving student engagement and assisting students to develop academic literacy skills: *“I think for me it was the Writing Centre. The Centre has been critical in my learning. It helped me write better and write to fulfil a specific purpose.”*

Though most students initially consented to poor computer skills, however the availability of and the access to the computer laboratories proved to be a valuable institutional resource. Reasons attached to the significance of the Computer laboratories was that: *“It is the Computer Laboratories (Computer Centres). It helped some of us who did not have their own laptops.”* The volume of students that used this facility was extremely high. The majority of students came from families of low socio-economic status and could not afford laptops as it has been alluded to earlier, students stated that: *“...it (computer lab) needed to be controlled; you get there in a hurry to do some work, urgent work, you find students busy with social networks.”*

Some students commended the institutional effort to provide wireless network: *“For me it was the free Wi-Fi. This allowed working at any part of the university where there was access to internet network.”* Students stated that it assisted them to access internet using their cellular telephones and laptops in particular those students who could afford smart phones and laptops.

Students expressed their dissatisfaction with tutorial programmes: *“Tutors! It is good to have tutors; though they have not been helpful to me. Maybe other students were benefiting from tutorials. But as for me! No I am Sorry.”* None of the respondents wanted to explain further what the challenges were regarding the tutorial programmes. The tutorial programmes were not the central focus of this study. It is however necessary for other studies to interrogate this

institutional support service further. This study acknowledges the tutorial programme as one of the institutional support services. Tutorial programmes at universities form the integral part of the student academic support systems. Tutorials, (Adams, 2006) optimize the academic performance of students at the university particularly those students that were disadvantaged by secondary education. On the other hand, Spencer (1994) argues for student academic support initiatives that focus on the academic development of university students, claiming that support programmes should not be viewed as peripheral activities to other university main stream activities.

The manner in which students distance themselves from the tutorial programmes suggests that students are not benefiting from this student support initiative. There is consensus amongst students that tutorial programmes exist at this rural university; however, based on the students' responses, tutorial programmes do not seem to be adding value to the academic development of the first year students. Through the tutorial programmes, students ought to receive enhanced module content through a structured tutorial programme, in smaller groups as a form of supplementary instruction. It has been mentioned that students did not intend to go beyond what they had stated regarding the tutorship programmes.

One of the challenges that emanated from the discussions was that students that stayed in off-campus residences whether private or university subsidized stated that they found themselves at a disadvantage. These students could not utilize some of the university support facilities and services as effectively as they would want to and as much as the university could make them available:

I stay off campus. When I am here to use the library, I cannot stay until 23h00. No matter how urgent the task is. No matter how important the work is. It is not safe to walk to off campus accommodation. Once you leave the University premises you are on your own. It is dangerous because I walk past kwaMgwazeni (a local tavern: literal translation: Stab him). We get mugged there when it is dark. It is better when we walk in groups.

Students have noted that the Writing Centre, the Computer laboratories, the Wi-Fi and the libraries are valuable institutional resources and facilities available that could be used to improve the nature and the level of their academic engagement. Its use, however, is contingent on availability of resources, like laptops, smart phones and access to computer labs. Staying

off-campus presents a challenge that curtails efficient usages of on-campus support processes and structures. While the writing centre seems to be a place where students feel they receive the most beneficial support, its efficiency is related to the individual attention that the students receive, suggesting that individual support rather than large classroom learning is favoured by students, something that university education can seldom provide. This means that students would need to explore opportunities to strengthen their independent learning in order to succeed at university, rather than relying on classroom lectures for their learning and assessments.

6.12 Students' low reading levels: Implications on student engagement

Success at the university level mainly depends on existing pre-entry college attributes, including the mastery of some of the fundamental academic skills (Tinto, 1993). These fundamental academic skills include: reading, academic writing, critical thinking, oral presentation, note taking, note making and advanced study techniques, to mention but a few. I begin this important section of the qualitative data, building on from the quantitative data that showed that 34% of the first year students spent between 1 and 5 hours per week on reading and 4% spend more than 30 hours. Another revelation was that 40 % of the students attend class having not completed readings or assignments.

The above prelude is a precursor to students' narratives that I present hereunder. The first part of the interviews was directly related to module based reading. Firstly, students attributed low reading levels and tendencies to the exorbitant cost of books: *"It was the first time I saw a book that costs R700.00. We had to buy books. Four books, and none of these books was less than R300.00."* The cost of textbooks far exceeded the students' budgets: *"Textbooks are expensive. If you look at the book allowance that we are getting, it is not enough to cover the cost as books range from R300.00 to R1500.00."* Reading skill is still regarded as the most critical skill required by students at university as it provides student with the skills to enter the depth of their respective academic domains. Students cite cost factors that influence the purchase of books resulting in low reading levels.

Students were also asked what strategies they put in place to circumvent the current challenge as it seemed to have ripple effects on their learning and they responded by saying: *“We share books, borrow from the library. I do not own a book. I do not have even a single book. I survive through borrowing from friends and the library.”* Whilst this tendency was working some of the time, students highlighted that books were not always available in the library as students borrow the same books at more or less the same time because they needed it for the same purpose. One student was open and said that he preferred audio materials:

I prefer to listen to recorded things, if more books could have CDs, it would be better for me. I am too lazy to read. I prefer audio, just to save time. I can listen to something for fifteen minutes or more. I know if I was doing the word for word reading; the same content would take two to three hours.

The academic fundamental skills mentioned in the introductory paragraph of this section are not taught at university. The reading skill; like many other fundamental skills are assumed to be possessed by students at university. Lecturers take for granted that students have the reading skills, for example. Students shifted the blame of their poor reading skills to their schooling as they said: *“For 12 to 15 years at the school level we had been exposed to situations where teachers did most of the reading for us. We had to do the listening.”* Coupled with the claims made by students on low reading levels, I make inferences that family backgrounds of most of the students have an effect. Students were not exposed to reading at a young age. They are first generation students who come from families with no culture of reading and high illiteracy levels.

Student engagement through reading of text books seems to be dependent upon the availability of reading materials relevant to their study. While text books are prescribed and are available in the library, access to and attitudes towards reading compromises students' engagement through reading of texts. The unevenness related to access and the attitudes towards readings are, therefore, influential factors in the lives of first year students and their academic performance. While the unevenness factor is a complex factor that implicates students and institutions, reading is an essential component of student engagement that influences both

students experience of first year as well as their academic performance and should be explored in greater depth.

6.13 Students' poor attendance of time tabled academic activities

Poor lecture attendance was also found to be a dominant factor that emerged during the quantitative data analysis. The quantitative data showed that:

- 36% of the first-year students attend all lectures
- 29% of the first-year students attend more than 75% of the lectures
- 18% of the first-year students attend between 51% and 75%
- 15% attend between 25% and 50%
- 2% attend less than 25%
- 1% does not attend

The quantitative data presented above were quite intriguing. This data prompted me to further probe students on what informs this level of attendance. The statistics were quite intriguing because the participants in the study are pre-service teachers who study full-time where contact lessons are the order of the day. I then posed a question to students during interviews and focus group sessions as to why would students not attend all time tabled academic activities and whether they see the attendance of time-tabled academic activities as important. The responses varied per individual student and individual members of the focus groups.

There were times that were highlighted as peak periods during which students do not attend. Students cited Monday as one of the days on which the attendance of academic activities like lectures, were poorly attended. One of the reasons for poor attendance was that the students over indulge in intoxicating beverages over the weekends and found it difficult to make it to early Monday morning lectures: *"Some students do not attend on Mondays mostly due to partying over the weekends."* This was one of the reasons or causes of poor attendance. The early classes or lectures on Monday were normally affected.

Students also cited Fridays as another day in which students find it very difficult to finish a day on campus attending lectures, citing reasons that some students start their weekends on Thursday nights and subsequently found it difficult to wake up in the morning and go to class. Others attended mostly morning sessions and did not attend late afternoon sessions on Fridays as they travelled to town to buy their weekend necessities.

Anytime around pay days including pension and government grant pay-outs was another pick period for non-attendance. Some students depended on allowances that they got from families and relatives for survival. Students cited periods around, the 15th, the 25th and month ends as times that some students did not attend classes because during these dates they were paid their allowances or obtained their grants. Some students received government child support grants while some others obtained monthly allowances from their grandparents' pension pay-outs or monthly grants. During these periods, students would go into town to withdraw cash from chain stores and banks to buy their monthly living necessities.

The following were general reasons that students gave to explain poor attendance of time-tabled academic activities:

- Some students said they missed morning classes due to travelling from their off-campus accommodation, citing weather conditions as one factor that caused poor class attendance. For an example, during the winter season, they found it unsafe to walk as individuals to campus because of darkness, either in the morning or in the evenings. During the summer season, they sometimes missed lectures when it rained.
- Others cited laziness: *"I am just lazy; sometimes I just sleep when I feel like not going to lecturers."*
- Some students said though they stay off-campus, they still are the ones who had better attendance records than the ones that stay on-campus: *"I can tell you though that the off campus students attend most. It is the students that stay on campus that have poor attendance."* The off-campus residents were compelled to come to campus because they needed access to privileges like Wi-Fi and internet. The off-campus residents were

forced to come to campus to access these privileges as the cost of data bundles needed to access internet through their smart phones was unbearably high.

- Learning styles was also another contributing factor to poor lecture attendance; one student said: *“I can’t concentrate in class. I prefer to work on my own. Most of the time I go to class only to find out which work needed to be done; all I need to know is which topics I needed to study for. It is just that my concentration span is very short.”*
- Other students cited teaching styles as one of the factors that affected attendance: *“I do not understand some of the lecturers; maybe it is because I was spoon-fed a lot at high school. It becomes difficult to attend when you know that you are likely to come out of that class the same or sometimes more confused because you do not understand the lecturer.”*
- Students also cited personal reasons as causes for non-attendance: *“Sometimes non-attendance is due to personal reasons like family commitments or sickness.”*
- Other students would make arrangements to ensure that they did not miss out completely from lectures: *“In certain instances, I find that I am committed, so I ask my friends to record the lecturer teaching. I would then listen to the lecturer and look at the course notes, or download from Moodle for those lecturers that used it (Moodle).”*
- There were other students who were motivated to attend as frequently as possible: *“For me attending is important, I understand better when I am on my own, re-living the lecturers’ voices, emphasis and things like that. When I am on my own in the examination room I can imagine and picture the lecturer teaching and I like it. I attend.”*
- Lastly, some students decided which sessions to attend and which ones to leave out: *“I understand practical session and I attend these, thick notes and theory is not for me.”*

Poor attendance of time-tabled academic activities has implications in the manner in which students engage and perform. The students’ responses resonate with quantitative data that showed students’ high socialization and relaxation tendencies. It has been noted as well; the implications of off-campus accommodation, travelling to class, safety and generally missing out on on-campus residence benefits. Some students mentioned the complexity of off-campus life and related chores as a major challenge; citing cooking, cleaning own rooms and laundry

as time consuming activities. It has been noted that most of these challenges and reasons for non-attendance may not necessarily be resolved by the institution over a short period of time.

I have highlighted these challenges using students' lived experiences to show cause on why the attendance of the time-tabled academic programme was poor. Building on previous sections' students' narratives, the study attempts to explore the level and the nature of student engagement and its relation to student academic performance. The next subsection presents the analysis of the academic staff's narratives on their role and perceptions of student engagement.

6.14 The Academic staff's perspectives on student engagement

One of the objectives of this study was to look at the role that academic staff members play in promoting and influencing student engagement. I present the evidence that emerged during semi-structured interviews with three first-year lecturers. This evidence sets out academic staff's perspectives on their understanding of and support of first year student engagement agenda. Evidence is presented in the form of staff narratives as I attempt to understand the extent to which their teaching approaches are aligned to support or to enhance the first-year student engagement agenda.

This section of the study focusses its attention on academic staff members who teach first year modules that have been classified as high risk modules where the failure rate of students exceeds 20%. I engaged these members of staff to explore how they enhance the quality of the first year students' experience with the aim of fostering stronger student engagement tendencies in their studies; and also to improve student learning, to enhance student retention and academic achievement.

One of the academic staff members stated that:

There are students who can connect with the subject matter more than others, and that has a lot to do with how engaged they are in the classroom. There are students who

because it is their first year they are away from their families; they are trying more to understand what to be at university means. Hence I say some are prepared and some aren't.

One of the most critical points of departure was the issue of large class sizes that hinder any intended good course by academic staff to effectively promote student engagement: *“Considering the number of students in our module, really I do not do anything; I just tell them that I have an open door policy; if you have any problem, please come to my office.”* This was in response to a question on whether they have strategies that foster or promote student engagement. Another response which was synonymous with the latter also acceded to large class sizes and how they impact negatively on their intended strategies to promote student engagement: *“...1300 students! How can you effectively individualize your interaction with students? So I know what is expected of a teacher because I have been teaching for many years at various institutions.”* There were convergent views around large class sizes:

There is no space, there is no way of individualization, but we can accommodate them, they can come to the office and discuss any problems that they might have encountered or experienced while we were teaching them in class. But generally to say one-on-one individualization method: NO! We do not have time.

On the understanding that large class sizes hinder the staff's efforts, I further asked if there is anything else they consider as an alternative. One academic staff member responded by saying: *“I think I know what you are looking: Extra activities or student engagement activities that I do: NO! NO! NO! If there is any; it will be a matter of inviting them to the office: “come to the office, and I will explain” and I do that.”*

I further asked if staff provide feedback on assignments:

It is important for them (students) to see that somebody is reading their stuff and takes care and show that through written feedback and comments. I think that is part of the engagement when they know that the Professors and Lectures are taking time to read their work or look at their work”

Giving feedback to students is regarded as important by the academic staff members. There is an indication from the above quote and the one below that feedback to students is regarded as important:

I write comments on their assignment covers. I like doing that. I comment on the spelling, grammar, the idea that the students have put on paper, I mark it, I correct it. I am known for that; that I mark, correct and comment. I do not just give 50/100 without telling them how I arrived at that particular mark.

Over and above giving written feedback, students are given the second chance to redo the assignment tasks when necessary to do so:

I do not like to fail students. Those that get marks below 50%, I give them the second opportunity to rewrite and resubmit. It is my policy and philosophy that when a student does not perform well in an open book form of an assessment like an assignment; it is highly unlikely that that student will never perform better in an examination where it is a closed book assessment. That is why I hardly give a mark below 50% unless it is horrible and there is clear evidence of negligence.

Academic staff members cited the short comings of some of their teaching approaches:

Where we really lack as Lecturers of content subjects; we do not even teach them things like referencing because we think that the English Department is responsible for that: But every teacher is an English teacher, is a language teacher. The thing is; we do not have time to divert our attention to other finer details of equally important aspects of the students' academic development. All we do is just to HINT that this is how Harvard or APA referencing is done and so on. We just go over things like that, but the actual teaching of referencing, quoting, citing and academic writing; we do not do it; yet we expect students to produce quality and water tight assignments.

There was an indication that academic staff members may not be involved in the orientation programmes:

At the university, I do not know whether orientation is done or not. If it is done, I do not know the content of it. When we find them in class during day one of lecturers, we just teach. Teach as if we had known them a long time back.

During the first lecture sessions students are merely told what is expected of them:

I welcome them and briefly tell them about the culture of the university. I tell them how to study at the university. I give them a moral talk that they are expected to go back home with a degree, not the other 'forms of degrees.' I outline the details of the module.

Staff members resort to the use of mother tongue to explain concepts:

I was subjected to an assessment by the students that I teach. The feedback was quite positive. Others who were non speakers of isiZulu gave negative feedback that I give examples in isiZulu. That was the only negative part of my report.

One staff member believed in incorporating moral education in his lectures:

Other students say I am too religious because I give examples of moral education and Christianity. I give examples from the bible. That you can't take away from me because I always tell them that Philosophy and Theology is one and the same thing.

Moral education as well as a holistic approach to teaching and learning was an important strategy for one senior lecturer:

That is how I teach; and I believe that my teaching should not only be about or for academic improvement and development only; but the development of the whole human being; the whole child: spiritually, emotionally, academically, intellectually and otherwise. That is my task as a teacher to develop the whole child in totality.

There was a common view that schools do not adequately prepare the learners for university. Asked if the schools do sufficiently in preparing learners for university; one staff member said: "No! No! No! No! Not all. That is one thing that demoralizes me. Schools do absolutely nothing."

I further asked which aspect (s) they regard as what students are poorly prepared in and one response was:

*English! English! You see when students write an assignment and say **Mens, womens, Childrens**. There is definitely something terribly wrong with the schooling system; that after 12 years of schooling students cannot spell correctly and do not understand plurals, does not understand the agreements and concords. These things are done in*

lower grades. Even reading is poor. I am sure that my frustration is firmly supported by the ANA results that students cannot read, write and add.

It was noted during the interviews that academic staffs' attempts in engaging students are constrained by several factors, including large class sizes and lecture styles.

There were general views that academic staff members presented as possible strategies at institutional level that can improve student engagement. I present hereunder some of those views.

- The institution should strengthen programmes that are aimed at enhancing students' academic literacies.
- The reading centre should become fully functional and should be used to promote reading skills.
- The First-year class sizes should be smaller: at least 50 students in the class.
- Increase human capital at the Writing Centre in order to cope with high volume of students
- The first-year students should be taught computer literacy skills.
- Teach students survival skills like: study skills and time management skills.

Some of the concluding remarks made by the academic staff members were as follows. On the calibre of students at the university:

We do not invite them anyway. We just have to deal with the students as they sit in front of us. We cannot choose who we want to teach. Having said so, I do not think looking at the numbers we have in the lecture rooms that we do justice to these students.

The general focus area of the university was also cited as critical and that the focus needs to change to look at the approaches that will promote student engagement:

The universities focus heavily on research and they forget about students as a whole because they go through so much. They (students) do not know where they fit in yet during their first year. You can't focus exclusively on one aspect and neglect the others. You have to focus on the students' feelings, their emotional intelligence, social and academic aspects.

Finally, one academic staff member said that:

We need to be seen as putting on efforts to show that students are welcome on campus. We need show students that we want them on campus enjoying their time during their new academic life. It should not be study! Study! There must be campus culture. Though I do not know what campus culture is in this university, I do not know whether there is vibrant campus culture that promotes student social engagement. There is no soccer! No chess clubs! Yes, there is music! Yet there is nothing that promotes reading like essay competitions and poetry. So it sounds like the Director of student services needs to start promoting these things. They need to hire somebody with a lot of enthusiasm and organizational skills and a lot of experience in creating the student culture; somebody with a lot of experience in student activities.

Drawing from the above presentation of data from academic staff it seems that there is a sense of hopelessness in accommodating all of the students into the learning process. Large classes, tight curriculum foci and time management seems to have major influences on the teaching and learning context of first year students, things that are beyond the control of academics. Despite the academic staff members' efforts in providing an environment that is conducive for optimal student engagement, the confounding factors do mitigate against the majority of students. Some students take the opportunity of visiting academic staff in their offices despite their invitations to do so. Their teaching methods and assessment process are also constrained by large class numbers and time and, therefore, few may benefit from detailed comments on their assignments or that they are engaged with during lecture times. The hopelessness is expressed by the academics when they say – “they try” – with little conviction that their efforts make any difference to the majority of students attending their lectures.

The next section provides first year students' cultural orientation and its implications on student engagement.

6.15 First year students' cultural orientations: Implications of cultural signals on student engagement

The earlier sections of this study alluded to the observations made that the group of students registered in this rural university is fairly homogenous. The homogeneity is informed amongst other things the mother tongue or home language that the majority of the students speak. The

University of Zululand as the case study; is located in the province of KwaZulu Natal which is dominated by the isiZulu speaking nationals. The dominant language spoken by most of the students in this rural university is isiZulu.

IsiZulu is one of the indigenous South African languages spoken by at least 10 million people in South Africa and understood by more than half of the South African population (Statistics South Africa, 2011). IsiZulu is one of South Africa's 11 official languages (Kamwendo, Hlongwa & Mkhize, 2014). I bring this background in order to contextualize the evidence that I forthwith present, and taking into account that culture is understood and transferred through the language which serves as means of expression of community and national identities (Mgqwashu, 2014).

There were startling observations that I made during the interview sessions and focus group discussion. The interviews with students were conducted in isiZulu and I later translated these into English. During all these processes that culminated into this chapter there were trends that were visible which raised my curiosity to further interrogate what appeared to be the students' cultural signals. These cultural signals also emerged as I developed the analysis of qualitative findings.

In the context of this study, cultural signals (Lee and Kramer, 2013) refer to material traits, or sets of visible, understandable and observable human behaviour patterns (Wacquant, 2008), associated with beliefs shared by and creating an identity of a particular social group (Burkitt, 1999). These cultural signals are much aligned to the culture of the Zulu nation and carry significant heritage that needs to be understood within the discourse of student engagement in a higher education institution. I use a rural setting that is dominated by students who predominantly share the same cultural heritage. These cultural signals need to be further explored and exploited on how they could inform the practice of teaching and learning. They are presented in this section to illuminate other matters for consideration in understanding and advancing the research agenda on student engagement.

It has been noted that one of the earlier experiences that affect first-year students' earlier academic integration was the fact that students were not properly inducted into the university. One of the observations was the culture shock. Some students were not used to large class sizes. Students came from the school environment where the class sizes were fairly small. The shock came when they attended lectures where there were more than 300 students in attendance, in one lecture hall and attending the same module. In expressing shock and dismay one student said:

I did not get a place to seat. All the seats were occupied. Some students stood on their feet at the back of the lecture hall. I did not expect it, and I sat on the floor in the aisle. Then the lecturer walked in, he had a laptop and he connected something (that I later learnt was a projector).

The large class sizes were not the only shocking experience; the use of technology during teaching was new to most of the students. One student recalled the use of the projector and PowerPoint slides and said:

"Slides started moving, I saw other students busy writing, I began to write as well. The talking was so fast, the slides just kept on moving and I could not finish sentences and phrases. I did not know whether to continue writing or listen to the lecturer."

Another student said:

"While trying to read and listen to the lecturer at the same time; the slides were so fast that I stopped writing because I could not keep up with the pace. I was trying to write everything. At school we were used to notes written on the board. The teacher would wait for you to finish. I felt so depressed and began to ask myself: Am I going to pass under these circumstances?"

The use of technology inside and outside the lecture rooms continued to suppress students' active engagement, participation and involvement during the teaching and learning sessions. Students cited the use of computers to search for journals and study materials, use of e-mails as means of communication, the use of Moodle to download notes, assignments and tasks. One student recalled:

The lecturer referred us to Moodle. I heard the lecturer saying; do not worry about taking notes, I shall post these on Moodle. I did not know what Moodle was; at first I

thought it was a name of the notice board. I did not know where to find it. At that time, I was still computer illiterate. There was no consideration to accommodate our computer illiteracy.

English as the medium of instruction (MoI) was also cited by students as one of the earlier university challenging experiences. Though teaching in most South African schools is done in English, some students were used to having teachers at high school that would use mother tongue language to explain certain concepts that students could not grasp during the lesson. The university presented a new and a challenging experience, where English was consistently and continuously used during lectures. They relied on code switching as there was no mother-tongue (isiZulu) usage to explain difficult concepts. Students further expressed challenges on the accent of lecturers who were foreign nationals.

Being away from family, friends and home environment was another earlier experience in which students expressed some uncertainty about their independence, responsibility and freedom. They had to take financial responsibility to buy their own groceries, do their cooking and cleaning. These were the extra responsibilities that they had to take care of. It is at this stage that some began to learn to take on these responsibilities. Students had to struggle for adaptation and acceptance of the reality of the new environment and situation. They were faced with the responsibility to negotiate new ways of living.

The importance of family and the spirit of brotherhood is the key feature that marks the identity of the Zulu nation. The concept of the family and brotherhood goes beyond the biological or genealogical parameters or boundaries. It also extends to people who live together and share matters of common interests. This is one of the key signals of the African philosophy of *ubuntu* (humanness). The African philosophy of *ubuntu* was signified by students during the interviews and the discussions by the students' frequent use of the terms like: *Bafo*: this is commonly used by younger generation; others use *mfowethu*: it means brother (*Bafo*) or my brother (*mfowethu*). *Bhuti* means older brother. The context in which this brother expression is used is when the younger one refers to older brother; but not the other way. Similarly, *sisi* refers to older sister, and *dadewethu* meaning my sister. Finally, the use of the term *mkhaya* meaning

home-girl or home-boy featured prominently during discussions. I bring these terms to show how students accord respect to each other which is quite fundamental amongst the Zulu.

Certain phrases were said and certain gestures were used by the students and in my observation, these were understood to be related to the students' cultural orientations. It was quick for me to make the distinctions and attach meanings to terms, phrases, gestures and behavioural patterns as I come from the same Zulu cultural orientation and upbringing. Below I present some phrases that were made by students: *"When the classes were full and I came late, I found it very uncomfortable to sit on the floor. I cannot sit comfortably on the floor with a dress, particularly when the male lecturer is teaching; even if it is female you cannot just sit anyhow."* Wearing of trousers by females is not very common amongst the majority of the black females particularly those that come from in rural areas, and even homes in urban areas that have parents that are still strongly rooted in tradition.

Students that were strongly rooted in traditions were partly due to both cultural orientations and religious orientation of the Nazareth Baptist Church, a strong religious denomination also called Shembe, founded by the Prophet Isaiah Shembe. Others came from rural households around the areas that are in strict and direct control of the Zulu monarch. The religion and the monarch have a strong influence on observing customs and traditions including the way in which women are dressed and behaved.

One female student said: *"I am a female; I can't just do things anyhow. You behave in front of elders and males."* The African culture still lacks in promoting women independence; women are still left behind in areas of decision making and leadership. The male dominance is still prevalent in most rural settings that still expect women to submit to male domination; as a result, it was noted that active participation of women in class could be challenged by these stereotypes. Poor contact with academic staff due to gender issues was another dominant feature amongst students.

The lack of competence and confidence in the use of spoken English in front of peers still posed another problem amongst most of the students. This came about when students had to ask questions during lectures or engage or participate in discussions: *“When you use “broken English” some students laugh at you. Others will call you by that wrong phrase or word that you used. It is not easy. Even when you know what to say in Zulu, you can’t say it.”* Poor or low command of English as a spoken language could be an inference drawn from this problem and probably the response to why students found it difficult to make presentations in class.

The extent to which students gained independence and freedom channelled some to begin to establish relationships and it became a challenge to others: *“The biggest mistake was to propose a girl that was clever in class, she just killed my confidence, worse she did not fall in love with me...”* the life events are inevitable, but to some the decisions to start building relationships became a challenge as these affected student engagement when some became afraid to make mistakes in class as they did not want to be embarrassed in front of their girlfriends. The young Zulu warriors coming of age cannot afford to appear shaken in front of maidens.

The next section presents some Zulu idiomatic and proverbial expressions that were used by students during the interview sessions. I have presented English parallels. Most of these expressions relate to seeking help, making friends, humanness and asking for help. This data primarily supports the notion that there is an avenue to exploit in extending the student engagement discourse through taking the cue on the material traits, behaviour and linguistic expression of one homogeneous social group. I have alluded to wealth of cultural knowledge that is contained in a home language that the world stands to benefit from.

Students were open to acknowledge their linguistic capital shortcomings, computer illiteracy and many others. They said that they learn better from one another. This claim will receive further elaboration in the discussion chapter where I expand in the power of the collaboration within among the Zulu and how this understanding could contribute student engagement agenda from a cultural perspective. The following are some of the expressions that were used by the students during discussions and some emerged during the interviews. I have carefully

selected a few, particularly those that translate the students' thinking towards the student engagement agenda:

“Injobo ithungelwa ebandla”: meaning it is not a shame to ask for advice from others i.e. seek advice from those who know. This expression was used when students emphasized the significance of mutually beneficial social and academic relationship as well consultation with staff.

“Inyoni yakhela ngamaqubu enye”: meaning a bird builds its nest using other birds' feathers. This expression featured when students said they do not have books; they cannot afford to buy them. They borrow from other.

“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”: meaning a person is a person through other persons or a person is a person because of people. The collaborative learning informed by group work, team work and the beneficial or reciprocal nature of friendship bore this expression.

“Izinyoni zansibanye zindiza ndawonye”: meaning birds of the same feathers flock together. There were instances where students could not find benefits from other group members and they ended up leaving those friends and found others that share similar values.

“Ingane engakhali ifela embelekweni”: meaning a child that does not cry dies in the sling or if you do not voice your problems / views, you will never be noticed. This came when some students were afraid to approach lecturers for help. The realization came when they noticed that it does not help to avoid seeing lecturers because they still remain the major bearers of information and knowledge vessels.

6.16 Conclusion

In conclusion; poor reading levels amongst students featured very prominently in the quantitative analysis. Data in this section have provided justifications and reasons given by students on why reading levels are low amongst students. Students cited the lack of books and the high cost thereof. Students said that they do not have books, or do not have time to read outside the module materials; citing off-campus living as one reason that makes them not to use the library effectively for this purpose. Starting new friends and forming groups was based on common or shared values. The students in this rural based university are cultured not to

question authority and that poor (direct) eye contact with lecturers featured strongly amongst students as it not customary for the young to look at the adult in eyes; subsequently, contact with staff outside the lecture sessions suffered. Also, some students were afraid to ask questions or engage academic staff inside and outside the classroom. It emerged that some of the students relied on being told and believed everything should be said by the lecturer. Students believed on notes and summaries provided by the lecturers as the final work that they needed to learn; consequently, some students could not read beyond the notes that they were given. It needs to be said that some students needed permission from the lecturers to do things. Finally, the influence of the oral tradition of Zulus is still a dominant feature amongst students.

This section of qualitative data analysis provided evidence to support the notion that students' cultural orientations have implications for first year students' academic and social integration. I have presented data in the previous sections that illuminated that first-year students are engaged more socially than academically within the institution citing socialization with friends amongst others as a draw factor. Students' perceptions were also presented and analysed. I have also presented evidence highlighting that academic staff's attempts in engaging first year students are constrained by various factors like large class sizes and lecture styles.

The next chapter presents an in-depth discussion of both the qualitative and quantitative findings using literature, theoretical and conceptual framework that best explains these results.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION OF THE KEY FINDINGS

7.1 Introduction

The preceding two chapters have offered the analyses of data sets that were generated using multiple methods. The first set of data that were presented and analysed; were data sets that were generated through the SASSE instrument which produced the student profiles, frequencies and statistical comparisons and the snapshot of student engagement indicators, high impact practices as well as the administrative summary of the participants in terms of gender, number of participants and participant seniority. The data sets produced in the analysis process produced findings, trends and patterns necessitated further exploration through qualitative means. Subsequently, these findings mentioned earlier were further used as gauge to guide and inform the qualitative data generation process which comprised the focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews with first year students. Some of the data sets that sought to understand primarily student academic performance were obtained through document analysis of first year students' academic performance record. The final set of data was generated through semi-structured interviews with academic staff members that taught first year students.

During the data analyses processes of both quantitative and qualitative data sets, several key findings emerged. Some of the findings that emerged are generally known in the research arena that seeks to understand first year student experience. Familiar findings include, amongst others, first year students' poor socio-economic background, school background, lack of skills to survive and thrive during their first year of study, undefined orientation and induction programmes. While the previous findings may seem common and widely cited in previous studies, this study went on to explore how students survive on top of the common conversations in the students' first year experiences.

Some of the findings were relatively unfamiliar and were worthy of further exploration, analysis, synthesis and discussion. These merged findings, herein referred to as unfamiliar, are presented and discussed in this chapter. Using evidence that emerged from and through thorough analyses of these two data sets, and guided by relevant literature as well as the theoretical constructs that underpin this study; in this chapter; I present, discuss and examine the integrated key findings as stated in the preceding paragraphs. In doing so I make judgements on what has been found and learnt in the context of this study in relation to the purpose statement, background as well as the research questions that this study is attempting to respond to.

In an attempt to understand the student engagement phenomenon and the first year experience in the context of this study, I extrapolate that student engagement is characterized by the amount of time that students devote to academic activities (Astin, 1984). This study has shown that the manner in which the first year university students use up their time in academic related activities is determined by the individual student's behaviour and motivation. Further, willingness to engage in these academic related activities is somewhat curtailed by various factors as Tinto (2012) argues that student success does not arise by chance, but rather through intentional and proactive policies of universities. The key findings of this study point out that there were numerous factors that came into sight that tend to limit effective student engagement practices; from the side of students, from the perspectives of academic staff members and from the institutional side.

7.2 The key finding of the student engagement phenomenon

This study reveals that off-campus residence, for an example, limits students' extended access to institutional infrastructural resources like, amongst others, the libraries, computer centres and internet access. Weather conditions, of summer and winter, come with challenges that affect students' lecture attendance and extended access to campus resources. Further, other factors that appear to limit informed, practicable and productive student engagement practices include students' chores in their residential settings. Safety concerns of students that arise from the rural nature of the university dictate the times in which students arrive and leave campus.

Some of the critical findings also point to gender, cultural heritage and language as having an impact in the manner in which students engage.

Despite the first-year students' inequalities: as a result of their background, previous schooling and socio-economic status that affect students' academic development (Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999); students are still able to devise strategies that enable them to navigate their way towards academic success. The sections below present arguments and in-depth discussions of the key findings that emerged, using what I had initially conceptualized as the three pillars of student engagement in the first year of study in an institution of higher learning: the student, the academic staff members and the institution as a site of learning and intellectual engagement.

7.2.1 Student engagement – an individual student's responsibility

Literature on student engagement in higher education has shown that there are various factors that contribute to the student engagement phenomenon. These factors include students that come from different and varying levels of economic, social and family backgrounds, to mention just but a few. I argue that while student engagement is viewed in the context of such diversity, it still remains an individual student's initial responsibility. It is the individual student's responsibility to adopt behavioural patterns that seek to advance high levels of academic performance. Students who are determined to succeed, and possess a positive psychological orientation (Bandura, 1986) and mental preparations are most likely to perform better than their counterparts who lack determination and willingness to succeed.

The nature and the level of student engagement within the first year of study in an undergraduate programme, has a direct relation to student performance. The next sub-sections (7.2.2) discuss the nature of student engagement and sub-section (7.2.3) focusses on the levels of student engagement. These sections attempt to highlight the relationship between the nature and the level of student engagement. It is the extent of the same relationship that determines the students' academic performance as illustrated in Figure 7.1 below.

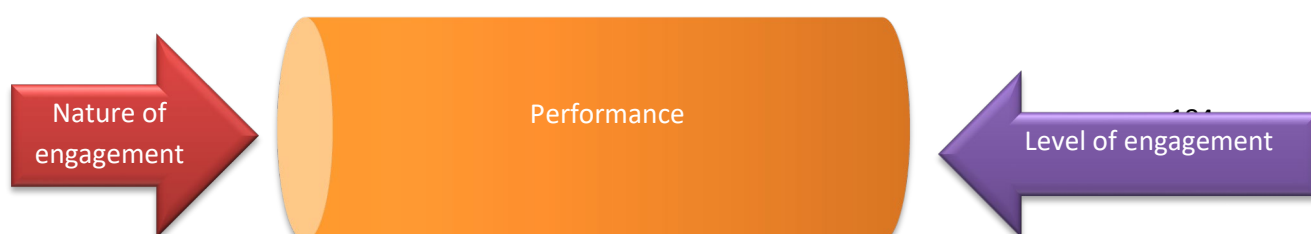


Figure 7.1: The relationship of the nature and the levels of student engagement

The above illustration in Figure 7.1 resonates with Milem and Berger's (1997) claim that one of the five postulates of Astin's (1975) theory of involvement perceive student involvement as what occurs in a continuum where different students invest different amounts of energy in various objects at various times. In this study, I add that not only do these amounts of energies differ quantitatively but also differ in nature and levels as well.

7.2.2 The nature of student engagement

There are various ways in which students can be seen to be engaged in academically purposeful activities. In extending the subject of the nature of engagement, I argue that the nature of student engagement determines the levels in which the first year students perform academically. Unexpectedly the findings of this study showed that students do not regularly attend scheduled class sessions. The university under exploration in this study is a full-time university with contact lectures as the primary means of knowledge dissemination (Gatherer and Manning, 1998). Figure 5.16 shows that there are students that frequently skip lectures in any given five-day week. Skipping lectures was not an expectation in a contact university situation. However, further interrogation through interviews revealed conflicting reasons such as laziness, lecturing styles, low levels of concentration and ill-discipline as some of the factors that contributed to low attendance (Massingham and Herrington, 2006); while some revealed that students are engaged in other academic related activities like preparing for assignments, tests and so on.

Self-engagement became a new phenomenon, where students skipped classes in order to access institutional technological infrastructure to do assignments, prepare for group activities, search

materials that they will take to their respective areas of residence for continued use after hours. The use of technological pieces of equipment like cellular phones to record lectures was an option adopted by some students in lieu of physical attendance. This strategy seemed beneficial to some students as they have an advantage of listening to the lecture over and over again at their own time and pace and in the comfort of their own space. Although one cannot conclusively condone non-attendance of scheduled lectures nor categorically appraise innovative strategies to make amends of the lost contact time, there ought to be a synergy in the application of alternatives which are consistent to institutional policies, not detrimental to students and not discouraging to academic staff members who spend time and resources to prepare lesson for contact with students who are expected to be physically present in lectures. This study found that student self-engagement is an emerging phenomenon adopted by individual students.

Self-engagement is a dynamic feature adopted by students in preparation for assignments, tests, examination and group discussions. Students in defined or structured study groups, first meet to identify roles for individual group members, assign tasks to individuals and then individuals go out to find resources and information, they share with other members of the group. Student self-engagement is a precursor for effective participation in or during group discussions.

The study found that study groups that have active group members, each member with clearly defined roles and responsibilities are most likely to produce positive results. This suggests that students stand a chance of mutually benefiting from another. Table 5.7 shows that collaborative learning had a mean score of 41.18 ranking the second highest engagement indicator. In the study, it also emerged that an even spread of skills amongst group members proved to be the most determining factor of belonging to a group. Skills like: computer literacy, ability to type and ability to make presentations made some groups to be more versatile than the others. There was evidence in the data that showed that working closely with others appeared to be a very strong feature (see Figure 5.15). This suggests that sharing academic experiences was a working feature amongst students; where students with stronger grasp of academic content are able to assist other members of the group. This feature partly highlights the reason why students are not actively involved in tutorials as stated in Section 6.11 of Chapter 6 where students expressed dissatisfaction with tutorial programmes stating that “Tutors! It is good to have

tutors; though they have not been helpful to me. Maybe other students are benefiting from tutorials. But as for me! No I am sorry”. The recommendation section of the thesis suggests how tutorial programmes could be enhanced to increase student participation.

It was concerning though to find that student-staff interaction as well as students’ effective interaction with academic development and support services staff proved to be low. The mean score for student-staff interaction was 14.17 as shown in Table 5.7, while student consultation with academic advisors ranked 7th showing 30% student participation as shown in Table 5.6 of High Impact Practices. It was also observed that students rate the manner in which academic staff members teach as effective, suggesting that academic staff members are able to articulate the contents of the modules very well.

Despite large class sizes, students still commend the academic staff teaching methods; the academic staff members’ ability to teach. The concerning matter though is that students do not initiate contacts with academic staff members. The manner in which students are reserved or economical in approaching academic staff members for assistance outside the lecture contact time is concerning. It is a matter that academic staff members also acknowledged as lacking, citing large class sizes and time as a concern. However, staff had indicated that they have an open door policy allowing students to come into their offices for consultation; suggesting that there is no hostility in their approach. The low level of student-staff interaction was further explored with students with the aim of finding students’ perceptions. Students provided reasons in mitigation of the low interaction. These factors are further discussed in the subsections that follow.

The nature of student engagement is determined by individual student’s willingness to perform better and to break the boundaries of ordinary stereotypes. Efforts put by students in their academic work vary from self-engagement to peer-learning. Evidence established from interviews showed a significant raise in students’ marks from students who self-engage and effectively participate in group activities. The inference that could be drawn is that such a nature of student engagement yields positive results, showing an increased progression in student performance.

I conclude that in this study the nature of student engagement is understood as that which is innate and characterized by individual student's sense, motivation, positive behaviour and discipline towards the achievement of high academic goals. Secondly, the nature of student engagement is also characterized by individual student's connection to his or her work. Thirdly, the nature of student engagement is determined by the extent to which an individual student strives to perform and achieve high academic standards despite known factors that would ordinarily deter an unmotivated and ill-disciplined student from high academic standards of performance. Fourthly, student engagement is understood as that which is fundamentally underpinned by self-engagement which leads to a deliberate and intentional participation in organized group activities, which most literature presents as peer learning and collaborative learning.

7.2.3 The levels of student engagement and its implications for academic success

What students do and how they do it has implications for the students' academic performance. The previous section has discussed the nature of student engagement and concluded on key elements that define it (student engagement). It can be said that all students at the university are, to a certain extent, engaged in one way or the other. What matters most is that the levels of student engagement are at varying levels; a phenomenon that makes student academic performances differ significantly. One of Astin's (1984) theoretical constructs of student involvement states that student involvement includes quantitative and qualitative components. It has been noted in this study that some students rate their own marks between 0% and 39%, while others rate their marks between 90% and 100%, while the majority rate highly in between: 40% and 89% (see Figure 5.7). Secondly, the extent to which student read (see Figure 5.17) has differing levels of student engagement. Thirdly, the extent to which first year students use technology (see Figure 5.10) has fluctuating levels as well. Finally, the attendance of time-tabled academic activities (see Figure 5.16) differs from student to student. It is within the broader understanding of Astin's (1984) theory of involvement which articulates the significance of students' input and outcomes. There is enough substance in Astin's theory in that it implies that qualitative involvement yields positive outcomes. There is no evidence in this study that suggests that quantitative involvement may not yield the similar results. However, the section below tries to draw slight and differing concepts of qualitative and

quantitative involvement; these concepts may yield similar results but are neither similar nor identical.

There are numerous other examples that could be used to substantiate the claim that I have put forth. To further extend my argument, I use the analytics of the SASSE instruments as shown in Figure 7.2 below where students need to base or rate their responses as:

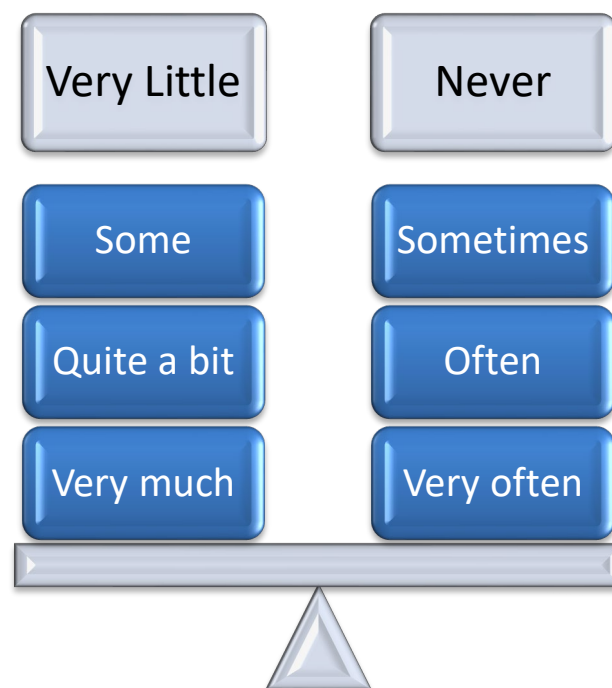


Figure 7.2: Frequency response chart on student engagement

Informed by the categories of responses above, there is sufficient reason also to categorize the levels of student engagement into at least three distinct levels if one combines the middle categories into a single level as demonstrated on Figure 7.3 below. The first level of student engagement could be understood to be at a moderate level where students do exactly what they are asked to do, nothing more nothing less, meaning that they only want to do work so that they pass the test, assignment or whatever task that they need to accomplish in order to get the necessary rewards in the form of marks and avoid being part of the failing statistics. These students' responses would fall in the "some / sometimes/ quite a bit/ often" level of responses. The second level of student engagement could be categorized as the non-compliant level. Students performing at this non-compliant level would not do tasks, would not attend lectures, would not submit assignment on time (or maybe not submit assignments at all); and to these

students the negative consequences of such actions do not matter. This group of students is purposely distanced or knowingly disengaged from academic activities. This category of students can be classified as falling into the “very little / never” category level of responses (see Figure 7.2). The third level of student engagement is the enthusiastic level. In this level, students go beyond the norm, put in an extra effort; consult with academic staff members, ask questions in class, seek advice and guidance as well as support from student academic development support services. The students at this level discuss feedback with academic staff members as a way of improving on future tasks. These are students who find joy and are genuinely attracted to their academic work and are eager to perform at the highest academic level possible. The enthusiastic level is believed to be students who critically engage with content, who ask clarity seeking questions in class and who interact with academic staff members at all levels.

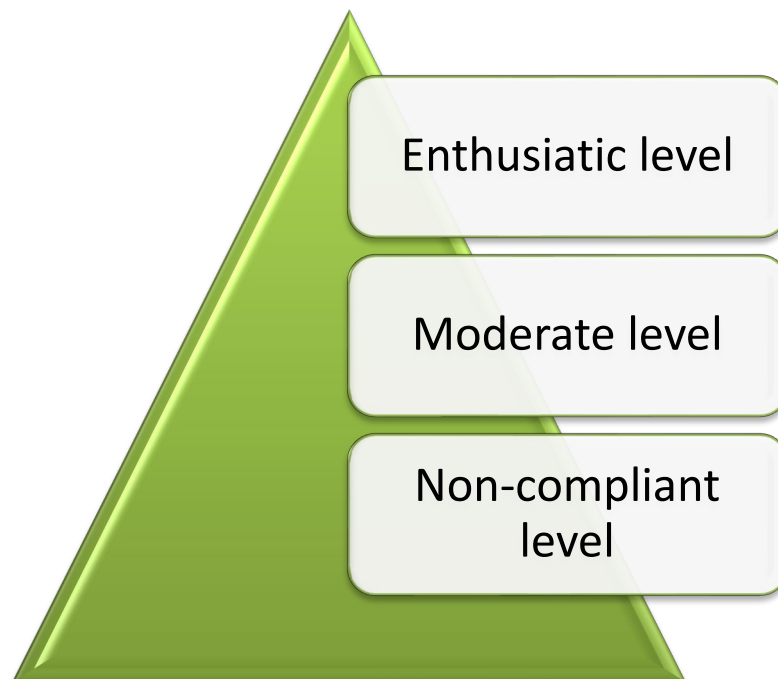


Figure 7.3: Levels of student engagement

I conclude that the level of student engagement is characterized by quantitative and qualitative elements. Also, the level of student engagement includes the input and output characteristics, wherein the input informs the quality of the outcomes. In this study, three levels of student engagement emerged; namely, the non-compliant level, the moderate level and enthusiastic levels. The decision to reach these levels was informed by the students’ response to the SASSE

questions. The responses showed two extreme positions where students had responses that were directly on the opposite ends of the involvement continuum. There was a fairly moderate group that was objectively modest in their responses. Following these levels of student engagement, the equation of input and output, I put forth the claim that the level of student engagement defines or presupposes students' academic performance.

7.2.3 Student engagement and cultural heritage

Individual students' responsibility as discussed in section 7.2.1 has shown that there is a role that the individual student needs to play in order to achieve academic success. This section extends academic success to include some elements of collective support. Student engagement as an individual student's responsibility and cultural heritage as an indicator of collective support are both critical for students' academic success. This particular section provides arguments for student engagement and cultural heritage, signalling the role of collective support and collectivism.

Ubuntu is an African concept that can be literally translated into English language as "humanness". There is a Zulu idiomatic expression that resonates with this concept which is: "*Umntu ungumuntu ngabantu*" (in English that means: "I am because of others". Or "A person is a person because of others"). The expression does not bear any racial connotations, but is used to express the importance of other people in the survival of others; this is an expression that values mutual dependency. Govender (2014) argues that student success cannot be attributed to a single factor. She approaches the discourse of first year student success at the university from an African concept of *Ubuntu*. This study has found that most of the students come from the Province of KwaZulu Natal; the largest majority comes from the Northern part of this Province.

The Northern part of KZN is mainly rural where most families are poor, have low socio-economic status, high unemployment, depend on Government grants and have high illiteracy rates. Further; almost all students are black South Africans that speak isiZulu as the home language. Thirdly, the majority of students are first generation students and first entry students at the university. Other findings revealed (see Table 5.2) that 58% of the participants were

female. Finally, the bulk of students fell below the age of 24 with only 8% above the age of 25 (see Figure 5.2).

Demographic diversity is an area that requires attention from all those that are involved in teaching the first year students. Van Zyl (2010) alludes to the improvements needed in South African Higher Education system; arguing that demographic diversity is a significant factor in understanding student academic performance. The above findings suggest that the students are fairly homogeneous and share a common culture. During interviews, students pronounced on their cultural pride and heritage. I argue that students' cultural orientations have implications in the students' academic and social integration as well as academic performance in their first year of study. In validating this claim, Wacquant (2008) argues that the cultural capital or educational credentials or familiarity with the bourgeois culture is the major determinant of life chances under the cloak of individual talent and academic meritocracy.

Earlier students' experiences affect first-year students' earlier academic integration as a result of not being inducted properly in a University. Using bits and pieces of expressions that emanated during interviews and focus group discussions it was evident that by the very nature of the students' cultural orientation, culture shock becomes the first barrier to effective earlier academic integration. Looking at Bourdieu's (2005) notion of habitus as a concept that is used to interpret the interplay between the past and the present, students experience difficulties in transcending into university structures because of their poor educational, cultural and socio-economic orientations (Burkitt, 1999). Students were not familiar with large class sizes, use of technology in teaching e.g. PowerPoint slides, Moodle, e-mails, use of computers as well as English as medium of instruction at the university. Most of the students, as they were in agreement relied on code switching because the mother-tongue (isiZulu) was not frequently used to explain foreign key concepts during lectures. Burkitt (1999) argues that habitus is a set of learned depositions; in the context of this study communication, language of instruction, academic literacy, computer literacy and familiarity with technology appeared to impede students' academic integration because these were never part of the culture of students in their childhood. It has been argued in section 3.2.1 of this thesis that habitus is critical in perpetuating inequality (Lee and Kramer, 2013) because individuals internalize their class status and social positions; indirectly or unintentionally reinforcing the very same social position and innate

histories. Also, as the students conceded for example that they experienced challenges with accent of lecturers particularly those lecturers who were foreign nationals. How then do these students' cultural repertoires affect the manner in which students engage? The notion of habitus has enabled this study to understand in more details the complex nature of the realities in the university environment faced by first year students who come from deprived backgrounds.

The cultural orientation presents challenges as students generally have a poor or a low command of English as a spoken language and also as a medium of instruction. Secondly poor contact with academic staff is challenged as most of the time students are expected to use English to communicate with academic staff, and have a problem to express their problems freely and convincingly. DiMaggio's (1982) claim is that teachers: "communicate more easily with students who participate in elite status cultures, give them more attention and special assistance, and perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack cultural capital" (p. 190). It can be said that, the issue of language is critical in understanding student engagement. The evidence in support of the previous statement is contained in Figure 5.17, where students are seen to be presenting low frequency in reading. The inference that could be made is that this can be attributed to the fact that most students were generally brought up by parents with high illiteracy rates and homes where reading materials are not commonly available or are non-existing. Secondly, the libraries are not available in rural areas. It has been stated that the majority of students are first generation students. These claims and inferences suggest that the majority of students were never exposed to the culture of reading at home except for the prescribed set books they were exposed to at school. Students now find themselves in the university environment which demands of high levels of critical engagement with complex academic texts.

The Zulu culture perpetuates an identity that needs to be understood in the education contexts. Firstly, one does not question authority as that is seen as sign of disrespect. That cultural orientation contributes immensely to low or poor participation in class discussions (see Figure 5.18 particularly the extent to which the students participate in module discussions and giving module presentation). Secondly, direct eye contact with an elder or a person in authority; to the English culture that shows that one is listening with respect and is not hiding anything; while in the Zulu culture looking at your senior straight in the eye is a sign of disrespect. This further

makes it difficult for students to approach academic staff members in their offices as well; as spaces of seniors are traditionally not common grounds of easy entry to the young ones. Entry into these spaces warrants some form of hierarchy or protocol.

Thirdly, large class sizes present a situation wherein students sit on the floor, females who traditionally wear dresses are unable to sit comfortably and concentrate during lectures particularly when a male lecturer is in front of the class presenting. This dress code may not equally affect girl or young females who have been modernized and prefer or feel comfortable to wear trousers. Attendance of classes for some female students could be affected, particularly if they arrive late for classes and know that they may not have a space to sit, they may either opt to stand at the door way and battle to hear the lecturer or opt not to enter the class.

I concur with Ramrathan (2013) who argues that universities need to begin “to view students as individuals influenced by a range of factors that make each one unique” (p. 218). However, the earlier part Ramrathan’s (2013) argument which states that “Universities need to move away from viewing students as particular groupings, like rural students or students from disadvantaged home backgrounds” (p.218) is challenged by the findings of this study in the context in which I have presented them. However, the findings from this study on students’ cultural orientation find backing in Ramrathan (2013) where he claims that “Group labelling perpetuates group identities and students who are historically from these identity groupings subtly promote an acceptance of this discourse” (p.218). The self-perpetuation of students’ group identities has proven to work positively for groups in this study. Students that tend to perform well academically are mostly active members of study groups, while students that perform badly academically are mostly detached from active group activities. The findings from this study indicate that students with high academic performance work in groups, where success was achieved students tended to use possessive to emphasize collective efforts. *“It became much better when we were introduced to the Writing Centre”. “We got 68%”. “We worked really hard for it”*. On the other hand, students who were non active members in groups, proved to be performing poorly in their academic work. The phrases below are extracts from individual students who had very low marks and performed poorly; their marks ranged from 0% to 35%.

- I did not realise that my laxity will catch with me
- I was not handing in assignments
- I messed up and I realised very late that I can't make a U-turn
- I met friends who were not serious about education

I present the above two scenarios to show the “WE” versus the “I” phenomenon; suggesting that group-work, team-work, peer-learning and collaborative learning prove to be productive. Govender (2014) offered the concept of “*ubuntu*” as an expression associated with academic success. The expression that is common to the Africanism “*ubuntu*”. The analysis of group formation has been offered in earlier sections of this thesis; the manner in which study groups are formed is not informed or guided by any institutional policies, but mainly through students’ selection and choice of friends. This suggests student engagement is influenced by the extent to which students integrate both academically and socially into the university environment, which results in high academic performance.

7.2.5 Student academic performance: the facts and figures

The university machinery as demonstrated earlier in the literature review chapter, measures its productivity on three quantifiable features. The first feature is the quantitative measure of students’ academic performance based on pass rates and failure rates. The second feature is the measurement of students’ dropout rates. The third feature is the university’s levels of throughput rates. In the literature review chapter, I highlighted the origin and the emergence of student engagement as the priority area in educational research. Amongst the fundamental objectives upon which it was founded was to understand one or more of the aspects stated above.

In this study, I argue that, academic performance, student dropout rates and throughput rates are informed by the extent to which students invest their efforts in academic work on one side; on the other side, institutional role in presenting platforms that are conducive to effective learning, teaching and student engagement. I have argued for the nature and the levels of student engagement in previous paragraphs. Secondly, my argument on how the universities

prepare the environment for active student participation, academic and social integration is offered.

The effectiveness of the student investment component in academic work is measured by academic performance or achievement rates. There are various levels in which the institutions use academic performance rates to make decisions. For an example, student admissions are determined by grade 12 scores. This signifies that the students with higher grade 12 scores receive preference to gain entry into the university. Secondly, the academic performance of students is measured by marks or scores, signifying that students with high scores have performed better than those with lower scores. The analysis of student performance using UNIZULU HEMIS data attests to this claim. Further evidence from the HEMIS data suggests that some modules with a historically low success rates are termed “high risk Modules” based on students’ marks. The extent to which the student performs in written tests, assignments and examinations is the common gauge of student performance. There was no evidence found in this study that suggested the alternative means of assessments, measure of academic performance except the written forms (See chapter 5 sub-section 5.21.3 and Figure 5.14).

Figure 5.10 shows evidence of the extent to which students write, the length of written tasks that are completed. The writing assignments at the university level require students to think clearly, logically and critically. In the process of writing and developing their arguments, students use valid evidence from various literature sources in order to produce academically sound, coherent and well-structured work. This demands students to possess high levels of academic literacy. Taking this argument one step back, in order for students to write better, and write well and write more; they need to read more. The relationship between reading and writing needs to be strong; before students can write effectively and respond to text critically, they ought to have acquired certain levels of reading skills. Figure 5.17 illustrates the amount of time that students spend on reading. If one looks at the two extremes in Figure 5.17; two percent of the students say they do not read, while only 4% of the students say they read over 30 hours per week. The majority of first year students (34%) read between 1 and 5 hours per week. Along with writing, critical thinking and logic; reading is one of the most precious commodities that a university student need to possess. The extent to which students engage in reading activities as presented above, is an indication that the majority of students have a

problem with reading. The implications of poor reading levels are far-reaching to university students. The qualitative data of this study also found that students are having challenges in writing; one student even suggested that it would be better if books had and other reading materials had an audio component. Students further cited the cost of prescribed books as exorbitant and thus further limiting students' reading because they may not have the books to read (subject related reading). Though the primary focus of this study was not on reading, it is worth mentioning that students who read more succeed more.

In an attempt to construct meaningful student engagement, reading and writing need to be viewed as interconnected processes. In the context of this study, based on the illustration in both Figures 5.10 and 5.17 as well as the student pre-university background, students possess varying levels of linguistic capital including vocabulary that is necessary for them (students) to engage in academic activities. The societal influence, family influence as well as university expectation in the extent in which students read and write presents challenges in student academic engagement. So, the quantitative and qualitative students' academic productivity is curtailed by low levels of reading that students possess. Because students spend lesser time in academic reading activities as the study found; therefore, their academic writing is curtailed; which limits students' ability to critically and academically express themselves in written texts.

The study found that students read less (quantity-time-effort) and produce minimum number of pages in written assignments (quality-quantity-effort). These interrelated aspects: reading and writing go a long way to determine how students engage in academic reading and writing. Academic reading is a critical process that precedes academic writing and is crucial for students' academic success. The low reading levels (as illustrated earlier); poor writing skills appear to be challenging the students' meaningful and constructive engagement levels as well as the academic performance of the majority of students. This is an indication of why students perform in the manner in which they do.

If academic writing is poor, then students will not be able to produce rich academic arguments in assignments, tests and examinations; and this suggests a low level of critical engagement. The arguments that were raised earlier, supported by evidence from both literature and findings

from this study further support the claim that some first year students bring to university aptitudes necessary for access and not necessarily sufficient for success and survival or to meet the academic demands in order to survive and succeed at university.

The first-year students' earlier academic and social integration are critical for their academic performance, persistence and success at the university. The findings suggest that first semester programmes, for example, would be advantageous to most first year students if they are structured to enable smooth transition from high school learning to university. The student support services should be geared to prepare students for academic immersion; this claim is made based on students' narration of their experience of the initial lectures, assignments, tests and examinations.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) claim that a field carries its characteristics, practices, rules and forms of authority, and that fields are autonomous and independent (Bourdieu, 2005). It also emerged from the study that students tend to use their own creativity and initiatives to navigate around academic and social integration. The study could not find evidence that shows how the students that come to the university for the first time are supported. Student orientation was cited as the only form activity that is meant to enable students gain entry into the academic environment, suggesting that there is no form of structured mediation. The barriers to academic entry become more stringent to students who have already been categorized as rural, lacking in various forms of capital required for success at the university.

Bourdieu (2005) claims that for one to be able to cross the barriers of entry and subsequently attain autonomy to be able to deal with the demands of that particular space, one requires adequate capital to be able to enter the space positions. In the absence of sufficient capital to cross the barriers of entry, first-year students have adopted the concept of communities of practice, group identity, mutual benefits, and inter-student relations as central in their learning, social and academic integration as well as improved academic success. Both students and staff have their own perceptions on the university's ability to provide spaces that are conducive for intellectual engagement, teaching and learning environment. In this instance, there was no

significant evidence to suggest structured ways in which the institution attempts to address first-year-experience beyond the orientation programmes.

The orientation programmes were viewed by students as having challenges in the manner in which they address their integration into the university. The orientation focused mainly on enabling students to understand and master the geographic coordinates of the campus that enable them to quickly access lecture halls and other institutional resources like student services, library and other key areas. The next section discusses academic staff members' roles in enhancing students' academic integration, participation and performance.

7.2.6 Academic staff members

Academic staff members' attempts in engaging students are constrained by several factors, including large class sizes and lecture styles. The findings suggest that effective and regular student feedback was not forthcoming. The innovative and engaging teaching strategies were also restricted because of large class sizes and huge numbers of students that academic staff members need to focus on. Furthermore, the findings revealed that assessment strategies that are adopted and used are mainly short questions and multiple choice type questions during tests and examinations. In addition, the critical engagement is mostly limited to assignments.

The focus of this study was to explore how academic staff members enhance student engagement. It emerged that academic staff members are open to student consultations. The study also found that students are generally satisfied with how academic staff members teach. Another finding was that the perceptions of academic staff members were that students do not use these consultations to their advantage; however, those that came for consultations were attended to. This is a further confirmation of DiMaggio's (1982) claim's that teachers communicate more easily with students from elite status culture and give them more attention and special assistance. Although there is no evidence to suggest which category of students in terms of family socio economic status, see academic staff members for consultation, the students that come from low socio-economic status, confirmed that they are afraid and lack

confidence to see academic staff; one of the reasons cited was that they lack the necessary linguistic capital to communicate. Academic staff members are of the view that first year students are not adequately prepared for university education; citing students' poor command of spoken and written English; further emphasising the arguments raised above on the general effects academic literacy have on student engagement, student performance and levels of achievements.

This notion is presented in the third chapter of this thesis, where decisions to explore Bourdieu's social theory on cultural capital and cultural reproduction are presented, and where an argument is presented that Bourdieu's sociology is quite critical of, established patterns of power and privilege (Wacquant, 2008). Secondly, Wacquant (2008) and DiMaggio (1982) concede that cultural capital is the cultural knowledge that serves as the currency that helps one to navigate the culture. The students that lack cultural capital (in a form of linguistic capital: English) tend to be disadvantaged from benefiting from effective academic staff members intended interventions.

7.3 Summary of the key findings

This section has presented the key findings in this study. It emerged that first year students' inequalities as a result of their background, previous schooling and socio-economic status affect their academic development. This study found that the first year students devise their own strategies that enable them to navigate their own ways towards academic success. The three conceptual pillars of student engagement related to the research questions that this study attempts to respond to seem to have held the parts this thesis together. It was found that student engagement is the responsibility of the individual student and the willingness to achieve; this phenomenon links with the extent to which students participate in groups (or do not participate in group activities). Psychological orientation and mental preparation of students plays a significant role in students' academic participation and performance. The nature and the level of student engagement were discussed. The study found that the nature of student engagement could either be quantitative or qualitative, while the levels of student engagement vary from non-compliance levels to enthusiastic levels. The role of academic staff members also received attention, on how their strategies enhance student engagement and how they interact with

students. This aspect was found to be limited to lecture methods that emphasize the transmission of knowledge through lectures, assessment activities limited to group assignments. These limitations were understood to be curtailed by large class sizes. The role of cultural orientation and student engagement also received attention as a factor that limits the extent to which students learn and interact with academic staff members. It was found that students do not possess the required linguistic capital to give them confidence to approach lecturers for assistance, guidance and coaching in the areas where they lack in class, assignments and so on. I have offered arguments on the findings, provided evidence in support of the arguments based on evidence from the study, literature and partly from theories that underpin this study. The next sections look at the findings using the theoretical lens that comes from the broad theories and theoretical constructs that were presented in the third chapter of this thesis.

7.4 The key findings and the theoretical explanations

Theoretical insights have presented valued explanations on some of the findings that emerged from this study. I have presented in section 3.1 that no single theory is sufficient to explain a phenomenon in isolation. Further, in section 3.2 I have offered that Bourdieu argues that theoretical concepts are there to present appropriate vocabulary that seeks to direct the research gaze in social science. I have also provided reasons as to why I eliminated some of the theories in the third chapter. However, immersion with data also proved that some of those theoretical concepts that were initially eliminated proved to be useful when analysing the data, like the Knowles (1984) theory of andragogy.

Bandura (1986) social learning theory supposition argues for an integrated approach to learning that combines the cognitive and the behavioural aspects to learning. Further assumption held in this theory is that learning is based on how the individual responds to environmental stimuli and that the individual's knowledge acquisition can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interaction, experiences and outside influences. Repeatedly, in this study, it has been highlighted that students found comfort in group interactions, peer learning

as well as collaborative learning. Students preferred to work in groups because of the reciprocity and mutual benefits from such collaboration.

Knowles (1984) defines andragogy as the art and science of helping adults to learn. Although there was no conclusive evidence that emerged from the data to conclusively rate the participants according to age as adults, the notion that adult learners move from dependency to self-directedness found resonance in this study as I argued that students learnt and devised their own ways of navigating ways of learning and coping in the university environment, suggesting a skill or a competence that resonates with Bourdieu's (1986) embodied cultural capital, which presents itself as a skill or a competence that cannot be separated from the holder. Bourdieu (1977, 1986) claims that embodied cultural capital is the type of knowledge that one seeks out on his own. This construct dictates for an acceptance that students at the university begin to take learning as responsible adults in a responsible and a productive manner. Linking Bourdieu's (1986) embodied cultural capital and Knowles' (1980) construct that adults are problem-centred and will always seek new ways to apply new learning as they assume new social or life roles, suggest that students may not necessarily be assumed to lack cultural capital in its entirety. There is value or currency in some of their innate histories and life experiences, which are usable when they (students) find themselves in circumstances where they cannot be assisted. This instance, where students seek and find new ways of learning resonates with Knowles (1984) construct that adults draw from their accumulated reservoir of life experiences to compliment and aid their own learning. The assertion from academic staff members that the good intentions to support students' engagement is curtailed by large class sizes is a confirmation that students are left to find ways of learning on their own.

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement has offered a lens to critically analyse institutions of higher education in relation to how students change and develop and how the curriculum attends to that change and development. The theory of involvement as Astin (1984) puts it, is determined by two factors (a) students' involvement in college life (b) students' non-involvement in college life. The propositions entrenched in the two factors presented above enabled arguments that were presented on the levels in which students engage academically. The findings suggested three levels of engagement which were: the non-compliant level, moderate level and the enthusiastic levels (see Figure 7.3).

Milem and Berger (1997) further present five postulates or constructs that originate from Astin's (1984) theory of involvement, which provided reasons to conclude that student engagement could present itself either quantitatively or qualitatively; thus drawing the relationship between the nature and the level of student engagement. Further, Tinto (1993) argues that:

There appears to be an important link between learning and persistence that arises from interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort. Involvement with one's peers and with the faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, is itself positively related to the quality of student effort and in turn to both learning and persistence (p.71).

This was presented in Figure 7.1 which demonstrated that the nature and the level of student engagement occurs in a continuum, where the extent in which either of them is exerted produces results or determines the level of student performance. The students' output in terms of results is determined by the individual students' input. The output-input relation is dependent on the environment in which this process occurs. I have argued and presented that university environment is a site of intellectual engagement. It is upon this claim and Astin's proposition that institutions of higher education provide environments that offer explanations for students' change and development.

Tinto's (1975) student integration model supports the interplay between the individual students' commitment to the goal of the university and completion and commitment to the institution. This study found that students who are attached to the institution, and have aspirations to stay longer and complete more than just an undergraduate degree, are much likely to persist, perform better and succeed at university.

Tinto's (1993) posits that institutions and students are continually interacting with another, suggesting that student persistence is strongly dependant on the extent to which students become integrated or incorporated into the social and academic communities of the university. It has been presented that the study did not prove that the institution does or does not provide for such integration, only inferences that were drawn from discussions that suggest that there is minimum value that could be attributed to the orientation programmes that were offered in

the context that was previously offered in the earlier sections of this chapter. This situation (where orientation programmes are not to the satisfaction or benefit of students) presents shortcomings in the manner in which they address cultural adaptation of students (Tinto, 1993). The cultural adaptation would have allowed the students to break away from their traditions which Tinto (1993) refers to as separation. This notion is also argued in Bourdieu's notion of habitus which is used to construe the interplay between the past and the present that is created through socialization; the further argument is that habitus captures how one carries history and how that history transcends into new circumstances (Swartz, 2013). The cultural adaptation allows students to gain full membership at university (acculturation), Tinto (1993). This further deprived students of an opportunity to constructively and purposely move from periphery to the centre stage of knowledge acquisition.

7.6 The contextual understating of student engagement

The findings of this study have been presented and the theoretical constructs have also been used to further explain some of the key findings. This section of the thesis exhibits the synthesis of literature that was consulted in framing this study, the broader theories that underpin this study, the theoretical constructs that have been used to analyse data and discuss the key findings. I present a consolidated explanation of student engagement in the context of this study.

As previously presented, Strydom and Mentz (2010) proffer that student engagement has two components; namely, what institutions do, and what students do. This study offers the third component; what academic staff members do (see Figure 7.4). The institution would ordinarily be understood as encompassing its resources: infrastructural, human resources, financial and so on. However, in this study it was necessary to conceptualize academic staff members as an independent pillar. The reason being, academic staff are the key human resource deployed to deal with students directly. Secondly, the study sought to explore the role played by academic staff members to promote student engagement within the university environment.

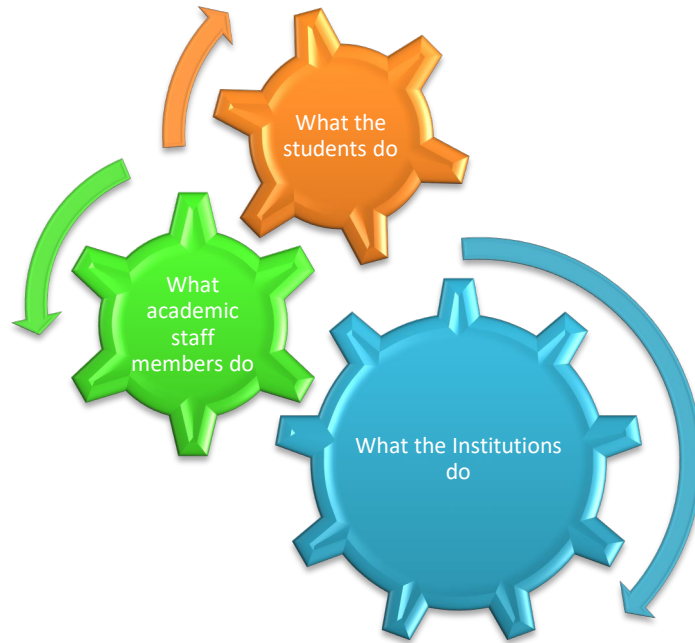


Figure 7.4: Components of student engagement

It has been offered in Section 2.5 of the literature review chapter that student engagement involves: Time on task, quality of effort, involvement, outcomes, good practices and integration. After rigorous examination of data and the discussion of the findings supported and guided by literature and theoretical constructs, this study offers an extended angle in which student engagement in relation to student success could further be understood and explained. This study offers that: (a) student engagement has three levels; namely non-compliant level, moderate level and enthusiastic level (b) students' academic performance is the outcome of the nature, level of student engagement and university environmental factors (c) external factors like student-staff-interaction, schooling background, family background, socio-economic background and university environment are contributing in the manner in which students engage (d) factors like student's behaviour, psychological preparation and motivation contribute to the manner in which students engage (e) student engagement is the individual student's desire and willingness to succeed responsibility (f) students' cultural orientations play a significant role in students' earlier integration into university.

Figure 7.5 illustrates a linear model of student engagement. The first part indicates that students come to university with certain attributes like: Family background, school background. Once

they are admitted into specific programmes they are engaged in the process of forming relations with the university environment and academic staff members. These relations are informed by the extent to which the social and academic integration has occurred. The next level shows that students begin to access the epistemological goods that the university offers to students. At this stage, students begin to have initial experiences with the curriculum. In the process of forming relations with the curriculum in general from relations with the curriculum; in the context of this study students' interaction with others was seen as the strong element or factor of student engagement. The next level of the model begins to become individualistic in the manner in which both the nature and the level of student engagement is seen to be improving, leading to an increased or a sustained student retention. The final product is student academic success, which could be qualified as the student progression into the next level of study and finally to graduation.

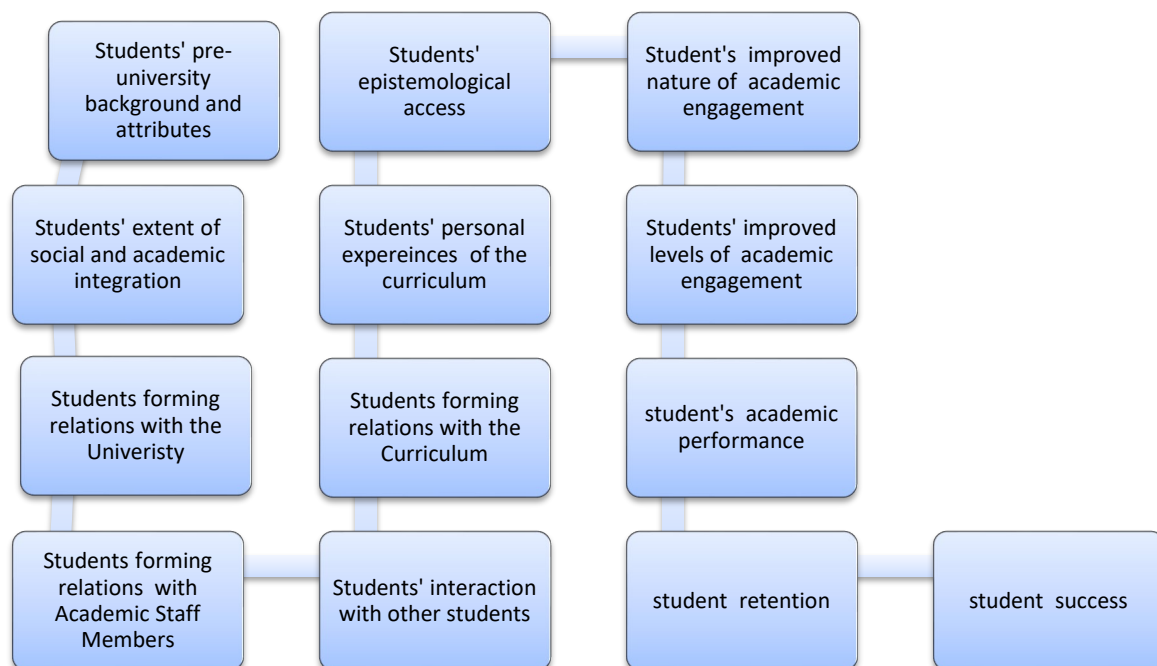


Figure 7.5: The Linear Model of Student Engagement

7.7 Concluding remarks

Student engagement is a complex phenomenon that could neither be understood exclusively in isolation of other contributing factors as outlined in section 7.5 of this study nor through a

single and a linear definition outside the context in which it is explained. The understating of student engagement requires a comprehensive analysis of a multitude of factors using literature, theories, context and evidence from the data that has been produced. This chapter has offered contextual factors which resulted in the claims made hereunder; that:

- The student inequalities as a result of their previous schooling
- The family background affects the manner in which the students perform at the university
- Student engagement is an individual student's responsibility; the nature and the level of student engagement is one of the determining factors of students' academic performance.

Student-self-engagement emerged in this study as a novel phenomenon that seeks to expand the existing understanding of student engagement. Student-self-engagement is conceptualized at that which involves individual students doing work on their own in preparation for group activities, assignments, tests and other credit bearing academic activities. Self-engagement appeared as a common and most effective practice for the majority of high performing students.

The students-staff interactions were at a very low level because of large class sizes and the students' low levels of linguistic capital and cultural orientations that made them fear to approach the lecturers for help. Demographic diversity and students' cultural orientations require attention as these limit the extent to which students participate in academic activities.

It was found that student engagement comes at varying levels. The varying levels of student engagement emanate from individual students' varying cultural capital caused by various factors like students' lack of reading and writing skills required at university level. This study found that student engagement is the deliberate action of students' investment of time into academic activities with an aim of attaining high marks. Student engagement is dependent on the university's task to provide an environment that conducive to intellectual engagement and the deployment of resources that facilitates and enables such mutual interaction.

The next chapter provides the conclusions, recommendation and the extent to which this study responded to the research questions.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has offered in-depth discussions of the key findings of this study and some theoretical explanations on the key findings. I discussed the key findings, presented arguments using literature and insights drawn from the data analysis, and with the use of key theoretical constructs from the theoretical framings that informed this study, I developed further theoretical insights on the phenomenon of first year students engagement within higher education.

This final section of the thesis focuses on what I had intended to do in this research project with a view to illuminating what has been accomplished through the research process, the key questions that drove the study process and a response to these key research questions. I thereafter, offer some substance on the significance of the study followed by a presentation of recommendations arising from this study for further research within the phenomenon of this research. Finally, I present the limitations of the study. Over and above the five critical parts mentioned above, this chapter also offers a section that draws attention to the contribution that this study makes in the research gaze of student engagement and student academic performance in higher education. In the process of undertaking this research study, I have also learnt and developed as a student and developed as a professional in field of practice. I included an autobiographical section where I highlight and reflect on how this research journey has capacitated me as student and as a professional in my field.

8.2 The background of the study

It has been highlighted in the introductory chapter of this thesis that Higher Education nationally and globally is grappling with issues related to student access, higher student retention, student success as well as student throughput and dropout. These challenges seem to have been in existence in the higher education fraternity at least for more than eight decades. Literature showed that the first entry into the research gaze on these issues began in the early 1930's in the USA.

The local studies in the South African contexts are fairly new as they began to tackle these similar higher education challenges in a more robust way to address the transformation issues after the democratic political dispensation in the 1990's. I have alluded to the historical lineage of the Higher Education sector in South Africa with the aim of highlighting how the past apartheid laws still impact the current Higher Education system in a negative way. The increasing and diverse South African population that accesses the higher education sector presents new challenges that need new approaches to address them. The challenges range from varying schooling backgrounds, diverse demographic factors, language and socio-economic factors to mention just but a few.

The South African Higher Education system has a high dropout rate of students in their first year of study at universities. Letseka and Maile (2008) claim the dropout rate of first year students to be at 30% using the 120 000 first year students that enrolled in the year 2000. Though these figures are fairly archaic, they are presented to indicate that the phenomenon has not changed in the recent times but instead the dropout rates are increasing as the enrolment figures are increasing every year. There have been numerous attempts to address the student failure rates, dropouts and retention. The attempts include the curriculum changes (CHE, 2014). I have argued for student engagement as a legitimate and a valuable academic activity that is geared towards desirable educational outcomes. This study was an attempt to offer some understanding on student engagement in their first year of study at a university in relation to academic performance.

8.3 Reviewing the focus of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature and the level of student engagement in their first year of study using the students registered for a Bachelor's degree in Education at UNIZULU as participants. The study focused on what is it that students do as engagement practices. The study also focused on the role played by the academic staff members to enhance, promote and develop student engagement. The academic staff teaching practices including assessment practices, feedback sessions, and student consultation were looked at with the aim of understanding how they promote student engagement. Finally, the study looked at the institutional role on promoting student engagement. The exploration of student engagement using these three pillars was intended to establish the interrelatedness of all three of them if any; and how the relationship promotes, enhances first year student academic engagement and student academic performance. The final outcome would be to understand why first year students performed in the manner in which they did at this particular rural university.

The study was set out to attempt to answer this set of four broad questions:

- How do academics engage the first year students?
- How do students engage themselves in academic work?
- What explains the nature and the level of student engagement within the first year of study in an undergraduate programme, and if any, their relations to student performance?
- How does student engagement relate to student performance?

8.4 The concluding remarks on student engagement

This study produced numerous findings. Some of these findings were earlier on referred to as familiar findings, suggesting that other studies have produced similar findings previously. They may have been produced in different context using different methodologies. The first part of this concluding remarks section on student engagement presents some of these findings. These findings may be usual or familiar findings, but they are important for this study as they provide the background and the stance upon which some of the arguments presented in this thesis are based. The second part of this section presents the summary of the key findings and the extent to which these key findings have responded to the key research questions that this study

attempted to respond to. The subsections (8.4.1 to 8.4.3) in this section of the chapter are formulated based on the key research questions.

The study found that the majority of the students that were registered in this rural university were Black South Africans from the KZN province and largely from the Northern part of Zululand, mainly from rural areas, from families of low socio-economic status, born and or raised by parents with reasonably high levels of illiteracy and unemployed. Some of the general findings suggest that these are largely first generation students and they have no family, siblings or parents that have been in higher education before them. The inference made was that rural based universities tend to attract students from their neighbourhood. The students were predominantly Zulu speaking. The average age group of this particular cohort of students was 19 years of age suggesting that they had completed grade 12 the previous year. The average entry at university is 18 years. This suggests that these students began their schooling at the age of seven or may have repeated a grade while in high school or may have stayed one year at home for a variety of reasons. The majority of which are first entry students. This background is presented to contextualize the key findings that are presented in the subsections sections that follow. There were various factors that were found to be useful in understanding student engagement. Most of these factors are used as evidence to inform and validate the claims made hereunder within the boundaries of the research questions listed in section 8.3 above.

8.4.1 The role of academic staff members in promoting student engagement

In response to the first research question: How do academics engage first year students? The study found that academic staff members' attempts in engaging students are constrained by several factors, including large class sizes and lecture styles. This was found to be limiting academic staff members' intentions in giving constructive feedback to the students based on tests and assignments that they may have written. Secondly, academic staff members are challenged to introduce innovative and engaging teaching strategies; citing the large classes and heavy work load as limiting factors. Thirdly, student-staff interactions were generally low; this was the view from both students and academic staff members. Students who had low or poor linguistic capital lacked confidence to approach academics for assistance.

While these issues of large class, teaching methods and open invitations are known to have influenced student engagement in class by lecturers, the continuance of these rationalities as reasons for not strengthening student engagement needs to be re-visited to maximise student engagement rather than reasons for why it would not improve the situation. For example, who would take up the open door opportunity to engage with academic staff on academic issues related to the lectures held? Perhaps those students that are confident enough and who have read and had self-engagement prior to meeting with the lecturing staff, would be the ones who would most likely take this opportunity. Taking into consideration the biography of students, it would be most unlikely that the first year students would respond to the open door call by lecturers. Hence the open door call may be an opportunity to develop student engagement in academic issues, but the reality is that students seldom make use of it and if they do, it would be because of extension of time, or other technical and personal issues not related to the academic engagement but which might have a bearing on their academic work.

The point made was that academic staff members had an open door policy welcoming students to come for consultation. Large class sizes reduce students to numbers and statistics and not known by names and surnames. This further distances the students from the central park of access to knowledge and leaving them in the periphery. As a result of that the students' educational experiences were affected.

8.4.2 How do students engage themselves in academic work?

In response to the second research question on how students engage themselves in academic work, the study found that students tend to use their own creativity and initiatives to navigate around challenging academic and social activities, circumstances and practices. Secondly, the phenomenon of student-self-engagement emerged as a novel feature that seeks to further understand how students engaged. The findings suggested that due to the fact that some students stay in off-campus residences, where basic services are limited, they tend to use day time and sometimes lecture time to do their assignments and prepare for group discussions. While this phenomenon was initially understood as a challenge, it was later found that

enthusiastic level students exploit the use technology by recording lectures while they self-engage in other constructive academic activities.

Thirdly, students that tend to perform well academically are mostly active members of study groups and students that perform poorly (academically) are mostly students which are inactive and detached from active group activities.

Fourthly, peer learning or student study groups that have mutual benefits are most popular and effective means of learning, making collaborative learning a popular and effective learning educational experience.

8.4.3 The nature and the level of student engagement

The third and the fourth research questions: What explains the nature and the level of student engagement within first year of study in an undergraduate programme, and if any their relations to student performance? The fourth question: How does student engagement relate to student performance? The analysis of data, and the key findings found that there is a direct relationship between student academic performance and the nature and the level of their engagement. Chapter seven showed a linear model that pointed out this interrelationship.

The study found that student engagement is an individual student's responsibility. The university environment contributes in the manner in which students engage in both social and academic activities. Further, the study found that there is relationship between how students engage, the extent to which they engage and their levels of academic performance. The nature of student engagement; which could either be qualitative or quantitative, vary from one student to the other, thus creating the three levels of engagement, the non-complaint level, the moderate level and the enthusiastic level. These levels and the nature of student engagement determine the level of academic performance of individual students. Within this context, student engagement was found to be a contributing factor to students' academic performance.

8.5 Recommendations

The study has highlighted a multi-layered approach towards understanding student engagement. However, there were aspects of the study that initially appeared to be unfamiliar and strange, such as the poor attendance of structured lectures. The students provided profound statements in mitigation of non-attendance. These mitigating reasons produced the student-self-engagement phenomenon. Future research studies may want to explore alternate ways to class-attendance and how technology could be used to enable students continued access to lecture sessions even if they have not physically presented themselves to classrooms. This may come up with a solution to large class sizes where academic staff members are unable to focus on individual students and where students are unable to find seats in the lecture room and face with a situation of standing at the door ways or sitting on the floor thus missing out on what is being presented.

Secondly, future studies could also focus on innovative strategies that academic staff members could adopt to enhance their practice in the large class sizes.

Thirdly, reading was another aspect that appeared to be a challenge to the majority of students and may require further interrogation with the aim of improving students' poor reading skills which in turn affect students' academic writing and communication with academic staff.

8.6 Significance of the study

This study is significant to first year students in that they would be able to know and understand the challenges that they face as first year students, how they can address these challenges through the examples and experiences presented by other first year students as recorded in this thesis. These may include the exploitation of technology to enhance their student engagement, self-engagement peer support, etc.

The study is also significant to higher education policy makers in that they would be in a position to distribute resources in a manner that is focused in reducing inequalities in higher education, would improve infrastructure development and increase human resources in order reduce the current high lecture-student ratios.

Academic staff of the universities would benefit from this study by understanding how some student support programmes like tutorials affect students in negative ways. Academic staff members will also be in a position to reflect on their teaching practice: come up with innovative ways that will enhance and develop student engagement; like use of technology. Further, universities and academic staff members will be in a position to develop and structure first year modules in such a way that these modules accommodate student diversity based on the perspectives of students that this thesis has offered.

8.7 Limitations of the study

I would like to reiterate that this study focused on first-year students registered at the University of Zululand for the Bachelor of Education programmes. I should stress that my study has been primarily concerned with student engagement in their first year of study and used UNIZULU as the case study. The analysis only concentrated on how student engagement relates to academic performance. My findings were subsequently restricted to how students engage in academic related activities and how their engagement relates to their academic performance. There was no intention to go beyond the chosen Faculty of Education because it is the largest in the institution and has students specializing in wider subject areas which are covered in other faculties. It has been mentioned in the methodology chapter that the intention was not understand student engagement in relation to subject area specialization. Further, I attempted to address the role played by academic staff members in promoting student engagement. In the process, I addressed the influence of the university environment as the site of intellectual engagement in promoting student engagement and the extent in which the university enables such intellectual engagement. The findings of this study are limited to the site in which they were generated, but can provide valuable scholarship to other similar environments and contexts.

8.8 The contribution in the research gaze on student engagement

Over and above the recommendations for future studies that I have offered previously, this study has produced another lens in which student engagement could be understood. Firstly, student engagement is the responsibility of an individual student. Secondly, student engagement needs to be understood in the context of students' cultural heritage. Thirdly, self-engagement is a critical phenomenon that transcends into various levels of student engagement levels.

Student engagement is the responsibility of an individual student and is informed by extent to which the student is motivated, psychologically oriented and the behavioural patterns. These elements contribute immensely to the both the quantitative and qualitative nature of student engagement. The nature of student engagement contributes to the levels of student engagement and subsequently determines the performance levels. In this context, this study contributes to academic staff members to see students and unique individuals that aspire for change, growth and development before they see them as a group or a class of students.

The effects of students' cultural heritage contribute to the student's nature and level of engagement. Students need to be understood as both unique individuals and as members of a cultural grouping with internal dynamics, beliefs and challenges. Students possess cultural signals that ought to be understood in the manner that would enhance student's participation in academic activities without fear and low confidence levels. Through its findings, this study, seeks to make a contribution to a multicultural approach towards student engagement, accepting the demographic diversity as one of the precincts of the student engagement.

Self-engagement is critical phenomenon that transcends into various levels of student engagement. Self-engagement as an emerging phenomenon needs to be enhanced as it enables students to independently engage. This student-self-engagement phenomenon is seen as increasing students' self-confidence while engaging with peers in study groups. While peer learning was a common practice amongst students, individual students had to prepare for

engagement thus making an individual group member an active participant. The significance of this finding is that while group work was favoured in this particular institution as one of the solutions to large class sizes; self-engagement needs to be promoted at the earlier stages of students' academic integration because as later on in the university life of the students; learning shall become the individual student's sole responsibility.

8.9 The autobiographical reflection

Undertaking this research study began as educational activity meant to obtain the highest academic qualification in the National Qualification Framework, but later on, my engagement turned to become an invaluable learning experience in my lifetime. Engaging actively in this research process helped me gain more insights and meaningful understanding of the nature of research.

Research is quite a messy and a reiterative process. I have learnt the significance of the research proposal mainly as means to assist the researcher to reach the data generation stage, and that the research proposal provides no guarantees of taking one towards the completion of the thesis as data and findings may suggest otherwise. I now know that undertaking a research project is not similar to fitting in the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Research can be frustrating, tedious, sometimes challenging and yet rewarding. I know now that it is a rewarding educational experience at this level. This study has provided me with valuable knowledge, skills and experiences that I shall always treasure and share with students that I work with including friends, my own children and family members. As a writing centre coordinator, I feel empowered to guide, support and mentor students that are still beginning similar educational research journeys.

I now know through the findings of my own study how to approach a first-year student at a university. I have an evidence based depiction of how isolated he / she feels within the confines of the university where orientation, induction may not have properly responded to the

integration needs. Furthermore, I am aware that students could either decide to stay or be unintentionally forced by circumstances to operate at the non-compliant level. In addition, I know how linguistic capital can be a limiting factor towards effective student engagement and academic performance.

I now better understand how (African) Zulu female students (in particular) suffer silently because of their upbringing, religious convictions and cultural stereotypes.

What began as the search for literature for a research study, has now become an exclusive resource in understanding debates, major and minor discourses in the South African Higher Education system, more especially about the history of the South African Higher Education sector and the effects that history have on the current university students, particularly those that come from backgrounds where generations were deprived access to education.

I am able to articulate my position, challenge and constructively critique arguments and claims with confidence, backed by literature, theory and evidence, particularly on discourses relating to first year students' experience.

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Annexure A: Provisional ethical approval



15 June 2015

Mr Jeffrey Siphwe Mkhize 914367521
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Mr Mkhize

Protocol reference number: HSS/0487/015D

Project title: Student engagement in the first year of study in undergraduate programmes in Higher Education.

Provisional Approval - Expedited

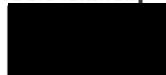
I wish to inform you that your application in connection with the above has been granted provisional approval, subject to:

1. Gatekeeper permission letters being obtained.
2. Research instrument being submitted.

Kindly submit your response to Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair), as soon as possible.

This approval is granted provisionally and the final approval for this project will be given once the above condition has been met. Research may not begin until full approval has been received from the HSSREC.

Yours faithfully



Dr S Singh (Chair)

/pw

cc Supervisor: Professor Labby Ramrathan
cc Academic Leader Research: Professor P Morojele
cc School Administrator: Ms B Bhengu, Ms T Khumalo & Mr SN Mthembu

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howick College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

Annexure B: Final Ethical Approval



26 August 2015

Mr Jeffrey S Mkhize 914367521
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Mr Mkhize

Protocol reference number: HSS/0487/0150

Project title: Student engagement in the first year of study in undergraduate programmes in Higher Education.

Full Approval – Expedited

This letter serves to notify you that your application in connection with the above has now been granted full approval.

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach/Methods must be reviewed and approved through an amendment/modification prior to its implementation. Please quote the above reference number for all queries relating to this study. Please note: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

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

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully



Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

/sx

cc Supervisor: Professor Labby Ramrathan

cc Academic Leader Research: Professor P. Morojele

cc School Administrator: Ms B Bherigu, Ms T Khumak, Ms PW Ndiranda & Mr SN Mchambu

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Annexure C: Gatekeeper's permission



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Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Innovation Office

Mr. JS Mkhize
School of Education
College of Humanities
University of KwaZulu Natal

Per email: mkhizejs@gmail.com

05 August 2015

Dear Mr. Mkhize

**REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT UNIZULU "STUDENT
ENGAGEMENT IN THE FIRST YEAR OF STUDY IN UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES IN
HIGHER EDUCATION"**

Your letter to me, dated 18 February 2015, refers.

I hereby grant approval for you to conduct part of your research at UNIZULU, as per the methodologies stated in your research proposal and in terms of the data collection instruments that you have submitted. I note also that the University of KwaZulu Natal has issued an ethical clearance certificate and having read the documentation, I am happy to accept that certificate.

You may use this letter as authorization when you approach the appropriate persons. Please note that permission is based on the documentation that you have submitted. Should you revise your research instruments, or use additional instruments, you must submit those to us as well.

I wish you well in your research.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Nokuthula Kunene
Chairperson: University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee

Annexure D: South African Survey of Student Engagement (Instrument)



South African Survey of Student Engagement 2013

This is a facsimile of the 2013 SASSE survey. The survey itself will be administered online.

1. Think about the current academic year. How often have you done each of the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

- a. Asked questions or contributed to module/subject discussions in other ways
- b. Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before handing it in
- c. Attended class without having completed readings or assignments
- d. Attended an art exhibit, play, or other theatre performance (dance, music, etc.)
- e. Asked another student to help you understand module/subject material
- f. Explained module/subject material to other students
- g. Prepared for exams by discussing or working through module/subject material with other students
- h. Worked with other students on projects or assignments
- i. Gave a module/subject presentation

2. During the current academic year, about how often have you done the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

- a. Combined ideas from different modules/subjects when completing assignments
- b. Connected your learning to societal problems or issues
- c. Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, economic, etc.) in module/subject discussions or writing assignments
- d. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue
- e. Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her point of view
- f. Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept
- g. Connected ideas from your modules/subjects to your prior experiences and knowledge

3. During the current academic year, about how often have you done the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

- a. Talked about your career plans with a lecturer
- b. Worked with a staff member on activities other than academic work (committees, projects, student groups, etc.)
- c. Discussed module/subject topics, ideas, or concepts with a lecturer outside of class
- d. Discussed your academic performance with a lecturer

4. During the current academic year, how much has your academic work emphasised the following?

Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little

- a. Memorising module/subject material (facts, ideas, etc.)
- b. Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations
- c. Identifying the different parts of an idea, experience, or argument in detail (analysing)
- d. Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source
- e. Forming a new idea or understanding by putting together various pieces of information

5. During the current academic year, to what extent have your lecturers done the following?

Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little

- a. Clearly explained module/subject outcomes and requirements
- b. Presented module/subject sessions in an organised way
- c. Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
- d. Provided feedback on a draft or work in progress
- e. Provided detailed feedback shortly after you completed tests or assignments

Annexure E: Informed Consent letter: Academic Staff Members



Informed consent letter for academic staff members participating in the research project

School of Education, College of Humanities

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Edgewood Campus

Dear Colleague

My name is Jeffrey Sipiwe Mkhize; I am a PhD student at the, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood campus.

The title of my research project is: **Student engagement in the first year of study in undergraduate programmes in Higher Education.** The broad focus of the research project is to explore student engagement in the academic work in the first year of study of their qualification at the University of Zululand: The case study of the Faculty of the Faculty of Education.

You have been identified as a possible participant in an interview process to produce some data on student academic engagement. The data that will be produced will help us understand student academic engagement in their first year of study. Student engagement is seen as a valid indication of institutional excellence. You will be interviewed. The interviews will be conducted at times and places that are convenient to you.

Please note that:

- Your confidentiality is guaranteed as your inputs will not be attributed to you in person, but reported only as a population member opinion.
- The interview is once off and would take approximately one hour.
- Any information given by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- This interview will be recorded for the convenience of the Research during the data analysis process.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.

I can be contacted at: Email: mkhizejs@gmail.com

Cellular phone number: 0843539590, Home Number: 0312618590, Work: 0359026248

You may also contact my Research Supervisor

Professor Labby Ramrathan: E-Mail address: ramrathanp@ukzn.ac.za

Cell: +27 826749829. OR +27 31 2608065

The following office can also be contacted

University of KwaZulu Natal, Research Ethics Offices: HSSREC, Private Bag X 5400, Durban, 4000, Telephone: +27312603587,

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

Kind regards

Mr. J.S. Mkhize



Academic Staff Member informed consent form

Declaration by the academic staff members participating in the research project

I..... (Full names of Academic staff member /Lecturer) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project and I voluntarily agree to participate in the research project. I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

I hereby consent to the audio recording of my interviews: YES / NO

Signature of Participating Lecturer:

Date: _____

Annexure F: Informed consent letter: Students



Informed consent letter for student participating in the research project

School of Education, College of Humanities

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Edgewood Campus

Dear Student Participant

My name is Jeffrey Sipiwe Mkhize; I am a PhD student at the, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood campus.

The title of my research project is: **Student engagement in the first year of study in undergraduate programmes in Higher Education.** The broad focus of the research project is to explore student engagement in the academic work in the first year of study of their qualification at the University of Zululand: The case study of the Faculty of Education.

You have been identified as a possible participant in an interview process to produce some data on student academic engagement. The data that will be produced will help us understand student academic engagement in their first year of study. Student engagement is seen as a valid indication of institutional excellence. You will be interviewed. The interviews will be conducted at times and places that are convenient to you.

Please note that:

- Your confidentiality is guaranteed as your inputs will not be attributed to you in person, but reported only as a population member opinion.
- The interview is once off and would take approximately one hour.
- Any information given by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- This interview will be recorded for the convenience of the Research during the data analysis process.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.

I can be contacted at:

Email: mkhizejs@gmail.com Cellular phone number: 0843539590 Home: 0312618590

Work: 0359026248

You may also contact my Research Supervisor

Professor Labby Ramrathan: E-Mail address: ramrathanp@ukzn.ac.za Cell: +27 826749829.
OR +27 31 2608065

The following office can also be contacted

University of KwaZulu Natal

Research Ethics Offices: HSSREC

Private Bag X 54001

Durban, 4000

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

Kind regards

Mr. J.S. Mkhize

Student informed consent form



Declaration student participating in the research project

I.....

(Full names of student), student number....., hereby confirm that I am an undergraduate student at the University of Zululand studying towards a Bachelor of Education. I was a first year student in 2014. I hereby state that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I voluntarily agree to participate in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

I hereby consent to the audio recording of my interviews: YES / NO

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Annexure: G Students Semi-structured interview questions

STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

Student engagement in the first year of study in undergraduate programmes in higher education

Name: _____ .Surname: _____

Student number: _____

Cellular phone number: _____

Gender: _____

Race group: _____ . Ethnic group: _____

Age: _____ B. Ed. Programme: _____

First year at University: _____

District/ Municipality/ home town: _____ . Home Language: _____

Orientation Programme

1. Did you attend the orientation programme? (Yes or No)
2. If you did not attend the first year orientation can you explain why?
3. If you attended the orientation programme; how did it help to shape your first year at university?
4. If you attended the orientation programme; what did you find interesting and most useful?
5. If you attended the orientation programme; what did you find not interesting and least useful?
6. If you attended the orientation programme (and it did not help you); why do you think it was a waste of time?
7. Orientation programme: what could have been done differently to make it better and helpful to new students?
8. What do you suggest UNIZULU should have done to make you feel welcome?

First classroom experience

1. What can you say about your first day in the classroom? What story can you tell about your first day? (about the lecturer, classroom, teaching, etc. anything that you find useful that you can relate to)
2. Do you remember your first assignments? What was your experience; describe how you felt, how you managed to cope with them (if you coped). Tell me a story about your assignment experience. What mark did you get, were you happy? Tell me your story.
3. What is the highest assignment mark that you have ever got? What did you do to achieve such high marks?
4. What is the lowest assignment mark that you have ever got? What do you think the reason to achieve such low marks? What did you do to improve?
5. What is the highest test mark that you have ever got? What did you do to achieve such high marks?
6. What is the lowest test mark that you have ever got? What do you think the reason to achieve such low marks? What did you do improve?
7. Which is your favourite module? Why?
8. Which was your worst module? (Public enemy number 1). Why? How did you cope though? What made it your enemy?
9. How often have you used the library, and how has this helped you. (are skilled enough to navigate library systems on your own?)
10. Explain your success at university in your first year. Were you successful?
11. Talk about the language of instruction.
12. Talk about technology at university. (Computers, internet, emails, etc.)
13. How has teaching and learning at this university met your expectations?
14. Talk about Course materials, textbooks, (learning resources). Did you have all of these?

Coping at university

1. How did you make friends?
2. How did you choose the friend(s) that you have?
3. What influence do your friends have on your academic performance?
4. What do you benefit from your friends that help you improve your academic performance?

5. What negative experiences did you have with friends that had an impact in your learning?
6. What strategies did you use to cope at university during your first year?
7. Did you miss home?
8. Describe your feeling (to be away from home). Tell me your story?
9. What was your biggest challenge? Your biggest stress (stressor) (disappointment)?
10. What was your biggest achievement?
11. What motivates you to keep performing well academically?
12. What hinders your academic performance?
13. How were you challenged by the university?
14. How does the following contribute to what you call success:
 - Self
 - University (lecturers, students, support programmes, curriculum)
 - Family
15. What would say was the pinnacle of your first year)? Explain!
16. How do you feel about your first year in college? In what ways were your expectations met? What surprised you?

University support programmes

1. What support does the university give you in order to enhance your performance?
2. What support programmes exist in your Faculty / Department?
3. Talk about support programmes and their role in your academic performance.
4. How effective is the faculty advising / support system?
5. Library, Tutoring, computer Labs, Writing Centre, etc.

Accommodation

1. Do you leave on Campus or off Campus?
2. What story can you tell about your on or off campus experience.
3. What role do you think accommodation plays in your academic performance?
4. How would you compare your place of residence from your home? The good and the bad.
5. How is the relationship between the students and the surrounding community?

Experiences about lecturing staff

1. How would you describe a good lecturer?
2. If you were to advise your good lecturer; what would you say to him or her?
3. How would you describe a bad lecturer? How would you describe a difficult lecturer?
4. If you were to advise the not so good lecturer; what would you say to him or her?
5. How did your lecturing staff encourage you to perform better? (Motivate/ promote academic engagement/ academic excellence)
6. What are things that some of the lecturing staff did to encourage you to perform better?
7. What are things that some of the lecturing staff did to discourage / demotivate you with reference to your academic performance.
8. When last did you have a formal appointment with a lecturer to discuss your performance or an assignment?

Influence by significant others

1. Looking at your first year experience at the university, how has each of the following contributed (directly or indirectly to your academic work: good or poor performance)
 - Parents / family / friends / study groups
 - Lecturers / Language of instructions /
 - University
 - Accommodation / money

Role of parents / family in promoting student engagement

1. What do your parents do to promote:
 - Positive academic engagement?
 - Persistence
2. What does your society expect from you and how does that motivate you?
3. Who else in your family has a university qualification? (Give details).

Choice of university

1. Was this your first choice university? Why did you choose this university?
2. Was an education qualification your first choice? (Give details about your choice of qualification(s)).
3. How has 2 and 1 made you perform the way you do?

4. Tell me a story about Unizulu (as your university of choice). How does it make you feel and perform?
5. Have you ever been to a university setting before admission? Open day, sport etc.
6. What was your dream university?
7. Would you have performed differently (for the better) if you were admitted at your dream university?
8. Tell me about your ideal university

Pre-university schooling / learner preparedness transition into university / school background

1. Take me through your pre-university schooling: from Preschool to high school.
2. How has your schooling prepared you for university? (If it did).
3. How has your schooling failed you? (If it did).
4. What would your school have done differently to prepare you for university?
5. What are the highlights of your schooling, that you believe still matter to your university education?
6. What would you have loved to bring along to university?
7. How has your school background shaped (not shaped) your performance?
8. What did you bring to the university with you?
9. How does content and workload of the classes compare with your high school classes?
10. How has large numbers of students contributed to your performance?
11. How do you stay organized for classes?

First year student again

1. If you were to be a first year student again; what would you
 - Continue to do?
 - Do differently?

Advise to first year students

1. Imagine you have a group of first year students to advise; what would you say them.

Advise to the University Vice Chancellor

1. If you were to meet the University Vice Chancellor; what would you tell her regarding your first year experience? What would you suggest to her that needs to be done

properly/ better/ differently in order to accommodate/ welcome first year students in a manner that is going to improve first year students' academic engagement?

Annexure: H Semi structured questions -Academic staff members

LECTURERS' QUESTIONS

Student engagement in the first year of study in undergraduate programmes in higher education

Biographical Details

Name: _____

Surname: _____

Cellular phone number: _____.

Gender: _____

Race group: _____. Ethnic group: _____

Age :(not compulsory) _____

Qualifications

Qualifications and year obtained:

Area (s) of specialization

Module taught: _____

Area of Specialization: _____

Number of years teaching this module: _____

Success rate of the years

What is your average pass rate in this module over the years?

How would you rate your student success?

Teaching Experience

Pre-university teaching experience: _____

University teaching experience: _____

Professional Development

(General) Workshops attended over the past 12 months: _____

Subject specific workshops attended over the past 12 months: _____

Conference presentations over the past 12 months: _____

Most recent publications: _____

Current studies: _____

How do you relate professional development to your teaching?

Promoting student engagement

What is your view on student engagement?

How do you think student engagement is best facilitated?

How do you help students experience success?

How do you promote student engagement / involvement?

What are the limitations/ challenges that hinder effective student engagement?

How do you overcome limitations/ challenges above?

How do you give feedback to your students? (Test/ assignments/ tasks, etc.)

Describe your teaching philosophy

Relationship with students

What kind of students do you like to work with? / What type of students could you teach most effectively?

What is your approach to empower your students?

How do you individualize instruction for your students?

How do you establish and foster good relationships with students?

General:

Relationship with colleagues

Relationship with parents

Identification of at risk students

Collaborative teaching

Staff meetings

Annexure I: Document Analysis guidelines



Document analysis

Qualitative document analysis schedule: for assessment of documents in various first year undergraduate programmes. I shall be looking at all the assessment records of all subjects for first year undergraduate programmes:

- Tests, Assignments, Examinations, other forms of assessments (where applicable: e.g. practicals)
- Records of interventions (assistance / help / support given to students –where applicable and available.

I shall look for the following key information.

- How many students were registered in the programme?
- How many qualified for the examinations?
- How many did not qualify for the examinations?
- How many passed ALL the first year subjects?
- How many failed ALL the first year subjects?
- How many students did not qualify to proceed to second level of study because of the Departmental rules?
- Which subjects did most students perform poorly on?
- Which subjects did most students perform best on?
- What discussions took place at the Examinations Board?

Any other information that may be relevant to this study will be looked at.

Annexure J: Editing Certificate

DR GIFT MHETA

PhD Linguistics

5 Elm Gardens
17 Cromwell Road
Glenwood
Durban
4001

11 April 2017

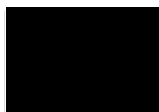
EDITING CERTIFICATE

Re: Jeffrey Sipiwe Mkhize

I confirm that I have edited Jeffrey Sipiwe Mkhize's PhD thesis titled, "Student Engagement in the First Year of Study in Undergraduate Programmes in Higher Education". I am a freelance editor specialising in proofreading and editing academic documents. My highest qualification is a PhD in Linguistics. Currently, I am the Writing Centre coordinator at Durban University of Technology.

Should you need anything clarified, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Gift Mheta