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Stories of students identified as at-risk: Insights into student retention and support at a South African University.

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A thesis submitted to the Wits School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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GENDER SENSITIVITY

The concern with gender sensitivity in this thesis was managed with the use of the singular/plural – they or theirs, which was used instead of the alternatives of he/she, or s/he, or his/hers, or the preference of her over him. Where he or she was used, it indicated the actual gender of the person to whom was being referred.

DECLARATION

Under the supervision of Professor Felix Maringe, I, Nevensha Sing, hereby declare that this research is my own original work and that all sources have been accurately reported and acknowledged. It is submitted to the Faculty of Humanities for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This thesis has not previously, in its entirety or in part, been submitted to any other University for any degree or examination in the interest of an academic qualification.



_____

Nevensha Sing

16 March 2015

_____

Date

ABSTRACT

The perturbing phenomenon of wastage, (revealed through incidences of unsatisfactory levels of student retention, poor pass and completion rates and an increase in repetition rates) is a cause for concern for universities as it has a bearing on financial expenditure as well as institutional reputation. For purposes of this study, being at-risk is synonymous with being vulnerable. Student vulnerability is not a homogeneous phenomenon and therefore different student support structures, strategies and policies need to be devised for different issues and problems experienced by vulnerable students. The study argues that as long as effective and adequate institutional support is lacking, student vulnerability will continue to be a 'wastage' catalyst.

Through narrative research and an online survey, this study explores the stories and experiences of students who identified themselves in their own words, to be at risk. This study uses an *integrated approach* to expand the notion of vulnerability by combining three approaches: *Risk-Hazards* approach, (the causes and effects of identified risks/hazards); *Political Economy* approach, (how political and economic factors underscore susceptibility to a risk/hazard); and the *Resilience* approach (how individuals cope with stress).

Researching *with* vulnerable people uncovers the 'hidden' marginalised lives of individuals or groups whose voices are often absent from mainstream discourses. Although vulnerability is widely used as a conceptual idea in many fields in both the hard and social sciences, its use in the field of education, particularly in Higher Education (HE), is under-conceptualised. Framed within the conceptual theory of vulnerability, this study sought to determine how students in universities had experienced the phenomenon of being at-risk, why they felt they had been susceptible, and how they had coped with it. The study sought to determine how their narratives of vulnerability and being at risk could inform debates and policy on student support and retention in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

The study adopted a narrative research approach based on the foundation of socio-cultural theory, embedded within a qualitative research framework. A qualitative framework in the field of investigation necessitates a study of phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of and interpret these experiences in terms of the meaning that people bring to them. As such, the study explored the phenomenon of vulnerability through the lens of the lived experiences of self-identified, students at risk at a HEI in the Gauteng Province, in SA. The study espouses an interpretive post-positivist paradigm within a qualitative methods design that uses a multi-stage procedure, essential for collecting narrative and survey data.

Data are collected through narrative interviews with 13 self-identified, at-risk students from different faculties of the university, across different study levels.

The ethical challenges experienced indicate that the narrative researcher should be required to have had appropriate training with a support system in place for both them and their respondents. This is because sophisticated psycho-social skills and interventions are demanded by such research. Further, the evidence suggests that doctoral students' training reproduces the marginalisation of vulnerability through inadequately addressing ways of researching with vulnerable people.

The study argues that the support interventions at HEIs exclude a silent number of students who suffer various forms of less obvious, but nevertheless equally and if not more debilitating vulnerabilities. Such students are not supported through conventional support strategies and structures and therefore feel marginalised from mainstream support services. Students at academic risk negotiate, use facilities available to them in so far as they are aware of these, despite some levels of scepticism about the effectiveness of these facilities. Students facing other kinds of risk cope with their vulnerability through the relationships developed through friendship, family and religious support. Stress is based on the individual's perception and interpretation of demands placed on them and not the demands themselves. Stress management of students through mentorship, can contribute to retention and throughput.

Three major models are investigated in this study: student vulnerability, support and retention models. The three models invite this study to ask crucial questions to improve the throughput of students at-risk. However, one model considered in isolation cannot provide a holistic answer. As such an integrated model combining all three models that can be used to ameliorate vulnerabilities experienced at multiple levels of the institution was adopted. The study proposes an integrated model whereby institutions combine issues of student vulnerability, support, and retention into a single coherent policy and strategy.

Understanding individual student vulnerabilities in a university can provide insight into how the institutions, their systems, and organisation harbour their own vulnerabilities. A key aspect of introducing a systemic and systematic approach to support which flows top-down from management to first-year, can address such institutional vulnerability.

Keywords:

at-risk students, vulnerability, wastage, dropout, support, retention, narrative research

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS EMANATING FROM THIS RESEARCH

Research plans for Data Collection and Analysis, October 19, 2012, WSoE PhD weekend.

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If you want to walk quickly, walk alone, if you want to walk far, walk together.

African Saying

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DEDICATION

To: His Divine Grace Srila A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and the devotees of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

An offering of love to my beloved parents, Mr. W. M. Sing (PrabhaVisnu Dasa) and Mrs Parsanthee Sing (Prema Bhakti Devi Dasi) for sanctifying my life and home with their endless blessing and through them, bestowing on me and my family, the shelter of Lord Krishna's Mercy.

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Nevensha Sing

March 2015

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GLOSSARY

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AP	Access Programme
B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
CCDU	Career Counselling and Development Unit
CHE	Council on Higher Education
cr	Cross-reference
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DoE	Department of Education
EBE	Engineering and the Built Environment
FOMO	Fear of missing out
HAU	Historically advantaged university
HDU	Historically disadvantaged university
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institution(s)
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IASAS	International Association of Student Affairs and Services
IO	International Office
IT	Information technology
ICT	Information and communications technology
ISKCON	International Society for Krishna Consciousness
NASPA	Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
NCHE	National Commission on Higher Education
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRF	National Research Foundation

NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid System
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
SA	South Africa
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAERA	South African Education Research Association Conference
SAPSE	South African Post School Education
SARUA	Southern African Regional Universities Association
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SDLU	Student Development Leadership Unit
SMS	Short message service
SRC	Student Representative Council
SSA	Sub Saharan Africa
TB	Tuberculosis
TLC	Tender loving care
UCT	University of Cape Town
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
USB	Universal Serial Bus
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand
WSoE	Wits School of Education
WWW	World-wide web or internet
ZAR	Zuid-Afrikaanse Rand (South African Rand – currency for SA)

CHAPTER 1
CONTEXT OF THE STUDY: UNFULFILLED PROMISES

Fate is what happens to you, while freewill is how you would respond.

1.1 Introduction

With reference to the quote above, the courageous response and commitment of vulnerable students to their academic goals, despite considerable difficulties faced, irrespective of whether they were undergraduates or postgraduates, is reason for research, revision and expansion in the areas of student support and retention in South African HE. South African HE is notorious for its wastage, in terms of reduced levels of student retention, poor pass rates, high levels of non-completion, escalating dropout and repetition statistics (Green Paper, DHET, 2012; Jansen, 2011; Van Zyl, 2010). Although importance is placed on student support in universities, such support does not have the desired effect in the face of the many challenges faced by students. Two of the most pressing ones are socio-economic status (SES), and the problematic South African school system which does little to prepare students for tertiary education. Students in universities experience vulnerability, due to both external as well as internal factors, and this often has had negative effects on the fulfilment of their true academic potential. The disturbing phenomenon of wastage, (characterised by incidences of unsatisfactory levels of student retention, poor pass and completion rates and an increase in repetition rates) is therefore a cause for concern for universities - from the point of view of financial expenditure as well as reputation. There exists a large corpus of research on the causes and consequences of such wastage. However, it could be argued that a large proportion of this research utilised quantitative approaches and generally drew evidence from secondary sources, to arrive at conclusions about the nature, extent, causes and effects of the wastage phenomena in HE (Maringe & Sing, 2014; Matthew, 2015; Swail, 2006).

There is a lack of evidence that relates to the lived experience of those who experience difficulties and challenges in HE, both in South Africa (SA) and in the rest of the world (Letseka, Cosser, Breier, & Visser, 2010; Leveson, McNeil, & Joiner, 2013; Wood, 2012). There exists little qualitative evidence which demonstrates ways in which students in universities experience difficulties that lead to such wastage. However, quantitative studies such as that of the CHE Task Team's proposal (Scott, 2013) offers to the field of HE that a focus on a flexible undergraduate curriculum structure, that allows for differential starting points, progression paths and thus duration, though not being flexible on exit standards and outcomes, may address diversity and inequality in students' educational backgrounds. This study attempted to explore how students in universities had experienced the

phenomenon of being at-risk, how they had coped with it, and how their narratives of vulnerability could inform student retention in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

The study is therefore about the nature of issues relating to at-risk[1] students and what HEIs could learn from their narrative experiences to not only improve retention but to make a contribution to a better understanding of the lived experience of the vulnerability of students. The purpose of this study was to explore the narratives of students and their vulnerability in HE that shape their experiences in a case study institution in SA. The data of vulnerable voices lends itself to qualitative research methods and through the process of categorisation and identification of as yet unaddressed problem areas, this work might have the potential to inform debates and strategies aimed at supporting students at risk and to better address the needs of students at risk.

The study was conducted with a specific focus on the narrative experiences of at-risk students in a South African University in the Gauteng Province. Thirteen interviews were conducted with students who volunteered and self-identified themselves as at-risk, of which two informed the pilot study and 11 remained as narrative interviews, while 95 students completed an online survey. The evidence indicated that students in HE had experienced the phenomenon of being at-risk and that this study, through their narrative experience of vulnerability, might be considered as significant to open the debate on how student support could improve retention.

Chapter 1 provides the context for this study by giving a background as to why this research was conducted. It identified the research questions that guided the study and then notes the significance and justification for undertaking the study. The background of the study situates student vulnerabilities in a changing global HE context and also includes a brief description of key concepts. The chapter concludes by providing the outline and structure of the chapters of the study.

[1] Although I use the term 'at-risk' students throughout this study, it needs to be pointed out that it is a problematic label that depicts students in deficit mode, without the acknowledgement of the structural factors that create risk. It is, however, a widely used catch phrase in academic circles when trying to determine which students require the services of various interventions. As such, I use this term, with caution and qualification, as well as awareness of the connotations attached. For purposes of this study, being at risk is used synonymously with being vulnerable – a category in which a surprising number of students for many different reasons would classify themselves. For clarity: *at risk* is written without a hyphen unless it is used as an adjective before a noun, e.g. at-risk student, but a student at risk.

1.2 Background to the study

The path to increasing student retention on campus is long and hard (Swail, Kuh, and Seidman (2006b)

Over the past two decades, since the first democratic elections in SA, coupled with the deracialisation of HE, significant changes have been made to HE institutional policy. Universities have concentrated on increasing and stabilising student enrolment numbers. However, the inadequate school preparation of a large proportion of candidates has posed a significant challenge (Kretzmann, 2012). There is an increasing concern that education systems across the world have continued to focus on broadening access without giving adequate attention to research or interventions that should have been designed to ensure that students succeed. As Scott (2012) stated, some HEIs hardly measure or analyse output and outcomes. The issue has grown in importance in SA and as Scott (2012) further contends, that even though the state has made large investments in increasing student enrolments and in providing financial aid, performance patterns reveal a poor return, in terms of graduates. There is a consensus in literature that despite over ZAR 4 billion a year having been spent on direct state subsidy and grants, the investment has not resulted in graduates (Letseka & Maile, 2008).

> *People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in the world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, make them.*
>
> George Bernard Shaw.

The above mind-set however, is easier said, than maintained. When situations get ‘tough to handle’, flight or escape is generally an easier option for most, but then when courage and tenacity overrides fear, a change can be made. The interest for this study arose through introspection and from personal experience as a full-time postgraduate student returning to university, after many years. It was my choice to embark on this journey of stress. As a busy, traditional Indian mother of three children, returning to HE was overwhelming at first. Many of the problems I describe that make up part of the experiences of other students have also been mine.

By and large, societies and families hold the hope that HE is a solution to economic problems and social exclusion. Even if it means mortgaging their home, plans are made to finance further education. So many students like myself, have dreams, hopes, desires, wishes and motivation to pursue education that is deemed worthwhile.

This study undertakes to share the experiences of students who had made the commitment to pursue a tertiary education but who had, at some point or the other, hit a roadblock in their journey. This study helps to put in their own words, their sense of vulnerability. The study therefore hopes to bring to light the links between student support and student retention. It is an attempt to contribute towards HEIs policy, by clarifying the nature and significance of some of the problems of student vulnerability.

Wastage in HE is the phenomenon from which this study originates. This chapter uncovers the wastage phenomena in different international settings, in addition to pointing out the broad strategic trends in HE, used to ameliorate these. Supporting student vulnerabilities, in a changing global HE context, is considered in four interrelated ways; firstly within an international context on student-related issues; secondly within an African context; thirdly, within a South African context; and fourthly, in the broader HE context. However, to begin, the study provides a brief clarification of the key terminologies used in the line of reasoning.

1.3 Key concepts

Three key definitions, *wastage*, *at-risk students*, and *student vulnerability*, need to be expanded to clarify the way in which I understand and use them.

1.3.1 Wastage in HE

HE in SA is characterised by different forms of wastage, for example, poor completion rates, high dropout rates, high failure rates, and poor attainment grades, among others. Wastage in South African HE has had many consequences. For example, viewed from the perspective of students who dropout, not only did they lose their initial financial investment, they were also likely to have significant debt for loans taken, were prone to loan default, in addition to the social aspects of loss of reputation and feelings of inadequacy. However, the most important thing that students lost was time - valuable 'life' time, time spent where little was gained (Swail, 2006, pp. 1-2).

1.3.2 Students at risk

The term student at-risk is a label that that could be both exclusive and discriminating. It is generally used to describe a wide range of groups such as recent high school graduates; adults returning to HE; university dropouts; illiterate adults; immigrants and students with limited English proficiency, amongst others. They are usually identified as those students who are viewed by their lecturers as being at-risk of failing and repeating their study courses and modules (Perez, 1998). This study argues against such assumptions to avoid

perpetuating the unproductive categorisation and stigmatisation when many more different forms of vulnerability exist.

1.3.3 Student vulnerability

While a variety of definitions of the term vulnerability have been suggested in the literature, this study adopts the view of Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, and Wisner (1994), namely the conditions that influence the capacity of students to confront the requirements of their studies successfully. The study argues that vulnerability therefore represents structural inequality, which might have compromised the student's achievement of learning goals and educational outcomes. As a result, for purposes of this study, being at-risk is synonymous with being vulnerable.

1.4 Student issues in a changing global HE context

An exposition of the contexts of vulnerable students in the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and parts of Africa and how student issues are addressed, is presented. A discussion on the South African context follows thereafter. The sections are briefly summarised in point form, highlighting key trends in the context of the respective continent and the issues raised, are revisited in the literature review.

1.4.1 The United States of America

Approximately 500 000 international students have chosen to study at universities in the USA, attracted by, amongst other factors, the reputation of many of the institutions, the latest technology, and the freedom to choose, or change subjects and schools (Studylink, 2014). Students have a choice of pursuing their studies either at an American College offering an undergraduate degree, or at an American University that also offers graduate degrees.

Universities in the USA have demonstrated their commitment to improving student retention, by hiring consultants who claim to have tested ways to improve retention. However, Tinto (2003) argues that the *universities' talk is superficial and cheap* (*italics* are my own).Tinto (2003, pp. 1-3) contends that universities have not adequately addressed the deeper roots of student attrition, as they have adopted ad hoc, add-on strategies, that are often ineffective and meaningless.

> …most universities do not take retention seriously. They treat student retention like so many other issues, as one more item to the list of issues to be addressed by the university…. they adopt what Parker Palmer calls the "add a course" strategy in addressing issues that face them. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies. Need to add address the issue of student retention, in particular that of new students? Add a freshman seminar or perhaps a freshman-mentoring programme… (Tinto (2003, p. 1).

USA universities, when faced with immigrants entering the HE system, upheld a vision, to "rid ethnic groups of their ethnic characteristics and to force them to acquire Anglo-Saxon values and behaviour" (Banks, 2006, p. 40). Leach (2011, p. 248), explains that the focus on cultural differences is not unique to the USA that had brought about policies to enable the assimilation of immigrants into the existing dominant culture. She likens this to a metaphor of joining a 'melting pot', as evident in New Zealand, where indigenous people have also been expected to assimilate into the dominant culture.

Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006, p. 1) highlight that students of colour, who had once been 'minority' students, are now the majority in number, totalling nearly half of the student body in some universities such as California State University, New Mexico State University, and the University of Texas in El Paso. Unfortunately, the enrolment and persistence rates of low-income students, such as those of African American, Latino, or Native American students, and students with disabilities, continue to lag behind white and Asian students (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). A later change in thinking in the USA, persuaded by trends in globalisation, saw a rejection of such assimilation policies in favour of a cultural pluralism argument (Leach, 2011). The 'salad bowl' analogy (as opposed to the 'melting pot' one), envisions each ethnic culture as being able to play an integral part in, as well as contribute to, society in total.

An additional challenge for the USA students is the tuition costs, which places HE out of reach for middle and low income families who have but one of two options: get into debt or put their university aspirations on hold (Peek and Burbank (2012). This contributes to perpetuating inequalities, and limiting political economic mobility. Research has demonstrated that meaningful employment in an occupation that promises long-term prospects, requires an employee to have earned a post-secondary education (Peek & Burbank, 2012).

The literature reviewed above on the USA HE context illustrated seven key issues as summarised below:

i. universities do not adequately address the causes of student attrition

ii. many institutions adopt ad hoc, add-on strategies that are often meaningless

iii. minorities are expected to assimilate into the dominant university culture

iv. minority students are now the majority in number

v. persistence rates of low-income students lag behind White and Asian students

vi. cultural pluralism has become a popular new global trend.

1.4.2 United Kingdom

The UK has a reputation for academic excellence with a choice of universities such as Oxford and Cambridge that combine university teaching and technology (Studylink, 2014). The UK boasts a well-developed, decentralised HE system. Douglass (2004, p. 13) counsels that when researchers consider a comparison of the HE system of the USA in relation to that of the UK, it must be borne in mind that the countries differ in undergraduate education structures. For example, a Bachelor Degree is a four-year program in the USA, in comparison to the three-year Bachelor Degree program in the UK.

Douglass (2004) reflects that the UK market demand for HE is somewhat 'quenched and stabilised.' He argues that the UK has a more considered view of the HE structures, in having less tertiary or post-school choices, since the now 'savvy [British] consumers' recognise the limits of pursuing a HE qualification as a 'vehicle' for securing employment in the current unstable economies.

The Browne Report (Browne, 2010, pp. 22-23) found that part-time students do not have the same access as full-time students to support for paying fees. Part-time students have to pay fees upfront; full-time students could defer the fees until they earned a salary. The findings further exposed that HEIs do not place as much importance on innovation in teaching and learning in part-time courses as they do in full-time courses. The Browne (2010) study also highlights the plight of the UK HE part-time students, who often lack Government financial support, and who cannot give up their jobs to improve their qualifications, even though they might have the desire to do so.

Thus the study advances from an understanding of the UK literature and experience of HE (see for example: Gibbs, Regan, & Simpson, 2006; McQueen, 2009; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-

Gauld, 2005) that amongst the reasons that students leave are, a lack of integration, dissatisfaction with course/institution, lack of preparedness, wrong choice of course, financial reasons or homesickness. However, the authors caution that the decisions of students to stay or leave the HEI are "complex and multifaceted" (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005, p. 710) and involves a "multi-layered set of factors", (Longden, 2002, p. 15).

The study now turns to consider an overview of the literature on some African perspectives of student vulnerability and strategies to address retention in HE

1.4.3 Africa

According to Kotecha (2012, p. 9), "One out of every four primary age children are still out of school, the capacity at the lower secondary, is half of what is required and at the upper secondary level, one third."

From 1991 to 1996, the number of students who had entered secondary and tertiary education in African countries increased from, 2.7 million to 9.3 million, (Kotecha, 2012). However, enrolment rates in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, are the lowest in the world, despite the fact that SADC countries contribute the highest amount of money into their Education sector (Koehn, 2012; Wycliffe, Samson, & Ayuya, 2013). Money has been pooled into Primary Education, and minimal money has been invested in HE. Kotecha (2012, pp. 6-8) argues that this phenomenon has contributed to HE being an elite system, where the competition is heightened for student access into HEIs. In addition, the impact of brain-drain, a lack of sufficient number of academics, a lack of infrastructure, educational resources, finances, has all contributed to the difficulties of creating a strong and sustainable HEI sector.

Kotecha (2012) contends that even though enrolments in SADC countries have improved over the past 50 years, when compared to Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), it lags behind in other countries globally. Comparatively, Africa's progress towards achieving global goals, such as Education for All (EFA), and Millennium Development Goals (target of universal primary education by 2015) despite being applauded, is not strong enough as yet to meet global demands and expectations (refer for example to: Carrim & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012; Dzvimbo, 2003; Wycliffe *et al*., 2013).

It stands to reason then, that even though student mobility is a global phenomenon, the numbers reflected in the SADC and the SSA regions, with increases from 2.2 million in 1999, to 4.5 million in 2008 reflect a crisis that requires an urgent, continent-wide effort to improve HE in Africa. Despite the UK, France and Portugal being key destinations in student mobility,

a new trend is demonstrated that sees 50% of the students from the SADC region now having chosen to study in another country in the same region, with the majority of students coming to SA. SA now ranks as the 11th biggest host country worldwide (Kotecha, 2012). The need therefore to support international students and their academic, social and cultural needs in SA, becomes inevitable.

The reviewed literature on the African continent in the HE context elucidates eleven key issues, as summarised below:

i. one out of every four primary age children are still not attending school,

ii. capacity at the lower secondary, is half of what is required,

iii. capacity at the upper secondary level, is one third of what is required,

iv. enrolment rates in the SADC countries are the lowest in the world,

v. HE is becoming an elite system, where there is competition for student access into HEIs,

vi. Sub-Saharan Africa is worst affected

vii. Africa is struggling to achieve the Education for All, and Millennium Development Goals,

viii. the crisis in HE in Africa, requires a continent-wide effort to improve,

ix. a change in trend sees 50% of the students from the SADC region, having chosen to study in another country in the same region,

x. a majority of students come to SA,

xi. SA ranks as the 11th biggest host country worldwide.

1.4.4 South Africa

The literature reviewed in the above sections on the HE contexts in the USA, UK and the African continent highlights five key issues:

i. despite ongoing studies that inform best practice, there is still a decline in student retention and throughput

ii. universities do not adequately address the causes of student attrition

iii. there is a global trend toward cultural pluralism

iv. Enrolments into primary, secondary and upper secondary levels of schooling in large parts of Africa is insufficient and below capacity

v. HE is an elite system, where there is strong competition for student access into HEIs.

Longden (2002, p. 3) cautions for the need to be sensitive to the differences between HE systems when drawing direct conclusions from respective findings. The points listed above, all pertain to some extent, to the South African HE context reviewed below.

Formal Education in SA comprises three levels - General Education and Training (GET), Further Education and Training (FET), and HE. In 2003 a new funding mechanism was introduced that changed the HE landscape in SA significantly (Inglesi & Pouris, 2008). SA inherited a three-tiered system of HE, comprising Universities, Technikons and Colleges that had not only been fragmented, segregated and differentially funded, publicly or privately, (see Table 1 below) and located, but had also been a system separated by race: Indian and African, Coloured and White (Skelton, 2013).

Table 1: Types of HEIs (Source: Adapted from DoE. (2008)

Institution type	Number
Publicly funded universities	17
Publicly funded universities of technology	6
Privately funded, accredited higher education providers	80
Total	103

Since 2004, the HE sector in SA has seen a transformation through a series of mergers and incorporations. The purpose was to restructure institutions so that current national needs could be addressed, and student access and sustaining growth in student numbers could be equalised (Inglesi & Pouris, 2008). SA now has 23 public universities comprising six public Universities of Technology, six public Comprehensive Universities and eleven Universities, as represented in Table 2 below:

Table 2: List of SA public universities (Source: Adapted from DoE. (2008)

Universities of Technology	Universities
1. Cape Peninsula University of Technology	1. North-West University
2. Central University of Technology	2. Rhodes University
3. Durban University of Technology	3. University of Cape Town
4. Mangosuthu University of Technology	4. University of Fort Hare
5. Tshwane University of Technology	5. University of Free State
6. Vaal University of Technology	6. University of KwaZulu-Natal
Comprehensive Universities	7. University of Limpopo
1. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	8. University of Pretoria
2. University of Johannesburg	9. University of Stellenbosch
3. University of South Africa	10. University of Western Cape
4. University of Venda	11. University of the Witwatersrand
5. University of Zululand	
6. Walter Sisulu University	

Searle and McKenna, cited in Skelton (2013, p. 103), claim that with the changing landscape of HE in SA came the pull between two ideological forces that are simultaneously embedded in a local pursuit of being:

i. the driving forces for economic development, and

ii. the imperative for social justice, social reconstruction, and equity.

This conflict is perceived when teaching occurs at the same time as a changing global economy and the changing role of HE Internationally in relation to SA economic development. SA has to enter the world arena as an equal competitor, highlighting a focus on efficiency, effectiveness, audit, viability and throughput rates (Skelton, 2013, p. 104). These factors need to be considered so as not to perpetuate the phenomenon of wastage in

HE (cr[2] on page 4). HEIs need to choose where they want to focus and need to deploy their resources accordingly else, "they run the risk of continuing to make physical access decisions which do not result in success for students" (Coughlan, 2006, p. 217). As such, Scott, Yeld, and Hendry (2007) report that the improvement of access to HE is less significant than was envisioned and that in terms of throughput, the HE system as a whole is not doing well.

1.4.5 South African HE landscape - last 20 years of democracy

Challenges experienced by the South African Education system over the past two decades, remain pressing. The World Economic Forum's, 2013 global technology report, ranked SA 140th out of 144 countries in terms of the low quality of the education system (Smith, 2013). A lack of basic educational resources, inadequate infrastructure, the poor socio-economic status of schools and their communities, amongst others, have existed as a serious crisis in Education in SA for many years.

Faced with the shortcomings and inequalities in SA's public school system being a major contributor to the poor and racially skewed performance in HE (Smith, 2013) questions have been raised as to how prepared are the new school leavers for the demands of a technology competitive, tertiary institution (SAnews, 10-6-2014). Studies reveal that the problem is not 'in' the students themselves, but rather due to systemic and historically constructed factors, which Carrim and Wangenge-Ouma (2012) use as a basis to stress that for HE to work effectively in SA, basic schooling has to be effective.

Pandor (2006) states that South Africa "can no longer afford to lose half our students at university to the dropout pool and we can no longer afford to look at the number of unemployed graduates without alarm." Kraak (2013) argues, that reducing youth unemployment has become one of the South African government's major policy goals. SA has widened access to universities but the imperative is to ensure that those young men and women whose parents struggled to send them there, succeed at university so that they are equipped to meet every challenge that the corporate world might present to them (refer to: Pandor, 2006; Van Zyl, 2007). Despite the many initiatives, SA's needs are not being met, resulting in a shortage of skilled graduates in the labour market, as "much of the country's intellectual talent is not being developed" (Smith, 2013). Especially worrying is that the gap of

[2] cr → refers to a cross reference within the thesis.

the number of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET), between the ages of 18 and 24 is widening, having risen from 32.7%, in 2008 to 36.1% in 2014 (Yates, 2014).

Democracy in SA since 1994 saw the introduction of new statutory bodies. Education Qualifications in SA are framed within the National Qualification Framework (NQF) and the Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC) which together with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), transitioned a change in the direction, purpose and re-structuring of HE. The intention is the deracialisation of the HE system, and an escalation of student participation. In spite of this, throughput and dropout rates remain unsatisfactory (CHE, 2010a, 2010b; Skelton, 2013). Many factors contribute to the challenges that South Africans face and which further the phenomenon of wastage in HE. These factors include amongst others, urbanisation, unemployment, lack of basic resources (food, shelter, health care, safety, and security), growing technological trends, international competition, and globalisation, issues pertaining to the language of instruction, learning, and communication. Further increasing wastage are the inequalities and social problems that beset South African society, such as HIV/AIDS, together with widespread poverty and the inadequacy of basic and tertiary education to provide a solution (Carrim & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012; Cloete, 2009; Kraak, 2013).

Under Apartheid rule, SA had very few African graduates. Although African students are by no means the only demographic that requires support, socio-economic factors determine that students in this demographic, reflect highest in the figures relating to non-retention. Statistics reveal that the throughput rate of African students attending historically White universities (HWU), is radically smaller when compared to the throughput of their White counterparts, and this discrepancy is in part a reflection of how African students are academically underprepared (for example refer to: Cloete, 2009; Jansen, 2001, 2004; Morrow, 1994, 2005). Table 3 below represents the participation[3] of students per race group in HE since 2004. To date there has been little agreement on what should be done in HE as a possible solution to balance the situation that even though the number of African students who enter HE have increased, equity has not been achieved.

[3] According to the CHE report, *participation rate* was calculated as the total headcount enrolments as a percentage of the total population between the ages of 20 - 24.

Table 3: Headcount enrolments in public higher education by race, 2004 to 2009 (Source: Adapted from CHE (2012)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Population
African	453. 640	446.946	451.106	476.768	515.058	515.058	39.194.851
Coloured	46.090	46.302	48.538	49.069	51.647	51.647	4.383.092
Indian	54.315	54.611	54.859	52.596	52.401	52.401	1.278.571
White	188.687	185.847	184.667	180.463	178.140	178.140	4.607.261
Total	744.489	735.073	741.380	761.090	799.490	799.490	49.463.775

Debate continues on the subject of what the best practice and strategies are to strengthen the management of African students' participation in public HE. Despite an increase from 49% in 1995 to 65% in 2008, the participation of African students is still 14% less than the proportion of Africans in the South African population. Literature reveals a deep concern for the poor participation and throughput rates in SA, see for example, CHE (2009, 2010b); Letseka and Maile (2008); Mabokela (1997). As can be seen from Table 4 below, proportionally more White and Indian students enrolled in 2008, while African and Coloured students remain underrepresented.

Table 4: Participation rates in SA HE by race, 2008 (Source: Adapted from CHE (2012)

	African	Coloured	Indian	White	Total
Participation Rate	13.3%	14.8%	44.9%	56.9%	17.0%
Population	4 108 226	373 548	119 402	314 868	4 916 044
Public HE	547 686	55 101	53 629	179 232	837 779

Literature makes known that African students experience hardship on many levels, such as alienation, loneliness, racism, or stigmatisation when they gain access to HWUs, (CHE, 2004; Koen, 2007; Kretzmann, 2012; Letseka & Maile, 2008). Another contributing factor to

the high dropout rates, is the disjuncture between African students prior educational experiences and that of being in a predominantly White institution (Fourie, 1999; Soudien, 2008; Van Zyl, 2010). Beck (2011, p. 17), proclaims that about 25% of first time students exit before or by the start of their second year, 30% pass under 50% of their first-year subjects, and only 21% graduate in the minimum time. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the dire state of student throughput as it can be argued that universities cannot accommodate or retain African students who do not feel a sense of belonging to the HWU. Higher Education South Africa, a body representing all 23 public universities and universities of technology (HESA, 2009a) reported that student dropout rates have escalated unfavourably and is reaching highs of up to 35% at some universities.

The current situation in HE shows the urgent need for the provision of student support structures and strategies. This is in line with universities across the world, as is reflected in policy documents that emphasise the strategic importance of such programmes (Ogude, Kilfoil, & du Plessis, 2012), and as a consequence, the specific contextual and social needs of SA students need to be factored into such programmes. There is no doubt about the challenges that such programmes pose for institutions, as is evident in studies that express the laments of academics (Letseka et al., 2010; Ogude et al., 2012; Swail, Kuh, & Seidman, 2006a; Tinto, 2006). A major problem with the application of student support is its inability to address adequately, student retention issues. The research trends to date on creating student support, tend to address the generalised perceived needs of students generated by a tendency to focus on quantitative findings of student experiences rather than utilising qualitative research methods (see for example: Scott et al., 2007).

1.4.6 The greatest loss for students

> ***The Higher Education Challenge:***
> *…the greatest loss for students is valuable 'Life' time*
> *…time spent, where little is gained*
>
> Swail (2006).

A significant debate in the field of Education is the on-going focus on the role of HEIs to resolve the predicament of HE. In the history of developing economies and developing countries, Du Pré (2009, p. 9) contends that technology, innovation and expertise, are thought of as key contributing factors. Du Pré (2009) further substantiates that these key factors should be drawn in conjunction with HEIs to solve societal problems *together with communities* and *not for communities.*

Ogude et al. (2012, p. 22) argue that the key factor contributing to the challenges that HEIs face, is in fact, poor schooling for the majority of South Africans (refer to: Chisholm, 2004;

Christie, 2008; Fleisch, 2008; Jansen, 2011). While poor schooling is a concern, Letseka *et al*. (2010) argue that in addition, the poor range of subject choices as well as the limited extent and nature of career guidance, are also contributing factors.

Furthermore, an undifferentiated post-school system limits opportunities for young South Africans to find entry into economically viable employment, making university study seem like the only option which itself could further perpetuate the existing inequalities of society. The unreliability of the Grade 12, National Senior Certificate (NSC), as a suitable measure for a university entrance, creates additional complications when universities introduce separate entrance tests and requirements. These factors, according to recent studies, (Letseka et al., 2010; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Ogude et al., 2012) need to be attended to, to inform the Strategic Plans that universities should adopt to bridge the school-university gap. Another major issue in HE, in a SA context, is that young people, NEET, with post-school qualifications remain unemployed even after graduating (Kraak, 2013) pointing to a gap in the support structures of universities that do not seem to play a role in helping graduates to find a job.

It could be argued that the internal problems that HEIs face, rest within three domains: student-related factors, staff-related factors and systemic factors (CHE, 2009, 2010a). The first domain, student-related factors, includes the notion of under-preparedness or students not being academically strong enough to cope with the demands of their studies. This is perhaps influenced by issues of students' prior learning and language skills, students' approaches to learning, their attitude and expectations, a diminished learning culture or students taking less responsibility for their learning. It also involves issues of the students' life and other pressures such as personal, social, financial or family matters (see for example: Morrow, 1994; Ratangee, 2006; Underhill, 2009).

The second domain has more recently emerged in literature to offer contradictory findings about staff-related factors. One major issue is referred to, as the staff themselves, being under-prepared to meet the demands of the changing teaching and learning environment. Studies expose out-dated approaches to pedagogy, the attitudes and skills of academic staff in teaching and assessment practices, the pressures on the time and energy of academic staff, as well as the staff being dispirited by changes in the university (for example refer to: Badat, 2010; Du Plessis & Fourie, 2011; Hassan, 2011).

The third contributing domain is systemic factors that include an increase in student numbers; inherent difficulty of some course content; resource constraints and too little support for students making the transition from school to university. In addition, this domain

refers to a lack of coordination and systematic assessment of various solutions that are attempted, and a lack of recognition for teaching and academic development work that discourages academic staff from putting energy into their teaching duties (Cloete, 2009; Kift, 2009; Kraak, 2013; Van Zyl, 2010).

Along these lines, the three domains depicted above, demonstrate that the institutions themselves, are under-prepared to meet the needs of the diverse student body (CHE, 2010a, p. 30) as well as being under-prepared to provide the necessary pedagogical and curriculum support needed by their academic faculty. A thorough understanding of the practical experiences of at-risk students could have implications for policy development and the development of models for strengthening student support.

Van Heerden (2009, p. 34) explains that student development and support structures in HE take on a multitude of forms and services as a result of various interpretations. However, even though the HEIs identify the developmental and support needs that an institution should address, implementation is not a linear process, given that the nature and diversity of the student body is in a constant state of flux.

Research has shown that wastage in HE has many consequences. For example, in financial terms:

> ...Losing students, from an economic standpoint, is just bad business. Every student 'lost' represents a financial loss for institutions. Institutions miss out on tuition and fees from that student, income from books and services, housing, and other revenue streams... (Swail (2006, p. 1).

Viewed from the perspective of students who dropout, not only do they lose their initial financial investment, they are also likely to have significant debt for loans taken out, are prone to loan default, in addition to the social aspects of loss of reputation and feelings of inadequacy. However, Swail (2006, pp. 1-2) regards the most important thing that students lose - is time - valuable 'life' time; time spent where little is gained. There are also a wide range of effects that might be difficult to measure, which nevertheless, might have disastrous effects on students who experience such vulnerabilities in universities. For example, loss of status, prestige and believability at the personal level, including loss of future income to support families and villages back home (Datnow, Solorzano, Watford, & Park, 2010; Letseka *et al*., 2010; Swail *et al*., 2003).

There is an increasing concern that the voices of those, for whom these programmes are intended, is generally absent in the literature. Almost by default, such students contribute

towards the phenomenon of wastage and are generally absent when research is conducted to examine the causes of such attrition. I put forward that these unheeded voices are those of students who are vulnerable and are not often heard and are rarely documented. This study intends to remedy this in some small way. The aim of this study is to examine the theoretical discourses and underpinnings associated with student support in universities. The aim is to initiate a contemporary framework within which to understand and analyse the narratives of students' vulnerability.

This study argues that a gap exists in South African HE research, in the adequate understanding and conceptualising of student vulnerability.

1.5 Research focus and thesis statement

This study focuses on:

i. student support, structures, strategies and policy that are in place by HEIs

ii. the role that the above play in improving retention and throughput,

iii. conceptualising students at risk and student vulnerability,

iv. the extent to which the self-identified at-risk student relates to the constructs of an integrated approach of (cr. on page 60): *Risk-Hazards* approach, (cause and effect); *Political Economy* approach, (susceptibility to a risk/hazard); and the *Resilience* approach (coping with a stress).

Thesis statement

Literature on retention depicts at-risk students as being identified with, amongst other labels: as recent high school graduates; adults returning to HE, over age cohort, university dropouts; foreigners, illiterate adults; immigrants; students with limited English proficiency, minority groups, non-traditional, under-prepared, students with physical/mental disability, and so forth. However, this notion of at risk is outdated and is limiting to the way institutions strategise student support. Institutional policy should therefore expand and redefine the definition of 'at-risk students' to include other forms of student vulnerability. This will increase the overall opportunity for student support strategies to be used to enhance student retention. The phenomenon of wastage in HE is attributed to the increase in student failure and dropout rates because it inhibits students' academic achievements. To alleviate this, student support policy should consider the voices of those who are vulnerable and who are not considered in the standard definition of who is at-risk. For as long as effective and adequate support is lacking, student vulnerability would continue to be a 'wastage' catalyst.

The argument underpinning the study is rooted in the following claims:

i. A gap exists wherein there is fairly little qualitative evidence which demonstrates ways in which students at universities, experience difficulties that lead to wastage.

ii. The research problem draws attention to the current problem of high student dropout and non-completion rates in relation to the current support provided and available for at-risk students in South African HE.

iii. Despite HEIs effort in creating student support structures, strategies and policies, the study identifies an existing gap wherein HEIs have for many years endured a number of problems in not being able to replicate such student support that could be transposable or applicable from one university context or from one student to another.

iv. Student support and student retention has been researched, but this study focuses particularly on students who are (or were) experiencing the effects of institutional change and the impact this has on their chances of completing their studies.

Framed within the conceptual theory of vulnerability, this study seeks to determine how students in universities experience the phenomenon of being at-risk, why they feel they are susceptible, and how do they cope with it. Lastly, the study seeks to determine how their narratives of vulnerability and being at risk could inform student support and retention in HEIs.

1.5.1 Research problem

The restructuring of the HE system in SA and the transformation of HEIs, is located within the country's broad political and socio-economic transition to democracy (Fourie, 1999). However, incidents of unsatisfactory levels of student retention, poor pass and completion rates and repetition, signal a prevalence of students being at-risk and therefore vulnerable in the HE sector (refer to: Green Paper DHET, 2012; Jansen, 2001, 2011).

There exists a large body of research on the causes and consequences of such wastage (for example: Beck, 2011; CHE, 2010a; Letseka *et al*., 2010; Mabokela, 1997). The challenge is that a large proportion of these studies utilise quantitative approaches and generally draw evidence from secondary sources to arrive at conclusions about the nature, extent, causes and effects of the wastage phenomena in HE.

From the preceeding overview of the subject area, follows the reseach problem. There seems to be a gap in research between university support structures and the vulnerable students' for whom they are intended. The voices of the vulnerable have not been adequately captured in existing research and literature, and as such, for this study, evidence is best sought through qualitative research which targets the very students experiencing such vulnerabilities. The abrupt shift from the controlled environment of school and family to an

environment in which students are expected to accept personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives, would create anxiety and distress, undermining their normal coping mechanisms (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000; Lowe & Cook, 2003; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) leading to the label of being a student at-risk. These aspects are examined using the theory of vulnerability to explore the narratives of at-risk students to better inform policy and practice.

1.5.2 Research question

To develop a sound understanding of the problem, the study explores the following research question:

> How do at-risk students in universities negotiate their sense of vulnerability to cope with the demands of their study programmes and how might the stories of their lived experiences inform debates around student retention and support?

When exploring the primary research question, the following secondary questions are considered:

Sub-questions

i. What are the experiences of students at risk and how do they relate to the support they get from their institutions for both their academic and social lives?

ii. How do the students at risk negotiate the barriers and challenges they face in their social and academic lives?

iii. What institutional mechanisms and models exist to assist students in general and those at-risk in particular, and how effective are these mechanisms perceived to be?

iv. How do institutional policy documents describe the relationship between student retention and student support and how do students relate to and evaluate these policies?

v. How do students suggest the current student support models and strategies at the institution be improved as a strategy for ameliorating their vulnerabilities?

1.5.3 Research aim

The study aims to investigate how students who are at risk negotiate their academic and social lives to better cope with the demands of their study programmes by conducting narrative interviews with students who self-identified to be at-risk.

The four aims of the study are listed below:

i. The first key aim, based on the theory of vulnerability, is to determine how students in universities experience the phenomenon of being at-risk, how they cope, why they felt susceptible to risk and how their narratives of vulnerability might be used to inform debates and policy on student support and retention in HEIs.

ii. Secondly, the study aims to explore the potential of vulnerability theory as a generative framework for adding to the conceptual understanding of what it is to be at-risk in universities.

iii. Thirdly, the study aims to develop a model which foregrounds the vulnerable as key informants in the discourse of being at-risk in universities.

iv. Lastly, the study aims to examine the methodological and ethical challenges associated with researching with vulnerable people in HE.

I argue that student vulnerability is not a homogeneous phenomenon and that different student support structures, strategies and policies need to be devised for different issues and problems experienced by vulnerable students. I suggest that through the methodology of qualitative, narrative research, the voice of students' lived vulnerability has a potential to transform the decisions relating to support and retention strategies. I also propose a revised model, based on the study's adopted model for researching student vulnerability in HE, which opens up research into new paradigms of thinking on student vulnerability, support and retention.

Consideration of the study's research questions and research objectives

The five sub-questions of the study are developed in consideration of an in-depth review of key theoretical models of student experience, student support and of student retention in HE. In the following section, a table summary (cr. on page 22) is used to demonstrate the relationship between the study's research questions and research objectives and the theories that informed them (see Table 5). The section thereafter is a brief description of the methodology used to underpin this study.

Table 5: Theories that inform the scope of the study

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS	RESEARCH OUTLINE to manage the sub-questions	RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	THEORIES
1. What are the experiences of students at risk and how do they relate to the support they got from their institutions for both their academic and social lives?	*elicited the narrative of the students at risk firstly to ascertain the nature of their academic and social issues and then explored what their experiences have been of the support or lack thereof. *this highlighted the extent of the involvement of the institution in fostering relationships with students and the effectiveness in identifying and addressing student needs.	Objective 1 To give voice to vulnerable students by enabling them through an anonymous platform, to share and contribute their own experiences and stories, thus adding to the debates around student support and retention.	Student Dropout (Barefoot, 2004; Bean, 1980; Lourens & Smith, 2003) Vulnerable Story-telling (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007) Vulnerable Voices (Batchelor, 2006)
2. How do the students at risk negotiate the barriers and challenges they face in their social and academic lives?	*dealt with the lived experience of the students at risk, and what they were personally doing to address their own barriers and challenges. *aimed to establish how perceptive students at risk were to their own situation and what steps they were (or were not) taking to be agents in improving their own experience.	Objective 2 To ascertain how at-risk students deal with their academic and social lives to cope with the pressures of their study programmes	Habitus and Forms of Capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Woolcock & Narayan, 2002)
3. What institutional mechanisms and models exist to assist students in general and those at-risk in particular, and how effective are these mechanisms perceived to be?	*looked at what forms of support structures were made available to students at the case study institution. * investigated what channels/systems/mechanisms the faculty and the respective school/s has in place for early identification of students at risk. * investigated the practicality and effectiveness of such models by analysing the narrative experiences of students at risk.	Objective 3 To understand and explore the nature and type of student support structures that is made available to the undergraduate student body at the institution.	Building Bridges of Support (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012) Student Satisfaction (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 2006; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2012)

4. How do institutional policy documents describe the relationship between student retention and student support and how do students relate to and evaluate these policies?	*conducted a policy document analysis of whether the institution targets the problems raised by students and how the institution envisions and describes the relationship between retention and support. * investigated how the institution implements strategies as set out in such policy documents.	Objective 4 To establish how the institution perceives the relationship between student support and student retention.	Institutional Support Structures, strategies and Interventions (Elling, 2002; Kuh, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2004) Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)
5. How do students suggest the current student support models and strategies at the institution be improved as a strategy for ameliorating their vulnerabilities?	*sought the students' opinions of how they believe the models of student support could be improved	Objective 5 To use the stories of at-risk students to remodel strategies for providing effective support and hence reduce wastage in universities.	Student Support (Bartram, 2008; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009) Student as Consumer (Maringe, 2010; Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2012) HE Market (P. Gibbs, 2011; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006)

1.6 Research methodology

Research is defined as the systematic process of inquiry carried out by collecting knowledge that is reliable and valid by logically analysing the data that is based on evidence, for a particular purpose (McMillan, 2010). This section provides an introductory overview of the methodology that was utilised to plan and design the study to collect information needed to investigate a specific research problem.

The study was developed through a review of literature, examining both theoretical and empirical studies on student support and at-risk student experiences, as well as through documentary analysis. The documents analysed included policy and procedure documents of the South African HE sector regarding student support. This was followed by narrative interviews and an online survey of students self-identified at being at-risk.

The key aspect that the research methodology questions is:

> How do students at risk, come, or do not come to terms with their sense of vulnerability and how might their lived experiences, bring up to date, the debates around student retention and support.

Qualitative research

Given the intended focus of studying student experiences of being at risk, this study is conceptualised as falling within the interpretive post-positivist paradigm (Pring *et al*., 2012; Silverman, 2006). The narrative approach serves not only as my frame of reference, a way of reflection during the inquiry process, or as a research method, but also as a model for analysis. Hence, I borrow from Connelly and Clandinin (1990), and also from Moen (2006), that a narrative approach serves as both the phenomenon and the method.

The study thus adopts a narrative research approach based on the foundation of socio-cultural theory, embedded within a qualitative research framework. A qualitative framework in the field of investigation necessitates a study of phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of and interpret these experiences in terms of the meaning that people bring to them. As such, the study explores the phenomenon of vulnerability through the lens of the lived experiences of self-identified, students at risk at a HEI in the Gauteng Province, in SA.

1.6.1 Data collection of narrative interviews and analysis

Large element of qualitative research

Firstly I would like to point out key characteristics of narrative designs. These include: collecting of individual experiences, collecting accounts of individual stories, putting them into a chronological order, restorying them, followed by coding for themes and identifying the context of the individuals' experiences (refer to: Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Creswell, 2014). During the process, and again at the end, I had the opportunity to collaborate with my respondents to ensure clarity on critical issues.

Each of the steps mentioned above required dedication of time and attention to detail. To begin, I focused on gaining access and the gathering of stories. To do so, I had to attempt to create a collaborative relationship of care and trust between myself and the respondent. My intention was to empower the respondent to tell their story through assurances that ethical codes would be adhered to. Participants had the option to withdraw, without reason.

Once the stories had been collected on audio files, I had to organise and appropriately label and transcribe the interviews conducted. The **restorying** of the individual stories began with the need to pay attention to detail and cross-reference with my field notes. It helped to recreate and reconnect to the narration. Thereafter a process of retranscription followed, to seek and identify key elements of each story that had been aimed at ascertaining the participant's problem/s, actions and resolutions through sequencing of time, place and plot. Restorying involved the organizing of key codes into a logical sequence. Besides having used the transcripts, I still felt the need to listen to the voice recordings repeatedly, to establish the emotional under- and overtones in the narration. This established where participants placed particular kinds of emphases. This was done in a way such that the events would make sense to a reader, by providing a causal link among the ideas shared by trying to reveal interaction, with a sense of continuity and a setting of the situation in which various parts of the story were set.

Data analysis is based on the theoretical framework proposed for exploring vulnerability (Maringe & Sing, 2014) and reflects findings with implications for strengthening institutional processes, which might help in interrogating student vulnerabilities in HE (see Chapter 3 for more detail).

1.6.2 Data collection and analysis of an online survey

A small element of quantitative research

Using Survey Monkey[4], an online survey was designed to allow volunteer students to participate in a study that would air their vulnerability and experiences. Chapter 5 of the study provides a discussion and analysis of findings of the survey in detail. Data analysis is based on the theoretical framework proposed for exploring vulnerability as also used in the qualitative narrative interviews. The approach to research and the methodology used, is further explained, described and justified in full detail in Chapter 3.

1.7 Significance of the research

This study is significant in three respects:

Firstly, this study creates a starting point for student support services in HE to develop a broad framework, strategic policy, to better facilitate understanding of the vulnerability of students. This is relevant at all levels of study and aims at better support and retention.

[4] An online survey programme creator resource that was paid for use by the researcher.

Secondly, this study addresses an under-researched area and its focus is the narrative experience of students' vulnerability.

Thirdly, the study has promise to yield potential benefits to the wider community of academic researchers both nationally and internationally, in areas of student support and retention, with conceivable implications for policy and practice.

What follows in the next section is an account of the justification for conducting this study.

1.8 Justification for the research

This section serves the purpose of providing a justification of the study undertaken as a valid contribution to the field of HE and student support in relation to student experiences. This study is deemed important on several theoretical and practical grounds as is explained below:

Firstly, this study makes use of an existing theory in a new setting of research where it has not been applied before. In other words, this study has used concepts that are traditionally used in a field, external to that of student experiences and support (see for example: Crossling, 2002; Kuh, 2005; Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009; Tinto, 2006). Concepts such as the: *Risk-Hazard,* investigates the relationship between cause and effect; *Political Economy*, investigates susceptibility to a risk or hazard; and the concept *Resilience* investigates the capacity of a system, to cope with a stress. The above concepts which have been borrowed and adapted to inform the theoretical framework of vulnerability for this study, is also applicable, within the domain of global Environmental Change (also refer to: Füssel, 2007; Liverman, 1990; Turner *et al*., 2003). It adds to better theoretical understanding of the concepts 'students at risk' and 'students' vulnerability.' The study contributes to an enhanced conceptual understanding of the term 'students at risk', that is regarded as synonymous with the term, 'students' vulnerability' (Maringe & Sing, 2014). The theoretical framework of the study is dealt with in Chapter 2, including finer detail.

Secondly, by means of offering a broader and more personalised awareness of what forms of 'vulnerability' students experience through their restories, much could be learnt about how students at risk, needs to be re-defined.

Thirdly, the study has the potential to contribute to a better interpretation of the phenomena of students being at-risk and proposes how student support could be improved to ameliorate the wastage factors in HE. Such amelioration could have positive economic implications (refer for example to: Letseka & Maile, 2008).

Fourthly, the study has identified a gap that previous research on student support has neglected, namely the personal accounts of students at risk, for whom such support structures are intended (refer for example to: Van Zyl, 2010). It is thought as possible that a qualitative element will add depth to the understanding of experiences of vulnerability and provide insight on how best HEIs can support them.

Lastly, this study encompasses a social motive as justification of the research (see for example: Cloete, 2009; Fourie, 1999). Student support structures are generally driven and created in response to institutional surveys and other quantitative research designs (HESA, 2009b).This study is an attempt to gain insight into the shared narrative experiences of underprepared, and socially, as well as psychologically vulnerable students. It is an attempt at creating a layered and nuanced understanding of the social and other dynamics that inform vulnerability. This kind of information and insight is required if socially relevant action is to be taken to address issues of vulnerability.

1.9 Structure and outline of the study

The study is divided into six chapters.

Chapter 1, an introductory chapter, deals with contextualisation and with mapping and gives a background to the study. The chapter outlines the nature and extent of issues around student support and retention in universities in SA. In the research that is described in the subsequent chapters, a link between the conceptual framework of vulnerability, student support and retention is maintained.

Chapter 2 provides a reflection on key themes in the literature on student vulnerability, support and retention. The aim of this chapter is to summarise relevant literature, highlighting the general trends of studies within the field of HE in SA. The chapter also deals with the conceptual dimensions of the study and reviews the literature which informed the theoretical framework. The study argues for further investigation into the reconceptualisation of being at risk as a multidimensional concept which has not been adequately dealt with in HE institutional ethics policy and practice.

Chapter 3 describes the research problem in relation to the chosen research design. The chapter begins with a discussion of the purpose and rationale of the study. The research questions and study population are revisited. It contains a discussion on the theoretical framework and both data collection and data analysis. Ethical issues and the validity of the research conclude the chapter.

Chapter 4 is presented in two parts. Chapter 4 argues that the voices of the vulnerable have not been adequately captured in existing research and as such Part A presents the restoried biographies of the 11 narrative interview respondents. The restories are structured based on the theoretical framework of Vulnerability, identified and examined in Chapter 3. The restories begin with biographical data on each respondent, following a line of investigation into their experience of vulnerability. Part B focuses on a further analysis presented in table format that highlights key elements of the personal writings submitted online.

Chapter 5 is presented in two parts. Part A presents an analysis discussion based on the restoried narratives in the previous chapter, 4. The table summarises: who is susceptible to risks and why. It describes the hazards experienced and the ways respondents coped / did not cope with their experience of vulnerability. In addition, Part B of the chapter presents and discusses the data from the online survey.

Chapter 6 concludes the study and furnishes an interpretation of the results of the study in relation to the theoretical base. It reports on conclusions and implications of the research conducted with students who self-identified as being at risk to explore how they negotiated their academic and social lives to better cope with the demands of their study programmes.

The formulation of a revised model on conceptualising student vulnerability to expand the debate on student support targeted at enhancing retention is recommended.

1.10 Limitations

Limitations refer to that which is within the control of the researcher, and the scope of the study. For methodology limitations of the study that was beyond my control, refer to Chapter 3 and for those pertaining to other limitations of the study, refer to Chapter 6.

The design of the present study aims at gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of students self-identified, as being at-risk. In this investigative study, the aim is to communicate the experiences of voices often missing from the literature. To not further perpetuate a student's sense of vulnerability, the population sample was not determined by the use of individuals' quantitative assessment indicators, but through voluntary participation.

The study is restricted to one university situated in Gauteng, SA, as it set out to determine the effect of students' vulnerability in relation to their coping with the demands of their academic programme. Reasons informing the choice of a single HEI are that: the institution is reputed to be a leading research and academic university; it is also situated at the hub of the Province's economic and social development attracting the enrolments of both national

and international students. Further justification, is that the purpose of the current study was to obtain narratives that are rich in detail and not restricted to a number of narratives of a vulnerable group of a population.

1.11 Summary

The main purpose of this chapter was to set the context of the study. It introduced the research problem and relevant research issues. After the study had been justified, key concepts were specified and the research methodology was described. The significance of the study is to understand the experiences of at-risk students and includes the concept of vulnerability. This study identifies gaps in the existing research which had been done on supporting at-risk students. It is suggested that a qualitative element will add depth to the understanding of their experiences of vulnerability and will provide insight on how best HEIs can support them.

The chapter concluded by specifying the limitations of the study and outlining the structure of the rest of the study. The following chapter focuses on and addresses the research questions through a review of the literature.

CHAPTER 2

STUDENT SUPPORT AND RETENTION IN HE

> *In the same way in which no one else can do my running for me, no one else can do my learning for me…There are, of course many things which might help me to do it more effectively…I must be willing to learn…*
>
> (Morrow (1994).

2.1 Introduction

There is a considerable body of research that had already been done in the field of student support. Students may have the vision and agency necessary for academic achievement, however due to unique life experiences and challenges, they do need different types of targeted support to succeed as asserted by Morrow (1994) in the quote above.

There are three common types of literature reviews, systematic review (which is rigorous, and context and single question based), a meta-analysis review (which tends to be a statistical and quantitative combination of evidence from studies, such as is used in health care), and a narrative review, the approach that is used in this study. A narrative review of literature is based on a set of review questions and usually involves using qualitative methods to synthesise new interpretations across a range of studies (Rollnick & Venkat, 2011). Chapter 2 begins by connecting the research questions (see page 20 for research questions and sub-questions) to the literature review, and by laying out how the theoretical dimensions of the study relate to the research questions of the study. Literature published on HE access, HE wastage, and student retention issues, at-risk students, student vulnerability, as well as student support, are some of the components that had a relation to the core questions and the intention of this chapter, was through a review of literature, to sketch how those relationships are constituted.

2.2 Connecting the research questions to the literature review

The Chapter firstly begins with an elaboration of key concepts used to inform an understanding of the research. Secondly, the chapter considers the changing landscape of HE and what the literature reveals about student experience and issues in South African HE. Thirdly, the chapter engages with research already done in the field of student retention and student support in HE. Fourthly, the chapter deals with the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the study. The review is therefore structured into three parts.

Part A deals with three major questions, namely:

i. A review of key concepts

ii. What did literature reveal about the issues of students' academic and social experiences?

iii. What are the current debates on student retention and support?

Part B deals with four major questions, namely:

i. How is student vulnerability conceptualised?

ii. How is research with vulnerable students perceived to be at risk done?

iii. How did the students at risk address their sense of vulnerability, and what were their perceptions of barriers and challenges?

iv. How could universities support, assist and retain such students by looking at the trends and models of institutional mechanisms in HEIs in SA and how did the institutional policy documents support this association?

Part C deals with two major questions, namely:

i. What are the theoretical underpinnings used to understand the nature of the problem of the research?

ii. What is the conceptual framework used to inform the data collection and analysis of the research?

2.3 Part A: Research contextualisation

The key concepts, first introduced in Chapter 1, required further detail, and are therefore revisited.

2.3.1 Review of key concepts

The chapter now moves to concepts that are prominent in the literature debating the issues around access, physical and epistemic access, student voice, student support, retention and such related concepts.

Physical and epistemic access to HE

Access

One could understand the word *access* as it pertains to HE on two different levels, namely physical and epistemic access. Unequal participation in HE is a problem experienced by many HEIs across the world. Access and equity strategies have been put in place in SA, at both national and institutional policies levels since the mid-nineties. However, literature reveals that there is still room for improvement as there is still a stark under-representation of low socio economic status (SES) students.

Physical access

Students compete for access to limited spaces at universities while prominence is placed on HEIs to attract the students with the highest scholastic achievement. SA is a country riddled with a history of struggle and discrimination, and is under pressure by bodies such the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) to meet equity targets in terms of racial categories (refer to: S. Y. Essack, 2013; Rollnick, 2010).

Student access is defined by Ratangee (2006), as access to full administrative support, learner support services, and an opportunity to access technology, lifelong learning and success. Lubben, Davidowitz, Buffler, Allie, and Scott (2010) argue that current discourse in SA includes the macro-economic need to compete in the global economy, as well as the micro-economic view of HE as a free market commodity.

In the past there has been an unprecedented amount of research on increasing HE access to students, however the debate extends in recent years to include not only a focus on access, but on equity, and quality. The SA, DoE (2001, Par: 2.2, Outcome: 1) policy states, for example, that the South African Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) aims at increased student participation thereby ensuring an "equitable, sustainable and productive HE system that would be of high quality". The question arises as to how this vision is to be realised in the light of the existing and dire shortcomings of basic education practice (Kraak, 2013). In the midst of attention to access concerns, HE is faced with challenges of equity. Bitzer (2010) asserts that there are six myths relevant to achieving equitable access.

These 'myths' are perhaps strategies or policy goals that had not necessarily made access to HEIs achievable for all, mainly because they had not been implemented as yet, and perhaps because a myth is a falsehood that many people believed might resolve access issues, but had as yet not materialised. A reflective discussion follows on how Bitzer (2010) argues to dispel such 'myths'.

i. *Expanding participation would improve equity*: Despite an increase in participation of students from low SES backgrounds, James (2007) challenged that expansion led to social inequality as access to elite universities and certain programmes became heavily skewed towards higher social classes (Bitzer, 2010, p. 305).

ii. *Free or low-cost HE would improve equity*: There is little evidence that supports that low-cost HE widens participation or improves equity amongst groups. Rather, Bitzer (2010) dispels this myth by making a case that the assumption is that the cost of HE is a principal barrier to access, which as literature shows, it is not.

iii. *Improving equity involves the removal of barriers to access*: This myth is dispelled with the argument that young adults from previously disadvantaged communities might not see their potential or have the desire to participate in HE, therefore imploring all the Education Sectors to act through intervention, commitment and improvement within a corresponding policy approach.

iv. *The onus is on universities to resolve the equity problem*: The generalisability of much published research on this issue is problematic as universities tend to recruit a small amount of successful learners in the Further Education and Training phase (FET), who have the potential to perform well at a HEI. However, focussing on them is to "work on the margins of the equity problem" and as such, equity in HE requires "systemic improvements within all education sectors" (Bitzer, 2010).

v. *Widening participation will lower standards or lower retention and completion rates*: Recent evidence suggests that there is some truth that output numbers (graduates) have decreased. However, holding onto such a pessimistic view of human potential and capacity is a limited interpretation of mass education.

vi. *Students will be selected for HE on academic merit*: Studies and research on this topic show that equity and merit are two concepts that are in tension. The tension is made evident when access is based on the distinction that certain students have deserving, intellectual potential and are thereby compensated by the institution when they do gain access. Thus, James (2007) contends that access on merit using entry ratings and rankings, to some extent reveal a student's intrinsic intellectual ability which illustrates that equity is merely an appendage to merit. It had been suggested that despite the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA, 2008) putting forward stringent criteria for measuring equity and access targets, the shortfall is that the policy is weak on strategies for effective implementation.

The second description of the term 'access to HE' has been described as referring to a student's epistemic form of access. Numerous studies refer to epistemic access as a student's preparation for becoming a part of a practice.

Epistemic access

Morrow (2005) advocated that epistemic access is gaining access to an academic practice by learning the intrinsic disciplines and constitutive standards of that practice, in other words learning how to become a participant in an academic practice. Jansen (2001) adds that epistemological access is "access to knowledge, its various forms, how it is organised, its value bases, its politics and its power." This view is supported by Morrow (2005) who advised that mere formal access or physical access to the institutions which distribute knowledge is different from and not a sufficient condition for epistemological access. However, Lange, (CHE, 2010b) made a case that epistemological access drew attention to the unconscious and unquestioned processes of concept formation and knowledge acquisition and to the assumptions that inform the manner in which teaching at university level takes place. Lange further contends that most universities hold the view of students being autonomous agents, who are going to actualise their potential by making the most of the opportunities offered to them.

This study maintains that both physical and epistemic forms of access are pertinent to understanding the experiences of vulnerable students, as they are likely to find their way into the narratives that forms the core of this study.

Student voice

Recent evidence suggests that the concept of student voice uses an epistemological voice for knowing, a practical voice for doing, and an ontological voice for being and becoming. Batchelor (2006) investigates these dimensions of the student's voice and defines the three key elements needed to understand the nature of being at-risk. It has been demonstrated by Batchelor (2006) that a voice for being and becoming is less valued and validated in current trends of HE, and seemingly more vulnerable, than voices for knowing and doing. He goes on to infer that self-creation (openness and receptivity) is at the very heart of being a student:

> *…a student's creativity can only ever be a self-creation...*
> *to study is not to create something but to create oneself...*
>
> Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p. 55).

The immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actor's point of view, are crucial. The concept of voice is referred to as the research subjects' voice. However, Moen (2008) advises that in the narrative approach the term 'voices' is used rather than 'voice' because they recognised that the narratives are in part personal stories shaped by the knowledge, experiences, values and feelings of the persons who are telling them. At the same time, they are also collective stories that are shaped by the addressees and the cultural, historical and institutional settings in which they occur (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005 as cited in Moen, 2008, p. 61).

On reflection, student voice is not exclusive; they are intimately interrelated. Giving the vulnerable/at-risk students voice has to be combined with meaningful hearing, listening and doing. However, such approaches tend to overlook the fact that doing is the action that would reflect active engagement with the depth of meaning, siphoned from the vulnerable students' lived experience/s. Therefore, the study identifies that 'voice', however it is defined, only becomes meaningful if it has an audience, and that it is the responsibility of the HEIs to create such a platform for vulnerable students to share their narratives. This would expand the kind of scaffolding needed to support a more holistic development.

Student support

The general nature of much published research on the issue of student support is problematic as what we know about student support is largely based upon empirical studies that quantifies students' academic success or failure (Crossling, 2002; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009; Myers, 2013). In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on student support in HEIs that uses a deficit model of students, where students are regarded as having the problem, of needing the support and of the HEI as being the provider of that support. Such literature reveals two large umbrellas of support (refer to: Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Kuh, 2005; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Porter, 2006; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2004): academic support (writing workshops, tutorials, laboratories, writing centres, and so forth) and non-academic support (provision of basic needs: food, water, accommodation, and transport, emotional, social, financial, psychological, procedural, practical, spiritual, or cultural forms of support). Williams, Haverila, and Sharif (2007) state that universities, like other service providers, are under increased pressure to deliver the best possible service to students (customers) to ensure that they are satisfied with their overall academic experience. Customer satisfaction would then presumably result in better through-put and retention rates by infusing student loyalty that would perhaps promote positive word-of-mouth recommendations of the HEI to others.

For purposes of this study, *implementation of student support* refers to the policies, structures, strategies, and mechanisms in place at a university, provided by the institution to address the academic and social needs of the student body.

Retention and related concepts

There is a large volume of published studies describing the phenomenon of retention (for example: Aitken, 1982; Chickering, 2004; Forsman, Linder, Moll, Fraser, & Andersson, 2012; Ogude *et al*., 2012; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Simpson, 2010; Swail, 2006; Tinto, 2003; Yorke, 2004). In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on students' degree completion and non-completion with various interpretations, thus leading to a need, for this study to define the following concepts:

i. **Student attrition:** a reduction or decrease in numbers from the beginning to the end of the course/programme/institution/system under review (Berge & Huang, 2004).

ii. **Student dropout:** a student leaving their studies in terms of either voluntary withdrawal or academic dismissal (Forsman, 2011), or a student leaving the university or college prematurely (Beck, 2011). However, student dropout might also be referred to in the following three ways:

   a. **Institutional departure:** when a student leaves the institution to continue their studies at another institution, or as
   b. **Institutional stop out:** when a student leaves their studies for a short time but returns again to continue their studies at the same institution, or as
   c. **System departure:** when a student leaves the education system prematurely having not completed their studies at any institution.

iii. **Student persistence:** persistence with studies from beginning to end of a course or programme (Forsman, 2011).

iv. **Student transfer:** a student who decides to transfer to another institution.

What matters to student success?

Research on academic performance reveals that individuals attribute success to internal factors and failure to external factors for which they deem themselves not responsible (Rotter, 1966). Internal and dispositional factors are considered to be personal effort, responsibility and ability with a self-serving bias (Chireshe, Shumba, Mudhovozi, & Denhere, 2009). HEIs regard students as customers and therefore aim to keep them satisfied with the understanding that the relationship would lead to customer loyalty (Maringe & Gibbs, 2008) and studies describe three main categories of measuring this loyalty at universities (Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2008):

i. Students returning to study at the same university at a higher level,

ii. How frequently the student made use of the ancillary services at the institution (for e.g. the library, catering, IT services) that leads to student retention, and lastly,

iii. Student (customer) satisfaction with the HE experience that leads to referrals, and recommendations to friends and family.

But what matters most is to understand how the student engagement factors interact (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008) with gender, race, ethnicity, first generation student status, and within a South African context, to be aware of the nature of the experience of the historically disadvantaged student who differs strongly from white counterparts. A number of qualitative (and largely very general) studies have been conducted on students' psychosocial engagement. These studies construct student engagement as the time and energy invested by students in educationally purposeful activities and the institution's effort to remediate and assist with educational practices (Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Student success is therefore defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainments of educational objectives, and post-college performance (Kuh *et al*., 2006).

Models that examine aspect of student success include five variables (Kuh *et al*., 2008):

i. student background, demographics, and pre-academic experiences;

ii. structural characteristics, mission, size, selectivity of the university;

iii. faculty, staff and peer interactions;

iii. student perception of the learning environment; and lastly,

iv. the quality of the student's effort dedicated to educational purposeful activities.

Figure 1 below illustrates the interplay between the various elements.

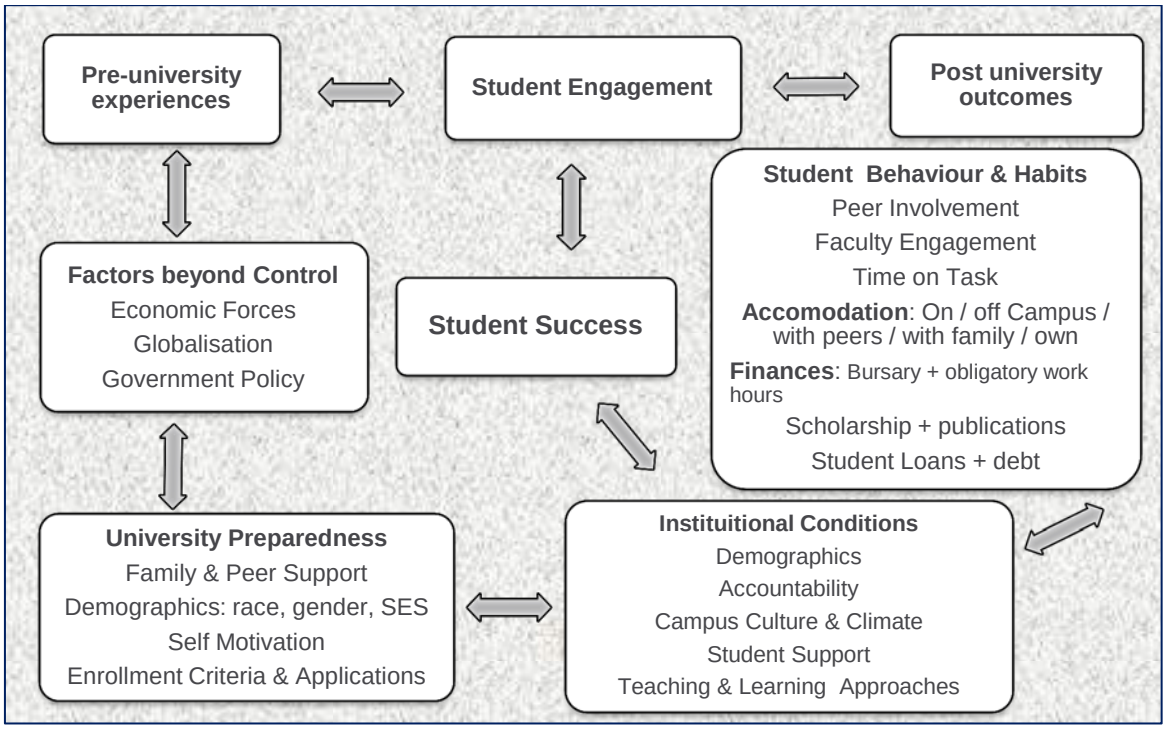


Figure 1: A model of student engagement to measure student success (Source: Adapted from Kuh et al. (2006, p. 8)

Barriers to success

In trying to understand the academic and social experiences of at-risk students, literature provided useful categories from which to establish areas that needed to be probed and examined. The two domains, academic or social, are used as umbrella terms and cover a host of sub-categories (Van Heerden, 2009). Being able to refine and hone questions and issues with precision, would assist in establishing the domain in which a student needed support. What the literature revealed is that there are no easy answers, and within a postmodernist framework, it is unlikely to establish problematic areas that are not intertwined with a host of other related problematic areas (Leveson et al., 2013; Morosanu, Handley, & O'Donovan, 2010).

A further differentiation of perceived barriers is expressed by Castle, Munro, and Osman (2006, p. 366) as situational, institutional and dispositional barriers. *Situational barriers* concern students experiencing issues such as coping with pre-existing work commitments, domestic responsibilities, problems of securing or financing child care, lack of adequate finance, and unaffordability of transport costs. *Institutional barriers* refer not only to an institutions physical location, entry requirements, but also timetable clashes, and practices and procedures which hinder full participation. *Dispositional barriers* are recognised by factors associated with self-esteem, past experiences, values, attitudes and a student's

beliefs about learning. In a South African context, students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds experience additional barriers to success that are referred to as physical and epistemological access barriers (refer to the previous section 2.2.1 for clarity) which perpetuate the inaccessibility and exclusiveness of HE (Castle *et al*., 2006). Studies reviewed thus far have confirmed that combined with tuition and learning materials related costs, a lack of clear and early targeted information on optional career and study paths, admissions and procedures, in addition to situational and institutional barriers experienced by non-traditional students, form a major barrier to participation in HE (Lyons, 2006; Maringe & Mourad, 2012; Wylie, 2010).

A review on full-time student dropout in the USA (Tinto, 1975) focused on the reciprocal nature of academic and social integration suggesting that an excess in one inhibits the other. But at the same time Tinto (1975) also hypothesises that: "academic integration, and therefore goal commitment is somewhat more important to persistence in college than is social integration and/or institutional commitment". However, Billing (1997, p. 126), states that: "Environmental support compensates for weak academic support, but academic support would not compensate for weak environmental support." It is likely that students themselves will make these connections, and thus this study looked at the way in which students express such relationships and how they construct the problems and how they envisage ways in which institutional intervention might bolster their determination to persist.

2.3.2 Models of retention

There are many different theories that are proposed to make meaning of what factors contribute to student persistence; student success, educational attainment and on the other hand, what factors contribute to student attrition and departure. Literature classifies retention models into three respective but overlapping types. Organisational theories focus on the structure of and behaviour within institutions as the key element in student retention. Psychological theories of retention explained a student's persistence by looking at the internal processes informing a student's social and academic integration. It thus examined a student's reasons for departure as part of the psyche of a student (Van Zyl, 2010). Sociological theories regard the student's decision to depart as being informed by both the student being part of the university's culture as well as the student being part of a wider social community and setting. Refer to Table 6 below that lists some of the key retention theories and perspectives developed over time in HE.

Table 6: Key retention theories and perspectives developed over time in HE

Retention theories and perspectives	
Organisational behaviour theories	
College Readiness Model	Conley (2007)
Student Engagement Theory	Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007)
Transition Theory	Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995)
Psychological theories	
Internationalist/Integration Theory	Tinto (1975)
Longitudinal Departure Model	Tinto (1993)
Psychological Model of College Student Retention	Bean and Eaton (2000)
Sociological theories	
Legitimate peripheral participation	Lave and Wenger (1991)
Communities of Difference	Tierney (1993)
Communities of Practice	Lave (1993)

Models developed since the early 1970s have examined the psychological variables of students and others have compared student satisfaction to worker satisfaction in an organisation. Andres and Carpenter (1997) suggest that the 1970s research on attrition is descriptive rather than theory-based, failing to explain the variation in student attrition. Current theoretical models of university student retention have examined student-institution 'fit' by looking at student variables, institutional variables, and specific themes such as the integration of students into HEIs to ascertain what factors affect a student's decision to persist or withdraw from HE.

Tinto's internationalist theory (1993) is a predominantly sociological perspective that proposes that students must first separate from the group with which they have been formerly associated, such as family and high school colleagues, then in the transition phase, students should interact in new ways with the group into which membership is sought, and finally incorporate normative values and behaviour of the new group. It seems that both academic and social integration are complimentary and yet independent processes to which students should adjust at university. Social integration is measured as a composite of peer-to-peer interactions and faculty-student interactions, while academic integration reflects the student's satisfaction with academic progress and choice of major (Kuh, Vesper, & Krehbiel, 1994) thus student persistence is a function of the dynamic relationship between the individual and other actors within the university and home community (Kuh *et al*., 2006). However, Tinto's theory may not be applicable to all students at risk in SA and as Kuh et al. (2006, p. 12) argue, a student's high level of commitment to the goal of graduation could compensate for a low level of commitment to the institution, and vice versa.

The integration-commitment model of attrition was developed by Tinto (1975) and later modified by Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) who labelled their model 'the withdrawal model'. The withdrawal model is based on the position that the more involved/integrated a student is into the academic and social life of an institution, the less likely are the chances that the student might withdraw. Lourens and Smith (2003) identify that within this model, student persistence is related to a student's level of academic and social integration with an institution, their commitment to earning a degree and commitment to an institution.

Research by Liu (2000, in Lourens & Smith, 2003) indicates that the commonality between integration and satisfaction is crucial to the success of academic performance and persistence, and that student satisfaction is strongly correlated to student retention. Primary causes of withdrawal among full-time students were identified as a mismatch between students and their choice of field of study; financial difficulties; the poor quality of student experience (the quality of the teaching); and the level of support given by staff and the organisation of the programme (Yorke, 1999 in Lourens & Smith, 2003).

Astin, 1993, p. 398 as cited in Wylie (2010), proposes that peer group interaction promoting student involvement in the institution is "the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years." He defines student involvement to comprise the following four criteria: the student devotes considerable energy to studying; the student spends a lot of time on campus; the student participates actively in student organizations; and the student interacts frequently with faculty members and other students (Astin, 1993).

Wylie (2010) argues that student non-persistence behaviour occurs at various critical points throughout the student's career. These critical points could be classified as either short-term (e.g. from enrolment to the student's first class, or during the first term), or longer term (e.g. at the completion of the first semester, the following (third) term of the first year, at the commencement of the second year, etc.).

A risk evaluation is undertaken by the student regarding the likelihood of failure and the potential effects on existing self-concept levels. In other words, the student considers the questions: "What is the risk of feeling worse about myself?" and "What will others think of me as a result of attempting the course and failing?" Wylie (2010) postulates that self-concept is a mediating variable that can indicate a student's intention to persist or not. However, he points out that the depth of these evaluations will be different for every student and the combination of influences of the many variables at play will vary between individuals. Wylie (2010) describes a process whereby the student whose self-perceptions have been

negatively impacted, re-evaluates their participation in their course of study and enters a cyclic process of disengagement and separation from the study commitment. Through the identification of variables to determine persistence behaviour (i.e. self-concept constructs), it is theorised that effective measurement of their impact can alert the researcher to the student who is vulnerable to dropping out. With the application of an appropriate intervention, the impact of the theorised cyclic pattern of disengagement from the study commitment may be averted, thereby influencing throughput rates.

Lifton, Seay and Bushko in Duranczyk, Higbee, and Lundell (2004, pp. 103-113) advocate that early identification of students who have a high potential to drop out, is a key strategy for improved retention. However, the programme needs to take into account student persistence skills, to prevent inefficiencies of wasting retention resources on students who do not need the support. There are a vast number of retention models in literature. However, the relevance of the models to a South African context needs to be determined.

2.3.3 Models of student support

In many HEIs, both locally in SA and globally, a debate is taking place as to how to minimise students' barriers to retention and graduation. Literature tends to characterise the HE system in SA as a 'low participation, high attrition' system because of its very poor success rates (Kraak, 2013). This view is supported by the CHE (2010a) that views access in terms of the inclusion, integration or assimilation of students from historically excluded groups into existing institutional structures and cultures without questioning the ways in which curricula and everyday institutional practices are shaped by dominant cultural constructs such as colonial racial categories and hetero-patriarchal norms. As a result students from historically excluded groups are required to enter into institutional discourses that are alien to them (see for example: Soudien, 2008; Spaull, 2013). It is necessary for HEIs therefore, to conceptualise student support in ways that can accommodate such challenges.

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature of student support models (Crossling, 2002; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009; Van Heerden, 2009). These models tend to fall into three broad models of student support: academic, non-academic, and integrated models of support. Student academic support structures may be defined as structures that focus on the improvement of students' learning in the form of remedial interventions, improving the proficiency and grasp of the language of instruction, or as specialised support for students with disability. Student academic development support could be broken down into study skills, referred to as academic literacies to support academic writing, and subject specific support to address gaps in subject knowledge and understanding. Skills training might

include programmes to address issues such as concentration strategies, time management, and dealing with examination anxiety. The academic support structures might also assist students in understanding academic policies and procedures. However, HEIs generally tend to tailor-make programmes that match and address the academic needs of their unique student body.

Student non-academic support structures may include counselling services (such as personal, family planning, trauma or career counselling) financial, professional, and health services, and library support services. Some of these services may take the form of employment services, financial aid, and enlist student organisations, and student representative councils. Various student clubs that correspond with students' interests, also play a role. Yet again, the proposed non-academic student support structures are not, prescribed or fixed and are specific to respective HEIs. An alternative is to look at the merit of an integrated model of student support. An integrated model of student support can include a combination of a cultural integrated model, language and academic writing models, and first year experience models.

2.3.4 Common ground: could the two models meet?

Knowledge about retention models is based on empirical, contextually-based studies and Forsman (2011, p. 6) argues that there is no simple road map for how HEIs could better understand and enhance student retention. A number of researchers found shortcomings in persistence and integration models. The complexity of the human condition makes it difficult to definitively prove the validity of one psychological or sociological theoretical model over another (Swail et al., 2006a). The following two sets of principles, however, represent the dominant thinking that underlies retention models.

Tinto (1993), as cited in Swail et al. (2006a, p. 34), offers a very useful set of action principles for implementation of a retention programme. It includes the possession of adequate resources and good incentives to attract faculty members and staff as part of support programmes. A sense of ownership, as well as the freedom that sufficient, unpressured time provides, is part of what acts as incentive. Coordinated efforts that ensure a systematic, campus-wide approach to student retention creates a climate conducive to such programmes (Swail, 2006). Insistence on well-trained staff with the necessary skills to assist and educate students is imperative. Not only is concerted early intervention proven effective, but also on-going assessment to detect problems as they arose. Thus the study argues the following:

Models of Retention + Models of Support = Models of Intervention

2.4. Part B: The problem

If you think you are beaten, you are. If you think you dare not, you don't.
If you'd like to win, but think you can't, it's almost a cinch, you won't.
Life's battles don't always go to the stronger or faster man;
But soon or later, the one who wins is the one who thinks he can.

(Author unknown)

The quote above encourages positive thinking, self-affirmation and self-belief as a key ingredient to success in life. The question arises then, what can an institution do to assist a student who lacks such conviction in order to achieve full academic potential? The primary purpose of the literature review is to explore issues of researching at-risk students experience and support in HE both internationally and locally. The chapter now moves to concepts relating to issues around student support and retention. An exposition of the understandings and discourses that underlie them are provided to shed a little light on the conceptual field of this study in the section that follows (PART C). This section draws on previous studies with a focus on conceptualising how to support vulnerable students in universities. Bear in mind that while student support has become a key strategic element of universities across the world, there is little evidence of how support and retention strategies translate into the lives of the students at risk. The study attempts to address this gap.

2.4.1 Conceptualising student vulnerability

Several studies have shown that a student's transition to HE comes with numerous challenges (Briggs *et al*., 2012; Torenbeek, Jansen, & Hofman, 2010), which if not properly addressed, can negatively affect their academic performance and psychological well-being (Clark, 2005; Morosanu *et al*., 2010). Data from several sources have identified that HEIs needed to regard student support policy, strategies and structures, as part of their key institutional strategic plans (DHET, 2012; SARUA, 2008).

A typology of *sorting*, *supporting*, *connecting*, and *transforming* are regarded as key intervention and retention strategies designed to assist at-risk students (Perez, 1998, p. 65). This typology takes the form of *sorting* students into homogeneous subgroups, *supporting* students in dealing with life's problems or responsibilities, *connecting* students with each other and the institution, and *transforming* students and the institution.

Perez (1998, pp. 73-74) makes reference to two national studies in the US, that could shed light on what had worked previously: the first study by Cross, (1976) recommends that degree credits be granted for remedial classes, and the second study, by Roueche, Baker and Roueche (1984) promoted the idea that retention programmes should include the awarding of credit and an interface with subsequent courses. Perez (1998, p. 74) points out that HEI policy, should bear in mind the following to serve at-risk students:

- pre-enrolment activities should be proactive;
- orientation should be required of entering students;
- late registration should be abolished;
- basic skills assessment and placement should be mandatory;
- dual enrolment in basic skills and regular academic courses should be eliminated;
- working students should be strongly encouraged to reduce academic loads;
- more comprehensive financial aid programmes should be provided;
- safety nets with faculty mentors and peers support should be established;
- problem-solving and literacy activities should be provided in all courses; and
- student and program outcomes should be regularly evaluated and results disseminated.

For HEIs to attend to both the cognitive and psycho-social needs of at-risk students effectively, the above mentioned conceptual categories should be integrated and combined with support strategies that are structured and directive, using non-traditional teaching and learning methods (Perez, 1998). Therefore, it is clear that to serve at-risk students is not a linear task. It is a complex process that involves institution-wide commitment (Castle et al., 2006; S. Y. Essack, 2013).

In universities, the term *student at-risk* is used to describe a wide range of groups such as recent high school graduates; adults returning to HE; university dropouts; illiterate adults; immigrants; and students with limited English proficiency, amongst others. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, in Perez, 1998) reported objections to such demographic definitions of students at risk that have traditionally been identified by observable characteristics (such as non-English-speaking, handicapped, minority); or by descriptors of their condition (such as displaced homemaker, dislocated worker); or by their status within the academic institution (such as student on probation, student with low basic skills). In addition, students at risk are usually identified as those students who, for example have taken much longer to complete their studies; are viewed by their lecturers as being at-risk of failing; or those repeating their courses including those that are experiencing a combination of contributing factors that are impacting on their academic proficiency (Aldridge & Rowley, 2001, p. 61).

2.4.2 At-risk students = vulnerable students

It is often assumed that the vulnerable in HE are more concentrated among the following categories of students:

- those with some form of mental incapacity;
- second language learners;
- those from fragile socio economic backgrounds;
- those from environments with inherent prejudice;
- those who are poorly or sometimes excessively funded;
- those who learn in highly gendered curricula areas;
- those who graduated from schools in challenging circumstances.

However, there is a need to beware of making assumptions as to who vulnerable people are to avoid unproductive categorisation and stigmatisation in researching people with differences of vulnerability.

More importantly, it is argued that such categorisation, while it may be generative in terms of laying a basis for designing targeted interventions, has the potential of excluding a silent number of students who suffer various forms of less obvious but nevertheless equally, if not more debilitating, vulnerabilities. Often their voices are silenced inadvertently through being excluded from conventional categorisation of those ordinarily thought to be at-risk. Thus, some students at risk tend to be marginalised, side-lined, discriminated against, and most crucially, are silenced in the academic literature. The motivation behind giving such students a voice has been a key driver of research with vulnerable people.

A variety of meanings of the word vulnerability can be traced to discourses on natural disasters and hazards. Weichselgartner (2001) considers vulnerability in the sense of being open to abuse as a consequence of the weight of disadvantaging circumstances. Such circumstances can influence people who, for example, may be exposed to challenging nuclear, environmental, climate change, health and disease factors over which they have little or no control. The consequences of such vulnerabilities can have severe socio-economic implications and can cause psychological harm to its victims. In this context, Hewitt (1997, p. 143) defines vulnerability as being:

> ...essentially about the human ecology of endangerment...and is embedded in the social geography of settlements... and the space of distribution of influence in communities and political organisation.

On the other hand, vulnerability can be conceptualised as the capacity of individuals or communities to cope with the effects of such natural disasters and hazards. For example Blaikie *et al*. (1994), define vulnerability as the:

> ...set of characteristics of a group or individual in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life and livelihood is at-risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or society.

Essentially, vulnerability can be looked at from a wide range of contexts and levels, including an individual, community, institutional, organisational, systemic, and even global levels. However, research which explores vulnerabilities at any of these levels often sheds light on the vulnerabilities of other levels. For example, understanding individual student vulnerabilities in a university could provide insight into how the institutions, their systems, and organisation harbour their own vulnerabilities. Such insight can lead to new ways in which they can harness resources differently, to assist students to cope with their vulnerabilities.

For the purpose of this study, the definition of vulnerability in the context of HE, by Blaikie *et al*. (1994) is borrowed. They highlight vulnerability as the conditions that influence the capacity of students to confront the requirements of their studies successfully; vulnerability in this manner represents those factors which might compromise the achievement of learning goals and educational outcomes.

2.4.3 Researching with vulnerable people

In an overview of vulnerability literature that weighs up different theoretical considerations, Weichselgartner (2001, p. 87) suggests that the causes of vulnerability are at the intersection of a tripartite process (entitlement, empowerment, and political economy) that produces the cause of vulnerability at the intersection of the space of social vulnerability, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

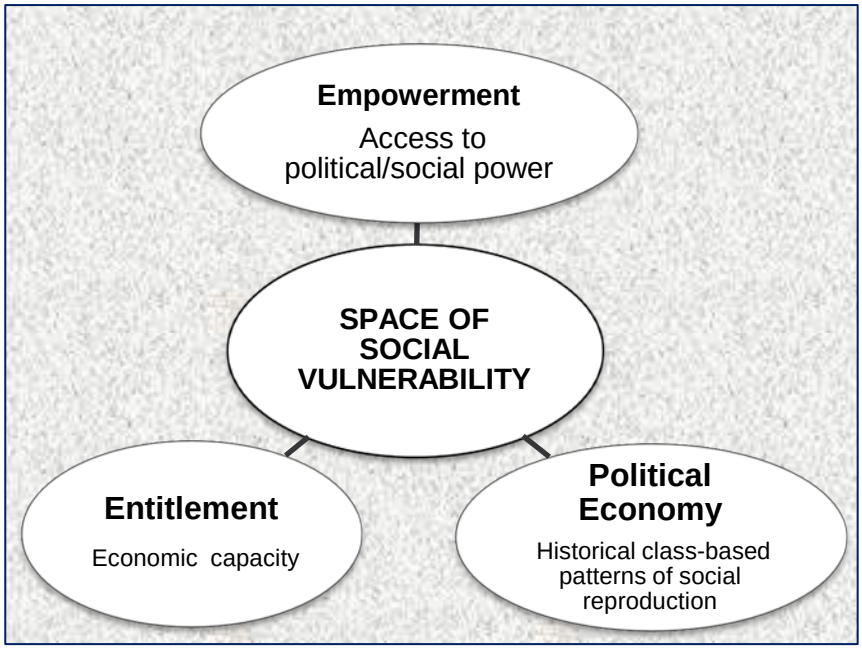


Figure 2: Space of social vulnerability (Source: Sing and Maringe (2014)

Perhaps the most serious relevance to this study is that the factors contributing to a student's sense of vulnerability cannot be easily juxtaposed to the outward symptoms of being at-risk. In other words, the outward manifestation of the student's vulnerability cannot be properly understood without hearing the voice of lived experience of the at-risk student.

Thus, vulnerability is the defining characteristic of life that lies at heart, in the essence of being human. Füssel (2007), suggests that research in education is therefore a response to the condition of humans, their organisations, their communities and their systems. Human Motivational Theories suggest that humans strive for self-actualisation as the ultimate goal of development of the human condition; however, this study argues that the fullest attainment of the human condition is the interrogation of that vulnerability.

Nobel Prize winners like Mother Theresa (Mother, 1983), Mahatma Gandhi (Gandhi, 2008), and Nelson Mandela (Mandela, 1990), won their laureates not only because they had a deeper understanding of their condition and themselves, but because they created and added value to those less fortunate in life (Maringe & Sing, 2014). The study suggests that using vulnerability as a lens for exploring the human, organisational, systemic, and even global conditions has the potential to contribute to conditions which liberate others from the shackles of vulnerabilities in their lives. However, vulnerability often has a tendency to become magnified when interrogated, as there is always a danger of exacerbating such vulnerability. Therefore undertaking research with vulnerable people magnifies the need for a heightened sense of ethical and methodological awareness. With this in mind, I confronted the idea of developing a theoretical or empirical framework for theorising vulnerability in HE

in Part C of this chapter. The study adopts the following model for researching vulnerability in HE as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

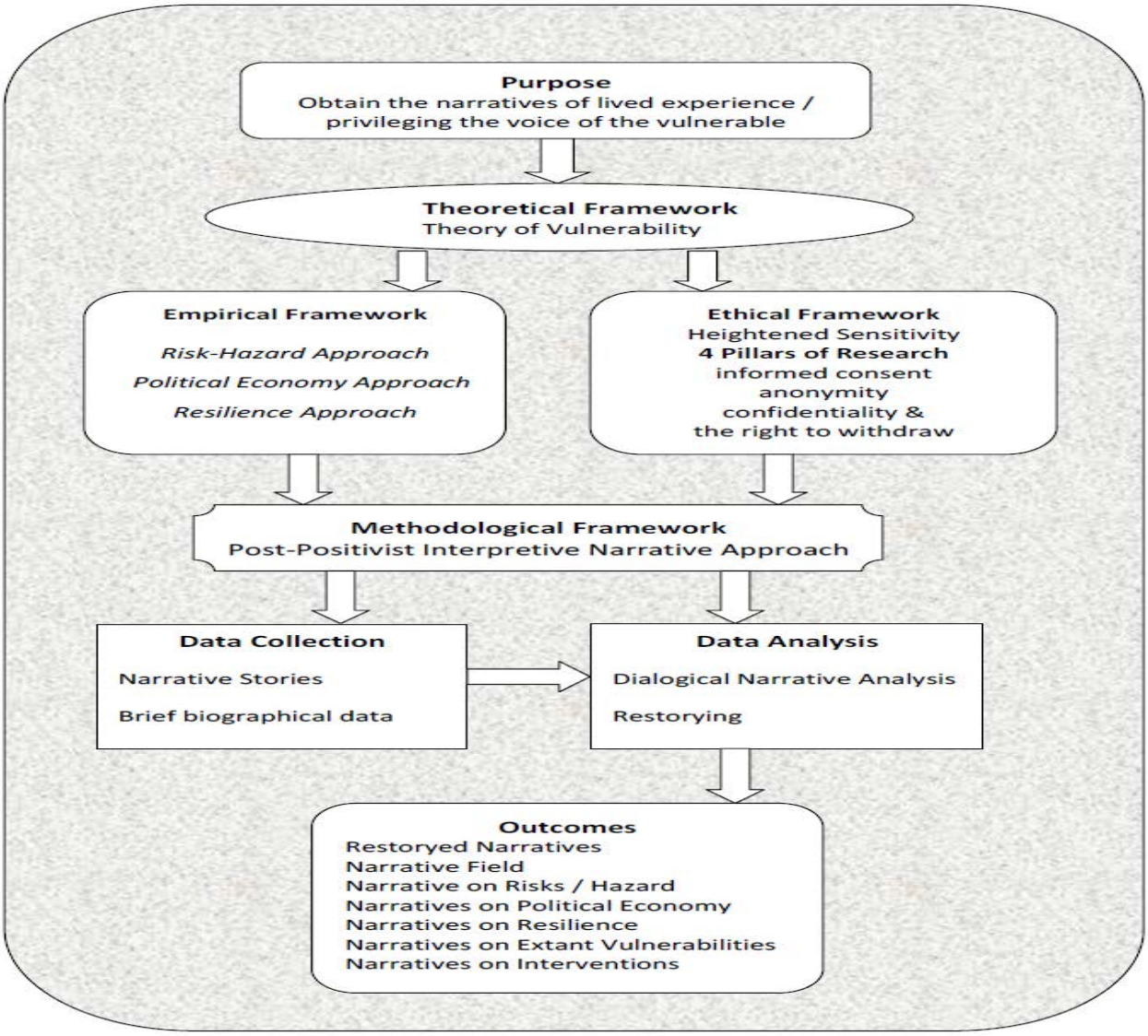


Figure 3: A model for researching vulnerability in Higher Education (Source: Sing and Maringe (2014)

Researching with vulnerable students perceived to be at-risk creates a focus on self-awareness underpins the second sub-question, which required interviewees to diagnose the problems that face them in their academic pursuits. In addition, they reflected on their own interventions to address their barriers to success. The literature focuses more on institutions and what they can do to mediate the students' situations and perceived barriers. One of the weaknesses with these programme interventions is that they are usually measured in terms of quantitative analysis of students marks. This involves a comparison between pre-and post-performance in relation to an the intervention programme, or other such statistical measures (see for example: Choy *et al*. (2000); Madden and Slavin (1987); McKenzie and Schweitzer

(2001); Slavin and Madden (1989)). The key problem arises as more students from social and family groups that have never before participated in HE, and who in many cases did not 'do well' in school, are encouraged to engage in HE, only to be set up for failure. Students are not generally seen as active agents that contribute to problem-solving. The focus is rather on what the institution did to provide the support structures for students. This study addresses the experiences of the students at risk within a South African context of HE and how these students articulate an interface between their own interventions and those that institutions do, or can, provide.

Coping with vulnerability: student perspective

How did the students at risk address their sense of vulnerability, their perceptions of barriers and challenges?

Research demonstrates that at-risk students need support. Social networks are defined as structures of relationships linking social actors that support students in their university activities or to overcome the hazards to their academic success.

A few examples of the commonly acknowledged groups of students who may be vulnerable, include marginalised groups of students such as students with disabilities, or the student in a wheelchair who needs access to different venues, or the hearing impaired student who needs a scribe but could not afford one, or the student of a child headed home who needs to work part-time to provide food for siblings (Batchelor, 2006). The study questions what support institutions provide for students who perhaps grew up in a financially stable and loving home, who are, despite the advantages, still at risk and vulnerable. What is the hidden vulnerability that institutions are missing?

2.4.4 Supporting and retaining vulnerable students

Institutions have a responsibility to support their students. With each intake of students, come students with unique challenges and circumstances. Such vulnerability is at the heart of the condition of being a student (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, pp. 55-56). This state of vulnerability, argues Batchelor (2006, p. 798), is provisional and transitional because it is a temporary and intermediary situation between the present and future.

Institutional mechanisms, support models and strategies

The third sub-question of the study, investigates institutional support models, policy, strategies, structures and mechanisms to assist students in general, and those at-risk specifically. In dealing with how to bridge the gaps found between school and university transition, retention expert, McCurrie (2009) identified in his research the merit of Summer

Bridge programmes in Columbia College, Chicago, USA (supported with the proposal of President Obama to the tune of twelve billion dollars). A Summer Bridge programme is defined as a short intense introduction to college that is designed to assist underprepared first year students, which is completed either as a precondition for admission or as a programme recommended to students who have potential but lack academic or social readiness. The efficacy of such Summer Bridge programmes has not been determined in a South African context, however, SA has carried out studies investigating the efficacy of Access Programmes (AP) that aim to ameliorate the challenges of redressing the past and the continuing inequalities in HE (refer to: Z. Essack & Quayle, 2007; Potgieter, Harding, Kritzinger, Somo, & Engelbrecht, 2015). McCurrie (2009) contends that universities use business models that apply cost- benefit analyses to value-added products and these business models are replacing discussions relating to students, curriculum and learning.

A HEI in the USA reported that the problem at their institution existed on three levels (Muse, 2003). Their first concern was a lack of information as to why students, who complete courses, continue to fail. The second concern related to interventions, counselling training, course design, and whether students had short-changed themselves by having taken courses that were not suitable because they were not familiar with the modes of learning. On a third level, the institution weighed the consequences of student dropout where revenue was lost. It would appear that universities succeed when their at-risk, vulnerable students are identified, and 'made acceptable' in meeting the admissions requirements for basic standards, This is usually facilitated by administrators through statistical models that not only determine which students are most likely to succeed and fail but also those that require support (McCurrie, 2009). Research also demonstrates that there is a need for students to have a point of contact amongst staff; they need to feel that they belong despite being in a large institution (Cooper, 2009; Thomas, 2012). Integration is a key strategy in most support models. Having programmes that familiarises students with institutional processes, such as orientation programmes/meet and greet/or induction programmes, creates an important starting point. Students also need the support of other students/peer support groups such as a 'buddy system', mentoring by second or third year students, tutor groups, or seminar/laboratory class groups, personal tutors and tutorials, as well as mini-projects that have been found to be useful to enhance course integration and familiarisation with facilities (Billing, 1997, p. 131). Institutional support is often discussed as interventions that take place in different fields or domains, for example, the libraries, and computer centres, language laboratories, counselling centres, health and wellness centres, or writing centres that all operate separately. These interventions tend to look at support as either academic or non-academic and rarely as a system that needs to be integrated. This is not to dismiss the

notion that certain students would need support in only one or two specific areas. This study listens to the accounts of the lived experiences of students and is alert to the kind of linkages that they draw between the various support programmes that are in existence.

The fourth sub-question draws attention to policy documents and makes a case for student support. Some institutions view student support as a form of crisis intervention that is generally ad hoc or perceived on an 'as-the-need-arises' basis. That means that these interventions are not proactive but rather reactive structures. Some literature has suggested that student support is not a major concern in the strategic planning of many institutions (The Green Paper DHET, 2012; Ogude *et al*., 2012; Slavin & Madden, 1989; Tinto, 2006). The intention of analysing policy documents is to ascertain not only what is said, but also that which is left unspoken. Much of the ethos of an institution is revealed in the language it employs and the way in which actors, actions and processes are described. The use of principles and strategies set out by Tinto (1993), and Beck (2011, pp. 40-42) are used as a measure for establishing policy intentions and thoughtfulness in this study. Studies reveal that Tinto's model and theories, basic writing programmes, bridge programmes, and first-year writing programmes are limited and do not adequately take into account the socio-economic status, the power of race, class, and gender that also can affect access and retention of students. McCurrie (2009) makes a case that minority groups and first-generation students are often penalised for not meeting HE's culturally-determined norms and standards, despite student support structures, centres, disability services, and policy.

Further indicating the need for student support on different levels, is the Browne Report (Browne, 2010) that draws attention to how the conception of student experience is caught between two policy imperatives: HE as a competitive marketplace and provider of skills, and as a facilitator of social mobility. However, Sabri (2011) makes known that there is a tension that exists in the Browne Review's assumptions with regards to students' agency and the contradictory nature of being both close-up (making financial judgements about future costs and still, knowingly making HE course study decisions) and distanced (from the financial transaction and the future costs of HE) that will shape their future. Furthermore, the Browne Report does not take into consideration the limitations and demands thus borne by students with low SES, low levels of cultural capital, and their possession of fewer resources to act as capable consumers. For that reason, they hold more anxiety about both immediate and future debt, and need support at different stages.

The final sub-question investigates how students suggest support models can be improved. Students at risk are often in a state of despair or disillusionment. Unrealistic expectations may form the backdrop to the way in which they envisage an ideal support system. However,

if support structures are in place, it would be useful to unravel where students perceived the misalignment between those structures and their needs. It may also be that certain forms of support are completely lacking. Structures do not change unless interventions are needed or suggested. Literature reveals that administrators in the Student Affairs Office advocate expanding access and improving retention. However, the 'fix-it' approach that they implemented neglected to answer questions about how class, race, and gender influenced teaching and learning (McCurrie, 2009). The literature makes it clear that support programmes do not usually receive the financial or other resources that are required to be effective. Success of support programmes are measured either quantitatively or not at all. This study looks at the narrative of students at risk and how they perceive the effectiveness of the support strategies in place.

2.5 Part C: Research tools

Part C deals with two major questions, namely:

i. What are the theoretical underpinnings of the research?

ii. What is the conceptual framework used to inform the data collection and analysis of the research?

2.5.1 Theoretical framework

Four theories inform the theoretical lens and framework that guides this study (cr. on page 22). They are better aligned as a discussion of thinking tools (A, B, C, and D). The usefulness of Thinking Tool A: Unified Theory of Self (Stets & Burke, 2000), assisted through the Thinking Tool B: Bourdieu's Theory of Social Practice, (Grenfell, 2010) enhanced by Thinking Tool C: Lave and Wenger's Theory of Communities of Practice (Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), is finally realised through the Thinking Tool D: Bonding and Bridging Theory, that enhances a perspective of Social Capital (Woolcock & Narayan, 2002).

Thinking Tool A: Unified theory of self

(Identity theory + social identity theory = unified theory of self)

> Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity (Wenger (1998, p. 215).

Central to the entire discipline of student support is the concept of identity which has occupied researchers from different disciplines over many centuries. Although there are a substantial number of studies on the identity of successful students, there are a limited number of studies on the identity of at-risk students. Those that look at vulnerable students inevitably conclude a lack of sense of self or associations with other deficit-driven views. D.

P. Swanson, Spencer, Harpalani, and Spencer (2002) assert that "identity is an extremely complex construction that had multiple domains", whereas Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) define identity as the "way a person understands and views himself, and is often viewed by others" and this is supported by Bagatell (2007) who reports that "constructing identities is often viewed as a complex, highly social process". Furthermore, Mead (1934, p. 63) affirmed that "selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves". The study adopts the definition of identity viewed through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism that defines identity as linked to the self, where the self is the result of interactions with others. Individuals define who they are when they engage in social interactions with others, and so too do they learn their expected life roles when faced with situations and their role in society.

The study draws on the research by Stets and Burke (2000) who assert that identity theory, with roots in structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980) has broad similarities with social identity theory, that has roots in social categorisation (Tajfel, 1978). Social identity theory defines identity in terms of social category meaning, while identity theory defines identity in terms of role meanings. Identity is not only embedded in the social roles a person has to play but by the way in which a person is part of different social structures. As such, a person adopts multiple roles and each of these not only creates a different persona and/or identity, but these then combines to form a composite identity.

They propose that a unification of the two theories would avoid redundancies and would establish a general theory of the self. In opposition to such a unification of theories, Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) argue that it is not advisable to integrate the two theories but rather investigate which is a better theory. The latter point is critiqued by Stets and Burke (2000) who believes that if instead, the two theories, identity and social identity theory were compared, the deficits of each theory would be complemented by the features of the other, thus forming a more comprehensive theory of self. They propose that theoretical unification of social identity theory and identity theory are in fact contrasting sides of a single theory that was developed independently yet dealing with different features of self-concept that have been labelled *identities*. A unified theory is valuable to this study as it demonstrates that a key difference originates in a view of the group as the basis for identity (who one is) is held by social identity theory and a view of the role as a basis for identity (what one does) is held by identity theory. As such, the unification theory promoted by Stets and Burke (2000) is interpreted by this study to affirm that being and doing are both central features of one's identity, that is, who one is and what one does are important sources of self-meaning.

Eight unified definitions are as follows (Stets & Burke, 2000):

i. self-categorisation is a cognitive association of the self within one social category distinct from another,

ii. the prototype or identity standard is a cognitive representation of a social category containing the means and norms that the person associates with the social category,

iii. an identity is a self-categorisation in terms of a social category referring to a class, group or role as represented in the prototype or identity standard,

iv. self-concept is the set of all of a person's identities,

v. an activated identity is one that guides behaviour, perceptions, and emotional responses in a situation,

vi. the salience of an identity is the probability that the identity would be activated in a situation,

vii. depersonalisation is the process of seeing the self in terms of the social category embodied, and

viii. self-verification is the process of behaving to maintain one's situationally manifest identity close to the meanings and expectations given in the standard.

Thus the unified theory holds an appeal to this study, as it incorporates factors such as the fit of an identity to a situation which in this study, implies that at-risk students may not fit the social settings of a HEI. The unified theory promotes two types of membership of any social category/group/role: one's identification with a group (being), added to behaviours (doing) that is then associated with the membership of that group. If identification with the group is problematic, a process of depersonalisation may take place. Through participation in the 'rituals'/behaviours of the group, a process of self-verification could take place. A unified identity theory examines the macro-, meso- and micro- social processes in the form of inter and intragroup relations (Stets & Burke, 2000) and how these may promote agency and reflection (aware of consequences).

Thinking Tool B: Habitus, field, capital, doxa, hexis, illusio, hysteresis and metanoia

While literature regards who one is and what one does as central sources of giving rise to self-meaning, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice explores concepts of *field*, *habitus,* and *capital* that provide a set of conceptual tools for explaining the structural aspects of the HE environment and the agency of the individual student in the process of learning. Grenfell (2010, p. 155) suggests that *habitus*, *field* and *capital* are Bourdieu's three primary thinking tools, referring to "the ontological complicity between the former two and their medium of operation through the latter". Bourdieu identified categories of capital namely economic, cultural and social capital, which he linked to class. These categories translate in varying degrees into symbolic capital as they are enacted in the social domain (Siisiäinen, 2000).

Life situates students' in a particular class, in a particular time and space and only when they become aware of this due to interaction outside their familiar environment, do they feel the need to reflect on who and what they are and what they have and do not have. Bourdieu refers to the subtle or blatant differences in an individual's mannerisms that arise because of such reflection as 'hexis', i.e. the way a person laughs or even eats, and so forth.

The habitus is a set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour people acquire through acting in society (Bourdieu, 1986), for example, whether they are brought up in a middle-class environment or in a working-class suburb. It is part of how society reproduces itself. However, there is also change. Conflict is built into society. People could find that their expectations and ways of living are suddenly out of step with the new social position in which they find themselves (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 19 as cited in Siisiäinen, 2000, p. 10).

A theoretical cornerstone of Bourdieu's sociology is the idea of society as a plurality of social fields. Forms of capital defined the positions and possibilities of the various agents in any social field that has a profile of its own, depending on the proportionate importance of the forms of capital within it (Siisiäinen (2000, p. 11). Therefore, in relation to student retention in HE, the notions of habitus and institutional habitus appear to be useful tools. If respective students feel that they do not fit in, then they may be more inclined to withdraw early. Maton (2010, p. 59) uses the analogy of a 'fish in water', referring to a 'field-habitus match'. Bourdieu speaks to this study, describing the 'mismatch' between the 'field-habitus' for the undergraduate student who does not know the limits of the 'doable and thinkable' (doxa) in his field.

'Illusio' or 'libido' is a concept used by Bourdieu to describe the social rules of the 'game', which can be in any domain, including the academic one (Grenfell, 2010, p. 153). Understanding 'the rules of the game' is a pivotal component in the achievement of success. Mentorship or peer support, designed so that an undergraduate student can 'own' the process of achieving their educational goals and be introduced into the doxa (unwritten 'rules of the game') in their respective field of HE, needs critical examination. 'Hysteresis' (the 'change effect') is central for understanding the role of support structures in HEIs as its task is to provide the student with a 'metanoia,' a 'mental transformation of one's whole vision of the social world,' (Bourdieu and Waccquant, 1992, p. 251 as cited in Maton, 2010, p. 60). The need to realign the student's habitus to something other is preceded by the need to redefine self-concept. When they are exploring a new field and the old habitus is no longer appropriate, that period of time that is taken to adapt to their new habitus, relative to the new field and new social interactions, is called hysteresis. At that time of uncertainty, HEIs can provide support structures that can assist a student through this phase. The process

continues, they learn, they socialise, they adapt, they internalise, and they define their new habitus, which is then evident in a different and evolved hexis.

Thinking Tool C: Communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation

While Bourdieu's theory provides a way of understanding practice, Lave and Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation provides a way of understanding the process of habitus development as arising out of the student's engagement with a community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation has widened the understanding of learning to include issues related to participation and identity transformation in a community of practice. Legitimate peripheral participation explains how newcomers gain gradual access to both the knowledge and activity of social practice through 'growing involvement' within a community of practice. They (1991, p. 53) conceive of identities as developing through "long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice", thus Lave and Wenger (1991) imply that identity, knowing and social membership, entail one another.

Communities of Practice can be used as an analytical tool to unpack the experience of students. To craft or construct 'identities in practice' is a social process. By generating a number of identities, a person gradually becomes a member of an on-going practice. Wenger (1998, p. 4) asserts that the learning process is based on the following premises: people are social beings and this is a central aspect of learning; knowledge requires competence in being able to play the role in which one is situated; knowing is a matter of active and meaningful engagement in the world. Lave (1993) argues strongly that learning is about the whole person, about becoming. To be a student, means knowing how to engage in the practice of being a student, e.g., amongst many other things, a student may need support to learn academic conventions, e.g. how to reference in an assignment, or how to use a programme such as Endnote.

Thinking Tool D: Bonding and bridging the academic and social divide

Having considered above, in Thinking Tool B, Bourdieu’s three categories of capital namely economic, cultural and social capital, which he had linked to class, that translate in varying degrees into symbolic capital as they are enacted in the social domain, I feel the need to further explore the notion of capital to lend even deeper significance to the experiences of vulnerable students at university. While a variety of definitions of the term social capital are suggested, this study uses the definition suggested by Kraak (2013, p. 86) who sees it as that set of mutually supportive relations in communities and nations that not only facilitates co-operation but also is a source of providing valuable collective and economic benefits to

members. A contrary relationship exists that can be demonstrated when members of the higher social classes have more visible supportive relations or social networks that assist in the transition through youth into adulthood, work and prosperity. In contrast, young people from the working class usually did not have social networks which facilitate career advice, information sharing, educational or job opportunities (Kraak, 2013). This argument substantiates the case that this study makes, that universities need to be responsible for providing the proxy network needed by the majority of students in the form of support services, targeted at different phases of education (e.g. to change mind-sets at school level to encourage academic excellence, to run information drives to advertise the career, social and sport opportunities at universities or to identify and target students with potential to excel).

The concept of student support, if viewed from a sociological perspective, is seen as a social construction. Social Capital Theory as a conceptual lens provides some understanding of the nature of HEIs. Woolcock and Narayan (2002, p. 229) distinguish four perspectives of Social Capital: **the communitarian view** (relating to social integration through participation in organisations designed to foster 'a sense of belonging'), **the networks view** (in which both vertical and horizontal associations are emphasised, vertical referring to cross-cultural associations and horizontal referring to intrapersonal relations within one's own cultural context), **the institutional view** (referring to formal institutional conventions that determine the way relationships are formed and developed), and **the synergy view** (referring to opportunities for alliances and strategies for creating cohesive relations).

Flaskerud and Winslow (1998) report that vulnerability is attributed to a lack of prospects: future income, jobs, education and housing. This acts as demotivating and places some groups of people at greater risk. Woolcock and Narayan (2002, p. 230) caution that without intercommunity ties, such as those that cross various social divides (based on religion, class, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status), strong horizontal ties could become a basis for the pursuit of narrow sectarian interests (Gittel and Vidal as cited in Woolcock & Narayan, 2002).

Furthermore, extending the debate on capital by Bourdieu, as put forward in the discussion in Thinking Tool B, Woolcock and Narayan (2002), in relation to universities, signpost that the capacity of social groups to act in their collective interest, depends on the quality of the formal institutions in which they reside and that also depends on their own internal coherence, credibility, and competence and on their external accountability to civil society. When an institution's social capital is embedded in social groups that are disconnected from one another, the more powerful groups dominate, to the exclusion of other groups. Therefore

Uphoff, 1992, as cited in Woolcock and Narayan (2002) argues that 'top-down' efforts are needed to introduce, sustain, and institutionalise 'bottom-up' development. To create synergy in HEIs, three central tasks confront theorists, researchers, and policymakers: to identify the nature of the relationship and extent of the interaction between the institution and its academic and student bodies; to develop institutional strategies based on these social relations, particularly the extent to which bonding and bridging could be facilitated; and thirdly to determine how the positive manifestations of Social Capital, cooperation, trust and institutional efficiency can offset disharmony, insecurities, isolation, and non-achievement.

2.5.2 Conceptual Framework

The study of vulnerability

Three major approaches to the study of vulnerability are identified in the literature (Füssel, 2012). Firstly, the *Risk-Hazard approach* examines the relationship between factors, which create vulnerabilities, and their consequences. In other words, it investigates the relationship between cause and effect. One key aspect is the distinction between two factors that determine the risk to a person/system: the 'hazard', which is a potentially damaging physical event, phenomenon, or human activity that is characterised by its location, intensity, frequency, and probability. Another factor, vulnerability, refers to the "relationship between the severity of the hazard and the degree of damage caused" (Füssel, 2007, p. 157).

Secondly, the *Political Economy approach*, asks the question, "who is vulnerable and why?" In other words, it tries to understand the person's susceptibility to a risk or hazard and the extent to which they feel included or excluded, based on their vulnerabilities. It refers to not only socioeconomic vulnerability exposed to multiple stresses, but to internal social vulnerability or cross-scale social vulnerability, i.e. vulnerability within oneself, at-risk, in relation to one or more social situations.

Thirdly, the *Resilience approach* questions how a system, group, or individual copes with the hazard and how they deal with vulnerability. In other words, it investigates the capacity to cope and adapt to a stress. The three approaches invite us to ask crucial questions to understand students at risk better. However, one approach considered in isolation cannot provide a holistic answer. As such, an integrated approach, which combines all three approaches to studying vulnerability amongst students at risk, is adopted as the theoretical framework for this study, as illustrated in figure 4 below.

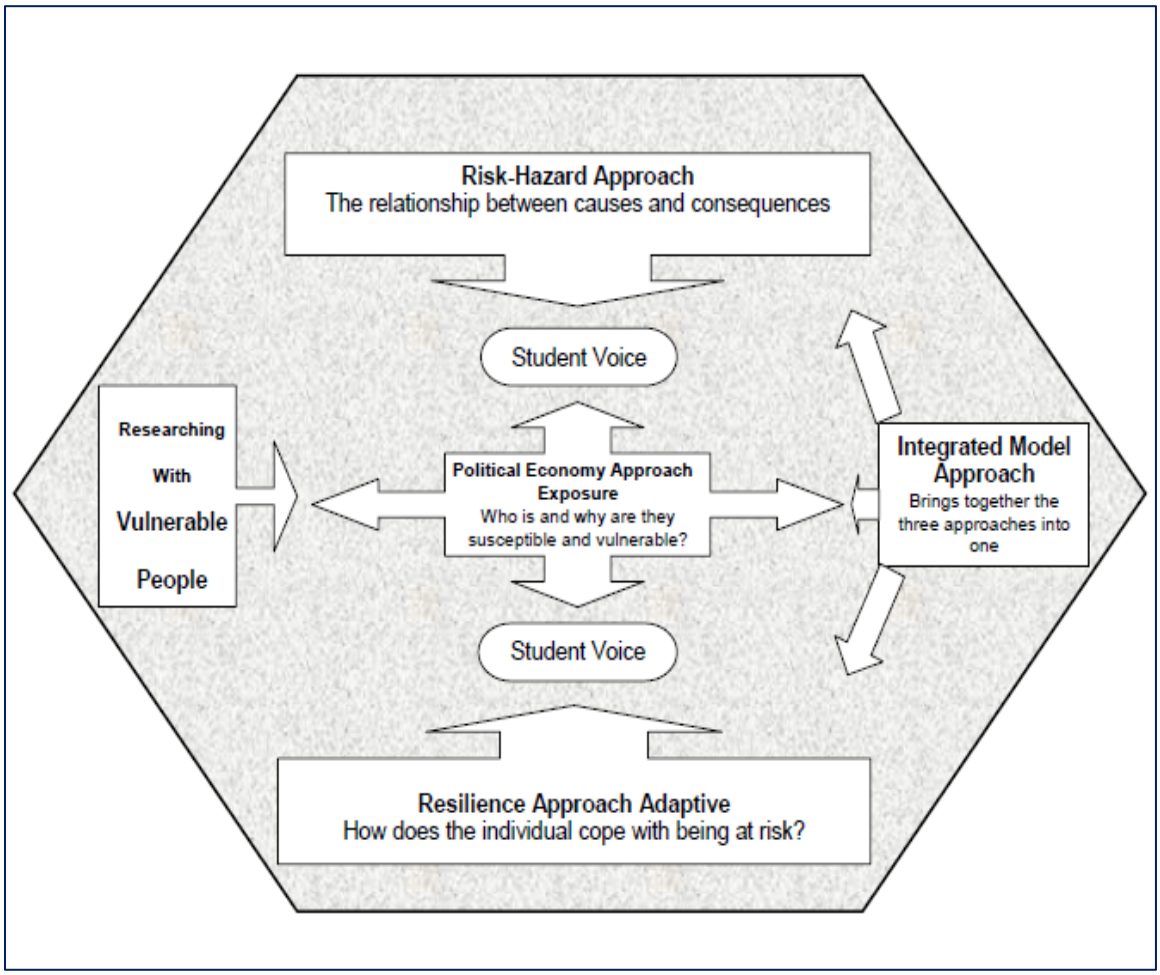


Figure 4: Theorising vulnerability research in Higher Education (Source: Maringe and Sing (2014)

2.6 Summary

This chapter aimed to connect the research questions to the literature review. In Part A, the chapter explained terminology that is fundamental to understanding the study, such as HE access, wastage, student retention, at-risk students, student vulnerability and how to best support such students. Part B, of the chapter contextualises the changing landscape of HE with regards to global trends, as well as a South African HE comparative perspective.

The theoretical lens that shapes this study draws on four sets of thinking tools: a Unified Theory of Self, Bourdieu's Theory of Social Practice, a Theory of Communities of Practice, and the Bonding and Bridging Theory. A synthesised conceptual framework that underpins the study brings together three approaches into one integrated approach, as a framework to study the phenomenon of vulnerability. Having now explained the theoretical and conceptual foundations used to understand the nature of the problem of this study, the next chapter discusses the methodology of the study.

CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH APPROACH

We cannot trample upon the humanity of others without devaluing our own. The Igobo, always practical, put it correctly in their proverb, Onye ji onye n' ani ji onwe ya: He who will hold another down in the mud must stay in the mud to keep him down.

Achebe (2009)

3.1 Introduction

The above quotation brings to light the seriousness and sensitivity of researching with vulnerable people. In order to carry out research with vulnerable individuals/groups researchers' need to maintain standards' of professional ethic. The research method and design are presented in this chapter. The previous chapter outlined the relevant literature on research in the field to substantiate the nature of student vulnerability, student support and student retention. This chapter maps the plans and procedures that inform the methodology that was used for this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the researcher's worldview which explains why a particular lens for the analysis of data is appropriate, followed by the aims of the study. The aim of this study is primarily to determine how students in universities experience the phenomenon of vulnerability, how they cope with it, and how their narratives of experience can improve student support and student retention at institutions. But there is more value, as Achebe (2009) in the quotation above advocates, namely, that when dealing with the dignity of others, and in the context of this study, when dealing with the vulnerability of others, one needs to be conscious of not perpetuating that vulnerability. Thus, this methodology chapter sketches a plan for researching with vulnerable people, which entails more than upholding ethical values. It entails bringing compassion and empowerment through articulation to the process.

The chapter covers the research design, strategy and procedures of inquiry used. The sampling strategy used to obtain participants and information on the selected participants is detailed, and followed by a discussion of the research instruments used to gather the data, the research process that was followed and the data analysis techniques employed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical procedures that were followed in this study. Refer to Figure 5 below for an illustration of the plan and procedure for this study.

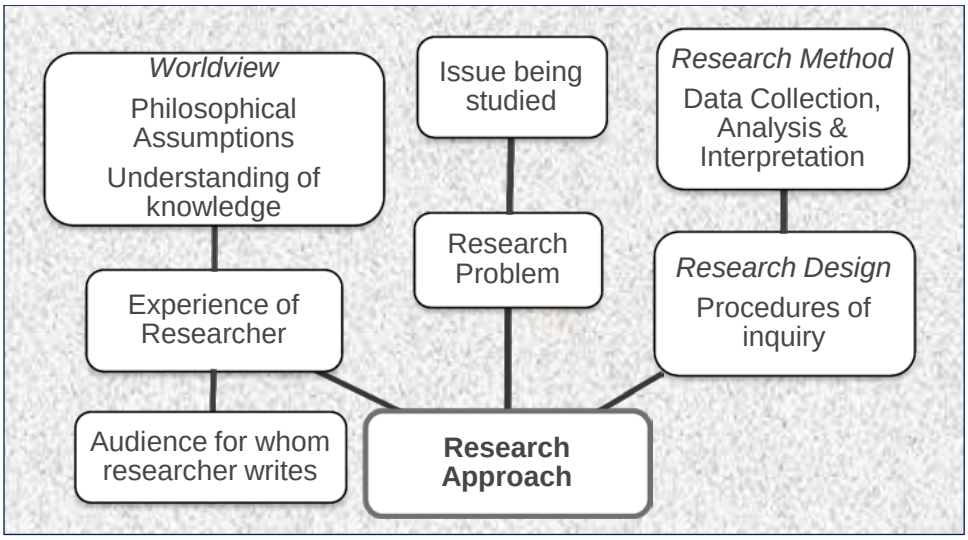


Figure 5: A framework plan for this research study (Source: Adapted from Creswell (2014)

This chapter aimed to provide validity for the study and thus argues that the chosen approach and methods addressed the study's key research question. Figure 6 below is an expansion on Figure 5 above.

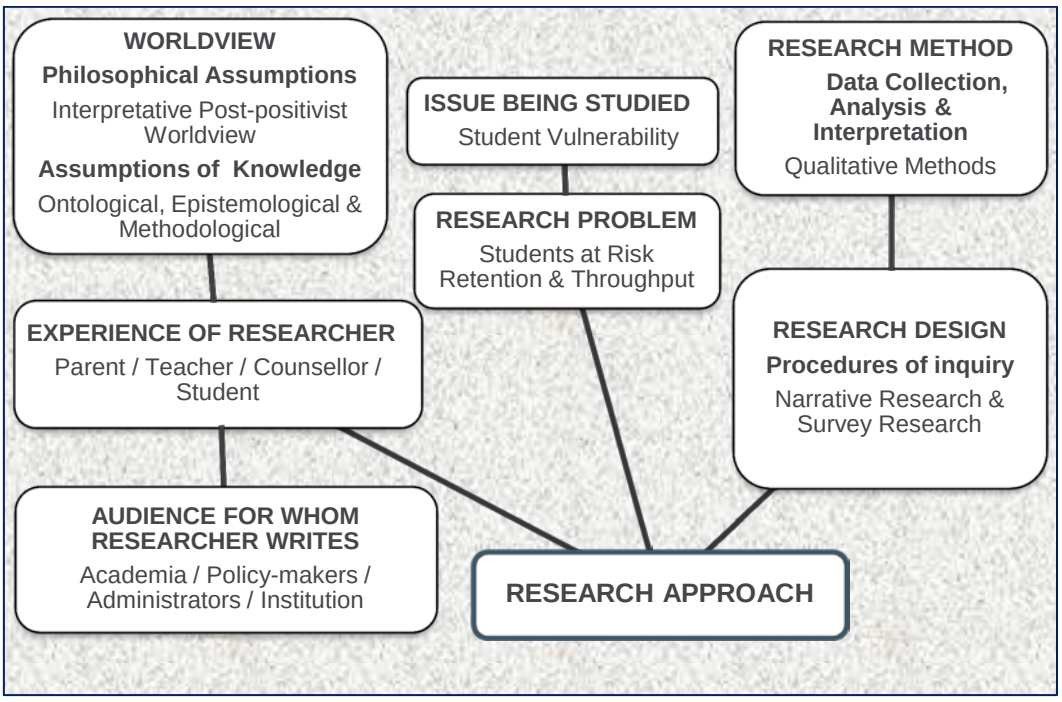


Figure 6: Research approach, plans and procedures of this study

3.2 Purpose and aim of the research

The purpose and aim of this study is to explore the relationship between at-risk students' perceptions of their experiences, and retention, when studying towards a university degree programme in a South African institution, in the Gauteng Province. In order to fulfil the expressed purpose of the study, the following questions were formulated to guide the research process.

Primary research question

The overarching research question is:

> How do at-risk students in universities negotiate their sense of vulnerability in order to cope with the demands of their study programmes and how might the stories of their lived experiences inform debates around student retention.

Research can have up to three purposes, descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory (Robson, 1993, p. 42) and this study has a combination of all three purposes, as illustrated in the five sub-questions depicted in Figure 7 below:

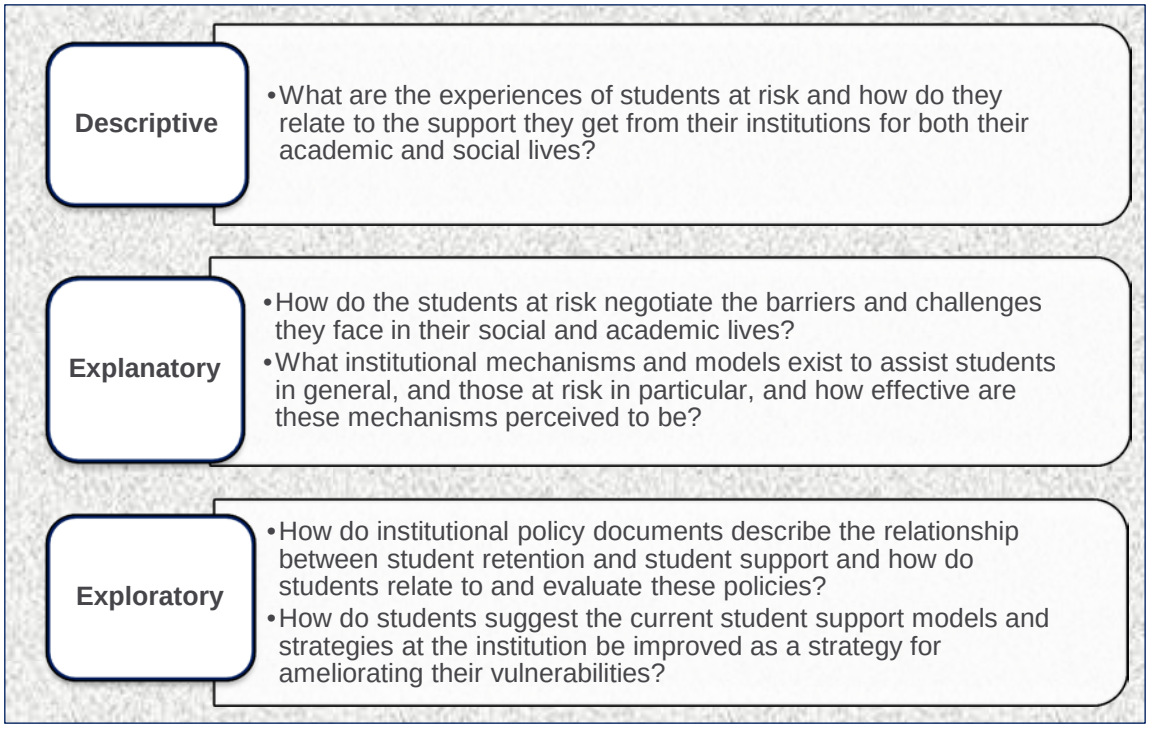


Figure 7: Link between research purpose and research questions

In this chapter, I present the research methodology designed to explore the narratives of vulnerability of students at a South African University, in Gauteng Province, SA and how they coped in their academic and social lives. Extant literature indicated that there are various risks and hazards to which students are exposed in their academic and social lives whilst at university, and these risks and hazards contribute to feelings of vulnerability (Costa & Kropp, 2012; Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). However, of the many factors of risks and hazards experienced, feelings of vulnerability are experienced on either level or a combination of two levels, that is, within oneself and from outside of oneself. Based on the literature, the following hypotheses are accepted:

i. There is a negative relationship between vulnerability within oneself and exposure to risks and hazards, outside of oneself.
ii. There is a positive relationship between institutional student support and retention of at-risk students.

An explanation of the nature of research in terms of philosophical underpinnings in relation to the chosen research approach follows.

3.3 Worldview and philosophical assumptions

In order to make meaning in the world, through the understanding of knowledge, researchers adopt approaches and methods that have their grounding in philosophical beliefs and thus deals with the worldview that the researcher brings to the study. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) define research philosophy as an overarching concept that is relevant to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge. People use three types of reasoning to understand the world around them, deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, and the combined, inductive-deductive approach.

3.3.1 Searching for truth

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011, p. 4) describe three characteristics of research which they define as a combination of experience and reasoning. Firstly, research is the experience of using the systematic and controlled inductive-deductive model. Secondly, research is empirical, where the social scientist turns to the measures subjective personal belief against objective, empirical facts and tests. Thirdly, research is self-correcting, where incorrect results are either revised or discarded.

3.3.2 Interpreting social reality

There are two different means for interpreting social reality: the Objectivist and the Subjectivist conceptions. The Objectivist conception of reality, based on the philosophical base of realism, holds that the world exists and is knowable as it really is. As such, organisations are real entities with a life of their own. The Subjectivist conception of reality, based on the philosophical base of idealism, holds that the world exists, but different people construe it in different ways. Not just organisations, but everything is constructed and interpreted and therefore only subjective versions of 'reality' exist (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 8).

3.3.3 Philosophical assumptions about social reality

Four interrelated elements (Cohen *et al*., 2011): ontology, epistemology, human nature, and methodology, guide the decision-making process and were followed in this the study, as discussed below.

a. Ontology

Ontology is the study of the nature of reality and being (Schraw, 2013), a branch of philosophy that addresses the nature of being and reality, in other words, what exists in the world. Ontology specifies what is considered to be truths about knowledge, information and the world (Schuh & Barab, 2008). As such, Schuh and Barab (2008, p. 72) posit that truth or knowledge is regarded as 'what is good for us' where truth or knowledge is equivalent to the consequences of the interactions. Ontology questions whether the nature of reality is fixed, objective, or subjective (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007). Although the researcher took the position of adopting a set of procedures to arrive at the 'truth' through analysis of data that is as objective and accurate as possible, the subjective and fluid nature of reality is always acknowledged and borne in mind - both the subjective realities of the participants and the researcher.

b. Epistemology

Epistemology and ontology support each other. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and beliefs about knowledge (Schraw, 2013). Epistemology is concerned with 'how we come to believe what exists' (Schuh & Barab, 2008, p. 68). Epistemological belief refers to specific belief about some aspect of knowledge that is part of broader epistemology (Schraw, 2013) and it addresses the origins, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge (Schuh & Barab, 2008, p. 70). Axiological assumptions take into account what the roles are of the value systems, of both the researcher and the participant.

c. Human Nature

How humans are portrayed in research is of essence as they can be both the object and subject of a study (Cohen et al., 2011). As objects, humans are treated in a perfunctory way and their role in the research is one over which they have little or no control. As subjects, human beings respond as active participants, creating and shaping their own world. In this research, human beings are considered subjects.

d. Methodology

Methodological assumptions reflect on what the research process is. This research process is informed by the previous three assumptions. The ontology, epistemology, and view of human nature influenced the methodological choices made. A paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world as it provides guidance on how researchers carry out the research (Paton, 1990), which leads us to the next sub-section.

3.4 An interpretative post-positivist worldview

Research paradigms offer a framework that comprises an accepted set of theories, methods, and ways of defining data. A worldview, also known as a research paradigm, is defined as a basic set of beliefs that guide action. It is further regarded as a researcher's general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that the researcher brings to a study (Creswell, 2014, p. 6). Postpositivism represents the thinking after positivism, challenging the notion of absolute truth, or that knowledge is unchangeable, with a view that research cannot be positive about claims of knowledge when studying the behaviour and actions of humans. Post-positivists hold a deterministic philosophy in which causes determine effects or outcomes (Creswell, 2014). Five key assumptions about the post-positivist worldview are highlighted by Phillips and Burbules (2000) as the following:

i. Knowledge is conjectural, i.e. absolute truth can never be found, implying that evidence is always imperfect/fallible,

ii. Research is the process that makes claims and thereafter refines or refutes them for claims more warranted,

iii. Data, evidence and rational considerations, shape knowledge,

iv. Research seeks to develop relevant, true statements that can serve to explain the situation of concern, and lastly,

v. Being objective is an essential part of inquiry, thus the need to examine methods and conclusions for bias.

I hold an *interpretive post-positivist worldview* as opposed to a *normative paradigm* that is a *positivist worldview*, which argues that human behaviour is rule-governed and should be investigated through natural science methods. The context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience, and as such, Cohen *et al*. (2011) provide the following guidelines on an interpretive paradigm as being:

i. Characterised by concern for the individual,

ii. Able to retain the integrity of the of the phenomena being investigated,

iii. Able to make the effort to get inside the person and understand the person from within,

iv. The aim of scientific investigation focused on action,

v. Future-orientated,

vi. Gives way to the multifaceted images of human behaviour as varied as the situations and contexts supporting them.

Positivism as opposed to postpositivism, strives for comprehending the world through observed phenomena. Understanding is sought through objectivity, measurability, predictability, controllability, and patterning; it combines the construction of laws and rules of behaviour with the ascription of causality. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007, p. 27) assert that under the umbrella of interpretive paradigms, meanings and interpretations are important. Further, interpretive paradigms function as people strive to interpret and operate in an already interpreted world. Therefore, as a 'double hermeneutic', interpretive paradigms are differentiated, as striving to understand and interpret the world, in terms of its actors (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 33).

Understanding through Complexity Theory

Critical theory is an approach to educational research that regards the previous two paradigms as incomplete accounts of social behaviour because of their neglect of political and ideological contexts. Critical theory is concerned not only in providing an account of society and behaviour, in understanding situations and phenomena, but also strives to promote the emancipation of individuals/groups based on equality and democracy, through change (Cohen *et al*., 2007). It has a transformative intention that will transform society and individuals to social democracy.

For that reason, the lenses used in this study are that of complexity theory. It is an emerging approach to educational research that ascertains that phenomena should be explored holistically, taking into account the dynamic interaction of several parts, not just as individuals, institutions, communities, and systems, but rather as a merging as a unit or web

of analysis (Cohen *et al.,* 2007, p. 34). Such a lens, in this study, regards and interprets educational research as a symbiosis of internal and external partnerships, to argue for different voices and views to be heard.

Having analysed the existing body of literature in the area of student support, vulnerability, and retention, in the previous chapter, it is now reasonable to describe the methods of investigation used in the PhD study. Polkinghorne (1995) argues that social research aims to report on experience from which new views about the social world can emerge. Therefore, Shaw (2009) contends that in order to relate to an experience, one can tell a story about one's own experience revealing insights about conflicts and tensions that individuals construct through their representations. These revelations can appear isolated when viewed alone in one narrative (Shaw, 2009) but in relation to the full study of student experience in HE, they can enable understanding of how to better support students. I now proceed to share a personal tale.

3.5 Understanding through self-reflection

The study is framed by my own educational journey and is reflected on through a consideration of both my undergraduate and postgraduate student experiences. I grew up in a traditional Indian home, within a community of neighbourhood 'uncles and aunts' that became family. I am the youngest and only daughter with two elder brothers. I relocated from KwaZulu-Natal Province to Gauteng Province, at the age of 17. I achieved my Higher Diploma in Education in 1996 as a full-time student. I have since returned twice as a part-time student to read towards my Bachelor of Education and then my Master of Education degrees. The relationship that I hold with my undergraduate university has not concluded as I am back again, many years later as a full-time student, juggling the roles of daughter, sister, wife, parent, niece, aunt, friend and so forth, with much difficulty but with sheer tenacity in order to pursue further studies in education. It was a difficult decision to make, to give up a steady income, and my financial independence.

My personal challenges include raising three children, teaching them about our culture, religion, values, and our South African heritage, supervising their homework and transporting them to and from school activities. We (my husband and I) raise them in an environment so different from the ones that we were respectively raised in. There is a lack of community or ‘village spirit,’ and instead we live in homes surrounded by high fences and tight security, with each neighbour engaged in the pursuit of worldly living. We have to create, nurture and foster relationships over distance so that our children may recognise the value of where we

come from. We also take our children to the temple to pray in addition to instilling in them the value, that their home is also a temple to focus on their spiritual development.

In my culture, I have learnt that the door to success lies at the feet of one's parents, meaning, in other words, that success comes through humility and with the blessings of your parents. My beloved parents have been through many personal challenges and difficulties to raise and educate us, and now in their old age, both parents have considerable health problems. It is a challenging and heart-breaking situation in which to be as a daughter.

Further intensifying my own stress levels, were challenges with regards to financing my studies, commuting costs to and from home, getting to grips with academic writing again, owning my space as a student, balancing my life roles, dealing with the toll on my physical health, asserting a new academic identity, and validating my experiences. A Sanskrit verse from Vedic scripture[5], sums up why I have chosen to focus my study on the vulnerability of students: (Srimad Bhagavatam, 10/10/14, as translated by Prabhupada, 1962):

> yathā kaṇṭaka-viddhāṅgo
> jantor necchati tāṁ vyathām
> jīva-sāmyaṁ gato liṅgair
> na tathāviddha-kaṇṭakah

Translation:

'By seeing their faces, one whose body has been pricked by pins can understand the pain of others who are pinpricked. Realising that this pain is the same for everyone, he does not want others to suffer in this way. But one who has never been pricked by pins cannot understand this pain (http://vedabase.net).'

There is an appreciation in this study that is motivated by my own personal struggles at an institution of higher learning. The toil involved in establishing a student identity and a sense of belonging was considerable, and required a level of persistence that is rarely remarked upon. It is envisaged that the study will make the point that the student at risk is a significant contributor to the phenomenon of wastage in HE. It is the students' own personal experiences at university that need to be analysed and considered in designing policy,

[5] Sanskrit is the primary language of classical Indian literature, philosophy, and scripture; an ancient Indic language; the language of Hinduism and the Vedas; and is the classical literary language of India. http://www.answers.com/topic/sanskrit

structures, strategies, to support them effectively. Consequently for as long as adequate support is lacking, students at risk will continue to be a 'wastage' statistic.

3.6 Research design

Yin (2009, p. 24) defines a research design as the logic that links the data to be collected and the conclusions to be drawn, to the initial questions of the study whereby every empirical study has an implicit and if not explicit, research design. Research design is the detailed explanation on how to conduct ethical research (Maree, 2013). In other words, it is a structured plan of how the data is collected, the instruments to be used and the strategy for analysis. A research design can involve either a fixed design, referred to as qualitative research, or a flexible design, referred to as a quantitative design (Robson, 2002, p. 5). Qualitative research is a systematic and rigorous form of inquiry that focuses on the contexts and meaning of human lives. It voices experiences of participants with the purpose of understanding processes in contexts using inductive or theory-development driven research. Quantitative research is a mode of inquiry using deductive research with the purpose of testing theories by gathering descriptive information that examines relationships among variables with the potential to provide measurable evidence to establish probable cause and effect (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, 2011, p. 4).

Qualitative research plays an important role in explaining the social world (Creswell, Shope, Vicki, Clark, & Green, 2006, p. 2). In this study, gaining an in-depth understanding of at-risk students' experiences of vulnerability at university was fundamental to finding out how they coped and what support they needed from their university. Thus a qualitative approach to this research was deemed appropriate. A small element of quantitative work, in the way of an online survey was added to the database. Consequently, for the purposes of this study, a combination of data set, allowed the study to gain rich insight into students experiences of vulnerability, and the reasons for such susceptibility. It thus became possible to research implications and extend the discussion on the practice of student support and retention in HE.

Procedures of inquiry

By using a qualitative research approach (refer to Figure 8 below), students' experiences of vulnerability are realised in their narration thereby allowing the social construction of multiple realities. The addition of quantitative data serves both, as a way of triangulation and as an enrichment of the data. Based on the research question and social issues to be resolved, the study employed narrative interviews and an online survey, focusing the spotlight on collecting rich data that focuses on depth and breadth.

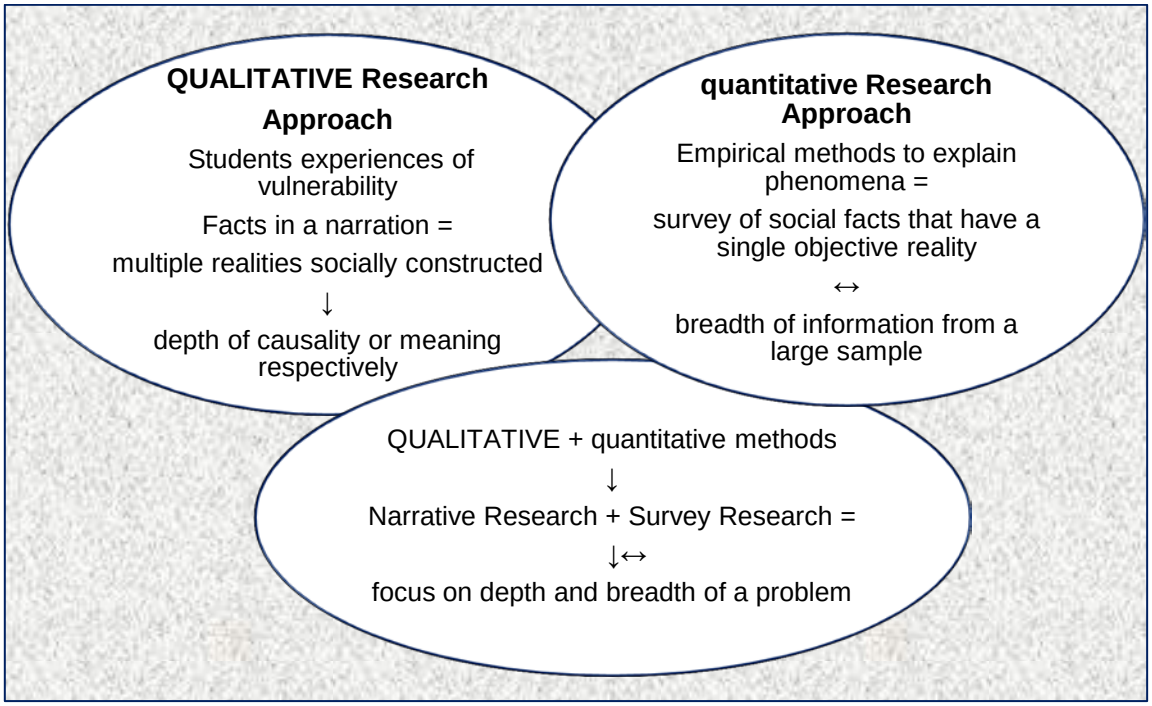


Figure 8: Qualitative research approach

The study began by exploring with qualitative data and analysis and then used the findings in a second quantitative phase, to create and develop an instrument that builds on the results of the initial database. The intention of adopting such a strategy was to develop better measurements with specific samples of population (at-risk students') and to see if data from a few individuals in the qualitative phase can be generalised to a larger sample (Creswell, 2014, p. 225). Figure 9 below illustrates the three-phase procedure.

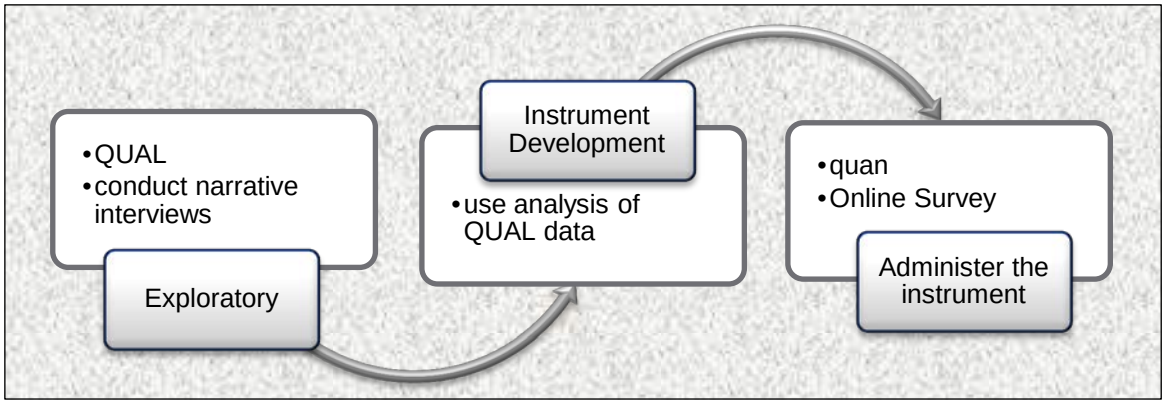


Figure 9: Three-phase procedure (Source: adapted from Creswell (2014)

Instrumental case study approach

Yin (2009, p. 18) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that:

i. Investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context,

ii. Boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident,

iii. Copes with the technical situation where there will be multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge/triangulate, and lastly,

iv. It benefits from prior development of theoretical positions to guide data collection and analysis.

By using a case study I aimed to develop a holistic understanding of student support and retention models in the case study institution. Case studies offer a multi-perspective analysis in which the researcher considers not only the voice and perspective of one or two participants in a situation. An instrumental case provides insight into a specific theme or issue (McMillan, 2010) and in this study it is the phenomenon of students at risk. The case study approach is concerned with investigating phenomena as they naturally occur, so there was no need for the researcher to impose controls or change any circumstances (Denscombe, 2010; McMillan, 2010; Neuman, 2003).

3.7 Narrative research

Research designs, also known as strategies of inquiry, are types of inquiry within qualitative and quantitative approaches that provide specific direction for procedures in research design (Creswell, 2014, p. 12). A research design is a detailed explanation of how a study was conducted, what instruments were used, and the elaboration of ethical considerations guiding the overall study.

This study is conceptualised as falling within the interpretative post-positivist paradigm view that knowledge is derived from interaction among groups of individuals and the personal writings in their environment, which together create a reality paradigm (Pring *et al*., 2012; Silverman, 2006). Within this paradigm, a narrative approach was identified as the most appropriate because participants had an opportunity to describe their experiences of the world in an unfettered way that expressed their natural responses to their world. Narrative researchers collect stories and write them up as narratives of experience. As Moen (2008, p. 60) explains, a narrative is a story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or their audience because when narratives are looked on within the framework of socio-cultural theory, there exists an interlinking between the individual and their context.

This means that as individuals tell their stories, they are not isolated and independent of their context thereby capturing both the individual and the context.

An interpretative post-positivist paradigm informed my study because it probes into and questions the taken-for-granted assumptions that students will 'fit into' the culture of a university in pursuit of their academic goals. Tierney (1997, p. 3) describes a modernist perspective of socialisation in a HEI as a rational process embedded in an understandable culture where culture is the sum of activities, symbolic and instrumental, that creates shared meaning. New students at a university regard socialisation as being the successful understanding and incorporation of those activities. A modernist framework of the culture of an organisation holds the view that a new student can learn the culture of an organisation because it is coherent and understandable.

Postmodernism points out that such totalisation hides contradictions, ambiguities, and oppositions and is a means for generating power and control (Boland, 1995 as cited by Tierney, 1997, p. 6). Therefore, within a postmodernist framework, culture is not waiting 'out there' to be discovered and 'acquired' by new students. According to Tierney (1997), the coherence of an organisation's culture derives from the partial and mutually dependent knowledge of each person caught in the process and develops out of the work they do together. The modernist assumption that an organisation's culture is coherent implies that all people in the culture are the same. Inherent in this view is that in such a culture there will be winners (persistence) and losers (dropouts), misfits (at-risk students) and fully incorporated members (graduates)[6]. Therefore, if the purpose of socialisation is assimilation, then the consequence is that those who do not learn the correct ways to assimilate (institutional fit) will fail or dropout.

An interpretative post-positivist paradigm view of organisational culture supports the view that socialisation is not a series of social acquisitions that occur in unchanging contexts irrespective of individual and group identity, and neither is it a planned sequence of learning activities where newcomer students learn one fact and then another. Tierney (1997) affirms that socialisation, as a cultural act, is an interpretive process involved in the creation rather than the transmittal of meaning, because culture is not discovered by unchanging newcomer students. He contends that socialisation involves give-and-take where new individuals make sense of an organisation through their own unique backgrounds and the current contexts in which the organisation resides.

[6] My own interpretation

An important reason for adopting this interpretative post-positivist paradigm view of organisational socialisation is that current literature (CHE, 2010a, 2010b; Griffin, Colella, & Goparaju, 2000; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009; Jansen, 2011; Morrow, 1994, 2005; Taormina, 1997; Tierney, 1997) questions whose obligation is it to change. It asks whether the onus of socialisation resides with the newcomer student. What are the implications for an organisation and how should it view newcomer students? How can the HEI reconfigure the socialisation processes in order to retain and support its student body?

To date various methods have been developed and introduced to measure students experience of institutional academic and non-academic support. In most recent studies, student experience has been weighed in different ways. Traditionally, student experience was evaluated by considering students' academic results. The student experience survey is another method widely used and has been drawn on in many investigational institutional studies. Another measure is the use of end of module/course/intervention evaluation, inviting students to anonymously assess their learning experience, as well as the preparation and delivery of the respective content and material.

Subsequently, the strength of the body of literature on student experience research lies in its sustained and international character. Another reason why this research body has been so influential in HE, is because it has involved many different knowledge domains, for example, physics, mathematics, engineering, economics, and so forth, to name but a few. At the risk of oversimplifying, the focus of student support research is the relationship between the context of students' social and academic background in relation to the type of learning that students' engage in and the context of that learning environment. Thus, it is understandable why most authors have used quantitative studies as the main non-invasive method to determine what students' needs are.

On the other hand, in spite of much new knowledge about the role of student support, this study is unique in that it addresses the needs of those students for whom the said structures and interventions in HEIs are intended, through their personal narrative experiences. A basic understanding of a narrative is that it is a term assigned to a text or a discourse. With regards to qualitative research, narrative can be regarded as a mode of inquiry used with a focus on the stories people tell. It is a specific type of qualitative design in which "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 240).

Narrative research involves the collecting of data from individuals who tell their stories and these stories are called field texts, that is, the raw data to be used by the researcher. These stories are situated within the participants' personal experience (home, university), their cultural (racial or ethnic) and historical (time and place) contexts (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 243). Thus the narrative approach to research is a frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, a research method, a mode for representing the research study (Moen, 2006). In other words, narrative research is according to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) both the phenomenon and the method.

Data collection of narrative interviews

There are various data collection techniques such as restorying, oral history, memorabilia, storytelling, letter writing, and autobiographical as well as biographical writing. The word 'narrative' is associated with terms such as 'tale' or 'story' that is told in the first person of their lived experience (Maree, 2010, pp. 102-103). The data collection technique that was adopted for this study was one-on-one narrative interviews with at-risk students in order to elicit the narrative of their lived experiences of being identified as a student at risk. Such interviews lend themselves to the collection of data that is based on the interviewee's opinions that is in fact privileged information (Denscombe, 2010). They were requested to write their stories based on the experiences of the support they received and how they have negotiated their social and academic lives.

Moen (2008, p. 53) defines a narrative approach as a frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, a research method, and a mode for representing the research study. She argues that the narrative approach is both the phenomenon and the method as suggested by Connelly & Clandinin, 1990. Narrative research is the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience (Gudmundsdottir, 2001 as cited by Moen, 2008, p. 54).

As Moen (2008, p. 60) explains, a narrative is a story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or his audience because when narratives are looked on within the framework of socio-cultural theory, there exists an interlinking between the individual and his context. This means that as individuals tell their stories, they are not isolated and independent of their context. Wertsh, 1991 as cited by Moen (2008, p. 60) reinforces this view by stating that as the individual in question is irreducibly connected to their social, cultural and institutional setting, narratives capture both the individual and the context.

A unique feature of narrative research is that the researcher analyses the students' stories and 're-stories' them into a chronological presentation that includes an introduction,

experiences, and interpretation of the process itself. The chronology of narrative research with the emphasis on sequence, sets narrative apart from other genres of research. Restorying involves the gathering of stories, analysing them for key elements and finally rewriting the stories in a chronological sequence.

Different types of Narrative Research

Polkinghorne (1995, p. 12) distinguishes between two analyses of narratives: one that finds different themes that hold across stories or taxonomies of story types; the other as a collection of descriptions of events or happenings which are configured into a story using a plotline.

Narrative studies can be informed by a specific contextual focus and a guiding perspective to advocate a particular cause. Different analytical lenses used by researchers can inform different variants of narrative, for example analytical lenses that are enabled and constrained by social resources, or socially situated interactive performances, or that by narrators developing interpretations, (Chase, 2005, as cited in Creswell et al., 2007, p. 243). Examples of narrative forms found in narrative research practices includes: a biography (researcher writes and records the experiences of another's life); an autobiography (written and recorded by individuals who are the subject of the study); life histories; and lastly personal-life experience (single or multiple episodes, common folklore). "Stories are just data with soul", as Nadar (2014, p. 23) asserts and further represents the following summary:

S → Suspicion of master narratives of knowledge,

T → Tool of knowledge gathering as well as knowledge sharing,

O → Objecting to objectivity by privileging subjectivity,

R → Reflexive of our positioning as researcher,

Y → Yearning for and working for change.

Ontological basis of narrative

Clandinin and Murphy (2009, p. 599) highlight the importance of situating the issues within the larger frame of the ontological commitments of narrative research. Three features of Deweyan ontology of experience are well suited for framing narrative research: firstly, an emphasis on the social dimensions of inquiry, secondly the temporality of knowledge generation, and thirdly, the continuity that is not merely perceptual but ontological. Stories can be regarded as the result of a confluence of social influences on a person's inner life, social influences on his or her environment, and his or her unique personal history. Narrative researchers usually begin with the ontology of experience grounded in Dewey's theory of

experience. From a conception of reality as relational, temporal, and continuous, narrative researchers arrive at a conception of how reality can be known.

> Following Dewey, the narrative inquirer takes the sphere of immediate human experiences as the first and most fundamental reality we have . . . and focuses on the way the relational, temporal, and continuous features of a pragmatic ontology of experience can manifest in narrative form, not just in retrospective representations of human experience but also in the lived immediacy of that experience. . . . Following from this ontology, the narrative inquirer arrives at a conception of knowledge . . . of human experience that remains within the stream of human lives (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p.44) as cited by Clandinin and Murphy (2009, p. 599).

There are various practices for conducting narrative research (such as through informal talk, or formal interviews) in order to collect data from individuals (Creswell et al., 2007, pp. 243-245), that is, to have them tell their stories (raw data) which is referred to as field texts. Other field texts can include journals or diaries or the researcher can observe the individual and take field notes, or personal writings such as formal letters, memos or photos. Individual stories are situated within the participants' personal experiences (their job, their homes) and their cultural (racial or ethnic) and historical (time and place) contexts (Clandinnin & Connelly, 2000 as cited by Creswell *et al*., 2007). The challenge then for the narrative researcher is to not further perpetuate the individual's sense of vulnerability through the interview.

Brief overview of the University in the Province of Gauteng

Using the real name of the university is a sensitive matter. By anonymising the name of the university, the study aims to also protect the students' that were interviewed as well as their future interests. The university is regarded as one of the leading universities in Africa and in the world. Not only is it renowned for its academic and research excellence but for its commitment to its social leadership role and the advancement of public good. The university publishes extensively in renowned journals and accommodates 7 research institutes, 20 research units and 10 research groups. The university comprises five faculties with 34 schools offering over 3000 courses. It has approximately 6 200 staff members and more than 30 000 students, of which 70 % are Black, 52 % are female and 33 % are postgraduate. The university hosts approximately 3 200 international students that originate from more than 96 countries, speaking over 100 languages. It has 14 museums, 11 libraries and 18 student residences as well as over 100 student clubs and societies. I shift now to describe the interview population for the study.

Narrative interview population

As mentioned, a complexity is gaining access to vulnerable people and in general, nobody wants to be labelled as 'at-risk' and let that label be publicly proclaimed. How the study would then identify students at risk was the biggest concern. The challenge of this study was to get participants that are at risk to participate in such a way that they are willing, they volunteer and are not afraid to do so. The first step was to secure ethics clearance from my university, to approach the gate-keeper[7] of the respective faculties to explain the purpose of my study and to obtain permission to gain access to the different schools in the faculty and their students. Thereafter, the second step was to secure the assistance of faculty Registrar. The third step was to again introduce the relevance of my study and seek permission and assistance from the university Registrar, requesting them to circulate a letter of invitation to all students who felt that they might want or needed to talk to somebody about their experience at the university thus far. The students had to identify themselves and be willing to share their stories with me, both in writing and orally. Sample size was not fixed prior to data collection.

Narrative interviews were conducted with 13 students who had self-identified their vulnerability status and wished to participate. Permission had to be obtained from the Deans of the respective five faculties in the university, to gain access to their students. With the assistance of an administrator in each faculty, the relevant information, request and consent forms for students were emailed to the respective Deans, for their information. Table 7 outlines how the selection process was managed to limit the extent of the study.

Table 7: Students invited to participate

Faculty	**Year/Level of Student**
Engineering and the Built Environment	1st Year Students & Masters Students
Humanities	2nd Year Students & PhD Students
Science	3rd Year Students
Health Sciences	4th Year Students
Commerce, Law and Management	Honours Students

[7] The term 'gate-keeper,' is used with reference to seeking permission from the Dean of the Faculty, and should not be interpreted negatively

Narrative interview sample size

Depending more on the richness of the stories that students would share and not on the number of stories (Alexander, 2010) the narrative approach (Goodson, 2012; Holloway & Freshwater, 2007) allowed me to listen to stories about student vulnerabilities, not just once from each respondent, but wherever possible, on several occasions. A convenient sample target was set at ten (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). When doing a narrative inquiry, a small number of interviews is rationalised due to the intense scrutiny entailed in this methodology (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Use of a narrative methodology was also preferred as it allows the use of generative analysis frameworks including Dialogical Narrative Analysis (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011) and restorying (Maree, 2010) approaches known to provide depth of understanding and analysis of the stories of students at risk (Creswell *et al*., 2007; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Statistics were not used to determine which student year or level is experiencing difficulties or a lack of success, or high levels of dropout. The differentiation of fields of study and years of study was done in order to avoid the labelling and stigmatisation of the respective faculty/school in my study. This was also done in order to gain access to the students in each faculty.

The students were individually interviewed by me, on a one-to-one basis, at a time and venue mutually agreed upon. No one else was involved in the interviews. Their narratives were taped recorded, transcribed, restoryed and analysed. If needed students were invited for additional interviews. In addition, students were provided with room for the opportunity to write up their own story (no limitations) and send it to me with their choice of including additional personal writings where this could be useful and if the participants were prepared to submit these. Based on the response from students across all faculties, an online survey was developed and administered to those students that were interested, but could not be accommodated in the intensive interviews. Despite the convenient sample target being set at ten students, from thirteen respondents, two informed the pilot study and only eleven were used for the narrative interviews.

3.8 Survey research

A survey design provides the quantitative, numeric description of trends or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population, whereby the researcher generalised or drew inferences to the population (Creswell, 2014, p. 155). The survey aimed to determine how students in universities experienced the phenomenon of being at risk, how they coped with it, and how their narratives of vulnerability could inform student retention in HEIs. The

purpose of the survey was to generalise from a sample of vulnerable, at-risk students to a population of the student body, so that inferences could be made about how an institution could perhaps best support at-risk students, to improve retention and throughput (Fowler, 2009). The survey was the preferred type of data collection procedure for this study in consideration of the following as represented in Table 8.

Table 8: Advantages and disadvantages of Internet surveys (Source: Aadapted: Denscombe (2010)

Advantages	Disadvantages
Surveys in social research, are rich in empirical data that is associated with getting information 'straight from the horse's mouth'.	Tendency to empiricism, where the data can be neglected and 'left to speak for itself'.
Internet surveys offers a span of vision which has wide and inclusive coverage, based therefore on a more representative sample, allowing access to people and situations that would not otherwise be possible.	Surveys tend to forfeit depth in the favour of breadth of data produced.
Vulnerable students more available over the Internet than conventional means of contact	An emphasis on wide and inclusive coverage can limit the degree to which the researcher can check on accuracy and honesty of responses.
Costs of use of the Survey Monkey are high but can be weighed against additional reduction of other associated costs (see next bullet)	Sample bias with Internet surveys, as not everyone is online.
Internet Surveys: Finite time span is set for the collection of survey responses, reduces turnaround time between administering a survey and receiving responses, get replies more quickly than conventional ways as respondent's get around to answering the questions sooner than with conventional surveys, reduces the costs of data collection (no travel, venue, data entry costs, or specialist equipment associated costs)	Response rates for participation in an online survey are a challenge as the invitation to participate can easily be ignored and 'binned' at the touch of a button.

Data collection of online surveys

The survey design applicable for this study was based on a sequential method (refer to section 3.4.3) in developing a survey instrument that was cross-sectional, with the data having being collected at one point of time, in the form of Internet survey data collection. Dillman et al., (1999) as cited in Cohen et al. (2011, pp. 278-279) provide key pieces of advice and principles for designing online survey questionnaires as summarised below:

Successful web-based surveys:

i. The researcher needs to take into account the inability of some respondents to access and respond to the web questionnaires that include advanced programming features that the respondent does not have the software for, nor the *download data bundles with regards to incurring charges* (my own addition), or the necessary computer speed to download.

ii. The survey needs to match the expectations of the respondent in completing the questionnaire design and layout.

The Internet survey population and sample

Probability sampling was not applicable to this study as it was not feasible to include a large number of at-risk students as I did not have sufficient information about the population to undertake probability sampling through conventional techniques.

Non-probability purposive sampling

Under such circumstances, I employed non-probability purposive sampling as the basis for selecting the sample, hence the choice of people in the sample were not a random selection (Denscombe, 2010). This study allowed the opportunity for at-risk students to self-identify and volunteer to be part of the study, which was critical for the research.

Systematically selected sampling frame

The use of a systematically selected sampling frame was essential in conducting the research for both the survey and narrative research, thereby attempting to keep the selection choice the same as indicated in the table below. The invitation to volunteer to participate was emailed to the respective year, level and faculty of the student body at the institution. To avoid bias in the sampling frame, the emailing lists were accessed by the database of the respective faculty administrations, first securing permission to do so (refer to Table 7 for sampling frame).

Sampling design

The sampling design for accessing the entire population of students at the institution was multistage, also referred to as clustering (Creswell, 2014, p. 158), which was considered as ideal as it was not possible to compile a list of at-risk students. Academic records were not used to determine who the, at-risk students are in this study, as that would go against the understanding of what is vulnerability (refer to Chapter 1 and 2 for further concept definition and detail).

Multistage or clustering procedure

In a multistage or clustering procedure, the researcher first identified clusters (groups per faculty), and then samples self-identified persons within those groups and who have volunteered to participate by contacting the researcher themselves. The decision to participate in the study was their own.

Stratification of the population

Stratification of the population before selecting the sample requires that the characteristics of the population members (e.g. gender - males and females) be known so that the sample reflects the true proportion of the student population (Creswell, 2014). However, the feeling of vulnerability is not gender based so every student was invited to participate and their sense of vulnerability dictated the choice of volunteering to participate.

3.9 Data capture and management

Data capture

Data collection and data analysis in qualitative research are not regarded as two separate processes. They are ongoing, cyclical and iterative—that is, a non-linear process (Maree, 2010). Charmaz (2006) as cited by (Mavetera, 2009) advocates that a data-gathering method would allow a researcher to view the researched phenomena in the same way as the participants in the research field see it. Data capture occurred through prolonged engagement with the participants over a period of time. I had to build trust with the participants, to ascertain whether there are any misunderstandings and misinformation in order to establish a good relationship based on trust and non-judgement.

I found that Froggatt (2001) assisted me in planning what to do after data collection as he cautioned against oversimplifying the iterative elements of the research. He advised that there is "no one right way to work with the data and that it is a process best learnt by doing" (Froggatt, 2001, p. 434). He describes four such process of analysis as illustrated in Figure 10 below that are: managing the data, describing the data, digging deeper and presentation of the data. Figure 10 illustrates that the process of data analysis is iterative with data collection and writing of the data (Froggatt, 2001).

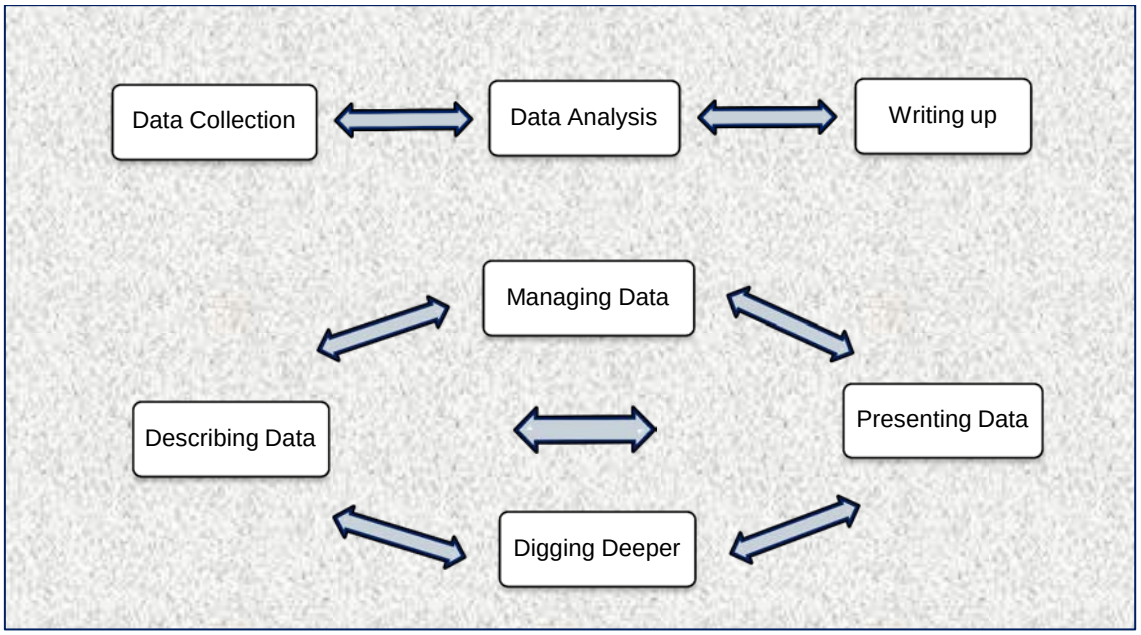


Figure 40: Iterative processes in qualitative data analysis (Source: Adapted from Froggatt (2001, p. 434)

In application of the guidelines above, the study maintained the following:

Managing the data

Managing the data refers to preparing the data for analysis. I stored the raw data of the interview recordings on my password-protected personal laptop and saved a backup on a personal external hard drive at home. After transcription, I still maintained working on electronic copies as a preference. Data was filed and organised in individual folders that were made clearly identifiable for my easy access. After transcription of the interviews, biographies in the form of restories were completed for each interview.

In order to analyse the open ended questions of the survey data, I made use of QDA Miner v4.0, which is a Mixed Method Qualitative Analysis software programme.

Describing the data

I was able to assign different codes to bits of data, so that I could retrieve and bring the text under that label together, thereby creating links between different data that had elements in common, that led to the development of concepts that encompass codes. Froggatt (2001) describes two practical procedures to assist in this process: data simplification and reduction, and data complication.

Data simplification and reduction: is the means to focus large volumes of data. A time-consuming process of listening and re-listening to recordings, transcribing and reading and

rereading data to become familiar with what exists, find new patterns, inconsistencies, things that can surprise or raise questions. Coding is then used to simplify the data.

Data complication: It was necessary that I kept a reflective paper trail track of codes that were created. Data were subsequently analysed and categories created, identified, explored and presented.

Digging deeper: After identification of the categories and themes, data were examined through an analytical process to find meaning. Froggatt (2001, p. 435) advises that an "exploration of narrative within data offers a way to place findings within a situated context that links the individual experience and the wider cultural framework".

Presentation of the data: I attempted to display the data in forms of visual diagrams in addition to quotations that added to the meaning of the data. Codes, categories and meanings were removed or refined, new ideas were explored and different perspectives identified throughout the data analysis process. Therefore it was perceived that the four stages described by Froggatt (2001) are not disconnected stages and in this study, the stages were rather conducted in an iterative approach between the different aspects of the process.

3.10 Data analysis

Narrative is constitutive of reality as well as of identity (May, 2011) and is therefore a basic human way of making sense of the world as we lead 'storied lives' (Reissman, 1993). Narrative analysis can be divided into approaches with different focuses that can also be combined as shown in Figure 11.

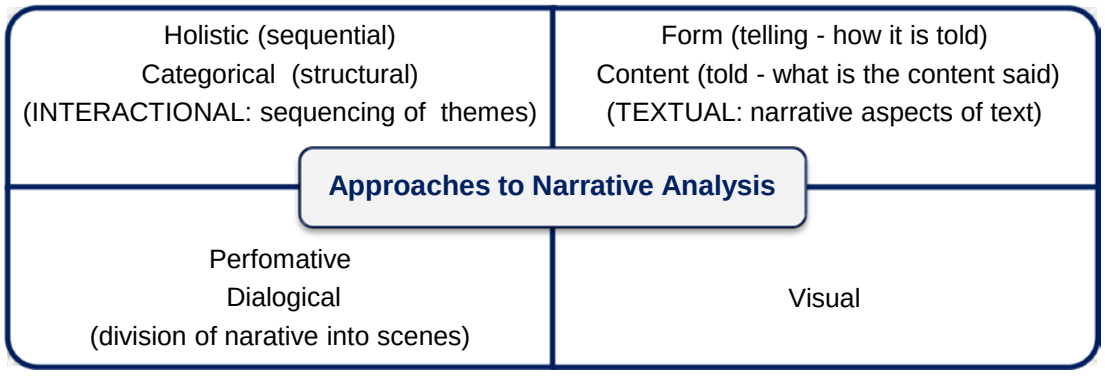


Figure 5: Approaches to narrative analysis (Source: Adapted from (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, Tamar, & Tamar, 1998; May, 2011; Riessman, 2008)

Narrative research is the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience (Gudmundsdottir, 2001 as cited by Moen, 2008, p. 54). Data analysis involves the establishment of codes and concepts from the raw data (from interview tapes/transcripts) with an 'open' mind. The analysis of data involves constantly comparing the emerging codes and categories with the data and also with new data specifically collected for the purpose of generating an understanding of the phenomenon that is thoroughly grounded in the data (Denscombe, 2010). Texts were analysed through thematic analysis, coding, categories, and themes.

In the analysis of narrative, the researcher who tracks sequences, chronology, stories, or processes in the data, must keep in mind that most narratives have a backwards and forwards nature that needs to be unravelled in the analysis (Maree, 2010). Maree further advises that the researcher analyses the data in search of narrative strings (present commonalities running through and across texts), narrative threads (major emerging themes) and temporal/spatial themes (past, present and future contexts).

3.11 Validity and reliability in narrative research

How did I know that the story was true in order to ensure the quality of the study? Wolcott, 1990 as cited in Moen (2008, p. 64) provides the following guidelines: that the inquirer be in the field to be studied for a long period; that the researcher has to listen to the research subjects; that the aim is to capture each research subject's voice; that writing begins early, with full reporting, and accurately recorded fieldwork notes; that the researcher be candid; and aware at all times of his subjectivity; that the researcher always strive "to not get it all wrong".

Triangulation is defined as the obtaining of convergent data using cross-validation and is used to affirm the reliability and validity of research studies (McMillan, 2010). Richardson (2000) as cited in (Maree, 2010) argues that triangulation is based on a fixed point or object, otherwise it cannot be triangulated.

For the purpose of this study, I proposed an alternate means to validate the research using a concept defined as Crystallisation. Maree (2010) articulates a preference to not just triangulate but instead, a study should crystallise, because our world is "far more than three sides". The concept of crystallisation[8] enabled me to shift from seeing something as a fixed,

[8] From a constructivist's perspective, which holds that reality is changing whether the observer wishes it or not, and there are multiple realities that people have in their minds, the different insights gained describe different

rigid, two-dimensional object, to the idea of an infinite variety of shapes, substance, transmutations, dimensions and angles of approach. Crystallisation provides the researcher with a complex and deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. This crystallisation emerges through the use of multiple sources of data, data gathering techniques and data analysis employed. This thereby represents the researcher's own reinterpretation of the phenomenon.

A contextual analysis of the policy documents of the case study institution will serve as another lens through which to examine student narratives. What I described as findings were those which crystallised from the data.

3.12 Ethical Challenges

Ethics is about reducing potential harm to participants. This is achieved through:

i. Informed consent

ii. Confidentiality

iii. Anonymity

iv. Freedom to withdraw at any point

The above was guaranteed by adhering to and observing the ethical code of the university at all times. Despite ethics being focused on reducing potential harm to participants, the students at risk, during their participation, can experience low levels of risk that can be unpredictable (e.g. emotions of anger/happiness/disappointment/anxiety, and so forth). If at any stage the student had an overwhelming response that needed to be contained, I suggested professional help, perhaps from a counsellor or a relevant support structure available at the university (e.g. the CCDU: Career, Counselling and Development Unit).

Low levels of risk can be identified, such as students can become emotionally engaged as they revisit their experiences. It can raise the anxiety levels of the students as they re-collect their experiences.

The above can be minimised by the design of the interview in that the focus was trained specifically on their experiences at university and by assuring them that I am not positioning

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perspectives that all reflect the unique reality and identity of the participants. Crystallization refers to not so much an exact, measurable finding, but an emerging reality that the researcher is describing and analysing (Maree, 2010).

myself in the interview as a superior student, but as somebody who has also had overwhelming experiences at university.

Confidentiality was maintained by ensuring that all writing that emanated from the study within this application would ensure the anonymity of the participants, and that student identities would be protected in the sharing of the data collected. Electronic data and interview transcripts were stored in Microsoft Word format on my university computer which is password-protected. Any other additional material generated in hard copies was stored in a locked cupboard in my office. The above was available only to me.

Anonymity and confidentiality was maintained by understanding that ethics was about reducing potential harm to the participants. By adhering to and observing the ethics code of the university at all times and having received my university's Ethics Clearance Certificate, together with draft instruments intended to be used in the study, I followed the following steps:

i. Permission and consent was requested by me from the case study institution.

ii. Permission and consent was also requested by me from the Deans of each Faculty to gain access to the students.

iii. Permission and consent was further requested by me from each of the students that volunteered to participate.

iv. No student numbers or names are used in the reported findings and analysis or in any form of publication made during/after the study.

v. All writing that emanates from the study within this application does and will ensure the anonymity of the participants, and that

vi Anonymity is guaranteed in that the participants' student names and student numbers will not be used in any writings or publications arising from the study.

The need for paying to attention to ethical issues is heightened when research with vulnerable people is undertaken (Connolly, 2003). Using the conventional four pillar framework for ethical considerations, I explored the need for this heightened sense of ethical efficacy.

In conducting this study, significant methodological and ethical challenges were faced, as will be discussed below.

3.13 Methodological challenges

In designing and conducting this study, a range of methodological challenges were identified which are briefly described below.

Role of the Researcher

Bearing in mind the sensitivity of the narratives as they unfolded, my role as a researcher felt to be at odds, when at times I wished I had the opportunity to stand at the top of a mountain and make known the injustices endured by the respective interviewee's. After each interview, when it came to the need for a debrief session, I made it a habit of good practise to write down how I felt in my fieldwork journal. However, when some cases where too intense and severe, I felt compelled, without revealing any identities that were involved, to make an appointment with my Supervisor to debrief. At those times, when I wished I could do more, or act immediately, I chose to work harder at completing my research, to get the 'stories out' as that is what the participants' in my study wanted most. They wanted to be heard. I could not delay the process of submitting my thesis, despite all the personal challenges occurring in my own life through this period. Fortunately, my training as a counsellor assisted me during the interviews to support the participants in their narrations, by practising active listening, which both motivated and comforted them to continue to trust me with their painful and sometimes tragic revelations of student experience.

Accessing the sample

Gaining access to students at risk provides formidable methodological challenges. To avoid labelling which can exacerbate stigmatisation and exclusion (Goffman, 1963), a decision was made that students willing to participate must self-identify, rather be identified externally by someone else, posing ethical questions associated with anonymity and confidentiality. This posed the challenge of having to work with deans of faculties, who were not always available or interested in the study and who more often than not, did not act in time in response to requests to recruit participants for the study. A letter was sent to all deans in the university, which was subsequently distributed to students. The letter did not mention the notion of being at risk, but only indicated an interest to recruit students who felt that they had substantial stories to share about their experience of studying and especially stories which focused on their struggles, trials and tribulations associated with their lives at university. After the first wave of email distribution, I was able to recruit a handful of willing participants (13), two of whom participated in a pilot study designed to offer a basis for strengthening the quality of the empirical study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2004).

The role of generative deception

It can be argued that by not telling participants that they were being invited to represent students at risk, that the approach could have been deceptive. However, much evidence shows that students generally do not want to be associated with labels which can be construed to be negative and that they generally prefer to steer away from participating in research in which they seem to be presented as either victims or in deficit. G. M. Swanson and Ward (1995) argue that minority group participation in medical trials of new drugs has a history of severe challenges related to research recruitment such that the use of conventional approaches has had a history of negative returns. Other ways such as offering rewards through aggressive recruitment and marketing campaigns have now become acceptable methods of increasing participation in research which seeks to target more vulnerable groups. Although I did not offer rewards, I considered that avoiding the use of conventional labels would help yield a useful sample of participants for this study.

Negotiating data gathering sites

Researching vulnerable people requires working with them in environments which they consider secure, safe, and in which they do not feel threatened in any way (Connolly, 2003). It was thus important to make sure that the participants chose the venue for the interviews. In one case, a participant chose a Cafe; in another my university office was preferred, while in another, their own home was the preferred site for the interview. Flexibility is the key to working with vulnerable people and an underlying principle is that of putting the participant first in decisions related to the research process. However, having said this, the researcher has to assess the extent to which preferred data collection sites would not compromise other factors associated with the efficacy and quality of the data and the research in general.

Negotiating data gathering times

In the same way, agreeing on a time to conduct the interviews proved to be quite a challenge. Again the principle here is to go with the preferred time of the participant rather than that of the researcher. In this study, times agreed for interviews ranged across the 24 hour spectrum, with some agreed in day while others were late afternoons and evenings.

Telling and structuring the stories

People ordinarily do not tell their stories in the logical way which would lend itself to acceptable academic reporting and writing. Some participants prefer to be nudged as the stories progress while others find it difficult to stop once they start speaking. This can present a dilemma of not having a standard data gathering framework and also for the less forthcoming participants, the researcher can influence the type of story told through asking

questions and steering the participants' narratives in certain predetermined ways. The decision about how much to nudge, what to ask and how, are important methodological aspects which require special skills by the researcher.

Restorying

Because people do not tell their stories in a logical way, the narratives have to be restoried. For purposes of this study, the restorying was informed by the empirical framework utilised by this study. Narrative inquiry space is three-dimensional: personal and social (the interaction); the past, present, future (continuity); and the place (situation). The three-dimensional inquiry space allows for new themes to emerge from the restorying. Restorying has common features such as a beginning, middle and an end, however when narrated, the narration is rarely in a chronological sequence. Restorying usually involves predicament, (a conflict, or struggle), a protagonist/character; and a sequence with implied causality (i.e., the plot), in other words, a time, place, plot and scene.

Stories are rewritten in the first instance to address the following key theoretical elements:

i. narrative field through biographical summaries and contextual study information;

ii. narratives which identify risks and hazards;

iii. narratives which highlight political and economic dimensions of being at risk

iv. narratives of resilience strategies utilised to cope with their vulnerabilities

v. narratives of intervention, which focus on how weak institutional structures might be modified in order to generate greater value for these at-risk students.

It is important for the participants to confirm that that the restoried narratives accurately represent their views expressed in the original stories (Bell, 2003).

Informed voluntary consent

Informed consent means that participants are fully briefed about the nature and purposes of the study before they are invited to participate. This was done initially in two stages. The first stage was a brief description of the project which was part of the invitation sent out to all students. Following an indication of willingness to participate, the students were then briefed again in greater detail with an opportunity to ask questions before they completed the consent form. However, beyond these two initial stages, narrative research with vulnerable people requires that the researcher keeps asking the participant at each subsequent occasion whether or not they wish to continue with the research. The reason is that, the interview can have the effect of increasing participant's vulnerabilities as they visit and revisit, recount and go through their stories of being at risk. Informed voluntary consent when

researching vulnerability is thus not a once-off event. A different form of access involves the need to establish a relationship with the vulnerable student allowing them the opportunity to trust the process and open up. This is by far the most difficult, as one has to balance the tightrope between being perceived as patronising and as overstepping the mark as a researcher. At the same time, it is important to have sufficient insight and interview technique to prevent the participants from feeling more vulnerable after the narration than before.

Anonymity

Because the stories told by vulnerable people are personal and often have very intimate details, the need for reporting data anonymously is paramount (Wiles, Charles, Crow, & Heath, 2006). Often researchers assign pseudonyms to participants. However use of these does not completely ensure anonymity. For example, a 40-year old single mother doing physics at university, and who travels daily on a bicycle to class, can be all people need to know to identify the participant despite the anonymised reference made in the study. In addition, it is important to get consent from participants about the pseudonyms that are going to be used in place of their real names. A case in the USA is reported where researchers were taken to court for giving a participant a pseudonym she violently detested. Needless to say, the researchers were left with a hefty bill to settle, and a bruised professional reputation. Some participants indicated that their real names could be used, but they needed to be advised, that while they might be fine with it at present, future circumstances can cause them to regret such a decision. Pseudonyms should be preferred over real names and the consent of the participant should be sought about use of selected pseudonyms.

Confidentiality

Absolute confidentiality can never be guaranteed. In fact, Wiles *et al*. (2006) argue that confidential research cannot be conducted as researchers have a duty to report. However, participants need to be assured that adequate measures such as use of password protected data storage mechanisms are in place; that the number of people who will have access to the data is limited; that all people who will have access to the research data will be adequately trained and sworn to the need to uphold confidentiality. The need for such assurances has been found to be greater when research is conducted with vulnerable people (Swanson & Ward, 1995).

Freedom to withdraw

A researcher should not wait for a participant to indicate their unwillingness to continue with an interview; they have to be asked, and consent given even on the second or third time. Consent to continue should be gained and signed each time that a researcher meets a vulnerable participant.

3.14 Summary

> *…we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which, in large measure, is what it is because of what has been done or transmitted from previous human activities…it ought not to be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum…*
>
> Dewey (1938/1997, p. 39)

Dewey, in the quote above reiterates that student experience of vulnerability does not occur in isolation of their environment, situation or circumstance. Within this chapter, an attempt was made to give a detailed justification of the chosen research design, data collection techniques, and the data analysis approach to support the investigation into ascertaining the lived experience of self-identified vulnerable students at university. The theoretical framework of theorising vulnerability research in HE (Maringe & Sing, 2014) adopted for this study, has been outlined. The research design revealed the structure of the what, where, when, why and how, the study was conducted. The sample selection and data collection have been explained in conjunction with the ethical considerations for this study. Validity and trustworthiness of narrative research was considered. The next chapter deals with the narratives of the respondents, as advised in the quote above, by linking their experience of vulnerability to their context.

CHAPTER 4

RESTORIED NARRATIVES

> *Narrative methods are always exploratory, conversational, tentative and indeterminate… they do not produce the truth but instead offer a measure of coherence and continuity of experience… narrative researchers are not scientists seeking laws that govern our behaviour… they are storytellers seeking meanings that may help us to cope with our own circumstances…*
>
> Hart (2002, pp. 141-156)

4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter discussed issues relating to conducting this study that included highlighting the research questions, relative methodologies and ethical concerns. This chapter focuses on the data analysis of the first set of data, the narrative interviews and personal writings. Hart (2002), above, reaffirms my aspiration for embarking on a narrative study of understanding vulnerability, that through conveying the voice of student experiences untold, this study may provide a sense of hope and promise to those reading it. The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research sub-questions, namely: what are the experiences of students at risk and how do they relate to the support they get from their institutions for both their academic and social lives; how do they negotiate the barriers and challenges that they face; what institutional models exist to assist students and how effective are they; how do institutional policy documents describe the relationship between student retention and student support and how do students relate to and evaluate these policies and lastly, how do students suggest the current student support models and strategies at the institution can be improved as a strategy for ameliorating their vulnerabilities. The research questions were investigated through both qualitative and quantitative data, namely through narrative interviews and a survey respectively. This chapter presents the qualitative data and analysis thereof. The chapter is set out in Part A, participants' biographical data, and Part B, the discussion of personal writings. The quantitative data and analysis is presented in the following chapter, Chapter 5.

As a recap, the primary research question that informed the study is:

> How do at-risk students in universities negotiate their sense of vulnerability in order to cope with the demands of their study programmes and how might the stories of their lived experiences inform debates around student retention and support?

4.2 Narratives as a restoried biography

An autobiography is the life history of a person written by him or herself whereas a biography is the history of a lifetime that highlights the facts about a person's life written by somebody else. A biography includes what the person did and how the person influenced the period in which they lived. According to Sedofia (2014) most biographies are interpretive, presenting the facts and also what the facts mean. A biography should be balanced, objective and free from bias and should include the following: date and place of birth, family information, lifetime accomplishments, major events of life and the effects/impacts on society (Sedofia, 2014, p. 88). The World Book Encyclopaedia (2001) outlines five basic steps for writing a biography:

i. choosing the person to be written about;

ii. researching the person's life;

iii. choosing a format for the written biography;

iv. doing the actual writing; and finally,

v. concluding with editing of the biography.

An inherent weakness in writing biographies is that the biographer, when faced with a lot of material, must decide how much to tell and include about a person's life (Sedofia, 2014), thus making writing a biography a task that is easier said than done.

The value of restorying

There are several ways of organising and presenting data analysis. Cohen *et al*. (2011) list seven such ways of presenting data:

i. Data analysis by groups
ii. Data analysis by individuals
iii. Data analysis relevant to a particular issue or theme
iv. Data analysis by research question
v. Data analysis by instrument
vi. Data analysis by combining case studies
vii. Data analysis by constructing a chronological narrative

This study used the seventh approach, that of constructing a chronological narrative. Humans make meaning and think in terms of 'storied text' which has the potential to catch not only the human condition, human intentionality, the full vividness of human experience, but also the multiple perspectives and the lived realities of the respondents (Bruner, 1986).

Restorying follows a *Dialogical Narrative Analysis* (DNA) approach that regards each story as a whole. Putting into practice a DNA approach, *phronesis* is an iterative process of hearing stories speak to the original research interest, and for that reason are chosen to be represented in writing by the analyst from the total of stories (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). By providing restoried narratives with elements of biographical detail, the analysis adopted in this study departed from the strictures of coding. By *'telling a story*,' the analysis minimised the risk of disembodied text that can result from coding and retrieval exercises. Cohen *et al*. (2011) further support restorying by asserting that such story-telling keeps text and content together; it retains the dignity of people as opposed to fragmenting bits into codes; it enables evolving situations; it allows for causes and consequences to be chartered, and thereby enables events to 'catch fire' as they develop.

4.3 Part A: Restories of respondents' narratives

The study combined narrative analysis together with biographical data. In so doing, the analysis conveys an added dimension of realism, authenticity, humanity, personality, emotions, views and values in the context of the narratives restoried (adapted: Cohen et al., 2011). Based on the theoretical framework of vulnerability adopted for this study (cr. on page 60), the 11 narrative interviews were restoried in a format that aimed to indicate the following:

Firstly, the biographical details of the participants, why did they identify themselves as being at risk by bringing to light what the risks and hazards were that they experienced? Secondly, an exploration of why they felt such susceptibility to those risks and hazards and thirdly, an explanation of how they coped or did not cope. The restories of the 11 respondents are arranged alphabetically[9] as follows: Cherise, Elsa, Fiona, Harry, Hillary, Ingrid, Martha, Oliver, Steven, Tanya and lastly, Zara.

[9] Just a reminder that these are not the respondents actual names

4.3.1 Cherise

Biographical details:

Cherise was in the final stages of her final year of her PhD degree when she decided to respond to the interview request. She felt that she did not want to seem like she is reporting on her bad experiences, but rather is excited with the opportunity to share her experiences so that people in a position of power can read it and do something about student support and experience. Cherise was 39 at the time of her interview and is married with two young school going children. She described that the top achievers in her home country came from public schools[10] as compared to the top achievers here in SA who tend to come from private schools. Cherise grew up with confidence that she was in a public school, getting the best education.

Risks & hazards approach:

Prior to studying at the South African University in Gauteng, Cherise worked in her home country, Kenya[11], as a teacher and had simultaneously furthered her education to a Master's degree level. She reminisced on her first job where she taught in Kalinchi, which was not in her home province. Cherise felt welcomed as the rural community embraced her, a new young teacher, and provided her with fresh milk and food daily. Cherise expressed her unhappiness about education for women in Kenya. She spoke about the Kenyan ceremony for girls who come of age, similar yet different to the coming of age in other cultures, such as the Jewish Bat Mitzvah ceremony for girls who come of age. With barely suppressed emotion, Cherise spoke about the female circumcision of girls in Kenya. It upset Cherise that the ceremony involved removing the female clitoris in order to 'remove sexual desire'. She reflected, that when she was a teacher, teaching a class that had for example fifteen girls in the Form One year, after the holidays, in the following year, moving on to the Form Two class, the same class could decrease in size from fifteen - to two girls only. Circumcision, Cherise explained, means graduation, that 'you are a woman now and no longer a child.' So men wait enthusiastically for the girls' circumcision to take place and then only come and 'take them away in marriage'. Mothers are campaigning to allow their

[10] There are three kinds of schools in South Africa: public fee-free schools (subsidised by the government), public private schools (subsidised by the government but they do charge school fees), and independent private schools (privately-governed with a religious background). Refer to: https://www.justlanded.com/english/South-Africa/South-Africa-Guide/Education/Schools-in-South-Africa

[11] Kenya is a country that is situated on the equator, on the East Coast of Africa

daughters who come of age to at least complete school and not get married immediately. Distraught mothers of her learners would beg Cherise to convince their daughters to not drop out of school. Private schooling, local schooling, and university schooling, reveal that in Kenya there exists levels of ethnicity and class distinction, whereas in SA there exists levels of race and class discrimination.

Political economy approach:

During the period of reading towards her Master's degree, she was afforded the opportunity to take time out from work and continue to receive her teacher salary. However, Cherise had to take a loan from the government to pay for her university fees. Cherise reflected that her HE experience in Kenya was somewhat stricter and harsher than her HE experience in SA. In Kenya, it is inter-department competition that raises the issue of ‘which is a better functioning department’. Cherise was therefore clear about what type of supervision she preferred. She reminisced that the relationship between supervisors and students are totally different in the two countries. Kenya is 'formal to the letter' whereas SA lecturers prefer to be called by their first name and not by their titles. Having achieved her Master's despite the challenges faced in Kenya, Cherise felt like there was more for her to accomplish. Cherise felt that the degree, although difficult, did not provide her with the rigour she had anticipated. A lecturer, who had only lectured them 'perhaps twice,' passed her class colleagues and herself on a subject that they did not attend or ‘do’ any work in. Cherise felt that some lecturers' work ethic was questionable in her home university, so she felt compelled that she needed to leave home to study abroad.

Cherise confided that in Kenya the university board tends to admit 'older or more mature' students to do a PhD. Student enrolment numbers are limited, and the admittance interview is challenging as the prospective students are grilled and critiqued on their knowledge expertise of their proposals and the 'verdict' is then given as either a pass or fail. This, she believes, is not the case in SA as students are given feedback after submitting their proposals and are given an opportunity to improve and return for a presentation. A close friend had returned home to Kenya from SA, after having completed her 'fairy-tale PhD' at the South African University in Gauteng and inspired her to come to SA to the same university and enrol as well.

Assenting to her friend's advice, Cherise left Kenya, motivated to study in SA and that is where her problems began. Starting her degree programme marked a significant change in her life. She arrived without accommodation and began to struggle financially. She felt she had a lack of information about her degree and that time and money was being wasted, not knowing the systems and processes in the university. It was a critical moment when she

realised that, had she been informed, she would have enrolled at the university with a proposal on hand, and not wasted time 'going around in circles trying to please a supervisor.' In spite of this, Cherise persevered. The transition from her home country to a foreign land, and to a renowned, but demanding and unfamiliar culture of teaching and learning, left her in distress. Difficulties began when supervision feedback became a 'very big problem' as she could not understand what she was doing wrong and did not know what was not acceptable.

> …I have been so frustrated, so demoralised, after reading the first line, being told that this will not work.

Cherise felt that her supervisor did not listen to her and she felt that the supervisor hated her. She felt alone and felt so frustrated that she never wanted to come back to university.

> …I felt that I was being judged and not my work … like I was being dismissed, not knowing where I went wrong/right. I needed direction to know exactly what to do. I had no real engagement that elaborated on what I needed… my research was eventually not even on a topic that I wanted to do.

Cherise lost faith that the communication between them would ever work. After submitting her proposal, Cherise, took a conscious decision not to return to the university and to apply elsewhere.

> …without being given advice or the opportunity to express oneself in meetings… I can't write like that, but I had to always think of what the supervisor wanted me to think... But sadly my research proposal kept on moving from one picture to a new picture to another picture all in the month of my proposal submission...

Resilience approach:

Upon requesting a change of supervisor, Cherise was advised that there is no guarantee that there would be a change in her results or the likelihood of getting appointed a 'better person.' Perhaps because Cherise prays, she reflected, she is not sure what happened to change her life.

> …My strongest support was the department in which I was doing my research.

A 'miracle' occurred after her proposal was passed. Her supervisor seemed to 'suddenly respect' her opinion and Cherise could meet, and schedule appointments to speak to her supervisor. The supervisor and Cherise had reached a better place of communication after the proposal was accepted. Things finally changed when the supervisor miraculously accepted Cherise.

> …. and Prof seemed to be bothered with my progress, just like that, like as if she was a different person…

Having thought about it long and hard, Cherise pondered whether a White or Black supervisor is better to have. In the international student body, there is an ongoing debate that is whispered amongst students:

> …a White supervisor will make you overwork but will not make you complete quickly and they have funding for you. Whereas a Black supervisor has no funding and will make you make their name famous, but they will make you work hard – and you will finish quickly.

Cherise offered advice to forthcoming students about their choice of supervisors, and to the supervisors themselves. Her viewpoint is that supervisors need to realise that first year PhD students have deadlines to meet, so they need to provide support to their PhD students in many ways. Again Cherise is reminded that in Kenya, class and ethnicity issues are transferred from elementary school to high school to university, whereas in SA, racism is seen and experienced daily in class.

> …in class Whites are treated better. Black people are looked down upon and White people think Black people cannot deliver. If you are Black you really have to go out of your way to prove your worth. You cannot range yourself with other people – you have to over excel.

Cherise, with pent up emotion, asked, 'so when is doing your best – enough?' …

> ….see me where I am today… I feel it has been a painful journey… I regret doing this PhD degree...

Cherise's resilience stood strong and the fear of going back home as a failure forced her pride to take the beating and stay on her path to completion. Her Catholic Church outside of university was helpful to her as Cherise felt that university life was too depressing. Cherise also felt isolated until she met a social group of Kenyans.

> …we were only four, now we are a big group of 11…

At times it was a struggle for Cherise to keep going. Despite the constraints, Cherise's circle of support developed with people from other African countries, for example, Ugandans, Tanzanians or Rwandans, as the common denominator was that they all spoke Swahili.

> … so there is an opportunity to feel like we are all from the same place as we can speak to each other in one language...

Cherise regretted that she did not have any support from South African students. She believed that part of the problem of not mixing with South African students, was to protect her self-identity.

> … I did not reveal my inner self. Else, I will be looked at as not good enough to fit in.

Cherise's advice is that PhD students need counselling as the temptation to quit comes with life-threatening thoughts.

> … I feel like I'm going to be giving up not just on a degree but that I am falling further into a hole… from there is that feeling of being like a failure… you can come all the way to SA and because you did not make it, how can you go back home to face your family and friends? We are mature students. Supervisors and the university cannot take us for granted… People we know and don't know are measuring us all the time, one against the other. But we are at different levels and yet, you feel so inadequate, when some PhD students brag about writing even the 6th paper – and you haven't even written one paper… you feel alone and devastated...

Cherise affirmed that her strongest feeling is that counselling for PhDs would be a suggestion that could prevent thoughts of suicide and dropout.

> …supervision determines the level of complication with the PhD. As students we cannot pretend that we come in perfect, however we all struggle with supervisors who always throw egg on your face.

She considers that a counselling opportunity with a focus on the PhD journey and on PhD supervision is needed. Furthermore, Cherise articulated that as a PhD student your identity is questioned. She spoke of stages of not knowing who she was and sadly, there was no one to talk to. Even worse ramifications are that PhD students do not talk about their work due to fear, discrimination and not fitting in.

> …I participated in this interview because I have not had a place to talk about my experiences – I want it to go on record. Finally I feel relieved that I have spoken about it and just getting a place to talk about it is a form of therapy…

Cherise is by now Doctor Cherise.

4.3.2 Elsa

Biographical details:

Elsa was 32 years and in the mid-stages of her PhD degree when interviewed. Elsa is an Ndebele-speaking; married mother of one son and comes from Zimbabwe. Her home is in the southern part of Zimbabwe, and as part of the Ndebele culture, she feels that she belongs to a minority group of the country.

Risks & hazards approach:

Elsa grew up in an educated home and both her parents are retired teachers. She was the youngest child at home with four sisters and three brothers. Growing up, Elsa began to feel invisible at home due to the huge age gap between her and her siblings. This lack of self-worth began to play havoc with Elsa's emotions. She identified her siblings as successful, and who unfortunately did not acknowledge her. When she noticed that her parents did not praise her for her achievements, she chose to fail at school. Her childhood logic was: 'no one did that before!' This rebellious behaviour incited a family meeting from which she was excluded. The outcome was an admonishment by her parents who cited their old age as a reason to motivate her to do better. Elsa found it difficult to talk to her mother as she was too old when Elsa was born and the age difference led to mutual apathy in trying to build a relationship.

As time moved on Elsa made peace with her educational pursuits and excelled. She regards herself as being very competitive but sadly did not make it into Medical School. Elsa went on to achieve a BSc degree in Zimbabwe and entered the job market. However, prior to coming to SA, life took a turn that left Elsa feeling helpless.

Elsa was a go-getter and managed to secure employment at an NGO back home working with health and sanitation in rural areas by providing training not only on hygiene, but on how to build boreholes, build toilets and maintain them. She recollected her joy at meeting new people all the time, especially the older generation of *gogo's*, and *umkhulu's*, (grandma's and grandpa's) who were curious to know 'why a beautiful girl' such as herself, was not yet married. Between 2004 - 2006, due to the recession in Zimbabwe and the politics of the country, Elsa lost her job.

Elsa persevered and then got another job and worked as an intern. At times it was a struggle for her to cope with the demands of her job environment. Because she was more qualified than her boss, never-ending problems with the boss ensued. She bore this until her boss resigned, and being the most qualified, with the most work experience, she applied for the

job to replace her boss. Devastated, she learnt that her retired boss had recommended somebody else for the position, someone who was junior to her with no work experience. Things went from bad to worse. The new boss was 'perverted and sexually harassed her.' Elsa decided to take it up, but unfortunately after the hearing, her company did not renew her contract, due to a so-called 'lack of finances.'

Political economy approach:

Being the youngest at home and the main breadwinner took its toll on her self-worth. Despite being retired teachers, her parents received no pension due to the recession and inflation in the country. Elsa had felt compelled to restructure and rethink her life plan.

After being at home and unemployed for three months, she decided to come to SA and live with her sister while looking for a job. Elsa felt an ambivalent limbo as her father did not want her to go to SA and Elsa fought her inner battle of not wanting to leave without his blessings.

Moving to SA provided an opportunity for her to create a new beginning for herself. Elsa secured employment at an Internet café in Yeoville[12]. She remembered that it was a job with fear of a different kind.

> … not to be stereotypical, but Nigerians sat there daily in the Internet café, sending out emails that you have won such and such prize. I feel even embarrassed to say one thing, that it was the Zimbabweans who could back-date fake bank papers to assist others to open accounts. One SA guy could also create a water and lights account that is needed for you to open clothing accounts. This was exploited as people would max out the store or credit card and simply tear it up, as their residential address and identity document did not exist in the first place.

Elsa was afraid for her life because she feared that if the police came in, she would also be arrested, just because she knew what the criminals were doing and did not report it. Elsa was in a catch 22 situation of 'keep quiet or have no income.'

[12] Yeoville is a suburb in the city of Johannesburg, in the Gauteng Province

She felt that only divine intervention could help her. Elsa met an NGO person who was doing research with migrants in Hillbrow[13]. Motivated by the NGO person, she applied to the University of the Free State to study further. Unfortunately she did not have a study permit and had to return home, which resulted in her dropping out from university. Elsa regrets that she did not know then about putting her studies in abeyance, so that she could have returned home, worked, got some money, secured a study permit and then resumed her studies.

Determined to improve her qualification, Elsa returned to SA to embark on a degree in a new field from her undergraduate choice. She secured a study permit and applied to the current university. She then learnt that as a foreigner she could also have access to a scholarship. Elsa enrolled for an intense, full-time Master's programme, with coursework and a dissertation to be submitted within one year. She completed and achieved it with success.

Elsa, despite the challenges of moving from hard sciences to social sciences, succeeded in her Master's coursework and research. She found this change of mind-set extremely hard, but nevertheless enrolled for a PhD degree.

> … in hard sciences, this for example, is a green flower but a social scientist will critically say that if under that light, the flower is blue…I had no idea what was expected of me – I was filled with fear as I had no idea of the new methodology…

Resilience approach:

University orientation was of no use as she still 'had to try and figure things out' on her own. She managed to find a writing centre but it was not effective. Regardless of having a good MA and PhD supervisor, Elsa felt overwhelmed by the methodology change and working on a group project.

> … if you understand theory in your own field and the person explains it in social terms, you will still not understand it...

'Life happens while you are busy making other plans' and Elsa got married to her school sweetheart during her PhD studies, and later gave birth to her baby in the middle of her PhD degree. Her husband is a good man and cares for her and their child deeply. Having been brought up to be an independent woman, she felt it strange that her father asked for an extreme amount in lobola from her husband as she felt that paying lobola was merely a token

[13] Hillbrow is another neighbouring suburb in the city of Johannesburg

part of her culture's symbolism. Elsa was awarded a Mellon scholarship and had to co-author a chapter of a book with her supervisor with whom she has a good relationship.

Elsa reflected on her home country and explained that Forced Migration is when people in countries that have histories of war, are forced to migrate, for example the Nigerian transnational issues that still leads to conflict today. Elsa was deeply concerned that the major polarisation between the Shona and Ndebele would cross over the border into other countries as well.

> … Zimbabwean ethnicity and hate is brought over the border, even identifiable with our dialects that are different…

To add clarity to understanding of the transnational conflict, Elsa illustrated her perception of meaning to having relocated to a new country but still fighting the conflict from her country of origin. Elsa explained that the ruling party, a Shona government, deployed an army between the years 1981–1987, that left 20 000 victims, and if that death toll is considered in parallel with the small geographical area, 20 000 people dying is a lot of people. It is referred to as the Mathebeleland Disturbances but is not classified as a genocide that targeted a specific group of people for religious/political reasons. The way Zimbabweans position themselves reveals their beliefs, for example like how they see the same land being fought over.

Elsa confided that she does not see herself involved in the transnational war. She believes that it is her husband’s and her own choice to do so, by keeping their lives blessed and simple.

> … I grew up not seeing myself as a victim, even though I have family that died and most of our friends are Shona…

Elsa believes that she can pass for being a South African as she looks similar to Black South Africans. However, when she visited the university's International Office (IO) she felt less than others.

> … There are no South Africans in the IO, you feel foreign as you are not treated well. The receptionist has an attitude problem and her persona reflects her projected aura of, 'you are wrong – so prove me wrong.'

Elsa learnt to adapt to the culture of SA by 'keeping silent'. She found ‘keeping silent’ to be most useful when using public transport in SA such as a taxi. There are certain key words that are seen as ‘triggers’ to alert Black South Africans that you are Foreign, for example the use of the word *uchago* and not *ubisi*, when referring to milk.

> …you learn not to say certain key words – which will make people pick up that you are not South African and they will then treat you differently and less than...

Although Elsa chose to study at the university, there was always a risk that she could get beaten up, even on campus.

> … Xenophobia is alive and well in SA. Being a migrant, I had to learn to be invisible… I live in the north of Johannesburg and attend a predominantly White Church, so my English is quite good.

With a light note in her voice, Elsa illustrated that when she goes back home to Zimbabwe, she is perceived to be 'cool' as she can speak Zulu but she revealed that on the other hand, when in SA, she does not speak Ndebele as it makes you stand out in a negative way. She believes that knowing English is an advantage to keep learning and improving, as it helps one go anywhere.

> … (With laughter) my son speaks Ndebele, but with an English accent!

The staff demographics in Elsa's division cause her inner turmoil, as she does not perceive it to be fair or transparent on hiring and permanent employment standards. Everyone in the department is White, including the student demographic, being Americans, Canadian Germans, Europeans, but glaringly, no Black South Africans. There are only two White South African staff members and the rest of the staff are internationals from Europe, not Africa. Elsa questions when will there be a change at her university. She regrets that even when she earns her PhD, there would be no upward progression in her division as she is not White.

> …If you are an international or foreign student and – if you present yourself as desperate – you get treated less – but if you put your cards on the table and lay down your expectations, you get treated better.

4.3.3 Fiona

Biographical details:

Fiona is a 30-year old Coloured female, of Irish decent, born in Gauteng but brought up by an aunt in Cape Town[14] who did not have any of her own children. Fiona was in her fourth year of an undergrad degree at the time of her interview. She is the eldest daughter of a teacher (her dad) and has four younger brothers. Her late mom was a secretary by profession. Fiona reminisced that her life in Cape Town was a challenge that was hard to endure.

> …lived with my neurotic uncle who was an alcoholic… it was not a good experience being there and going to school...

At times she realised she needed to get back to Johannesburg and start a better life. She went back eventually and started living again with her family. During this time, Fiona worked for six years in the corporate world. She was accepted to work in a Bank and got the opportunity to be a trainee but she was not happy in that career and so she applied to study towards her first degree at the university.

Risks & hazards approach:

Her application was denied. In discussion with her best friend, she decided to try again.

> …I reapplied the following year despite experiencing rejection… I had written an aptitude test as I am over a certain age, over 26 years old and I passed. I got accepted but without any financial support… I told my boss the same day and served my notice period over December…

During enrolment, an administrator asked Fiona to fill in a financial application form and she was awarded a bursary.

> …I wish I had done this degree before…earlier in my life… but life was really hard for me.

It was exciting being at university and her parents were very proud of her but sadly life robbed her unexpectedly of her best friend, her mom.

[14] Cape Town is another province in SA

Political economy approach:

> … throughout the day I sat… holding her… singing to her…but there was no life in her face… she looked like a corpse as she lay there and I knew that if I left her she would die… my dad and brothers couldn't handle it and I had no choice…

The ambulance had to be called in the early hours of the morning, but they did not want to come as her mother did not have a medical aid. Fiona believed that they eventually came to the home in case there was a death and Fiona's family could proceed legally to sue the ambulance service.

The doctor at the hospital was furious that the family did not bring Fiona's mom in earlier. She had advanced diabetes and had hidden her disease from the family. The family then realised that their mom could have survived but she chose not to tell them. Fiona was devastated as she realised that as she grew up, she watched her grandmother die of diabetes and she had suffered with gangrene and had to have her legs amputated. The realisation was that Fiona's mother did not wish to suffer like she had been witness to how her own mother died. Fiona was angry with her mom for being selfish and not seeking medical help. She was disillusioned as she needed her the most now in her new life of being a student. She felt betrayed as she felt her mother chose to die rather than fight her disease.

> … I never want to go through this again… I can't do this… but luckily my lecturers gave me extensions to my assignments and I pulled through, not with great results but I passed…

Resilience approach:

After her mother's death, the Church did family counselling as two of her brothers decided not to enter the Church for the funeral as they also could not accept their mom's death.

> …everything was a reminder of her… we no longer sat in the dining room as that was her favourite spot… life couldn't get any worse…

Two years after her mother's death, her father remarried a lady from Cape Town who was an old Church friend. Fiona was upset and unhappy with the news as she felt that he was now ruining the memory of her late mother.

> … how could he do this to us… breaking our family up… I went all the way to Cape Town for the wedding as he forced me to go…and people kept on telling me to hang on, it will be ok…

Faith proved the people right as her stepmother was good to her family. Her stepmom came with her own baggage of a previous marriage, three children and a husband that had walked out on her without any reason. However, she is good to them and most especially to her dad and has supported them all as a family through their grief over her mother's quick and unexpected death.

Time passed and Fiona finally found her true love with an old childhood friend. Fiona struggled with the relationship as she felt lost and unable to handle a relationship properly because she felt burdened with carrying her four brothers' problems all the time, such as one of her brother's not being allowed visiting rights to his children. Their lives' problems impacted on her life stress. To add to her challenges in life, it was unfortunate that Fiona's love was not an ideal fairy-tale.

> … my boyfriend pulled my arm and hurt me… and I told him to stop it… but it is not a very visible problem… my family love him but they do not know what he is really like...

Her boyfriend's mother had revealed to Fiona that he has a past that he needs to tell her about himself, but at the time of the interview, he still had not done so. Her boyfriend is very possessive and gets angry and jealous, questioning persistently if there are men on her campus or if she has male friends. Despite being the head of the home, looking after her dad and her brothers Fiona did not know how to find peace in her relationship.

> … a year later when I needed to speak to my mum, I would send her an SMS and then I would realise, oh God she is gone…. Slowly I accepted her death…

Fiona reflected that her learner driver's licence had expired and that was next on her 'to-achieve' list. Despite the problems she experienced within and outside the university, Fiona was able to exercise her agency to seek help and overcome the obstacles in order to earn her degree. Fiona looked forward to graduating and having a new life.

4.3.4 Harry

Biographical details:

Harry was born in a rural area of the KwaZulu Natal Province in SA. Harry was not only a top academic achiever in his school, but was also a sportsman, participating in volleyball. Harry's physics teacher, from Zimbabwe, saw a competition advertised at a university, gave Harry the details and motivated him to enter as it was going to be held at his school. Harry won a scholarship to attend a prestigious university in Gauteng. He was proudly the first of his generation of family and a representative member of the village to go to study at a university outside of his rural area.

Risks & hazards approach:

Sadly, Harry's mom became ill and life took a bad turn as his mom passed away in his first year at university, and the pressure of being the eldest in his family took over. Harry is now an orphan, who lives in the custody of his Grandma. His mom had run her own business of a little *spaza*[15] shop in Johannesburg and his late dad had two younger brothers and a sister. Harry felt responsible for his two siblings, a younger brother of 18 years and their baby sister of 7 years old.

Financial aid supported his first year of study through the competition that he won. Loss of Harry's mom put pressure on him and left him lonely. Harry was susceptible and vulnerable in his first year as a student and unfortunately this affected his academic success and he failed. Having passed a few courses from first year, he was able to repeat the first year subjects that he had failed, as well as take on a few second year subjects that he had passed. Harry faced his degree with partial achievement in multiple student year levels within a rare skills faculty.

Finance was a huge stressor in Harry's life because he needed to pay for not only his tuition but also the equipment he needed in his studies. In addition, he had to pay for accommodation and helping his family back home. Harry came from a rural background where the main language spoken was Zulu. His mother tongue was Sotho. His command of English was not that strong, and at first he struggled at university where the medium of instruction is strictly English.

[15] *Spaza* is a local South African word for a small shop in a rural area

Harry began to feel pressurised by deadlines and workloads and started to panic in his studies. This affected his learning and preparation for examinations. Harry had problems with understanding some of his coursework and his studies thus suffered, for example, Applied Mathematics, which he felt was his strongest subject when he was in school, was now the weakest subject that led to his exclusion from university.

Political economy approach:

His scholarship fell away and he experienced feelings of self-doubt, unworthiness and demoralisation. Harry's problems were compounded when he was forced to stop with his studies to secure some finances and had then appealed to the university to be accepted again as a student. Harry thus coped with his worries by finding work in order to help him pay his outstanding student fees, rent and provide for himself with other basic needs.

> …I am not a hard party guy and I don't really see the need for many friends… I do not have a social life. In my field of study… there is no time and what for, when I know that others are better than me so I have to work harder to try to keep up…

Harry goes out with friends to relax and to interact with people who can help him to cope with his situation. He was assisted in finding a job through a friend, whose mother knew people in Germany. They owned a company that had a branch in Sandton[16].

> … I was helped by a friend of a friend of a friend…total strangers who saw potential in me…

That was a turning point in his life as Harry had been afforded the opportunity to train with professionals in his field and to gain firsthand experience and more knowledge of what his career is about.

> … When you watch TV you get a fake sense of what your career is… and having known no person in this field, I felt lost when I started studying…

[16] Sandton is an affluent suburb in Johannesburg

Resilience approach:

Harry bore the burden of the responsibility of bringing up his siblings. Then again, he appreciated that his grandma and his uncle assist him a great deal. His uncle lives in Soweto[17] and eventually after completing school, Harry's younger brother came to stay with their uncle.

> …my brother decided to come to Johannesburg and got a part-time job teaching in the rural schools in Soweto… I am closer to him than to my little sister because of our age gap.

Although he was obliged to take time out from his studies, due to the exclusion for failing applied maths twice, he refused to give up on his dream of qualifying. He sought help from a lecturer in the support department in his division, who looked at the portfolio of work that he had completed in his year out of university. Together, they completed an appeal for re-entrance into the degree.

> … I have survived this nightmare as I love poetry and I have a written a book of poetry illustrating my personal growth as an individual... This helped me in my struggle with who I am and want to be… when I grew up I didn't know what I wanted to study and my school did not have a variety of subject options… so at university, I concentrated on the new 'fill in subjects' that I did not do at school and then paid the price when my familiar subjects, like English and Maths, suffered... my advice is for students to get experience in the career that they want to do. It is not about what you think you know. You have to work at each and every thing...

Harry had not enjoyed his university experiences thus far and he felt that had he been prepared, he would have passed or managed his study time more effectively.

> …It would have been good to have somebody to speak to or just to check up on you, like ask you how you are… we are away from home and have no one to lean on…

[17] Soweto (South Western Township) is a suburb in Johannesburg

Harry offered the advice that the university needed to put in place some support for students to give them a personal sense of caring and belonging.

> …administrators and course designers need to realise that we may enter university with good marks but we don't have the same family support or background as each other in our class. They need to level the playing field as we do not have the resources that the university expects us to have in this degree. I couldn't even buy the paper to print my projects on… nor had I ever seen or heard of some of the instruments we had to buy… even more miserable was not having been to Johannesburg before and having no one to take me to the shop that was stocked with what I needed for my studies…

Harry's felt that the strength that helped him through these bad experiences came from his ailing grandma, his uncle, aunt and the one lecturer from the division, and most importantly to him – was the memory of his physics teacher from his village who had spent his time until the 'wee hours' of the morning to teach him.

> … Universities need to know that they have to level the cultural divide, language divide, social divide and economic divide that we as students face every day in class…

Praying with full faith to God to watch over him, Harry was then convinced that he would not waste another year and will study and graduate for sure.

4.3.5 Hillary

Biographical details:

Hillary, a 27-year old young woman who comes from a small town on the outskirts of Swaziland[18], was at the time of the interview, studying towards her third year of her undergraduate degree. Despite having parents, Hillary often felt like an orphan, as they both did not want her to live with them when she was little. Eventually her father, who had little time for her and who never, took care of her, died. It did not take long for her mother to find love and remarry.

> … I do not matter to her…. My dad did not take care of me. Neither did my mom. My grandma is everything to me…

Fortunately her maternal grandmother took her in and raised her from a baby. Despite having an education in Swaziland, Hillary's grandma wanted more for her granddaughter and sent her to SA to study.

Risks & hazards approach:

A life-changing love affair after she had completed school in Swaziland in 2005 saw Hillary as a single parent at a very young age. She fell prey to the charm and sharp wit of a flamboyant medical doctor, who did not keep any of his promises and nor did he want to have anything to do with her pregnancy, birth of the child or the raising of their child. With her dreams of living 'happily ever after' shattered, Hillary gave birth to a beautiful daughter who she loves dearly.

> …my first love, he treated me like a queen and he had found me pure… But when I fell pregnant, he treated me like dirt and left me…

Tragedy did not end there as Hillary feared the worst...

> … he is such a smooth talker and so very handsome. He is a player and I didn't know it. When I was told about who he really is, I thought my life was doomed… I had no choice but to go three times for the HIV test, just in case it was positive, you know, after the three month window period… luckily I was not HIV positive as he had a very bad player reputation that I could not ignore…

[18] Swaziland is a neighbouring country of SA

Hillary, with the financial support of her grandma, is a single parent who has received no child maintenance or support from her child's father. Hillary reflected that only when her child turned six years of age, did the paternal grandmother inquire if the grandchild was okay or not. Despite coming from an all-educated family, the biological father did not care for his own daughter.

> …his elder brother feels something for my child and asks to see her in the school holidays and he is kind and his wife loves her, so I let them see her… I am surviving, somehow, thank God through all of that…

With thoughts for a better future for herself and her child, Hillary's grandma encouraged her to make something of her life. Hillary had passed her high school studies well in Swaziland, so her grandmother advised her to move to SA and redo her final two years so that she could be better prepared to study in a South African University that has English as a medium of instruction. Hillary felt it was heart-breaking, the sacrifice of leaving her young daughter in the care of her grandmother, and taking the plunge into the unknown.

> …imagine giving birth and then going back to school, going back into a uniform, in another country... I'm a single mom, and I have to leave my child with my gran… I can only pray that God keeps her safe...

Hillary, convinced that she needed to do something to have a chance at a better future, applied for a study permit to enter SA. However, Hillary did not have the ideal academic experience as she had imagined at university, nor was she certain about her future.

Political economy approach:

The nearest town from the border of her country Swaziland, is Nelspruit, where she attended a private school that cost R40 000 a year, which her gran had to save and pay for with much difficulty. In the year 2009, Hillary passed well enough to secure entry into university. Life did not play fair again. Hillary felt her life shattered into pieces when she was recognised as being a foreigner, because of the light complexion of her skin, as compared in general to South African Blacks and easily identifiable with her accent. She did not make friends easily and had to try hard to cope with academic essays and studies at university. The transition to an all-English speaking, teaching and learning university tested her self-confidence levels. On a social level, Hillary felt 'different, and less than others' and then her experience gradually worsened as academics treated her less than she should have been treated, with not much 'respect or understanding.'

Hillary started failing tests and assignments and there was no one to help her.

> …now I understand why students commit suicide…I wanted to commit suicide… I am being told by my lecturers that my English is poor and it hurt me… I don't even know why I am here to study...

Resilience approach:

Despite having been in SA for so long since completing her second Matric exam, Hillary could not get granted South African citizenship.

> …money in Swaziland is not good, and I cannot get citizenship here in SA...

She pays an international rate for medical aid which is very expensive to afford, considered together with the costs of tuition, accommodation, food and travel. Hillary had no 'real' friends and did not know where to go or who to turn to.

> …I saw a doctor on main campus that I spoke to and I said to him that I want to die... so he put me on medication and the tablets he gave me really helped me…

The need to end her life persisted and only with counselling, and reporting daily after class to the doctor, did Hillary manage to move on and try harder at her studies.

> (Crying)…he saved me from killing myself...

Hillary was doing her utmost to regain some self-esteem but it was difficult with ongoing academic and family challenges. Hillary's key motivation to keep on trying to get her degree is that she will be able to go back home and take care of her grandmother and her child.

> My grandma is paying my university fees and for baby's transport and school fees…she also gives me money allowance for my food, my clothing account and to live here in SA… it is so sad that with what my gran is paying for my fees, she should be able to drive a Mercedes Benz but she is instead driving an old Toyota Corolla… she is even ready to buy me an iPad but she doesn't see that she needs to upgrade her car instead…

A heart-rending tale within a tale is of Hillary's grandmother's struggle in life. Marriage according to Hillary is not a modern arrangement as she learnt from a young age that new brides are taught to bear any form abuse from their future in-laws.

> … in Swaziland, when you are a girl and you come of age, they take you to a kraal and swear at you to know what it is to be married...

When her gran was younger, she had had only one daughter, Hillary's mom. A calamity struck the family, when out of jealousy for her grandmother's education, property and success; her grandfather's extended family arranged an attack on her. Her gran was brutally stabbed 15 times by an 'arranged criminal' and catastrophically her intestines were damaged such that she could not have any more children.

Her grandfather, without asking her grandmother's permission, had two daughters out of wedlock and he did not consider how his decision would affect all their lives. Hillary loved her dear grandfather, she missed him, and so did her gran, as he sadly 'drank himself to death' six years ago. Her grandfather did not take the other lady as his second wife; and yet her grandmother had a soft heart towards his illegitimate daughters. Both the daughters, who are now adults, have oddly left their children, that is, her grandpa's illegitimate grandchildren, with her grandmother to raise them.

> … even though she is not their grandma, and her second cousin, not even by blood, she still has to look after his - out of marriage grandchildren – really for six years of doing that now… for how much longer must she continue to do so and she is getting old...

Hillary's life and that of her daughter are inextricably tied to her grandmother's and they believe that they owe her everything.

> (in tears) … she is our everything… my mom, my dad, gran, great grandma and our best friend...

Despite her grandmother's kindness and acceptance of her late husband's two illegitimate daughters, and in spite of looking after their children, the stepdaughters and their husbands want Hillary to move out of the house, which they argue is their father's and not her grandmother's. They feel that Hillary's grandfather's money is due to them and their children and not to Hillary and her daughter. They often emotionally hurt and argue with the grandmother that Hillary is being educated and is financially subsidised by their father's money and not her grandmother's.

> …Gran gave me a house in Swaziland, in the town as part of my inheritance for my daughter and myself, which I put up for rent but my two step-cousins want the house from me and I refuse to just give it to them. I refuse to leave the house. We even had to go and apply to get police protection in case, they hurt us.

Family animosity is felt and the history of her grandmother's pain is renewed daily by ongoing threats. The grandmother felt she was not worthy then and not now as well. This feels as deep-rooted pain for Hillary and her daughter too.

For Hillary, her sense of self-worth is also being tested again and again. She feels that now with her being labelled and treated so hurtfully by even her lecturers, that maybe, in self-doubt, she is not good enough.

> …I have no one to talk to. So now I feel so good that you asked me to share my experiences with you. My advice is for young people to persevere and get their degree. I am so glad to have such an interview...

4.3.6 Ingrid

Biographical details:

Ingrid was 23 years old at the time of her interview. She is a White South African female that had the good fortune of attending private schooling. Ingrid talked passionately about her love for sports in which she still actively participates. Ingrid was not the 'everyday' student who had some idea of who they 'may' want to be when they leave school, she was someone who worked hard, studied hard and never lost focus on whom she wanted to be. In this way, her key driving force throughout her schooling phases was knowing without any doubt, what her chosen career was. Ingrid was raised in a loving and supportive family and has an older sister. Her sister had just graduated with an Honours degree and they are all proud of her achievement.

> ….parents are very supportive, and that always means a lot to me… but my mum, she wanted to be a Doctor and she could not go to study and yet she is the ultimate mum! She had such good marks in Matric but sadly her parents couldn't afford higher education. She backs us up with our choices a 100%. Our dad is always hard-working, always trying to save and plan to do the best for us…

Ingrid did not take her blessings in life for granted. Ingrid believes in giving back to society. At school in her FET years, she completed 430 hours of community service and it made her feel worthwhile and fulfilled. She also did not expect her parents to pay for every single need or want and so from an early age, Ingrid tried out different part-time jobs. In her first year at university, Ingrid offered private tuition to students in Matric who wished to get into her specialised field and so she helped and mentored them towards their goals.

Risks & hazards approach:

Ingrid, despite being a motivated person, being able to fully exercise her academic agency, failed an important major in her 3rd year. She felt that she was 'big' enough or rather 'mature' enough to admit fault and accept responsibility for her failure

> … It was my responsibility, I did not pass it and I accept that, but unfortunately, I could not move into my 4th year without writing that subject again, and so I knew I had to repeat 3rd year again...

Henceforth began Ingrid's test of faith in herself and in her career. She reflected that she was a border mark student, getting between 58–59%, 'literally borderline'. Ingrid thought that there was hope for her to improve her results, as in the middle of the year, a member from the faculty support team met with her, reviewed her progress and he recommended support

intervention from the faculty for her. However, with excited anticipation, her hopes were shattered as the support that was promised, was never forthcoming, in any form.

Political economy approach:

Ingrid accounted that at the end of the year, she got 65% for her exam, added to her theory and practical mark, her year mark still fell short. Ingrid was prepared to let her failure rest and repeat her third year. However, the stark reality of unequal academic standards became apparent.

> …Who is monitoring the system for the student support interventions process, and if so, why are they not implementing it – why? … I am heartbroken, but also so angry...

Her anger and disillusionment grew when she decided to try to get her grade reassessed. Through the class grapevine another student, with a lower mark than her, had his family contact the faculty and threaten to remove their son. Tests and examinations, as a golden rule were not allowed to be remarked, as 'faculty are generally too busy' to do so. It was then made known that the student whose father complained, had his son's paper, which the faculty said they would never with any exceptions do, re-marked.

In desperation and needing just the 1.5% to pass, she wrote to the Dean of the faculty. No one replied. She collected her evidence, and then appealed again to the Dean of the faculty to consider a re-mark for her paper as well. The Dean responded that his secretary would give her the outcome of his investigation. Eventually, Ingrid received an email from the Dean's secretary, declaring that after the investigation, there was 'no such thing' that could have happened and that she was misinformed.

> … the secretary suggested that I accept my failure, and study hard this time…

The third year group got together and spoke to each other openly about what was going on in their department. With facts on hand, the group became further disillusioned as the unfair practice took place blatantly.

> ….no one misrepresented facts here, we know of two brothers who are a year apart that have transport problems and fees issues, and don't come in on the days when there are minimal lectures for either one as it would be a waste of petrol; no one is supporting them through their hardship….

As a group, they further realised that there was another incident where they found out that a female student had family problems. She had failed like Ingrid and many other students, however, in her case with 58%, she was still passed and moved on to fourth year and Ingrid

had to repeat her third year. They approached the girl and she did not respond. They could not understand the change in rules for individual students and no fair play for all students. Eventually as a class, they pieced together that…

> …if someone is foreign and has money, and lawyers at their beck and call, and parents who are loud, then you stand a chance to be treated differently. The student was a Black international male student from Zimbabwe. Their son should have failed, but behold, he was pushed through to fourth year instead; and here we remain in third year… where is the fairness in all of this?

She felt defenceless as she could not deal with the problems of inequality, unfair standards and being treated differently. Her deep feelings of anger against discrimination needed to be let out…

> …Our Dean is a hypocrite; his secretary handles issues by making decisions for him... and he stands in front of us every year and lies that he has an 'open door policy – I am here for the student' – NO you are not! It is a sad joke! UCT[19] was crucified on Carte Blanch[20], where a White student with 9 distinctions could not get access. Is it a question of White vs Coloured vs Black vs Indian, or in any other way around. Or does the university not see that they should strive for quality and not quantity? Does society want somebody who failed four subjects to be, by favour, pushed through? We do our time. I failed, I did my time, I am better, as I have learnt my skill and have developed… But some get away with everything…

Due to the turmoil within her thoughts and feelings, Ingrid confirmed that her experiences at the university had wounded her deeply.

> …It is still my responsibility, my studies are my responsibility... yet I still harbour so much hate and anger, I will never specialise at this University…

Ingrid's frustration with strictly following protocol and humbly approaching all avenues of the institution's hierarchy to assist her to resolve her query left her without any hope.

> ….I tried really hard to get the faculty to support us. What is unscrupulous is that no one stood up for me, I was just got shot down… we have a Student Council, who I

[19] UCT: University of Cape Town

[20] Carte Blanch is a television programme that screens germane news from SA and around the world

> approached with my issues and, I received no reply. I tried going to the Dean of Student Affairs, guess what, no response. I tried going to the Chancellor of Academics, no response. Our university has a hierarchy of fish, and I did my homework and found out who they all are and followed protocol. NO response.

Ingrid was so angry and hurt that tears poured from her eyes, as she declared that all of what has happened to her, has brought about a lot of negativity in her life, negativity that she did not need. In re-evaluating her actions, Ingrid was adamant that:

> ... in discussion as a group, we didn't want them to pass us who had failed, or pass all, or fail all… we just want that there should fair practice, that there should be no exceptions based on mundane reasons such as people with lots of money to donate to the university or because of people with political pull…

Ingrid suggested that if there wold be such a case again of a student needing to pass a senior year, in need of only 1.5%, a process should be put in place so that the person is treated fairly, like everyone else. Ingrid promotes the viewpoint that if a student is borderline, their results and attendance should be taken under consideration together to inform the decision of assistance. She maintains that if something is promised, it should be given, not just be 'a waste of time and paper.'

> … It is one messed up situation at our school. It is emotionally overtaxing and until today, I am very angry…I feel hatred…

Ingrid recalled a tutorial wherein someone taught them something valuable and involved her and treated her with dignity and 'as an equal' – it had made all the difference to her resolve to pursue her chosen career despite the hardship.

> …they wanted me to learn and got me in to do an amazing task, else I would have left this field if it were not that I found my belonging, else I would have dropped out by now…

Resilience approach:

This part of the narration of Ingrid's life experience, takes another unexpected turn. She tied to move past the pressures of her studies by taking up cycling. She has since also successfully completed the 94.7[21] marathon and through her different sports, Ingrid re-established her love for her profession, looking beyond her bad experiences at university.

Having been involved in giving back to communities since her school days, Ingrid got back to her old high school and managed a drive to raise donations for an impoverished community in Kliptown[22]. She arranged a food drive and drove a clothes marathon, raised food as well as clothes, for a children's centre. Ingrid also shares her passion for ballet by teaching ballet to the community's children after school.

> …I saw the difference. Six teachers to 150 children, teachers in SA suffer and kids suffer, and you cannot help but see the innocence of children. I enjoyed helping them. They need and crave for anybody to care and to want to make a difference.

At that stage of her life, Ingrid was still in between feelings of peace and anger.

> … I feel demoralisation, like stagnated… I am standing still, and I can't move forward or closer to any money, no closer to independence, or any closer to having my own place, not yet closer to being independent from my parents… I can't wait to get a place of my own…

Ingrid's key concern was that the 'weeding out' system at university seems to be one with an 'exit goal focus' and not of support and intervention. She said that most interventions are put down on paper, but do not materialise, nor do they happen in time. She feels that interventions without action are useless as it serves no purpose besides 'window dressing' for faculty, with no concern for the student, as there exists 'no follow-up'. Ingrid suggested a working one-on-one, individualised intervention system that is followed through and monitored.

> … Faculty is totally useless. They don't give out information in time and perhaps it's because they have a lot of responsibility but prefer to rather shirk that responsibility. No one sees that the point is that the student must be progressing. Cases should be

[21] 94.7 is a local Gauteng, radio station

[22] Kliptown is a suburb in Johannesburg

> individualised and followed through. Things such as a student not having missed a single tutorial or lab, and having made steady progress, should be considered before faculty judges all of us…

A major point that Ingrid wants to be made known is that 'this is not an issue about race'. She expresses that if a person works hard, then they are meant to be at university. The problem she wants to highlight is that there is no equality at HEIs.

> … we should be looking far beyond, race, colour, or language, beyond local or international, most paramount, being - irrespective of race. People just need to listen. Equality and transparency is needed! If this is the pass mark, let it be neither more nor less, let it be equal and fair for everyone. I want people's eyes to be opened and to know what really happens at university…

Ingrid copes through her quality time spent engaged in sports, doing charity work and is now even making an effort to socialise and 'mix' with people. She found it difficult to be between years, as relationships are made and then circumstance leads to them drifting apart. However, the people she has met in her repeated year are kind to her and help her through things that she may not understand and she shares her knowledge with them as well.

> …some individuals make it blatant that there are ill feelings… knowing it strengthens your character. Sometimes, even though I don't break easily, I feel pain… I am hard enough to be strong enough for somebody, but not hard enough to be inhumane or uncaring… However, I believe that there is something in everybody that is beautiful or attractive – even in life… At that time I liked being angry and it got me through the year but now I am trying to make peace with my anger and just want to get out of this university…

After some deep silence, Ingrid disclosed a buried truth of her inner self, her inner pain…

She felt the need to tell me something secret, something hidden.

Ingrid said that some people push their problems forward to gain sympathy or avoidance of responsibility. She on the other hand, chose the extreme of living her tragedy alone. She tried to cope with her private life and it meant nothing to the university that she did not cry out her needs to them. There was no value in surviving on your own. Make a noise and be heard, seems to be the only way to go. But that is not who Ingrid chooses to be.

She did not report her personal issue, and took it as her personal burden to carry – alone. Ingrid had developed a tumour in her breast and went into hospital to have it removed. The doctors operated on her but unfortunately her operation got infected. Thankfully the tumour was benign.

> …I took an ultra sound and went for a biopsy... people take health care for granted. I have always had private health care and you only realise what it means when you go into or even go outside, or pass by a public hospital...

Ingrid revealed that her mom was diagnosed with uterine cancer in Ingrid's first year at university. Her big sister was diagnosed with third stage cervical cancer in Ingrid's second year. Her own fear and close call was in her (first) third year. This tragedy of ongoing obstacles did not end as Ingrid met a young man and fell in love with him. When he was not there for her when she needed him the most, she started having 'a gut feeling, an empty feeling that he was cheating'. He was. Neither could he support her as 'he was not such a giving person'. Ingrid conveys that it is now time for herself and her studies and her goals.

Being an independent thinker, Ingrid was not happy with her living arrangements. She loves her family dearly, but does not want to live at home anymore. Her nephew of 1½ years of age comes to stay over at his grandparents' house, and as wonderful as that is, it distracts her from her studies as he demands constant attention and entertainment.

Ingrid is making an effort to earn some money by tutoring two Matric girls but does not have enough money as yet to move out and live on her own. She would prefer to have no financial obligation to her dad. She looks forward to work and to take on her own lease agreement and pay her dad back.

> My biggest regret is not earning as I should have been. I have now lost two years... …It is nice to get this off my chest. I am glad that it is out there now that I have told you and now my experience has been given a chance for someone else to see that there are flaws at this university…and that there is something seriously wrong with the implementation of student support…

4.3.7 Martha

Biographical details:

Martha was 22 years old and between her second and third year at university when interviewed. Martha is a single female, born on the East Rand in Johannesburg. She comes from a close-knit Zulu family who support her plans for education despite themselves not having any tertiary education. Martha began to struggle financially which was a 'really big issue' as she had to travel daily from a far distance to attend university. Martha worked hard to qualify for a bursary to attend university. Gaining financial support would mean less travelling and being able to afford to stay at residence.

Risks & hazards approach:

Martha had become sick in the first few months of her first year and could not continue with her studies. Yet, she continued to pursue her degree despite being excluded and having had to repeat her first year. All the same, Martha did not only experience academic problems but also personal problems. At times it was a struggle to keep going on. In spite of this, she was determined and drew on her inner strength and the assistance from her Church to cope with her personal problems. She believes that she is an average student who felt excluded from the university by a decision that was beyond her control, namely her unforeseen illness. She did recall contacting the university to inform them of her ill health; however, she did not recollect who took down her telephone message. As a result she had no proof to justify her appeal to the university Registrar against exclusion.

> …I did not simply bunk lectures as something else… something serious was happening to my life that needed immediate attention...

To further exacerbate circumstances, a lecturer who was between moving houses, had unfortunately misplaced her exam paper and Martha then failed the subject again. The transition from being a confident student to not being sure about her pursuit of education, left Martha to draw on the support from senior staff members in her department to cope with the structural constraints that she experienced with regards to timetabling her conflicting majors. These constraints included clashes with her subjects that were being lectured at overlapping times. Martha, despite her academic and personal problems, approached every level of bureaucracy to re-enter university and when she did with the help of the SRC (student representative council), she participated in university-driven societies and projects that promoted building a positive image of the university. She became part of the ‘Growing University Pride’ initiative. Having an outgoing, unique, special, fun-loving, and

bubbly personality, Martha found her role to be important in trying to change people's perspectives on their experiences and outlook on life:

> …I like to change the way people see things, or their views by showing them different sides and perspectives…

Political economy approach:

Martha attended an Afrikaans Primary school in Brakpan and then moved to Germiston for high school. Life turned a new page for when she was 16 years old, her mom's sister revealed more to her about her birth. Martha could not believe that her dad was in fact her stepdad. She felt a bond with her stepdad – more so than with her mom.

> … I think that it would have been easier to think that my mom was my stepmom instead of my dad, as we are not really close...

She found out that her mother had 'remarried' when she was 4 years old (more clarity on this later). Halfway through the interview Martha asked herself why she did not just go to UJ[23], and why was she so committed to the University that she was in. Martha being enrolled at the same university for 6 years - in order to get a 4-year degree qualification - continued to plague her with worry. It was critical for Martha that she would be able to pursue her Honours degree in 2015, but that is if the university would let her move forward.

Thinking back about her childhood, Martha revealed that her parents always found something to fight about, and the push forward in her life was to:

> … just graduate and get a fresh start on life…

During her first year, Martha faced a peril that nothing in her life had prepared her for. It was not noticed by anyone that she had become suddenly different or that she felt that she could not eat, or do anything constructive until her father thankfully picked it up. Martha contemplated that she had a *calling*; something which was happening that was out of her control. She had internalised a spirit over which she had no control and this spirit needed to be calmed. It made her feel lonely and disillusioned simultaneously. Eventually her father took her to the Zion Christian Church (known for their green logo with a silver star).

[23] UJ: the University of Johannesburg

There it was established by the elders of the Church that there was a prophecy, and that Martha was bestowed with a gift, a gift of becoming a prophet herself. Until April 2009 life seemed to be on track for an enthusiastic first year Martha, with dreams and hopes, and then her aspirations were brought to a screeching halt.

> … I feel like this is unfair to have things just be thrown at me…

Martha admitted to feeling awfully suicidal, by asking:

> …imagine if something you have no power over, takes over your life. You wonder can this just be over and please – please give me another body…

Resilience approach:

Martha stayed at the Church for a long time to deal with what was happening to her. When she was called upon to help others, by being a Prophet, and in revealing prophecies for others benefit, seemed to have a negative effect on her being but she believed that she could not deny that with the ‘bad there was some good’.

> …I wouldn't be who I am if it wasn't for the *calling* and such things…

Martha has since written an autobiography on her life and hopes to publish it soon. She felt writing was her way of expression as she could not and had not spoken to anyone about her *calling*. Again, with introspection, Martha stated:

> …things are thrown at you when you do not have a choice...

As her powers of prophecy grew, Martha began dreaming a warning of sorts that cast another strong presence of someone important in her life. This led Martha to investigate what her dreams were revealing to her with the help of the Church and her aunt. Despite the conflict within herself, life threw another curved ball at her when she discovered her mom had married her stepdad when she was four years old and that - he was not her biological father. Turmoil within Martha bubbled as she faced another hazard that her *calling* 'comes from' (was inherited) from her biological dad's ancestors. Martha then undertook a new path to discover who her biological father was and why she was not told about him previously. She was hurt and angry. More confusingly, Martha felt that her stepdad was someone who was wonderful to her, making it difficult to accept that he was not her birth father.

Her own investigation revealed that her biological father had died a long time ago. Apparently he was a gangster and he was shot to death. Burdened with this knowledge Martha was told that her biological father's family did not want to claim her when she was born. She then met

with her biological father's family and her heart broke further. She wondered if she could take any more pain. Martha's mother and biological father did not share a relationship. Her mother was 17 years old when she was raped by him when they were in high school. A nightmare followed that exposed that Martha was regarded as an abomination of rape by her biological father's family.

Martha's inner battle raged on as she did not have any support besides that of her Church.

> …I know so much about people that now - I don't have any friends. I can't really date as a dream will reveal how the relationship will end, so why bother...

There were moments along this trajectory that revealed how the battle between her academic self and her spiritual *calling* left a hole in her soul as Martha searched desperately for answers.

> …so why couldn't those ancestors deal with these things when they were alive? Why must I now deal with everybody's issues… anyway, faith has brought me here to this interview for me to speak to you...

The institution attempted to assist by recommending that Martha goes for counselling. However, she felt that the CCDU never helped her effectively, as her life did not get any better. The Church however, was a place that accepted her and allowed her the space to find her *calling*.

> … I tried changing the CCDU counsellor and it still never got better. Sometimes I believe that not to handle things – is handling it – cry about it – just cry and get it out of your system…

4.3.8 Oliver

Biographical details:

Oliver was between his second and third years of his undergrad 4-year degree. At the time of the interview, he was 21 years old. He is a Xhosa-speaking South African born in the Free State Province in SA. Education for Oliver created an opportunity for a better future. His home background was not steady as his parents got divorced and then both his parents and later his grandfather and grandmother also died. He had to face almost a yearly burden of death and loss of his immediate family members, one after the other.

Risks & hazards approach:

Oliver struggled with academic learning at university and found speaking and writing an essay in English extremely 'difficult and scary.' Taking lecture notes was difficult for him, especially since lecturers have different expectations of a student and they also teach differently and at ‘different speeds’, which are hard to follow. As much as he tried to adapt to the lectures, he just continued to suffer in note-taking and thereafter he battled to understand what was being taught. It reached a point that even when Oliver read his notes after lectures, he could not grasp the key points or the value of the lecture or his own hand-written notes.

> …For me having to take the lecture notes is a problem. I still struggle taking notes and even now when I take notes, I don't understand what I have written…

Taking notes and paying attention was an obstacle for Oliver. He came up with a plan to help himself by going over his notes to understand the lecture, but he did not have much success.

> ….I just tried to listen at the same time - but it's kind of difficult to concentrate on everything: writing and listening and understanding… I suffer like that. When I return to my room and study again there is just some stuff that I wrote that I don't understand at all…

Despite putting his plan of revision into action, Oliver felt the need to go back to consult with his lecturers. Consultations were difficult to schedule. Most of the time, the lecturer was either busy, not available or simply not there.

Political economy approach:

Oliver felt susceptible to academic demands and stress that led to failure in his first year. Taking notes was a serious issue because for him the pace of the lecturers was very fast across most subjects. Further perpetuating this problem of a lack of understanding was not being able to consult with a lecturer in time, prior to the following lecture.

> ….I sometimes do not understand last week's notes and I tried to consult with the lecturer who was very busy, so I still end up confused. I don't have an answer for last week's notes – it's kind of hectic when you are still waiting for a consult with the lecturer and now you sit in the lecture again, not understanding last week or this week's notes….

Oliver felt left in the lurch as lecturers refuse to give hand-outs (printed notes) when they expect students to pay attention and make their own notes. He had approached a lecturer for the PowerPoint presentation, which he was denied

> ...I try to listen and to write fast. Neither is there time to ask questions as the lecture is fast going… and then the lecturer will say, 'oh, don't take that point down' and then I am even more confused as to what is important and what is not important in a lecture...

Oliver found the pacing of lectures to be a serious issue from first to second through to third year. It was further compounded by his poor note-taking skills and the inability to actively listen while taking notes, added to not understanding the notes that he had taken.

> …Some subjects I don't know how I passed… But I don't want to just pass with a 50% … At school I could understand better with 30 – 40 students in a class, and here at university there are some lectures that are massive with more than 100 students, in a big room where you can't really hear properly as not all the lecturers want to use mikes…

In addition, Oliver felt susceptible to different types of experiences as he found the transition from attending an all-Black high school to a multiracial university and classroom, overwhelming. Oliver struggled with his social class and university identity in many ways.

Socially, Oliver had met many people from different cultures and with peer pressure, he felt compelled to fit in and to be like others. With peer pressure, socialising became important, while studying took second priority.

Oliver felt prone to further occurrences when he reflected that even though he came to university to study, at university there exists other pressures and an ongoing competition to 'be better than others and to fit in.'

> …you make a lot of friends and then you see that some friends are financially more well-off than you are; some friends are less financially inclined than you; and there are the people behind you who aren't even eating today… it's very hard to study having not eaten and you start to worry about those people because if you are a human being, you will care. Then again you have to also worry about keeping up with others… it all takes a lot of your time to think about and plan…

Oliver declared that at that moment he was 'not in such a bad situation' as he tried to cook for himself but then when he finished university and went back home late, he tried to book a meal to eat - only if he had money available. Despite the academic struggles, Oliver felt it difficult to keep up with a different kind of peer pressure where he had to be seen as 'cool and not gay.'

> … I think the trend is in having a lot of chicks[24] which is called the *dating game*. You are expected to have at least five chicks that you know; at separate times... you have to get chicks especially now that they all expect attention and to show that 'hey she's mine,' you have to walk with them and be seen. Otherwise they call you names like - you are a sissie or a gay, so you listen to them and are seen in class to prove to them you are not that and that you are a man…

Oliver finds this *'dating game'* that he is forced to play, exhausting and difficult in many ways.

> …. I'm a man and I can get gals but the gals expect something from you, trust me, it happens…

Oliver recollected that when it was his girlfriend's birthday, she had expected him to buy a birthday cake and a gift for her but unfortunately he was 'broke'.

> ….Our peers push you to get chicks and the chicks come and demand money for this and that all the time, so you find that boys have expectations and the gals also …

Oliver regards relationships to be overrated and that sometimes one 'has to do what is needed' in order to keep cool and fit in at university.

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[24] Chick is a slang word mainly used by males to refer to a girlfriend

> … in dating there is there is nothing like one valentine and love and romance, you have to have many girlfriends, but make sure you do not get hurt – if she flounders along the way you know you can break up and if she is not secure with you, you have a back-up babe, to keep the image – of course one has to grow up and find the right girl to marry… but this is what works in university…

Oliver did not have a stable upbringing. When he was young, he lived in Gauteng and his parents were married. When they divorced in 2005, he had to go back to the rural areas in the Free State Province. He lived at his mother's home until Grade 7 but he did not like living there. He felt that it was not what he should be experiencing.

> …I liked debating and other cultural activities but my grandpa could not give me money to go to this – so I wanted to go to my mum, but honestly, my grandpa gave me the cultural values. He supported and encouraged me to go to school and taught me how important school is, but when I asked for money, he didn't have the money and my mamma didn't believe me because she was far away. That's why I wanted to go back to her…

With good fortune, his mother started working and took him back to Gauteng for the completion of his schooling but fate was not on his side as his mum died of TB in 2007.

> … it was very hard, from there on my life was hard, even financially as I had to fend for myself or go back to Free State…

In weighing up his options in hindsight as to his choices, Oliver recalled that unfortunately his father did not play a major part in his life or in his upbringing. He had approached his mother when he was younger to take him to meet his father. Oliver reflected that his father treated him 'nicely' on that one visit, and then Oliver had to face the news of his father's tragic death in a car accident a year later. When reminiscing, Oliver shared that his father had two other children who were younger than Oliver, with another woman, and not his mother. It caused further lack of self-esteem and identity when he realised that his father chose to care for his other two children and not for him. He doubted that they were married and he wondered what had happened to them as he never saw them again after his one visit with his dad.

His mom remarried after his parents divorced and he was living with his stepfather and stepsister in Tembisa[25]. His stepsister was fifteen years old at that time, in Grade 8, and he loved her dearly. His stepdad cared for him even though his mother was dead and is always ready to help him in any way, financially as well.

His late mom's family did not want him to stay with his stepfather and he was taken in to live with his mom's sister and completed Grade 11 and 12 in a town called Springs, in Johannesburg.

Resilience approach:

Oliver felt that despite his troubled life, his motivation was his baby stepsister. He holds the belief that to give her a stable life, he had to work very hard in Grade 11 and 12. The hard work paid off and Oliver received a bursary to go to university.

> …my sister keeps me strong and also my prayer. In having to pray, and in knowing God, I keep strong…

Oliver questioned why his mother died at such a young age and why she left him alone. It was a pain and loss that he had not fully accepted. His mom had worked in a restaurant and she had both her parents. Not only was her father wealthy – she had a choice of making a better life for both herself and him.

> … she had me in her teens, it was her choice… but even so she loved me. She didn't even go to school, but she had worked hard for us… even when I was in the Free State, and I had went home to Gauteng for the holidays, she'd buy me clothes. I never lacked for anything, even grandma used to send money for me when I was in the Free State… but my mum, she didn't always make good choices…

However, Oliver still felt strongly that his life could have been different. He maintains a belief that 'having two parents is the key to success for any person'.

> …My mom had both parents and they were not poor but my mum had me when she was a teenager, and she could have gone to school but she chose not to… if you have two parents, one is bound to support you, and if you are lucky both will support you…you will then be a success…

[25] Tembisa is a Township in the Gauteng Province

Coping with death and so many losses in such a short space of time, was a struggle. In a space of four years, he had lost four family members. First his grandfather died at the age of 75, followed by the death of his father. Then his grandmother died as a result of all the 'stress,' in her life, followed by the tragic loss of his mother.

> …I'm coping and I haven't failed any courses this year. I think I am strong minded… and I destress by going to see a comedy show or something… and now and then I have a drink or two…(laughing), but I do not do Castle[26]…

Oliver affirmed that despite knowing about the university counselling places (such as the CCDU), he chose to rather be part of 'Love Life,' an organisation where he first went for counselling and is now a volunteer counsellor there himself for other people. Attending prayer, Oliver confesses, is not as rewarding as it is projected to be.

> …I do go to Church but not always, mainly on Christmas day, and auspicious days… when you go to Church sometimes and look at those people who are preaching, you end up going back home and feeling just as depressed as you were before going to Church…for me praying alone in my room is enough for me, maybe reading my Bible now and then but I believe that my relationship with God is a personal one and you do not need to be in a false sense of community to reach Him…

To unwind, Oliver used to do karate at school and unfortunately stopped after achieving his yellow belt[27]. He prefers to do weight-lifting now as the university does *mixed karate* and not a *pure form* of karate which he prefers.

To further subsidise his student lifestyle, Oliver joined a Business Social club on campus where he was engaged in designing eco-friendly ways of washing cars to raise a steady income. Oliver's entrepreneurial endeavour came with its own challenges of trying to raise R200 to register his company in Pretoria with the CPA (Company Protection Act) but nonetheless, that is Oliver's plan to follow through with his steadfast determination.

> …I won't jeopardise anything to get my degree, and my motivation is making a better life for my little sister...

[26] Castle is a local Beer Brand

[27] Yellow belt is a graded level based on martial arts ability and competence

4.3.9 Steven

Biographical details:

Steven is a Catholic who believes in the word of His Father[28].

> … my mentality is to serve the people. I'm grateful that I have a religious background but I am not a fanatic. But there are certain guidelines in any religion that teach you how to be human – Christ says that I am the son of God, I am not going to judge anybody and I am here to love everybody and I'll treat everybody equally.

Steven was a 31-year old male at the time of the interview, in his final year of his PhD. Prior to his PhD, he completed an extended course, as he was a point less on his undergraduate application. He has an elder brother who is married and Steven is proud to be an uncle to his beloved nephew. Steven has both his parents who he feels, give him not only their financial support, but also believe in his ability and future success. Steven attended private schooling in SA where he was unfortunately bullied and labelled by his peers. He felt that having been bullied set the grounded strength needed for him to not let anyone ride over him at university. It made him resilient at university and in his dealings with 'academic bullies.'

Risks & hazards approach:

Steven experienced difficulty on three levels, at home (strict and harsh upbringing), at university (supervisors) and on a mundane (physical looks) level. He expressed that despite being supportive; his dad was not someone who easily tolerated mistakes. Steven recollected that in his undergraduate days, he had found a mentor who inspired him to pursue his chosen career path. He worked hard and achieved success in his undergraduate studies despite the obstacles on his path. Steven felt angry and hurt that the university, the academic scholars and his colleagues judged him by the common stereotype attached to his physical self.

Devastatingly, his work was rejected by his PhD supervisor on the day of submission and it turned his life into turmoil. He struggled to assert his views and his thoughts on his research to his supervisor as the supervisor continuously undermined his intelligence and prolonged the submission of his research proposal. Life threw Steven another calamity with the death of the same supervisor and it became worse as he had to look for a new supervisor. The new supervisor, he felt, was not the best choice for supervising his research. Steven expressed

[28] Reference to the Father: Lord Jesus Christ

that 'a person becomes what others do to them' and it is rare for someone to not fall into the same pattern of who they meet – 'monsters.'

> … I don't want to become them – a monster…

Issues with supervisors are such that Steven feels that they position themselves on 'high and mighty platforms, where they portray themselves as greater than others, which instead comes across as blatant discrimination'. Steven struggled with class and identity and labelled this the *'God Effect*' of supervisors, who believe that they are God with an unwritten, 'do not dare question it' attitude. If anybody defied the status quo and asked questions, they were told, 'you are just a student, just shut up'. In his experience, supervisors show prejudice and racism towards students and if their work is remarkable, supervisors feel jealousy and a fear of the newcomer being better.

> … studying is now a business, and no longer an opportunity. It is a business world no longer an engagement of the mind… you have to 'kiss butt' to get up in the field as supervisors have an inability to listen to reason and they demand a blind viewpoint, of don't question me I am the academic…

Political economy approach:

Steven is of both Austrian and German decent, a first generation in SA, who is often singled out and treated as an outsider, not only by the university faculty but also by people in society, because of his exceptionally tall height, his mother tongue, his different pronunciation of English, the colour of his eyes and his above average, large body physique. Steven internalised the idea that his dad did not easily tolerate mistakes and this had somehow always prompted him to stand up to meet anyone's expectations of him, whether in the academic or social field.

Steven proclaimed that he is a human being who is 'not high up there in the clouds' with regards to his studying in a rare-skills field and having published in accredited journals towards his research. He was disappointed that if a student sits with their lecturers, the lecturers begin to 'think that they are Gods' and it makes them 'even more arrogant.' He was disillusioned as he did not want to be seen as 'kissing up' to the lecturers because automatically this lead to him being unwanted and unworthy.

Steven developed his own instruments that were better than standard equipment but it was not deemed as important/normal by his supervisor. Steven reveals that he is 'not out for making money or basking in fame' when he develops something, and *that*, Steven pinpoints, was the beginning of his growing problems. Rivalry began when the supervisor projected an attitude of 'she is the staff member - I am the student – I have to follow.'

> … Supervisors tried to beat submission into me, and the more I resisted, it showed me the cruel and true face of the university where I thought it would never happen again, like it happened to me at my school. At university, staff who are grown up individuals, aged between 50 – 60 years old, revert to bullying tactics to get you to do what they told you to do...'

Resilience approach:

Steven comes from a humble home with parents who expect the best from him at university, so he refused to let himself give up as his family could not afford to pay for an additional failed year. Steven affirms that as a student one has no chance of being heard, even if the matter is raised with the student committee. Politics dictate and such bodies are controlled and have no power to effect change.

> ….At this university, if students or their student structures don't toe the line they are shown the door – finished.

Steven values people who do not step on others, and he lives by the philosophy of Socrates who describes civic life as he believes it should be; thus Steven wants academics to remain 'true to themselves and remember that they are simply people - who are NOT better than or above others'.

> …I know that I know nothing...

Steven reasons that even beggars at a street corner sometimes do not even need anything, but they simply want someone else to acknowledge that they are there, similarly students need just that, a little bit of acknowledgment.

Through his experience, Steven realised that he enrolled at university to learn but the institution does not teach you to learn, instead it teaches you how to obey – how to fit into a system that is completely wrong.

> …a university should be a free learning institution… I shouldn't have mentors who try to assert their positions on me – they should teach me, should direct me, help me and they shouldn't be there to criticise me the whole time when they themselves do not accept criticism, for I believe that if it applies to me, it applies to you – show, teach, guide, engage the mind – but at this university there is no open mindedness – it's one mind-set – depending on who you are working under.

Steven continued emotionally distressed expressing his innermost thoughts of fear and anger and injustice. He believes that we are placed on this universe for a reason, to improve the lives of whomever we meet. Steven did not fail any of his major subjects; he was a dedicated and committed student towards his studies. What made him feel helpless was his relationship with academics in positions of authority.

> … if I'm placed in an ant colony it's to behave like an ant and to serve that colony – to better the colony through my actions – even the ants have a better take on life – they have a queen – who is directing them – they work together – nobody is prejudiced to being a worker/or a soldier – they all have a role to play and they all follow an organised system – to work in a functioning system – But we have to be individuals – we have to be heard – we can't be cast aside – if that one ant dies to save the colony – we can't ignore that...

4.3.10 Tanya

Biographical details:

Tanya was a 22-year old South African female, finalising her Master's degree at the time of the interview. She was contemplating whether she should work full-time after her degree or plan to read towards her PhD in a rare-skills field. Tanya came from a close-knit Indian family and community upbringing. She is the youngest sister in a large extended family. At the beginning of the interview, Tanya expressed that she was glad of the opportunity to share her experiences, because she could do so anonymously.

> …I have never had the opportunity to speak about my issues and be anonymous. So I am glad to have this opportunity….

Tanya's undergraduate days were successful as she was selected to represent her faculty by travelling to both Paris and Europe to participate in presentations of her research at international conferences. Tanya's confidence in academia was not only developed in an international arena, but also boosted with her winning local South African conference competitions.

Risks & hazards approach:

Tanya experienced various levels of hardship that had ripple effects on her life plans. She struggled to come to grips with her social class and identity. She was awaiting her Master's degree submission results and was still participating as a full-time student in her department. Her calamities unfolded when she was requested by her supervisor to share and present her research to her fellow colleagues in their group meetings. After a few months following her well-received presentation of her research methodology and findings, Tanya joined another group session where she was only in attendance and not presenting her own research work. As Tanya sat attentive to the presentation, she realised that the work being presented looked and sounded extremely familiar.

> …I have never been so upset like that in my whole life…

The trouble began which Tanya faced when having placed her trust and faith in her supervisor and his instructions; she shared her work with her research team of fellow students as part of good practice. But alas, a fellow student plagiarised her research. She did her best to immediately question and open the debate on what she believed but her attempts were devastatingly shut down by her supervisor.

> …my so-called friend, a student from Nigeria, copied word for word from my proposal's methodology section, and he knew it and I knew it…

The ripple effect of such betrayal was that her supervisor was her key referee on her job applications and she realised that job after job application was somehow sabotaged at a referee level despite keenness of prospective employers.

An additional challenge that Tanya faced was in deciding if she would go to the next level of qualifications by enrolling for a PhD. Coming from a family that did not have the financial means to fund her education, her decision rested on her application for financial support. However, Tanya felt that her PhD funding application was also sabotaged by her supervisor.

Furthermore, a position was advertised in her department for which she had applied. However, another female had a 'vendetta to be better than' her despite being less qualified and experienced than Tanya. Her department unfairly promoted another female despite being less qualified and experienced than Tanya and Tanya felt again that this was a form of discrimination against her age, race and nationality.

Political economy approach:

Tanya felt helpless as she feels that in SA the general perceptions and stereotypes of race groups are detrimental to fostering genuine relationships.

> …if you are Indian, people think you have a family business and are well-to-do…

However, the reality of her family background was the opposite. She even felt dismissed by students from her own racial group, when she felt that they realised that she did not have the best phone or clothes and that she not only used public transport but did not go clubbing or drinking.

> … I didn't even know what a USB stick was or how to use a computer. We never had a computer at home because we could never afford one…

Tanya had to deal with being the only sibling left at home and felt a sense of responsibility to her ailing parents' deteriorating health. Her dad, who she adored, began to lose his eyesight. As his health deteriorated, the family atmosphere was filled with doubt, fear and worry over his state of mind. Her sense of weakness increased.

In the other part of her university life, despite being a sharing and caring person, Tanya felt the need to report the incident of plagiarism of her work. Despite the university having a

strong stance and policy against plagiarism, her faculty advised her to not give out her work in *word.doc* format in future.

> …. but it was brushed under the table as the student and our supervisor were of the same nationality and to top it all, his father was family friends with the supervisor….

Furthermore, her department does not easily promote the employment of South Africans as in her opinion and observation; her supervisor tends to employ mainly non-South Africans in their department.

> … he chooses who he offers jobs to and everyone knows it…

Tanya was angry as she could not understand the logic of staff appointments. Her field occupies a scarce skill position in SA and yet the university was not promoting or hiring South Africans. Tanya was hurt and disillusioned, yet she expressed that she did not hold any prejudice against foreign students or faculty, but her experiences were telling her that something was wrong and she confessed that she did not know how to deal with this complexity of her perceptions.

When the supervisor was away, he left the 'Star lady' in charge. Tanya asked her to investigate the student's rewriting of his proposal to see if he had plagiarised again.

> …. Can you believe it, she said 'no' – his work was still the same, and yet he hadn't changed my work that he plagiarised…

Upon the supervisors return from overseas, Tanya took all proof of the plagiarism to him. He was appreciative that she brought it to his attention and assured her that he would prefer to sort it out privately.

> …. He advised me to not have unnecessary stress… and that his best advice is to move on else, he hinted to me that in our rare-skills job environment, I may ruin my career….

The supervisor called a meeting and the student that plagiarised cried out to them:

> … he screamed, 'Oh Jesus protect me, for I am a victim of plagiarism'… can you believe the audacity… what does he mean victim? He was the plagiariser!

With all that was happening, Tanya felt fearful of reporting her supervisor as she felt that he held the power to withhold her pass and her funding.

> …Prof has a full on stereotypical personality and a persona perception of a typical Nigerian from his country. I don't just fear him, but his large size also intimidates me…and you know, I don't want to lose my scholarship…

As time passed, Tanya realised that she was still in the same group with the plagiariser. With life throwing her another hard hit, she was left out from a conference selection for students to go to America with their supervisor and to present at a conference and produce publications thereafter.

> … but the student who plagiarised my work, was selected to attend and, guess what, he still presented my work which he did not change… getting off on other peoples work… how is it possible that some students get pushed through as long as the faculty just keeps the numbers high…. I think that the quality of students is questionable. They don't even know the difference between qualitative and quantitative research...

Tanya broke down and cried, distressed. The realisation that her friends who knew about what the student did, who were still co-authoring with him and happy to go on the same conference – without thinking of her, left her shattered.

Resilience approach:

Facing all her obstacles on her path to success was not easy. Her experience of discrimination on so many levels, prompted her to join a campus society, where she was voted in as President. Tanya took her responsibilities seriously and fought for the rights of others. Through her interaction with university clubs and societies, she met a disability group. Through their support and motivation she found the opportunity to locate a sports club for visually impaired people, so that her dad could regain some of his self-esteem and self-worth.

Through the grapevine, Tanya heard that students before her time had taken issues with the supervisor, up to the level of the Chancellor. It was heard that not only did he pinpoint who it was that did so, he victimised them, 'to make them pay for standing up against him.'

> …I'm so upset that he asked me to share my work and then he didn't protect that sharing space, when someone we all know plagiarised my work. That guy has succeeded and I'm still doing all the other jobs that Prof keeps on shoving at me...

At 22 she realised that she would 'stick it out with his meanness' and Prof would then be likely to help her progress. She approached her supervisor with the option of doing her PhD. He proposed that she look for funding first.

Tanya believed that only with the Lord's mercy she found funding herself and all her applications came through and she was delighted.

> …Prof's 'promised golden key' did not quite ice it as I got a scholarship of R200 000 to do my PhD/year, without his 'so-called' help…

However, her trajectory of suffering did not end, as she received a letter saying, that her application for her PhD was declined. Maybe, she reasoned that it was so perhaps because she was still going to graduate with her Master's degree.

> …I am at a loss. I rejected three jobs offers as I choose to do my PhD with Prof, and you won't believe I found out that he had rejected my application…

With all her hopes going up into flames, Tanya approached her supervisor telling him of her devastating news.

> …Prof, I have got good news, I got my funding for my PhD. Even though you had given me a topic, I'm sadly rejected… I do not know why…

Her supervisor seemed shocked that she got funding on her own and then revealed that because the lady mentioned previously ('his star - favourite') was to be promoted, he wanted Tanya to work for him for a year and recommended that they ask the NRF to give her the funding the following year. She took the opportunity to tell her supervisor of her plans to marry and he shockingly told her what he thought.

> … he said that I'm too young to do my PhD and when I told him that I'm getting married, instead of congratulating me, he said that it is also the worst thing to employ married people, as White people, Indian people, young people and all other South African people can't do a PhD and be married at the same time…

Tanya was horrified as she then realised that not only was he a racist, her Professor was also a sexist.

> …These white and Indian people just use our funding opportunities to get pregnant and waste the funding…

Tanya saw no other alternative than to go as far away from her supervisor as she could.

> … on emails he is professional to the letter but when he speaks to you one-on-one you realise how racist and prejudiced he actually is...

She wanted her PhD, despite her age, despite her race, despite wanting a family, she wanted a job that was not being an overqualified and underpaid admin assistant for the Professor. Tanya followed the trail of disappointments and it dawned on her that when and where her supervisor was connected, she did not get any job offers.

As such, with her supervisor as a key referee, her job applications were not met with success. Instinct drove her to remove his name as the key referee - within an hour Tanya was called for an interview and successfully secured a job.

Tanya was leaving her department in the university, in a rare-skills field, with bitterness:

> …. I feel I don't trust Nigerian foreigners anymore, even though I have so many good foreign friends from other countries... Now with my experience with Prof and the male Nigerian student, I realise that they use our resources to his and his peoples benefit; he even has isolated our department through this. I hate him… I hate this department I can't wait to get out of there. I dread that even in the new job, I will end up meeting him as I am in such a small field of expertise...

Despite the struggles Tanya experienced within the university, she made an effort to reassure herself that all that was important at that time was her parents' health, her passing of her Master's degree, the planning of her wedding, with a hope for the future of a new job with new beginnings.

4.3.11 Zara

Biographical details:

Zara, a 23-year old female, was in her Honour's level of study at the time of the interview. Before beginning her narration, Zara asserted that she did not feel that she had any 'major issues' that are often heard about but she still wanted to meet me and talk about her experiences. She then relaxed and revealed what was on her mind.

Prior to embarking on her career choice at university, Zara wanted to complete Drama, but was convinced otherwise.

> …not a proper degree, not a career, no stability…

Therefore, with family persuasion, she chose the safer route of a pursuing a 'proper qualification'. Zara comes from a humble background that sees her mother as a teacher and her father as self-employed. Her elder brother studied at an International Hotel School and she has a younger sister who was in Grade 9. Unfortunately the family faced financial challenges as her father's business was not doing well. Her mother's health took strain as she was then the sole provider and had to pay for both Zara's university fees and for her sister's school fees.

> … my mom pays for everything. Dad paid for my first two years and my mom took over her in my, second, year which was actually my third year as I had failed first year…

Risks & hazards approach:

Zara not only struggled with her identity, but admitted to failing her first year due to the choices she had made. However, she does not regret not doing Drama as a career as she felt that:

> …all drama students fall into a lifestyle, something like a spirit, a 'don't care' attitude. I believe God wanted me for a reason to study this and not the drama, and I have accepted it…

Zara grew up in Krugersdorp, in the Gauteng Province, and comes from a Xhosa-speaking home with strict upbringing and values. Her mother is Tswana and is more open towards her daughters now that they are adults but Zara still believes that she cannot cross the boundary as her mother is not her friend, but she is her mother.

Political economy approach:

During her schooling years Zara was a dedicated hardworking learner so she felt it difficult to fit into the culture of being a university student.

> … I didn't want to be a 'Miss Goodie Goodie' or look out of place…

At times it was difficult for her to fit in. Zara tried smoking a Hubbly[29]; because she feared being looked at like as if she did not belong and that meant that she included herself in everything in which her friends were participating in - as often as possible.

> … I suffered with FOMO (fear of missing out), and the Hubbly left me with a mellow feeling. You can mix the water with milk or weed and it relaxes and calms the mind.

Zara engaged with an inner battle not wanting to consciously succumb to peer pressure. Zara used alcohol and other substances to be 'cool' and she felt that she was in control as she would only drink when she was with her friends but she eventually she realised that this was on an almost daily basis and it was not what she had wanted. She felt that she had to find other means of keeping busy.

> … even with the drinking thing, I was asked why I'm not drinking. I tried so hard to fit in so I ended up drinking ciders and hot stuff at clubs in Melville and Sandton or then again at someone's flat who stayed off campus, alcohol was available everywhere…

Then there was the pressure of balancing a social life and a study life, with a reminder at the back of her mind that she needed to study. Having missed out on studying economics at school, she needed to study hard but because of her social life, she did not. First year was not what she had expected, it was tough and Zara failed first year. She felt complete amongst her friends and that sense of 'belonging' comforted her into forgetting that she had come to university with the purpose of studying in order to lead a better life in her future. Despite her failure, Zara felt some comfort that she had passed a few subjects, although not to the best of her ability, so she felt that the second time round - that her first year was much easier to manage.

[29] A recreational smoking device that can be addictive

The transition she faced from being studious at school to being 'hip and cool' at university impeded her sense of judgment. Zara felt ambivalent - of being a 'goodie-goodie' student that passed and not being 'cool', or doing what everyone was doing and being a student that was liked and accepted.

> … I couldn't even understand my purpose in life anymore. Even the drinking lost my interest, yet it was easily available. Although the stuff didn't even taste nice, I would drink, with friends and we often played a game called bottles, counting from 1-7 bottles, and as your memory decreased, you had more privileges to have another shot...

Despite her inner conflict of values and principles, Zara, continued to 'fit in' as she held on tight to her FOMO.

Resilience approach:

Participating in a life, with friends around her, Zara reached a turning point in her life. She realised that and changed.

> …we are born into this world alone, so thinking about how life isn't about the people around me, that there was something more to my life than being with and following others, I eventually reached that point and grew up...

Zara conceded that she had lots of fun with her friends but the core point was that without them she felt alone and often missed home and this made her at times realise how different she was from her friends and how they were all destined for different destinations, some good and some bad. Zara sought refuge from her chosen path of 'FOMO' and joined a Charismatic Church that strictly follows the word of the Bible. Her Church does not see baptism as a little sprinkling of water, but as an emersion of the full body into water to belong to Christ.

Zara revealed that her failure in her first year, made her second year worth living as she got to Church and heard the word of God. Zara felt that her formed relationship with God grew every day.

> … I made the relationship with God work by speaking to friends and elders. Basically it is God speaking through me to you and by reading the Holy Bible. I felt His voice, in prayer. I felt that because I prayed more, I studied less and my marks improved…

For Zara it had been hard to pray previously, it was just meaningless, and now her view is that it is 'literally like having a relationship with your best friend who is God.' The older she got, the fewer friends she had, and she is firm in belief that she does not judge them.

> …I am at peace at having things done in God's way. If I compare my identity then and now – then going with the flow – now I am standing on the shoulders of Jesus Christ – being with Him. I saw what my life is without God – and I needed that moment of breakthrough to find God…

Emotionally, Zara felt that she needed help. She had heard of the CCDU, but never went there.

> …I did not think that the CCDU was for me. But my relationship with God saved me. I don't have an open relationship with my parents as I couldn't confront them as they believed I was on a chosen path and that I was focused. They also believed that I was a good girl who was respected and hard-working… I just did not want to tarnish that image…

Zara felt that she could not let her parents down any further:

> …When I failed 1st year, I didn't get any labels, and my parents supported me through my studies as they did not go to university themselves…

They knew that Zara was not paying attention to her books 24/7. But sadly life had gone the other way, the path of FOMO, smoking, drinking and going out. However, she declared that she did not compromise on basic principles of no sex before marriage.

> … my perception of a good girl are girls who don't want to sleep around and they do not have fun and study all the time – they would call me a 'good girl' to my face, which hurt and it worked, I followed the. It was then difficult to give up the hard party life…

Zara offered her opinion that the university has a variety of groups and societies, but has lost all clear focus. She explained that they encourage social and emotional growth through attending social gatherings or parties but neglect attending to a person's spiritual growth and development. Zara felt that it would have been a better experience at university, of time not wasted, had she had a mentor to help her to head in the right direction.

Zara felt that the university needs to check and monitor more often if students actually understand and grasp what they are learning. In the corridors Zara heard everyone talk of exclusion but they never really understood the system and how that would and could

happen. Zara did not seek help but when she repeated a year she then only started looking for and consulting with her lecturers to get extra information, as well as to enhance her knowledge so that she would not repeat any courses again. Zara's relationship with God allowed Him to take some control over her life. Zara also cut back on some friends because of the changes she then made in her life.

4.4 Part B: Analysis of personal writings

Six personal writings were selected for the study. They are to be found after the Appendix section for easy reading and access. The personal writings were all sent electronically, via email to me. I do not know the authors as they had also self-identified to be at risk or have been at risk and wished to share their experiences, both good and bad. The personal writings are listed below:

Artefact 1: Poem: a part of me

Artefact 2: My experience at university

Artefact 3: My issues at university

Artefact 4: University has been wonderful

Artefact 5: It was never about being average

Artefact 6: Poem: Irish Blessing

In keeping with the data analysis plan for narrative research, Part B shares a few written pieces that the respondents chose to share. The personal writings have been investigated in relation to the model for theorising vulnerability research in HE (cr. on page 60). The issues that emerged from the analysis of the personal writings are striking in two ways. Noticeable is the variety of genres through which the students chose to express themselves, for example through poetry, essay writing, PowerPoint presentations, key summaries, combined with visual representations where possible and applicable. Analysis of their personal writings made known the 'two sides of a coin' in a student's experience that could be either positive or negative experiences, or both. Students' self-expression through their shared personal writings revealed both excellent as well as challenging learning experiences at the university.

Table 9 depicts these personal writings.

Table 9: Personal writings that hint at hope

	RISKS Hazard causes & consequences	Political Economy Exposure: who is vulnerable & why	RESILIENCE how to COPE	Anecdotes of Success/Advice
Poem: A part of me				
1	Unknown environment of university Identity in question Failed a major	Fear of background Newly found biological father did not want to know her Fear of being homeless	University is the way out of problems and struggles Provided shelter/accommodation Good Personality helps overcome fear	University is a means to an end – one way ticket out
PowerPoint: My experience at University				
2	Need of confirmation letter to process study permit Registered late Struggled to locate way around campus Did not understand how timetable and tutorials work Struggled with major taken Did not know of fathers existence Accommodation far from school Supervisor did not approve topic – forced to change topic Feeling discouraged	Afraid of getting lost Adjustments to being in a new place Struggle to cope on own – CCDU = unavailable Did not get advise on major options Deaths in family Missing out on family functions Rejected by father's family and himself University did not reply in time Fear of going home in the dark	Focus on completion goal through perseverance	The University throws you over the edge and gives you a thin thread to pull yourself back up

My issues at University				
3	Issues around attendance Dehydrated – no water available outside toilets Post graduate studying is not easy Parking problem Damage cars Disadvantaged in group work	Unhygienic toilets Does not wish to drink water from toilet taps Adult students faced with challenges at work Challenges distract studying Insufficient allocation of parking bays Shortage of parking instils fear Being a female and having to park outside university All group members do not do sufficient work for participation	Easy enrolment process Facilitate water bottles points and include it in fees 'We are the clients of this business'	Great lecturers, Pleasure to be associated with the University The University should allow a re-write for students if needs be University should provide additional water points on all floors Lecturers should engage with below average achievers and intervene with support
University has been wonderful				
4	Not knowing how school system works Not knowing how to use the library No clarity provided on how to use student card to upload money to use for printing services Did not know how to use university bus services	No postgraduate orientation Could not interpret bus routes or schedules Could not get international clearance in time Workload overwhelming	CCDU for career guidance Administrators and faculty respond in time to emails To be able to apply knowledge and skills at a company on completion	The University is hard work all the way
It was never about being average				
5	1st year experience was difficult Questioning career	Stigma attached to being a B.Ed. student Assumption made	Made friends with a senior student in the same course	It was never about being average Want to challenge

	choice	that students are average A student's metaphor related to the University Logo – 'the University gives you the edge' = 'Battle to the edge is not yet over' → indicating the commitment of the student to persevere	Chose teaching over Engineering Need to make a difference in Standards of Education in SA Became a Leader and a Mentor Rational and self-agency Found an excellent Mentor Served as First Year Experience Ambassador Felt the pleasure of being a mentor and seeing the difference being made Aim to graduate on record time	the stigma that 'main campus students' give us Student development leadership unit (SDLU) allowed me to develop and enjoy a holistic student life I always strive for excellence Want to be a teacher recognised for quality of teaching and motivation given to learners Remain the best version of ME and never lose my character The university has its challenges and when I fail to overcome them, I tell myself that failure is just an event. I would rather be a failure doing what I love than succeed doing what I hate
Poem: Irish Blessing				
6		Respondent asked if I would share this poem of inspiration to others	Favourite poem that motivates the respondent	Poem of Irish Blessings

4.5 Summary

Converging themes from the restories and personal writings

In alphabetical order, the following eight themes reveal the convergence of common elements of exposure to risks and hazards that students experienced in the narrative investigation.

a. Dealing with death and family responsibilities
b. Peer pressure, FOMO experience, living away from home
c. Postgraduate student and supervisor relationship
d. Race, cultural, ethnicity and religious influences
e. Relationships with authority
f. Social class and identity
g. Undergraduate student and lecturer relationship
h. Xenophobia, stereotypes and discrimination

The data from the six personal writings largely support what was revealed through the restories. However, through these artefacts an additional theme was highlighted and brought forward.

Institutional infrastructure and services (not being sufficient to meet the needs of the student body) needs such as:

- a short supply of student parking bays,
- inadequate provision of water stations (that are not only the toilet taps),
- insufficient appointments' available to consult with counselling services,
- the prerequisite of paying a price (with money being a luxury) for ongoing counselling,
- no post-graduate orientation,
- no support on how to use library services,
- no support on how to use a student card to load money,
- non-timeous response from university and faculty registrar,
- safety and security risks,
- student evaluation for sexism/racism,
- unclear bus routes and timetables, and lastly
- unhygienic toilets.

Chapter 4 was presented in two parts: A and B. Part A was a restory analysis of 11 narrative interviews. Through the presentation of restories in this chapter, the researcher agrees with Cohen et al. (2011, p. 554) that narratives are not only powerful, human and integrated, but they are truly qualitative. A further analysis of the restories is undertaken in Chapter 5.

Part B was a summary of six personal writings submitted online to the researcher, to share the respondents' experiences, motivation and an offer of their suggestions. These included personal writings 1 to -6:

1. Poem: A part of me;
2. My experience at University;
3. My issues at University;
4. University has been wonderful;
5. It was never about being average; and lastly
6. Poem: Irish Blessing.

CHAPTER 5
MODELLING VULNERABILITY

The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.

Socrates

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter focused on the data analysis of the restoried narratives and submitted personal writings. In keeping with the advice of Socrates, this study looks for deeper meaning and as such the purpose of this chapter is to provide a synthesis and an evaluation of the results of Chapter 4 that is to be interpreted against the background of theory presented in Chapter 2. HE in South African universities are witness to increasing diversity, such as students coming from different social and cultural backgrounds, with different experiences and varying levels of educational needs and academic potential. McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) propose a challenge for universities, to not only recognise the diversity of student needs, but to cater for the changing and heterogeneous population of the student body. They advise HEIs to focus not only on widening university admission numbers, but also on providing the support and assistance needed to ensure that students have a reasonable chance of success. The analysis of the restories has confirmed the point that HEIs need to be cognisant of the diverse population of the student body and strategise support policy and practice accordingly. Chapter 5 is arranged in two parts:

Part A: Interview analysis discussion

Part B: Survey analysis discussion

5.2 Part A: Interview analysis discussion

The interviews were restoried into chronological descriptions, punctuated by examples of particular issues that have engaged the focus of the vulnerability model designed for this study. Although the re-stories may be regarded as ‘little stories’ or as ‘short stories,’ they do matter, as they have been connected to the circumstances in which the issues of vulnerability have been developed and thus demonstrate a mixture of agency and structure (refer to: Griffiths, 2014). The data from the narratives of the respondents' restoried biographies that were presented in the previous chapter (Chapter 4) are now summarised in an easy access tabulated form that highlights key constituents of the vulnerability model (illustrated below in Table 10).

Table 10: Narrative threads of vulnerability

Narrative Threads of Vulnerability			
Integrated approach		Combines all three approaches to studying vulnerability: Risk-Hazard, Political Economy, & the Resilience approach	
	Risk-Hazard approach	**Political Economy approach**	**Resilience approach**
Recap of meaning: using an integrated approach to understanding vulnerability	Examines the relationship between cause and effect of the factors which create vulnerabilities.	Who is vulnerable and why? Understand the individual's susceptibility to a risk/hazard/extent to which they feel included/excluded based on their vulnerabilities.	How do a group/an individual cope with the hazard/vulnerability or have the capacity to adapt to a stress.
Respondent	**Risks and stressors…**	**They think they are vulnerable because…**	**They cope with their vulnerability by…**
1. Cherise	Language barrier Nationality Ethnicity Cultural beliefs Customs	Studying away from home Speaking a language that is not the mother tongue Lack of social support Fear of being looked at as 'dumb'- less than others Did not see need to ask for	Ate humble pie and accepted the mistreatment until she found her strength to stand up for herself Circle of intimacy was with people who spoke the same language No South African support

	Traditions Supervision Acceptable and non-acceptable norms Struggled with class and identity	help Fear of not completing degree Fear of failure – so had 'no choice but to stick it out'	or interaction with colleagues Fear of not completing degree and being humiliated by family and friends back in the country of origin
2. Elsa	Xenophobia Fear for personal safety Past jobs filled with hardship Yet to overcome issues of her past Struggled with class and identity Hiding away from ethnic identity to some extent Uncertain about progression in division	International African student Intercultural, ethnicity problem is brought and dealt with over the border Transnational conflict White-dominated staff and student body Easy to recognise dialect = danger Xenophobia	I learnt to be invisible. If you present yourself as desperate – you get treated less If you put your cards on the table and lay down your expectations, you get treated better. Husband's love and support. Singing and prayers at Church
3. Fiona	Death of mother of a chronic illness Played role of head of the home Worked in a fast-paced corporate world Difficulties with jealous colleagues Application to university was rejected without	Over-age in student body cohort Had no prior study experience Did not save money earned over the years as she was responsible for groceries and home supplies Did not have financial security to apply for a loan	Family of musicians Sings at Church Attended university counselling once and then a session with her Church by the family Pastor Asked for help from lecturers Learnt to accept step-mother and is now able to

	reasons Reapplied with writing an entrance exam for being over a certain age – success in enrolment Cooking and taking care of siblings Duties of buying food Kept the house running Felt suicidal with pressure and stress Wanted to dropout Poor results further depressed her	Chronic illness, Diabetes was kept hidden from the family by mother She felt cheated of having the opportunity to help her mother through modern medicine Four younger brothers Only female figure In an abusive relationship with boyfriend that she did not want to leave Father one year after mother's death, decided to re-marry Hated this intrusion of an unknown into their home	depend on her for household duties and chores
4. Harry	Failed applied maths twice Excluded from university Devastated Difficulty in understand the lecturers who spoke English too fast Struggled with social class and identity Did not know where to go or shop for tools and	Mom died in first year of university Orphan Responsible for the care of two younger siblings Gogo[30] was the key support for raising and schooling the siblings while he had to leave the village Studying away from rural village	Attended tutorials and labs Excluded yet used the opportunity to work in his field A friend of a friend of a friend, strangers helped him to pick up the pieces and find a job Gained work experience in his field of study

[30] Zulu word for 'grandmother'

	equipment needed for course Felt lecturers assumed that they would all know what the different tools were and how to reach a shop that supplied them	First time in a city Learning in a language that was not his mother tongue Felt that the university does not level the entry ground to university and presumes that all have students have the same resources, family support, and knowhow Not used to dress and social etiquette of university culture No personal care or support from lecturers Difference in expectations and experience No one to talk to	No time for leisure including playing volleyball or socialising Assistance from a senior Lecturer to appeal expulsion Made use of work portfolio to motivate the decision and application for re-enrolment into the degree programme Used a personal diary to document his feelings and emotions Wrote poetry that voiced his pain, happiness and tribulations Hoped to publish his feelings Reading the Bible and taking shelter in God helped him to cope
5. Hillary	Family problems Low self-esteem Teenage pregnancy Fear of HIV Insulted by lecturers Struggled with social class and identity Poor English	Single mom No job No money to repay Gogo for paying her tuition Studying away from home Older than age group cohort in her studies Speaking a language that is not the mother tongue	Visited a Doctor on campus Medical aid is expensive but it helped with treatment On medication and counselling with the doctor on a daily basis until need to commit suicide passed Tries to focus on her

	Sounds foreign and weak in English Failing but trying Cannot accept insults from staff or the comments in the marking of scripts	Lack of social support Fear of being uneducated Feelings of committing suicide No parental support Raised by grandparents Death in family Conflict over family property and wealth inheritance	daughter and providing for her future Goes to ask for help from tutors and writing centre but still feels isolated and not good enough for university
6. Ingrid	Sense of enormous responsibility Excessive workload Professional conflict Time Academic pressure	In her first year she realised that she had to take care of her parents sooner or later Studies had not been moving any closer to her financial freedom goal With academic work demands she had no social life Did not make many friends She failed third year and students who had lower marks than her were promoted into the next year System was not fair Did not receive a listening ear from faculty University does not care about the students and that some students never miss	Coped by being positive and keeping her head held up Always reminded herself that she was taking a step closer to her goals with each day She cycles to keep fit and is engaged with community services where she volunteers to help those less fortunate Approached all necessary channels to investigate issues She had to accept that she had failed and repeated her year with even better marks Had to maintain a balance between herself, studies

		classes and that should also be considered when passing or failing them Failing and having to repeat a year frustrated her as she felt that she was not moving forward Not moving any closer to her success or financial freedom that she craved	and a lack of a social life and she then managed to make friends Tried not to put so much pressure on herself for keeping track of the time she had given herself to graduate from the university and the time she had lost due to circumstances beyond her control
7. Martha	Health, exclusion from course Failure of subjects Poor administrative support Social issues of acceptance Family, cultural, financial, and spiritual issues had to be hidden from friends No real friends Struggled with personal identity Timetable clash in repeating parts of different year level courses Six years to complete a four year degree Past identity issues	Away from home Another Province Status of exclusion from university that was unfair (appeal process) No alternative route to seek assistance Poor administration Lack of care or support from university Student representative council (SRC), did not want to believe in her *calling* Ancestors vs personal identity = cultural and spiritual conflict	Compiled a personal paper trail of correspondence with university Made use of her file of records by sending to administration to appeal decision of exclusion Elders from Zionist Church, supported her through inner conflict Department head was supportive, and assisted with her appeal application With Church and family support, she reached an acceptance of the *calling* to be a Prophet

	were hidden Spiritual *calling* Ancestors asking her for more than she was willing to do		
8. Oliver	Failure of subjects and needed to repeat a year Peer pressure and being promiscuous in his relationships to keep his image intact as a 'man' Four consecutive deaths in family Growing up away from mother in another Province Not having enough money to do what he wanted to do at school when he lived with his grandparents' Father did not play a part in his life – yet he had children from another lady who he cared for – why not for him	Academic difficulty with understanding lectures and note taking Lack of support from lecturers Growing up without both parents Dealing with parent divorce was not easy Being handed around from one place to another to live Dealing with mothers remarriage Dealing with death of grandparents and both parents	Succumbed to peer pressure to fit in and belong to a social group at university Social life overtook focus on student life and studies Was not coping well Picked up pieces of his life by volunteering at a counselling centre to help others Does weight training Relaxes with more than a beer Prays to God in privacy of his room Realigned his focus to an entrepreneurial club at university, with a goal of generating income Wants to persevere to improve life off his stepsister that he adores

9. Steven	Personal experience: three levels: home, identity and university Supervisor mismatch Poor supervision Lack of timeous feedback Death of supervisor New supervisor put student down by attacking his sense of self-worth Struggled with social class and identity Fell prey to being stereotyped with perceptions, a lack of information by others and discrimination based on: gender, race, language and nationality No time for friends – so no friendship or peer support	Early background of being a victim of bullying Rejection by supervisor on day of submission New supervisor/supervisors show prejudice and racism towards student Not South African/Dual citizenship Language and accent /physical size (height) /over 7 foot (over 2 metres) race/gender/stereotypes Difficult childhood at school – bullying continued into university Emotional due to unfair politics of the university Has to live with stigma surrounding physical appearance - perception of being abusive/racist	Believes he is on journey of self-discovery Holds a passion for his profession Family support Belief in the Church and God No institutional support
10. Tanya	Needed support for PhD funding and her application was discriminated against based on her age + race + gender + nationality Division does not promote employment of	Did not choose her supervisor who was allocated to her as being 'the best choice' Supervisor was key referee… job applications ≠ success	Removed Supervisor's name as referee, called for interview = job success Joined an HEI political party Voted in and served as

	South Africans → despite being scarce skill field in SA Research was plagiarised and department did not support her complaint Was left out from conference selection Fear of the possibility of denial of leave in new job for time off to get married Did not choose supervisor Fell prey to being stereotyped with perceptions, a lack of information by others and discrimination based on: race, language and nationality Struggled with social class and identity	Fear of reporting supervisor else he would withhold her Master's degree pass The student who plagiarised her work – attended the conference and still presented work that was still hers in part Limited/scarce skill job field Feelings of isolation/ injustice/discrimination/sub servience/prejudice/anger Was not computer literate: did not use a USB, memory stick before university No computer at home Looked down on by others in her same race group Father's disability drained her emotions Months away from marriage Employment was not secure due to supervisor's influence Supervisor hired less qualified and less experienced tutors to be lecturers of his own nationality/close neighbouring country - over a student who was not of his nationality and	president of the Party Influenced by University's Disability Society to seek help for her father Empowered her father to join a blind cricket team to be a bit more like he used to be Who do you report plagiarism to/lack of support/lack of credibility/nothing on the Internet/ CCDU in undergraduate years costs R 30 a session ≠ feasible Family support from fiancé Student paid tuition through academic awards and was a recipient of a full scholarship Charity organisation helped with fees

		especially if they were South African	
11. Zara	Peer pressure Smoking Alcohol Partying/clubbing Failed courses Struggled with social class and identity Failed first year	FOMO (fear of missing out) Identity confusion as to who she wanted to be Wanted especially to fit in at university First from family to attend University not a College friends that were not really true	Went through the phases Did want she feared Did all everything to be accepted Hit rock bottom with no success Zara found God, her Saviour Support and strength from 'standing on the shoulders of Jesus Christ' As opposed to 'finding your identity in Christ'

5.3 Overview of Part A

Adopting the conceptual model of understanding vulnerability, an overview of the findings was presented using the concepts previously defined. But first, space is needed to capture feelings and expressions of emotion expressed through the restories above. The voicing of powerful emotion, as listed below, could signify the state but not the level of vulnerability to which the at-risk students are being exposed.

Narrative threads: FEELINGS and EMOTION Expressed = VULNERABILITY

Student experience cannot be divorced from students' self-expression. The following Table 11 is arranged in alphabetical order listing the feelings and emotions expressed by vulnerable students.

Table 11: Feelings and emotions as an expression of vulnerability

Feelings and emotions as an expression of vulnerability	
Exclusion by	discrimination, injustice, isolation, prejudice
Expression of	anger, curiosity, deep-rooted pain, demoralisation, denial of feelings, depression
Fear of	being beaten up, being judged, being recognised as foreign, exposed to public scrutiny and mockery, failure and labelling, missing out (FOMO)
Feelings of being	a low life, able to transfer to another body by dying, a non-human being, forced subservience, frustrated, going literally crazy, guilty, less than others of a different colour, lonely, self-doubt, stupid and worthless, stupid because I sound different, suicidal, unhappy, unworthy
Struggle revealing	hardship, hasn't been easy, helplessness, not being allowed, not knowing, powerlessness, self-realisation denied, suspension vs exclusion vs support

The study has put forward a clear identification of narrative threads per respondent based on the theoretical framework. In this chapter the results of the analysis of the qualitative element of data collected were presented and discussed. The results indicate that at-risk students are exposed to various risks and hazards that were mostly not mentioned in current literature and the reasons for their susceptibility to such risks/hazards, are manifold. It is apparent that students tend to cope with vulnerability by seeking assistance from support structures that are largely external to the institution. This raises questions about what is it that the quantitative data has revealed, so the study turns to the following section, Part B that maps a discussion and analysis of the online survey data.

5.4 Part B: Survey analysis discussion

The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.
Ernest Hemingway

The words above express a desire for strength of character, fortitude or 'being able to pick up the pieces' demonstrated by many individuals through history, through times gone by with the intention to move on after facing calamities/hardship. However, this may not always be the case thereby necessitating the essential role of pastoral student support at universities.

In designing online survey questionnaires, the researcher took into account the design and layout of the survey due to the probability of some respondents' inability to easily access and respond to the web questionnaires. The survey needed to be user-friendly, quick and easy to complete within a minimal time and with minimal stress.

The primary task of data reduction is coding, i.e. assigning a code number to each answer in a survey (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 407). Using **Survey Monkey** was not as easy as expected due to the high number of respondents and the resultant volume of data. To further analyse the survey data, I did so by ordering the data in an accessible way. I also made use of **QDA Miner v4.0**, which is a Mixed Method Qualitative Analysis Software programme. I had to learn how to use such an analysis software which was also time consuming and difficult at times. To manage the data, I thus used two types of coding for the survey. For close-ended questions I made use of a pre-coding framework, and for the open-ended questions, I used a post-coding framework, as illustrated in Figure 12 below.

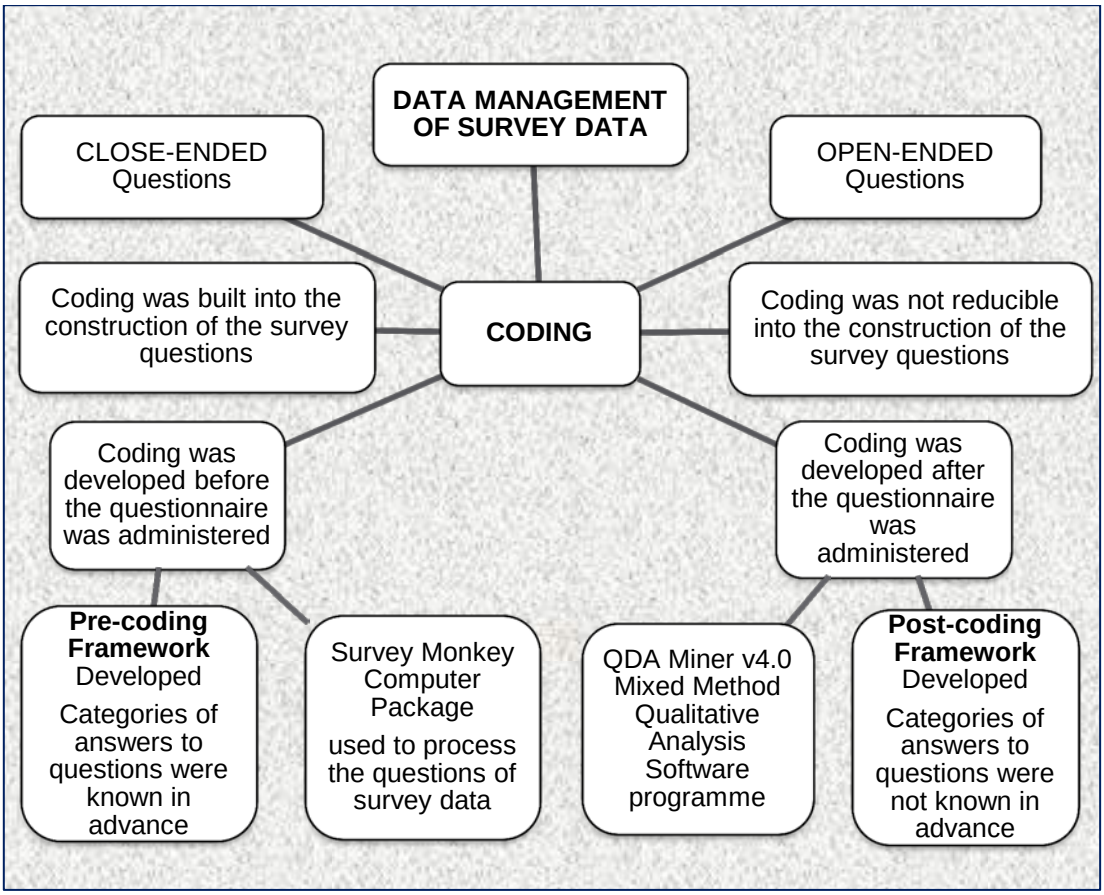


Figure 6: Data management plan of survey data

The chapter now addresses the following analysis questions:

Who; Where; What; When; Why; How.

WHO

Respondents: Gender, race, age, part-time/full-time, national/international

Who were the respondents for the online survey? The analysis indicates that of the student sample population, the majority of students who self-identified to participate were Black males and White females, 62.5% and 51.3% respectively (see Figure 13).

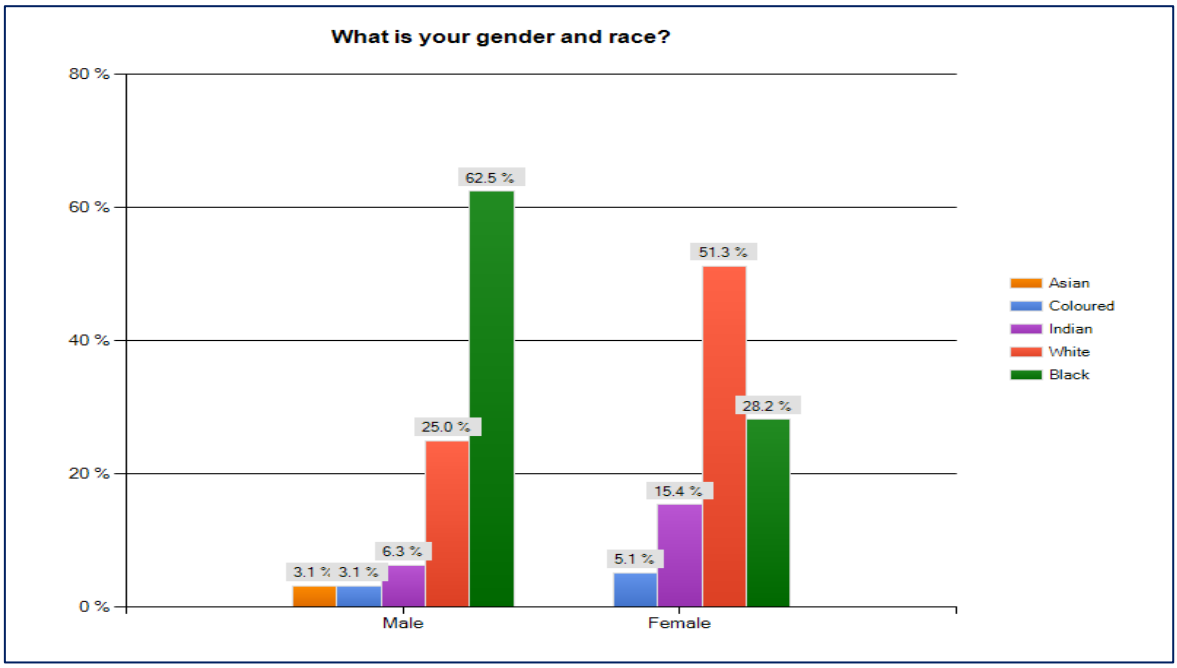


Figure 7: Participation by gender and race

The highest participating age group was the 25-34 year olds (36%), followed by 18-24 year olds (,31%), and a tie of 15.5% of respondents aged between 35-44 year olds and 45-55 year old respondents. The lowest participating age group was 1.4%, being aged between 55-64 years old. Refer to Figure 14 below for further detail.

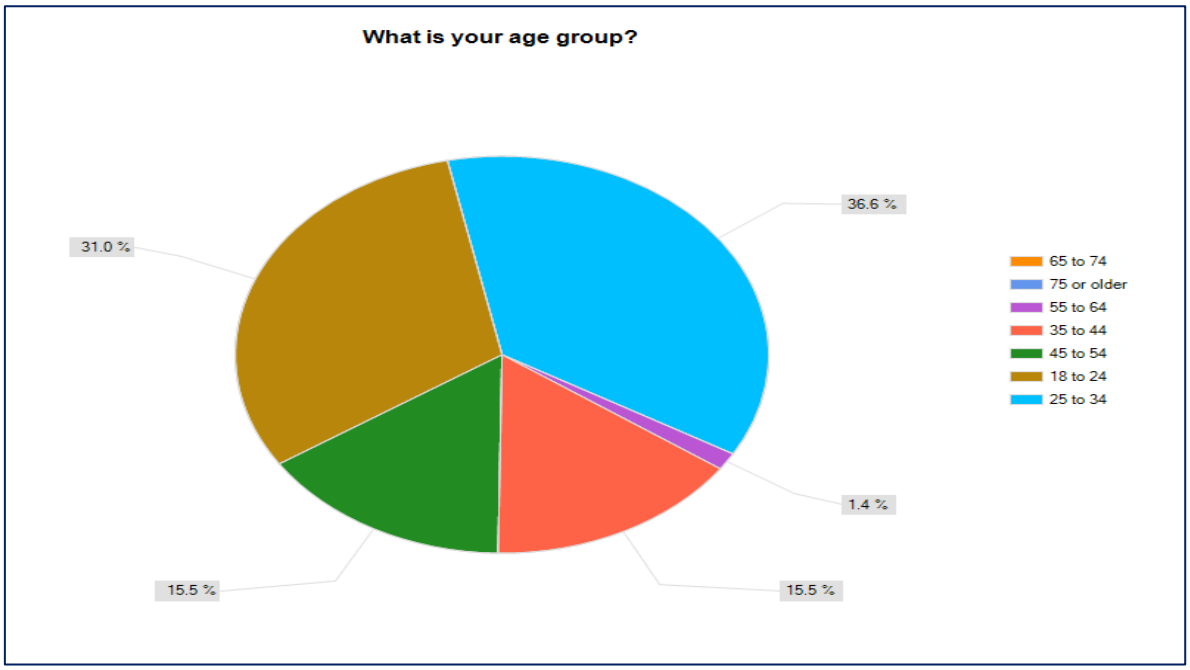


Figure 8: Participation per age group

It is apparent from Figure 16 below that both national and international respondents participated in the study. The data indicates that mainly full-time international students responded as compared to only 16.7% of part-time international students. 64.2% of the full-time national respondents' participated as compared to only 35.8% of part-time national students.

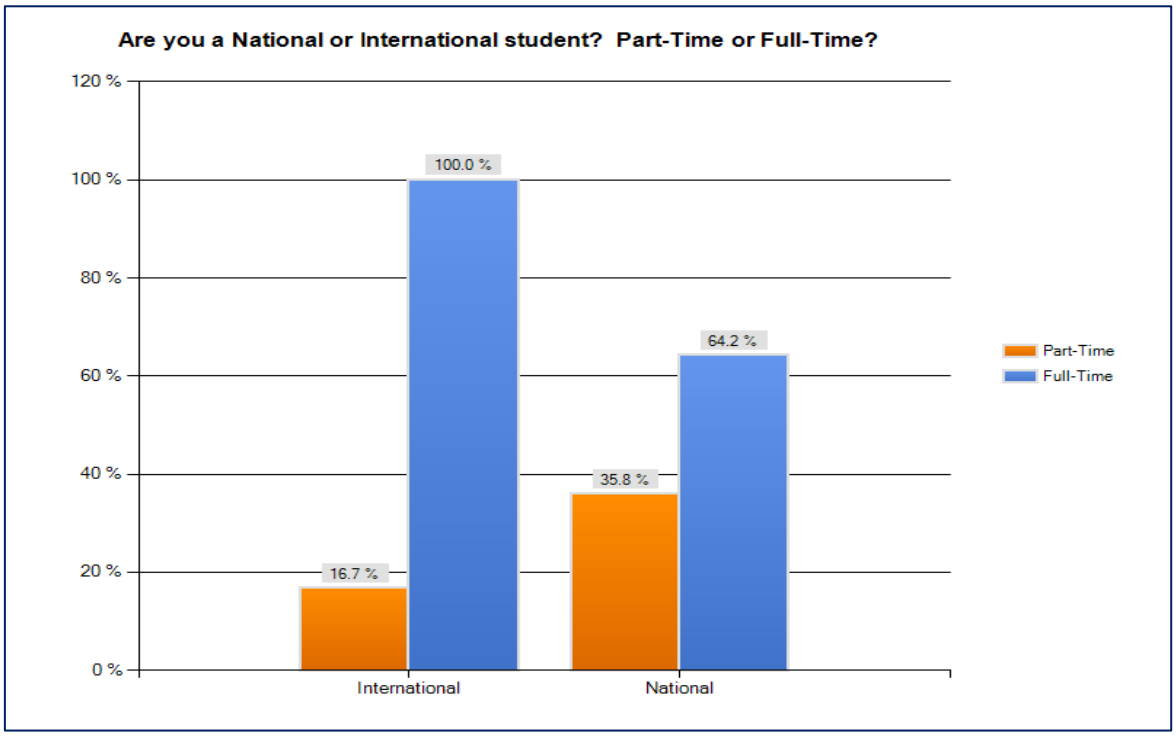


Figure 9: Part-time/full-time national or international status

WHERE

Respondents: Faculty and level of studies

Figure 16 below is revealing in several ways. Firstly, unlike the other tables, it provides additional analysis per faculty, per level of participation of the respondents. From this data, it can be seen that across all five faculties, the highest number of respondents seemed to comprise Master's level students. Further analysis shows that the most number of respondents in this group were from the Faculty of Science, followed by the Faculty of Health Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, and lastly, by the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment. What is interesting is that the 1st years, 3rd years and Honours level students were the least likely to respond in the Faculty of Humanities. The second highest level to respond was that of the 2nd year level in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment. The third highest level to respond was that of the PhD level in the Faculty of Humanities (see Figure 16).

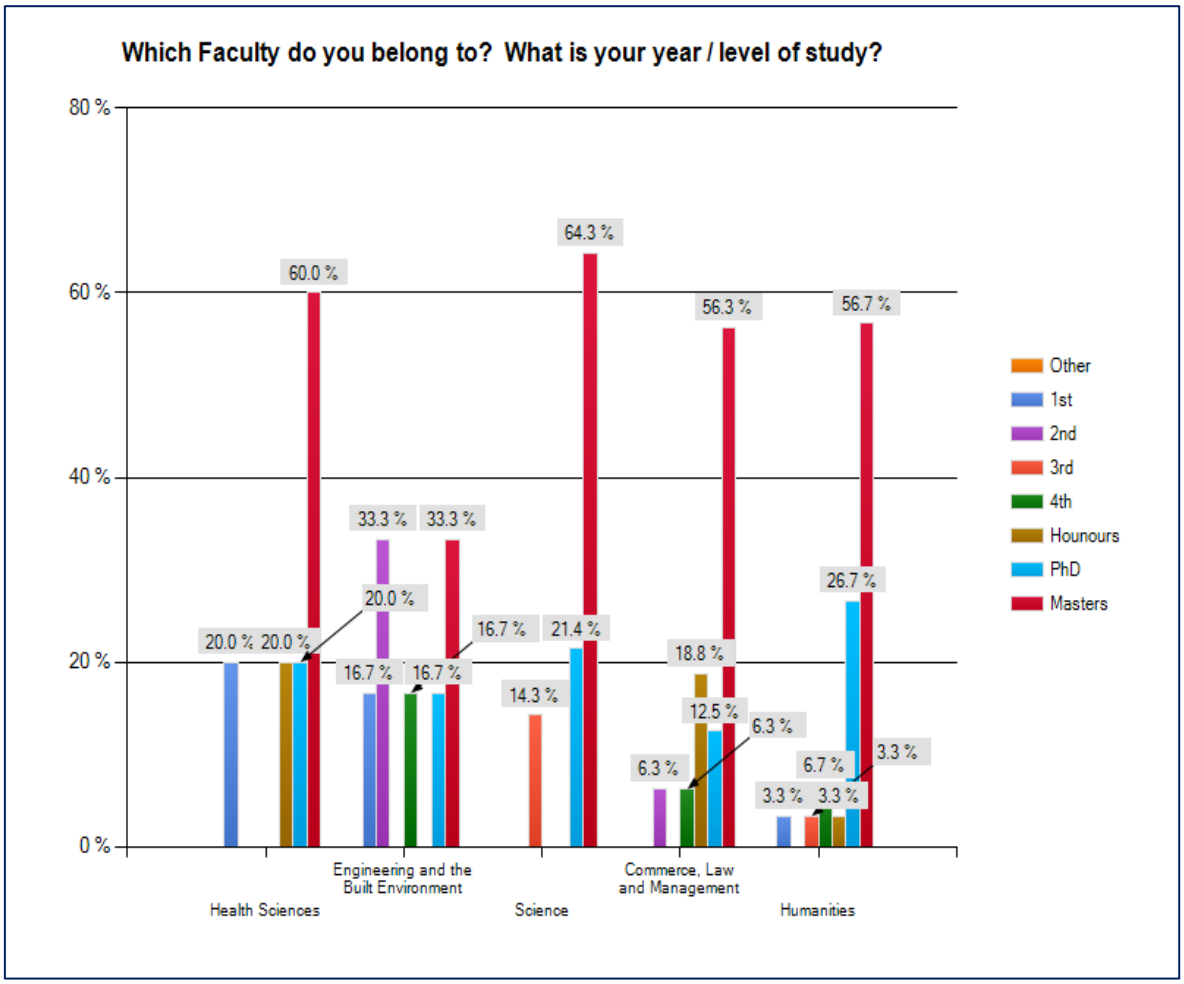


Figure 10: Faculty and level of studies

WHAT

Respondents: Risks/hazards: sense of vulnerability

The most striking result to emerge from the analysis of the data depicted in Figure 17 below is that respondents viewed their highest sense of vulnerability in financial terms, and their lowest sense of vulnerability in terms of spiritual identity.

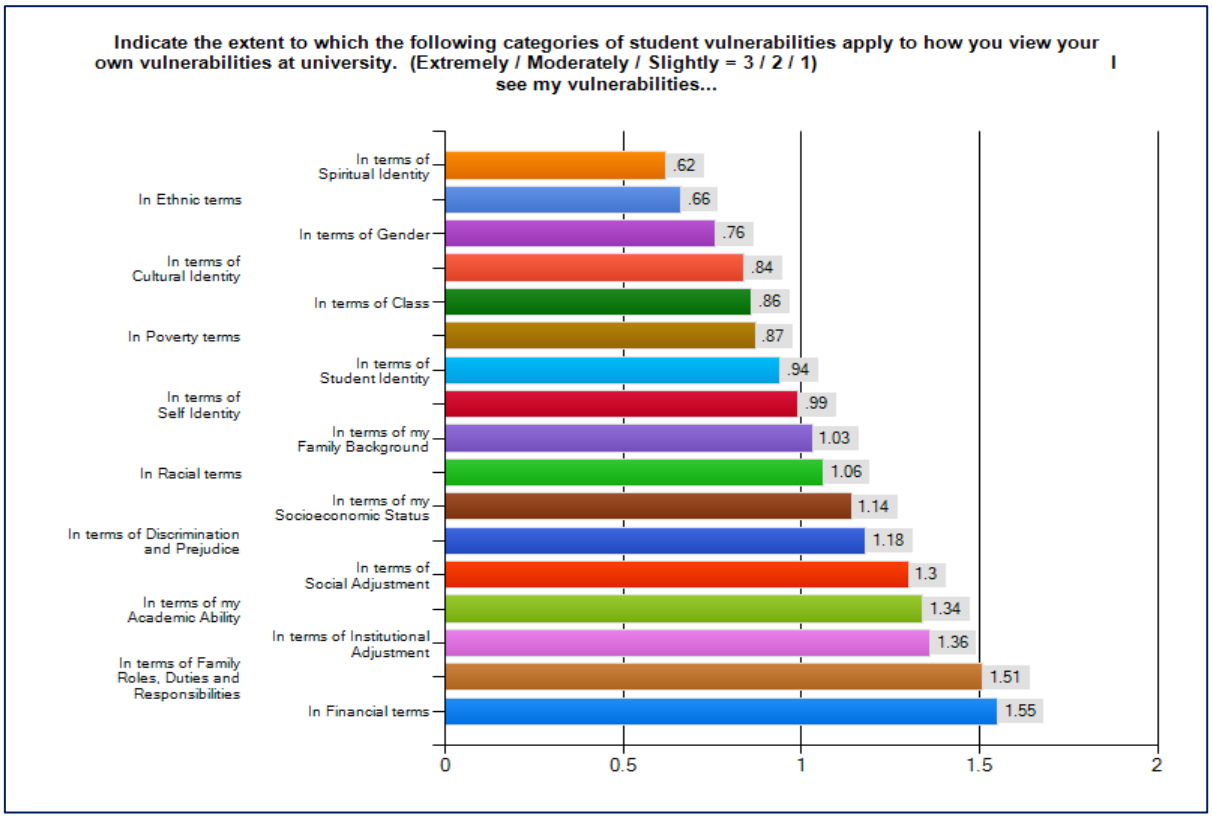


Figure 11: Respondents view of personal vulnerability

Following closely behind vulnerability in financial terms, respondents experienced vulnerability in terms of family roles, duties and responsibilities. Surprising was that institutional adjustment created a greater sense of vulnerability than academic ability. This was followed by social adjustment. Respondents experienced vulnerability to be greater in terms of discrimination and prejudice than in terms of their SES. Respondents experienced a higher sense of vulnerability in racial terms than in terms of their family background. Vulnerability experienced in terms of self-identity, followed by student identity, was more significant than the vulnerability of respondents in terms of poverty and class. Lastly, respondents experienced a greater sense of vulnerability in terms of cultural identity and gender, than in terms of ethnicity and spiritual identity. The study turns now to the 'WHEN', when respondents came to university, were their expectations similar to the realities of university life.

WHEN

Respondents: Expectations of university

Interestingly, the majority of the respondents felt that university was exactly what they had expected it to be, as illustrated in Figure 18 below.

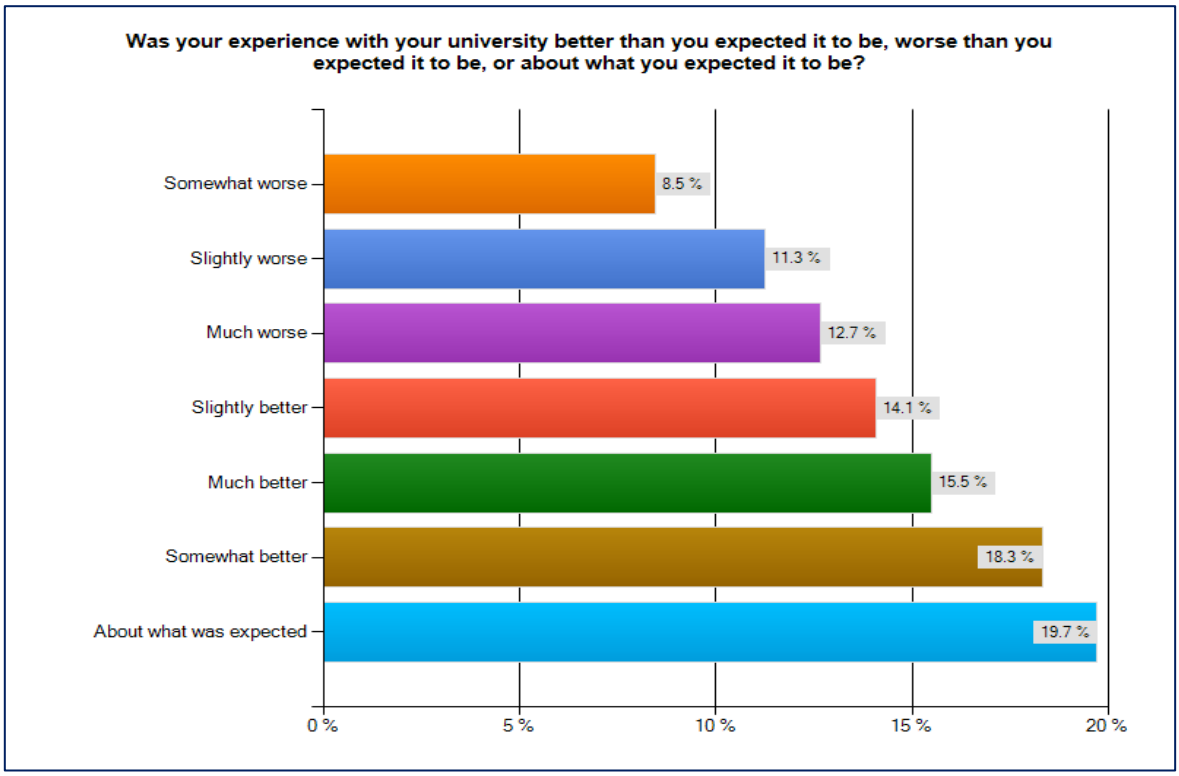


Figure 12: Expectations of university experience

There is a 9.8% difference in the number of respondents who felt that their experience was somewhat better than those who felt it was somewhat worse than their expectations. A larger number of respondents felt their experience to be much better than those who thought it was much worse. There is a small 2.8% difference between those respondents who felt that that their experiences were slightly better than those who felt it was slightly worse than their expectations. This begs the questions, that if their experiences where not far off from their expectations of university, why were the students still experiencing vulnerability? This section now speaks to this conundrum.

WHY

Respondents: Political economy: why are they vulnerable?

The single most striking observation which emerged from the data was a comparison that the majority of respondents did not feel susceptible to vulnerability in terms of the limitations in their language ability, or in terms of social skills or in terms of limitations in their self-ability, but instead they felt susceptible to vulnerability due to terms of circumstances being beyond their control, in terms of difficulty to challenge the system, as well as in terms of difficulty to challenge people in positions of authority (see Figure 19).

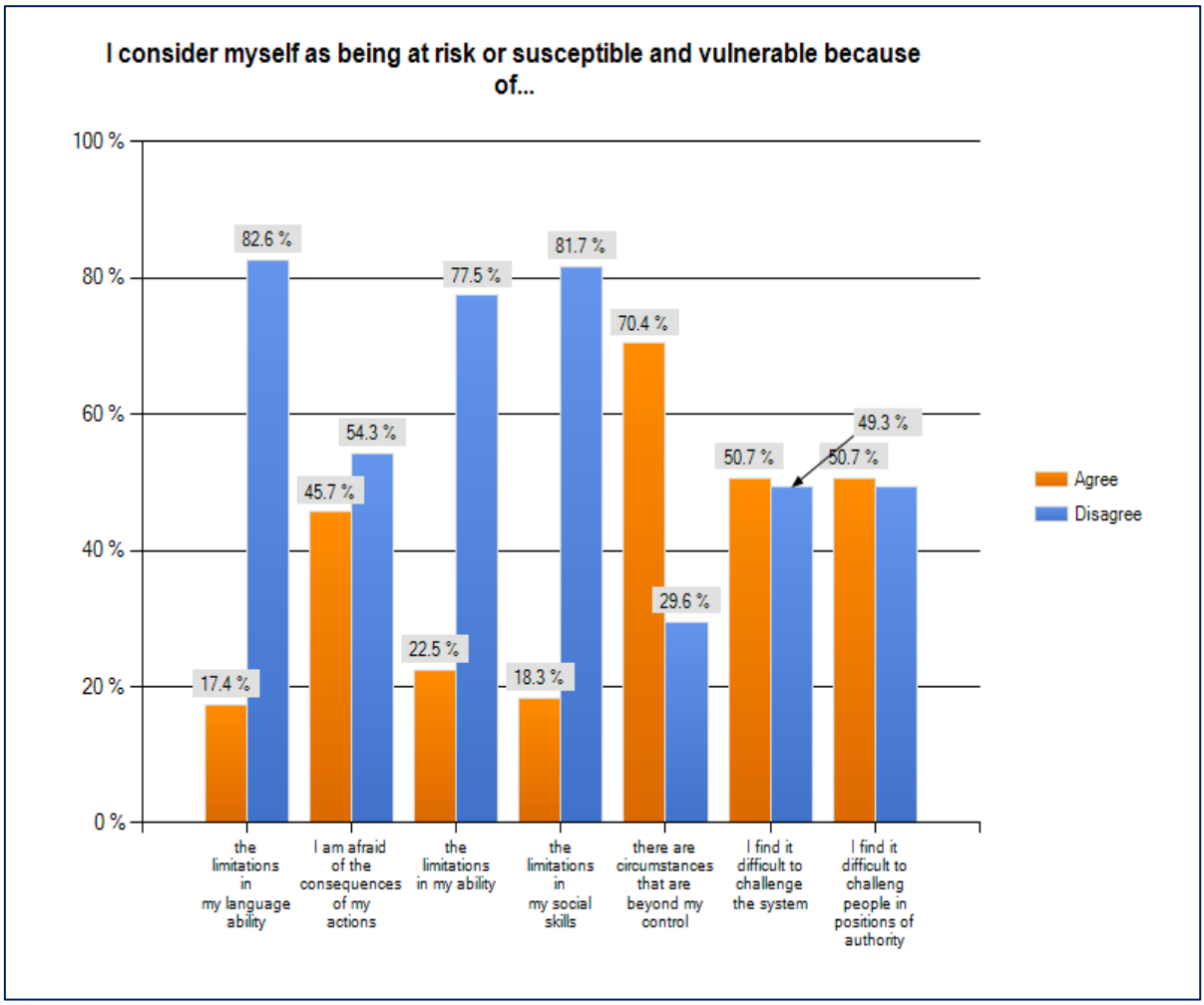


Figure 19: Respondents reasons for being susceptible to vulnerability

It can further be seen from the data that almost half of the respondents felt susceptible to vulnerability because they were afraid of the consequences of their actions. This leads to the question of how the students coped.

HOW

Respondents: How did the respondents cope

It is apparent from the data that the majority of respondents cope with their vulnerability through friendship and then family support and that the respondents' derived the least benefit from student driven support, for e.g. the SRC and other student bodies (see Figure 20).

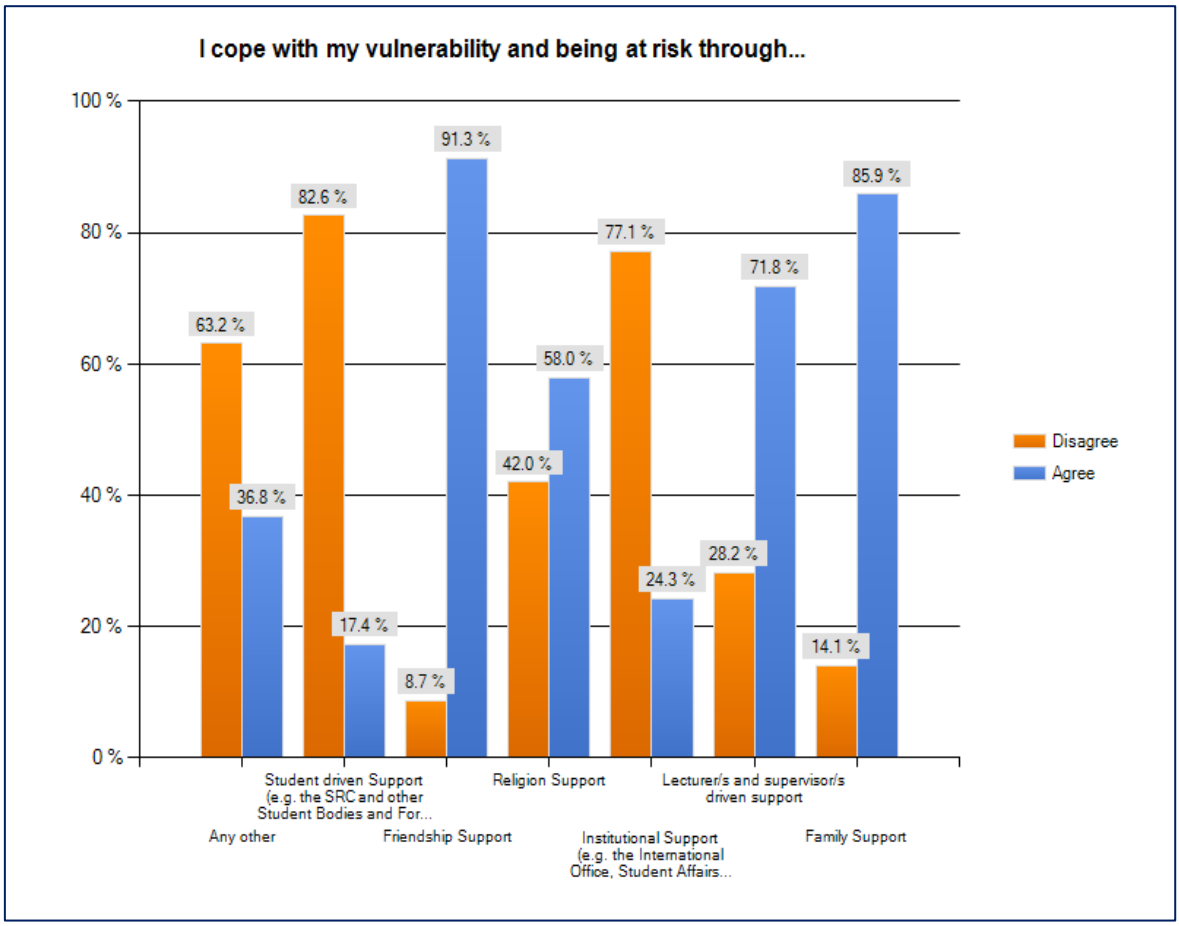


Figure 13: Coping with vulnerability

There was a significant difference in the number of respondents who felt that they coped better with lecturer and supervisor driven support than with institutional support, for e.g. the International Office and Student Affairs. As can be seen from the data, more than 50% of the respondents coped with their vulnerability through religious support.

Analysis of open-ended questions

The data management plan (cr. on page 168) acknowledged that to manage the open-ended questions in the survey, a different method and approach was required. The use of the **QDA Miner v4.0**, a Mixed Method Qualitative Analysis software programme manages such data and develops a post-coding framework to answer the following two questions:

i. What were the most frustrating/worst support experience/service?

ii. What would be done if the hands of the clock could be turned back?

The codes and categories of responses to which they refer are summarised in Table 12 below.

Table 12: Coding open-ended questions

Most Frustrating / Worst support service / experience...		
Code	**Category**	**% Codes**
AdmRegOrient	Poor administration, registration and orientation services / facilities	13.3 %
BT	Bad treatment by lecturers	28.3 %
CCDU/SRC/OnlineGroups	Poor Support Structures and Services	5.3 %
FinAid	Financial Aid Office / Staff	16.8 %
IO	Poor International Office services / facilities	8.8 %
LFI	Lack of facilities and infrastructure	14.2 %
LibServ	Poor library services / facilities	3.5 %
LSS	Lack of Supervisors Support	9. 7 %

If I could turn back the clock...		
Code	**Category**	**% Codes**
WdntGO	Would not have gone / done / decision	6.4 %
ChangeME	change the way I think / feel / react	22.9 %
WdntChange	Would not change the way I think / feel / react	5.9 %
TakeActn	act immediately / stand up	4. 8 %

The figures above provide the results of the respondents' response to two open-ended questions. The section now gives an interpretation of the data. From the data it is apparent that respondents found the worst and most frustrating support and service to be that offered by their lecturers themselves. The least most frustrating service was that offered by the university's library. The data revealed that respondents felt that the services from the Financial Aid Office, was more frustrating than the lack of facilities and infrastructure of the university. Furthermore, they found the International Office services and facilities to be more frustrating than the other support services, such as the CCDU, SRC and Online groups. Lastly, they found the administration, registration and student orientation, to be less rewarding than the support of supervisors. In an analysis of the data set of the second open-ended question, there was a significant voicing of opinion that if the respondents could turn back the clock, the majority would change the way they think, feel and react to their vulnerabilities. Perhaps this indicates a trend of students internalising the reasons of the obstacles on their path to academic success.

5.5 Summary

HE in South African, has as its focus the promise of improved throughput and the creation of a qualified and skilled workforce (DHET, 2012). However, O'Shea (2007) cautions that to assure an 'open-door' university policy, HEIs should not fall prey to the 'revolving door' university status (as described by: Cope & Hannah, 1975) as illustrated in the consideration of the survey data. In sum, the analysis of the survey: who, where, what, when, why, and how questions, are presented below:

i. Both national and international students were vulnerable, more especially, full-time, Black males and White females, with the highest participating age group being the 25-35 year old students.

ii. Data indicated that students across faculties and levels of study experience a sense of being vulnerable, with the highest number of respondents at the postgraduate level.

iii. Besides exposure to vulnerability in terms of finances, the majority of the students experienced vulnerability in terms of family roles, duties and responsibilities.

iv. When the students came to study at university, the majority felt that their experiences were very similar to what they had expected.

v. Respondents felt that they were susceptible to exposure to risks and hazards, because of circumstances being beyond their control. In addition, they experienced difficulty in challenging the system and people in positions of authority, and more especially, they were afraid of the consequences of their actions.

vi. Vulnerable students coped mostly with their vulnerability through friendship, family and religious support, and least from institutional structures and strategies of support.

vii. Students found the worst support to be that from their lecturers, and if they could turn back the clock, they would change the way they think, feel and react to their vulnerabilities.

In this chapter the results of the analysis of the quantitative element of data collected were presented and discussed. The results generally support the notion that the identification of predictors of academic success or failure is closely related to the findings of the study, investigated through the restories (as illustrated in the summary of Chapter 4). These factors include psychosocial factors and academic performance (Tinto, 1975), academic and social factors (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983), and cognitive (self-efficacy) and demographic predictors of academic success (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). However, they are insufficient in addressing the notion of vulnerability (Sing & Maringe, 2014).

In addition, a review of the previous research on understanding student dropout and retention revealed that the studies were biased (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001) towards a research population of 'traditional' White full-time students who are no longer an accurate representation of the student population either in the USA or in SA.

In keeping with the counsel of Socrates as stated below, the following chapter (Chapter 6) presents the conclusions, limitations and implications of the study.

Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.

Socrates

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Success is to be measured not so much by the position one has reached in life as by the obstacles one has overcome while trying to succeed.

Booker T. Washington

6.1 Introduction

Through introspection, bearing in mind the words of Washington above, I admit, that I too, sometimes, tend to focus mainly on attaining the next shifting goalpost of life, instead of valuing what has been achieved. Perhaps we should acknowledge and appreciate instead, the rough terrain of the 'mountains and gullies' that we have respectively traversed in the pursuit of achieving preceding goals.

Per se, the previous chapters illustrated and argued that student experience of vulnerability is linked to both academic and non-academic factors, and that the conceptualisation of being at risk is a multidimensional concept which is not adequately dealt with in HE institutional ethics policy and practice. Chapter 1 provided a contextualisation for the study by highlighting issues around student support and retention in HE. Chapter 2 reviewed literature on student vulnerability, support and retention and outlined the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the study. Chapter 3 described the research design and how the theoretical framework would lend itself to both data collection and its analysis. Chapter 4 presented the restoried biographies of the respondents that followed a line of investigation into their experiences of vulnerability, and included key elements of their personal writings submitted online. Chapter 5 presented an analysis of the restories from Chapter 4 in tabular format, as well as an analysis of data from the online survey, thereby summarising who is susceptible to risks and why, and the ways they coped/did not cope with their experience of vulnerability.

This chapter presents an interpretation of the results of the study in relation to the theoretical base, and reports on conclusions and implications of the research conducted with self-identified at-risk students. The study explored how they negotiated their academic and social lives to better cope with the demands of their study programmes. The study proposes a revised model of conceptualising student vulnerability to expand the debate on student support targeted at enhancing retention.

6.2 Study conclusions

Based on the synthesis of the literature review and the three data sets: restories, personal writings and survey[31]

The study began with the goal of answering the following main research question and five sub-questions.

> How do at-risk students in universities negotiate their sense of vulnerability in order to cope with the demands of their study programmes and how might the stories of their lived experiences inform debates around student retention and support?

The following sub-questions feed into the primary research question:

i. What are the experiences of students at risk and how do they relate to the support they get from their institutions for both their academic and social lives?

ii. How do the students at risk negotiate the barriers and challenges they face in their social and academic lives?

iii. What institutional mechanisms and models exist to assist students in general, and those at-risk in particular, and how effective are these mechanisms perceived to be?

iv. How do institutional policy documents describe the relationship between student retention and student support and how do students relate to and evaluate these policies?

v. How do students suggest the current student support models and strategies at the institution be improved as a strategy for ameliorating their vulnerabilities?

In addressing the above sub-questions, I firstly reviewed the literature in Chapter 2 to find out what studies have previously been done pertaining to the issues of student support and retention of at-risk students and thereby drawing attention to what gaps may exist in literature. Chapter 4 contained a narrative research investigation of students who self-identified to be at risk. The online survey in Chapter 5 posed similar questions to the participants, seeking their response to the type of vulnerability to which they had been

[31] To further manage the data analysis, refer to Appendix A.10, (on page 202), Narrative Threads: Combining Restories and Artefact Analysis, in order to see the link between the data sets.

exposed, why they were susceptible and how they had coped (or not) with such exposure. I have tried to show through the design of the study that the sub-questions were key in my planning, similar to the setting of a story-line that needed to unfold, which through this study was attempted via a narrative investigation and an online survey. I will now address the sub-questions to indicate findings from the data in relation to the Thinking Tools described in Chapter 2 (pages 54 – 58, also cr. on page 22 for further detail).

i. What are the experiences of students at risk and how do they relate to the support they get from their institutions for both their academic and social lives?

Students voiced urgency for personal care and interaction, perhaps in the form of mentors. The data showed that respondents, who identified themselves to be at risk, do not always fit the 'taken for granted' categorisations of such students as identified from the literature review. These include students with some form of mental distress who need psychological intervention, a student with a physical disability who needs adapted study material or infrastructure or means of delivery (braille/access ramps/lifts/sign language), second-language learners, those from fragile socioeconomic backgrounds and so forth. Their exposure to risks and hazards do not match the 'taken for granted' categorisations, such as inability to cope with academic work, poor writing skills or low academic achievement. As Bourdieu asserts (refer to Thinking Tool B), conflict is built into society and as the data illustrated, students found that their expectations and ways of living were out of step with the new social position in which they found themselves. The study argues that the support interventions at HEIs exclude a silent number of students who suffer various forms of less obvious but nevertheless equally, if not more, debilitating vulnerabilities. Thus, such students at risk tend to be marginalised, discriminated against, and most crucially, are not supported through conventional support strategies and structures.

ii. How do the students at risk negotiate the barriers and challenges they face in their social and academic lives?

The study revealed that students at risk negotiate the barriers and challenges that they face in their social lives through succumbing to those very risks, for example, peer pressure, drinking, smoking marijuana (dagga/weed/pot), promiscuity, and so forth. They felt that they were susceptible to risks and hazards, because of circumstances that were beyond their control. In other words, using the analogy of a 'fish out of water', referring to the 'mismatch' between the 'field-habitus' for the student who does not know the limits of the 'doable and thinkable' (doxa) in his field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Students at risk negotiate the barriers and challenges that they face in their academic lives by using facilities available to them. This they do as far as possible, where they are aware of these, for example, visiting the writing centre, attending tutorials and labs, study groups and so on. However, there exist academic struggles that are of a different order, such as challenging the system and people in positions of authority. Students generally feel impotent and afraid of the consequences of their actions. This study argues that the barriers and challenges that students at risk face in their social lives are usually intertwined with negative repercussions on their academic lives and academic potential.

iii. What institutional mechanisms and models exist to assist students in general and those at-risk in particular, and how effective are these mechanisms perceived to be?

The study has shown that despite institutional structures being in place for their support and development, students at risk coped with their vulnerability through other means. The need student's to realign their habitus to something other was preceded by the need to redefine their self-concept. At such stages when the old habitus is no longer appropriate, that period of hysteresis, of uncertainty, HEIs should provide pastoral support structures that can assist a student. The study however revealed that students coped mainly by means of relationships developed through friendship, family and religious support, and least from institutional structures and strategies of support. This study found the worst support came from certain lecturers, creating a perception amongst vulnerable students that the institution was unwilling or unable to address their needs.

iv. How do institutional policy documents describe the relationship between student retention and student support and how do students relate to and evaluate these policies?

The literature reviewed in this study revealed that support models and retention models in HE act as mechanisms that stand outside mainstream departmental teaching and those which have devised groups of specialists to fit within policies. In other words, the support and retention models are managed by notably different administration, academic and support staff teams. The data also divulged that despite students' awareness of such support and retention interventions, they were often sceptical of their effectiveness. When support and retention models are measured by dropout and non-completion rates, the presumption is that these are ineffective. It may be that a more integrated model which targets students in line with their specific course needs would be more effective.

v. How do students suggest the current student support models and strategies at the institution should be improved as a strategy for ameliorating their vulnerabilities?

Students believe that having to pay for counselling services was insensitive to the plight of financially vulnerable students, who have other responsibilities such as the provision of basic needs to younger siblings or the elderly, back at their place of origin. They also found the services offered to be limited in the capacity to address immediate or urgent risks and hazards due to a lack of available appointments. Legitimate peripheral participation explains how students through 'growing involvement' within a community of practice, feel a sense of belonging. Lave and Wenger (1991) advocate that learning is about the whole person, about becoming, knowing how to engage in the practice of being a student, for example, a student needing support to learn academic conventions or the taken for granted assumption that they may know which retailer sells subject specific tools or the assumption that students can visualise the tools/equipment needed to be purchased.

Vulnerable students suggest that institutional structures and strategies of support should provide opportunities to express themselves free of the fear of being penalised in any way. Students found the institutional support strategies to be ineffective; they believed themselves to be signifiers of 'institutional window dressing' only because there was no follow-through action. Students at risk further disclosed that the processes of appeal are not transparent and are more often than not filled with cases of unfairness, and decisions influenced by nepotism. They also voice that when issues are raised through the correct channels, the cases are not adequately dealt with and are simply delegated to a 'less than responsible/capable' person who looks down on them and further perpetuates their sense of vulnerability.

Thus the study argues that 'top-down' efforts are needed to introduce, sustain, and institutionalise 'bottom-up' development (Woolcock & Narayan, 2002) in the form of three central tasks: to identify the nature of the relationship and extent of the interaction between the institution and its academic and student bodies; to develop institutional strategies based on bonding and bridging; and thirdly to realise how cooperation, trust and institutional efficiency may offset disharmony, insecurities, isolation, and non-achievement. When students face risks and hazards, outside the scope of institutional support, their status of vulnerability, leads to a loss of self-belief, poor academic achievement and eventual dropout.

Addressing the students' accounts of their vulnerability through an integrated approach

Risk/hazard approach: causes & consequences

The restoried narratives illustrate that students experience different manifestations of vulnerability due to a mixture of risk and hazard factors. Students experience difficulties and struggles at various levels of intensity. Apparent is that what can be manageable for one person, can be life-threatening to another. Students are vulnerable, given that they are exposed to risks or challenges, both within and outside themselves, in relation to others in a variety of social contexts. The restories convey interrelated stories within the story, illustrating that narrative cannot be removed from the context in which they are set. The prominent risk and hazard factors, illustrated below in Figure 21, reveal the interconnectedness of self within society.

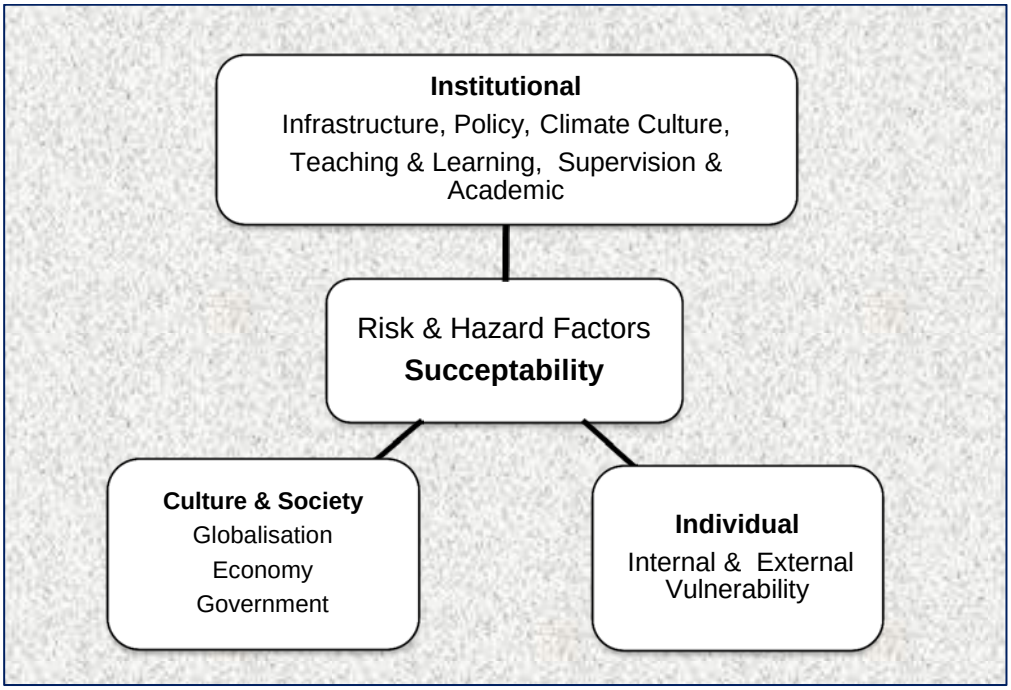


Figure 14: Context of vulnerability

Evidence from the survey illustrates that adult/mature students experience difficulties and struggles while pursuing their academic qualifications. Their exposure to various forms of risk and hazard factors, are attributed to factors both within and outside themselves, over which they might not have much control. Students constructing 'identities in practice' is a social process whereby a person gradually becomes a member of an on-going practice (Wenger, 1998).

The consequences of such exposure are manifested in various forms of vulnerability. Some of these manifestations result in a conflict of identity, interests, roles, responsibilities and duty. The consequences are further manifested in self-doubt and a lack of self-worth, unless ameliorated with targeted support.

Political economy: Exposure - who is vulnerable and why

The student feeling vulnerable is not necessarily the student that has a background of academic struggle. The study identifies that a student who is above average in academic achievement, can also be susceptible to the exposure of risks and hazards during their academic journey. For this reason, the study argues that those students who do not fit the general 'taken-for-granted' stereotype of a student at risk, represents the missing voice of student vulnerability in institutional support strategies. The study contends that students feel susceptible to different factors at various levels of intensity, due to their exposure to risks and hazards that not only displaces them from their sense of perceived stability, but also rocks their sense of equilibrium. In essence, with reference to the unification theory[32] being and doing are both central features of one's identity, that is, who one is and what one does are important sources of self-meaning.

The data further indicates from the respondents' demographic detail, that vulnerability is not experienced only at undergraduate levels, but as well as between each transitional level of academic achievement in HE (see Figure 22).

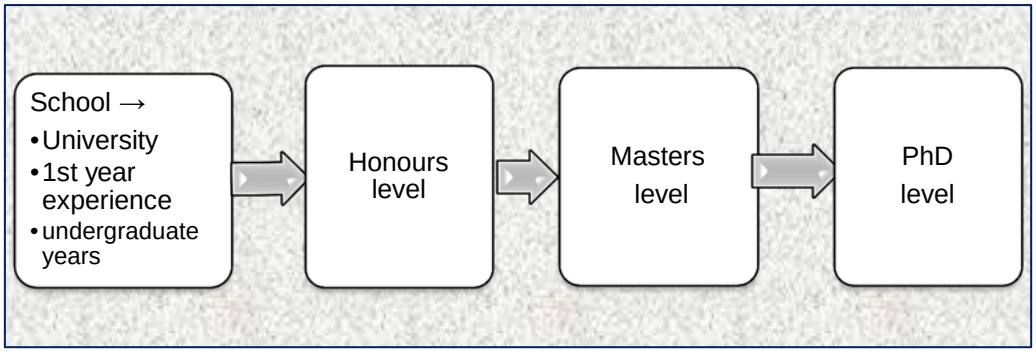


Figure 15: Levels of transitional vulnerability

The analysis of the survey data exposes that student identity is shaped by social, institutional and personal interactions. When there are conflicts that arise from such exposure to risk and hazards, an individual's susceptibility to vulnerability increases.

[32] cr. on page 54 – 58

Data also indicates conflict between cultural/spiritual and academic sense of identity. The study now directs attention to how students persevered and persisted with their studies.

Resilience: cope/adapt

The evidence revealed that to cope with vulnerability, some students often retreat into themselves, with a preference for isolation as a precaution against further exposure to risks and hazards. Others lean on friends, family, Church; Holy Scriptures, music, different forms of self-expression, sport, athletic challenges, dance, community service, and so forth (see Figure 23 below).

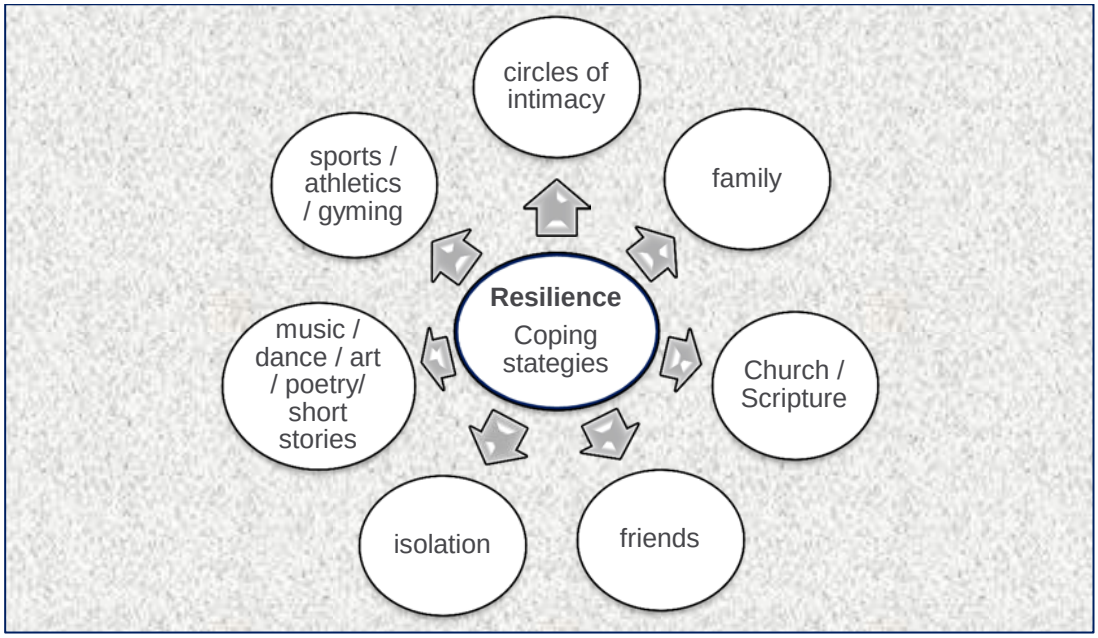


Figure 16: Resilience through coping strategies

The study found that to some extent the support structures made available by the university are not sufficiently disseminated to the student body. The analysis also reveals that even if students' chose to seek assistance at such facilities, there is a general perception of stigma attached to being seen in need of help. The unavailability of immediate appointments at support services and with lecturers' further exacerbates their sense of vulnerability. With that said, there are those students who participated in this study that have persevered, have been resilient and have adapted. Evidence also points to students who endured hazards and hardships because of responsibilities and duties beyond their control.

The analysis of the survey data brings to light the determination of many at-risk students to persevere with their studies, despite the obstacles in their path.

6.3 Implications

The difference between the impossible and the possible lies in a person's determination...

Tommy Lasorda

Lasorda echoes the attitude of those students who persisted despite the impediments. The findings of the study were presented in Chapters 4 and 5, together with a reflective analysis discussion. This section presents the implications of this research for further studies, policy, best practice and methodology.

Implications for policy and practice

Even though this study is based on a small sample, the findings suggest that an awareness of the reasons for student vulnerability is lacking in institutions and somehow a sense of apathy seems to prevail. Reasons for student dropout go far beyond academic ability only. When vulnerability is described as remediable through academic support structures, other forms of vulnerability and student support is seen as someone else's problem. These findings suggest a number of practical implications for policy, such as creating a space for institution wide commitment to accept responsibility for student support and retention. A reasonable approach to tackle this issue could be for policy-makers to acknowledge that dropout prevention and at-risk student support are interrelated. Doing so will help improve the way institutions support students at risk and thereby develop targeted interventions aimed at identifying and supporting student vulnerability. Substantiated by the student narratives, there exists a university wide policy implication for faculty conduct. As Johnson corroborates below, there is a need for faculty training on how to deal with students where gender might be a sensitive issue. There is also a need for university governance and leadership to have systems in place to monitor and remediate situations of malpractice.

> *Vulnerability of others illuminates our own vulnerability... lean into these feelings. Vulnerable, we acknowledge our interdependence and leave open the possibility to engage with one another in unrecognisable ways.*
>
> Johnson (2014, p. 583)

Interviews, personal writings and survey data, together reveal that transitional challenges, associated risks, and targeted support, need to be included in institutional strategic plans, not only focusing between school and first-year experiences, but at each degree level thereafter, as illustrated in Figure 24 below.

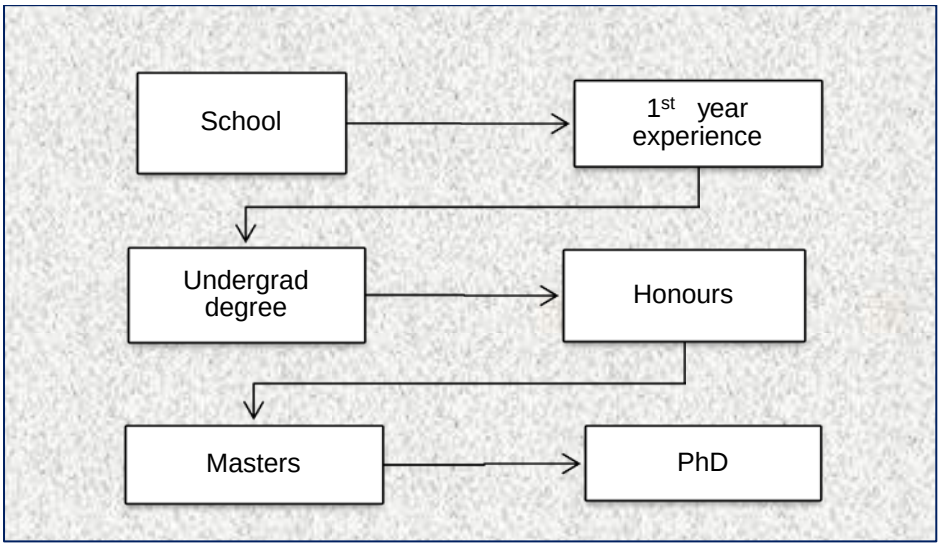


Figure 17: Vulnerability at transitional levels in Higher Education

The results generally support the notion that there are significant gaps in the HEIs policy on identifying students at risk who do not fit or fall into mainstream categories. The results also indicate that the integrated approach, conceptual model on which the study is based, holds value and merit. It identified additional causes and consequences of risks and hazards, who is vulnerable, and why, and lastly, how is it that vulnerable students cope with their stressors.

This study accordingly, adds to vulnerability theory and the study of student support aimed at improving retention by specifying a framework of how to do research with vulnerable people. Other research identified the factors that contribute to student dropout (Bean, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tinto, 1975) and gave a deterministic account of identifying at-risk students (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Van Zyl, 2010; Woollacott, 2013). But this work leaves open the point at issue of how at-risk students actually experience their sense of vulnerability. In addressing this gap, this study explored the narrative experiences of at-risk students by paying close attention to detail, and restorying their narratives. The theoretical framework used in this study explains the integrated approach by which to better grasp what risks students are exposed to, why are they susceptible to such risks and what do they do to ameliorate their situation and achieve academic success.

Ethics policy concerns and implications

One of the significant findings from conducting narrative interviews in this study is that, despite approval from the university's ethics committee to conduct the study, a further investigation is needed on how the ethics policy itself can be improved. The relevance of proposing an amended ethics policy can be drawn from the present study's ethics application

that was silent on the aspect of the doctoral student's qualifications to carry out research with vulnerable people. Any HEIs ethics policy should ensure that the researcher applying to carry out research with vulnerable groups is accustomed to and adequately trained to deal with sensitive matters. The institution should have in place a practical course for doctoral students conducting surveys, interviews, or any form of research with vulnerable people. The policy should also have in place a reliable and confidential opportunity for the doctoral student to be debriefed after any such research with vulnerable people. Establishing such safety measures as part of an institution's ethics body structure will afford the opportunity for the doctoral student to be debriefed. If a case is life-threatening, there should be an opportunity or structure in place that will ethically safeguard both the participant and the doctoral student.

Implications for methodology

This study has shown that the originality of this research lies in the development of an integrated model for studying vulnerability that can be used in both data collection and analysis. However, despite having adopted a model for conceptualising vulnerability (cr. on page 60) it proposes a new model for the way we look at and stay abreast of student vulnerability by modifying the core conceptualisation, so as to address the concerns that emerged from the findings of this study.

The three additional concepts are discussed below.

i. Barriers to academic success

The study contributes to vulnerability theory by sharpening its focal concept of the political economy approach that examines who is susceptible to risks/hazards, and why. On the one hand, the study expands the concept of political economy to include the possibility that the exposure to socially constructed risks/hazards can be used to understand the students' barrier to academic success. Prior research has emphasised the importance of understanding the barriers that exist to students' achievement of academic success (refer to: Morrow, 2005; Wylie, 2010). The new integrated model for understanding vulnerability that is put forward, is complemented by including a portrayal of barriers to success, i.e. situational, institutional, dispositional barriers, with the addition of spiritual and cultural barriers (refer to: Castle *et al*., 2006), (cr. on page 191). A more nuanced awareness that the experiences of vulnerability are embedded within the students' perception of stress needs to be considered when devising support structures.

ii. Stress Perception

Quantitative approaches are popular for the investigation of an individual's stress (see, for example: Abouserie, 1994; Gadzella, Masten, & Stacks, 1998; Saroson, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978). It has been argued that stress is an expected part of being a student, for example, the transition from home/country/leaving behind family - to university, new responsibilities, new friends, no set boundaries, fear of failure, family expectations, heavy workload, lack of sleep, exam stress, financial pressure, assignment and project deadlines, all contribute to stress. However, people from different cultures and backgrounds, experience different stressors/risks/hazards and the consequences of stress are not experienced at the same level of intensity by respective individuals.

Recent developments in the field of student support and retention have led to a renewed interest in developing strategies in HE to reduce student stress. In many studies, a debate is taking place as to whether stress has only negative effects. Robotham and Julian (2006, p. 108) argue that stress can have a positive effect in enabling individuals to respond effectively in an emergency. More importantly, stress is the result of an individual's perception that they do not have the resources to cope with a perceived situation from the past, present or future, but such perceptions can be changed.

Stress is caused by fear, and Robotham and Julian (2006) show how the body's reaction to that fear is the instinctive preparation for 'fight or flight'. They assert that such stress is based on the individual's perception and interpretation of demands placed on them and not the demands themselves. It can be argued that in a HE system, participation is the key goal. However, not all students may seek help from institutional structures nor may they be aware of the availability of such facilities. The study points out that addressing the stress management of students could contribute to retention and throughput. The proposed revised model aimed towards support and retention is illustrated in Figure 25 below:

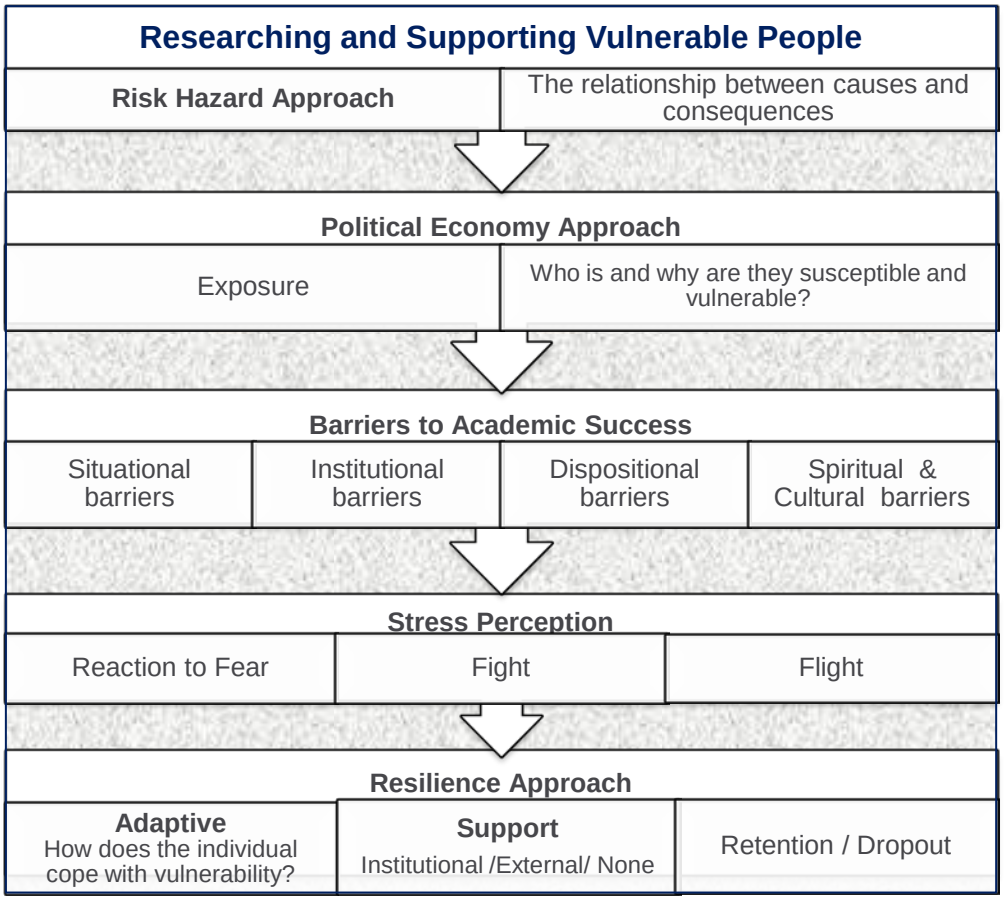


Figure 18: Integrated model dealing with student vulnerability. Source: Adapted from (Castle et al., 2006; Maringe & Sing, 2014; Robotham & Julian, 2006)

iii. Support and retention

With reference to Figure 27 as illustrated below (cr. on page 194):

Vulnerability model

Following the development of the integrated model of studying vulnerability, the findings of the study alluded to the development of an integrated model of student support and retention. For such an integration to work, retention strategies need to be supported by an institution wide buy-in and commitment. This has been demonstrated by the study's data analysis which illustrated how *underprepared the institution itself is* to adapt and support the changing diversity of students' needs and vulnerabilities. This study has shown how an exploration of the vulnerabilities at a student level sheds light on the vulnerabilities at other levels. In other words, understanding individual student vulnerabilities in a university could provide insight into how the institutions, their systems, and organisation harbour their own vulnerabilities.

Support model

Access Programmes investigations in SA, highlight the urgent need for universities to provide counselling and to equip underperforming students in terms of academic and life skills (Potgieter et al., 2015). Research indicates that first year orientation programmes, bridging and support programmes do yield an improvement in results and throughput (refer to: Z. Essack & Quayle, 2007; Potgieter et al., 2015). However, this study argues that there is a need for support throughout all transitional levels of achievement and progression in HE. One such approach is mentoring, long associated with being an apprentice model of graduate education (Jacobi, 1991), which is also regarded as a support, retention and enrichment strategy. A mentor is an individual with expertise who is willing to help develop the career of a mentee. A mentor has two primary functions, firstly to act as a coach to enrich the mentee's professional development and performance. Secondly, the mentor adopts a life-support, psychosocial function to act not only as a role model, but as a support system for the mentee, in finding a work-life balance (see for example: Platt & Woodbury, 2002; Young & Perrewé, 2004).

Mentoring has a weakness when the mentors that are allocated, or are given the directive to mentor students, are not willing, or adequately trained or equipped with skills to do so. A worst case scenario: strong academics but untrained as mentors, who have a reputation amongst the students as being 'hard/difficult/uncompromising,' are placed in positions where students have to consult with them and place their trust in them. It is probable that any vulnerable student who approaches them would come away in fear of the consequences of such confidence. Perhaps an opportunity for students to elect their own mentors from amongst their lecturers would strengthen the system. A complete mentoring and coaching programme, with a dedicated, skilled team ought to be established to work with the institution at all levels, for piloting, implementing, monitoring and sustaining the programme. By facilitating both formal and informal mentoring relationships, an institution needs to establish structures in place that remain a part of the core strategic plan of the institution.

In consideration of the workload demands, and the research output demands placed on academics, in addition to balancing their family/personal/social lives, it is not surprising that there is limited time available to add in student support or the support of each other. I envisage a structure of a *ripple down and aspire up* progression of mentorship and coaching such that, professors mentor and support aspiring lecturers ↔ who mentor and coach PhD students ↔ who mentor and coach Master's level students ↔ who mentor and coach Honours level students ↔ who mentor and coach undergraduate levels.

When a single hand claps, there is no sound, so perhaps with an institutional wide buy-in, of an integrated model of support and retention, there would exist the opportunity to ameliorate institutional vulnerabilities.

As discussed in the literature review (cr. in chapter 2), assimilation into an institution within a *melting pot* framework is not ideal. Integration through a *salad bowl* culture framework can create opportunities for tolerance of difference gained through understanding. Vulnerable students voiced their dissatisfaction with situations of institutional policy and practice, where conditions of engagement, processes or appeal were neither transparent nor fair. Leadership and management need to be an annual component of staff training, building and development. Leadership and management, as part of an integrated support model, could demand an institution wide commitment. Leaders need to learn and practice leadership in meaningful ways, such that it promotes the growth and development of mentees to be leaders in their own right, and not leadership gained by standing on the shoulders or heads of others.

Retention model

In order for retention strategies to be effective, they need to be viewed and implemented hand-in-hand with support models. There is a need to develop a policy, a structure and strategies around mentorship and coaching, to be implemented, monitored and revised regularly. Dealing with diversity through creating a *salad bowl* culture needs to be institution wide. Assimilation creates a loss of identity and further insecurities. Strategies targeted to nurture tolerance through understanding needs to be an ongoing commitment. Tolerance through understanding should not just be implemented as a once off effort during orientation or staff induction programmes. This integrated model needs further in-depth development and serves as a reflective framework that can be used to ameliorate vulnerabilities experienced at multiple levels of the institution (see Figure 26).

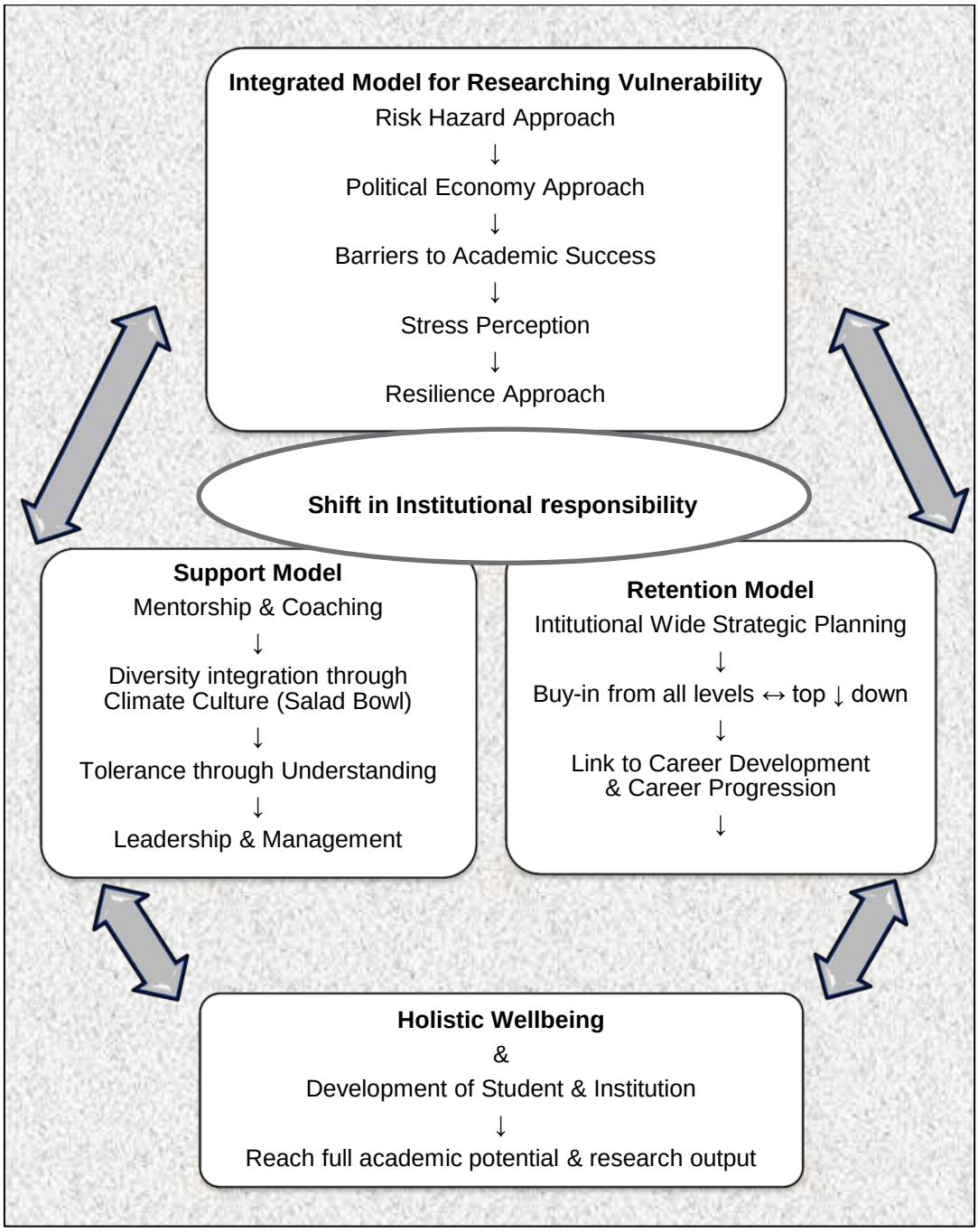


Figure 19: Integrated model of researching vulnerability, support and retention

In the following section, the study presents limitations and implications of this research for other studies and best practice.

6.4 Limitations and implications for further research

The study has offered a perspective on the important HE imperative of student support policy and practice. However, findings of this study should be considered in the light of its limitations. At the outset of the study, I was confident of the use of only a qualitative approach, of narrative research necessary to undertake an investigation of the study. However, with the overwhelming response from respondents willing to participate, I had to revise my plans and methods for data collection to add in a smaller element of quantitative data. As a direct consequence of this methodology, the study encountered a number of limitations, which need to be considered.

One limitation was that generalisations from this study were difficult to make as findings might not be transferrable, based on the study sample. The data were collected in a unique HEI environment and may not have suggested conclusions beyond the boundary of the study site.

A second limitation was that the study's research focus was not designed to evaluate at-risk factors related to a 'taken for granted' measure of vulnerability. The study instead adopted a means to identify students at risk that did not involve a scrutiny or evaluation of their academic results as the key indicator of their vulnerability.

A third limitation was that probability sampling was not applicable to the study. The study used a convenience sample that allowed the opportunity for at-risk students to self-identify and volunteer to be part of the study, which was essential for the research. However, with a small sample size of narrative interviews, caution must be applied, as the findings may not be transferable to the larger student body.

The findings of this study also suggest that for further research, a more detailed investigation is needed to evaluate the institution's support structures. This would have to include students' perceptions and experience of such structures so that interventions could be revised or adapted to suit the changing needs of the student body.

The questions that I pose after listening to and studying the narratives of at-risk students, are informed by opening the debate on seeking solutions to what action can be taken:

i. How do we identify student vulnerability, outside this project?

ii. What platform is there for vulnerable students to feel safe enough to self-identify and for the HEI to provide targeted support and intervention aimed at student development, academic success, and holistic wellness?

iii. What support structure or strategy can be put in place to help those students who do not have the agency/will to rise above their circumstances and stay focused on their end goal?

iv. How can we support and develop students who persevere?

The literature on vulnerability, specifically in the context of how such an understanding can help HEIs to better support and retain students, is largely inconclusive on several vital questions:

i. Do HEIs factor into their conceptualisation of at-risk students, those students who due to their vulnerability and susceptibility to risks, are not able fulfil their academic potential?

ii. Do student support structures address such vulnerability effectively?

Within this frame of thinking, a study by Horn and Carroll (1997) reported on the '*pipeline to college*' concept which was based on three steps by students:

aspiration (a student's desire to continue their education beyond school) → academic preparation → and lastly, entrance exams and university application.

This study motivates that such a concept may perhaps be extended to explore further major junctures in the pathway for a student to exit university with success, for example, '*a pipeline to university graduation*' involving four steps:

aspiration→ academic preparation and support → holistic wellness → graduation.

6.5 Conclusion

> *Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.*
>
> Adichie (2009)

As Adichie counsels above, stories do matter. The story of this research was not intended to exasperate vulnerability but to ameliorate such vulnerability through understanding the voices of those generally not considered in the development of support structures and retention policies.

To begin this section, I will now provide a personal reflection on what I have learnt from the study. Doing research with a vulnerable population requires time, patience and skill. *Skills to:* access them; be able to communicate with them so that as a researcher you do not further perpetuate their feelings of discomfort; interview them respectfully and sensitively so that they do not hold any feelings of regret at having made the brave decision to confide in you; interview them highlighting the opportunity for them to stop the interview at any time they begin to feel any form of discomfort and assure them that they do not even need to provide any reason to end the interview as it is their narration and they are in control of what they wish to share and do not wish to share; manage the data of the interview recordings and keep it protected and inaccessible to others; not be judgmental; not think yourself better than or worse than; to process the depth of what they are sharing and have the ability to not get overwhelmed by the severity of their circumstance; to protect their identity; and in addition, secure a venue that is not only private but where they would be comfortable and feel safe. The key to doing narrative research, for me was in reading and preparation, thereby learning and being aware of the intricacies of the methodology itself, for example being able to be a good listener and in entrusting the narrator to direct the pace and depth of the interview, as it was solely their choice to share what their real-life experiences are.

I am in my comfort zone when doing qualitative research, while it was a challenge to design a quantitative online survey as well as strategise how to access such a large sample of a vulnerable population and maintain confidentiality in a cyber-area. It was a learning curve in planning on how to uphold ethical standards, such that despite the respondents indicating their willingness to participate in the survey, and even with securing their permission to email them the link, I still afforded them an opportunity when they accessed the survey, to continue or alternatively end the process immediately. An additional challenge was weighing the costs of keeping the survey open for a maximum amount of time, as well as reminding students to participate as the time grew closer to the closure of the survey.

I have reached a conclusive understanding that people, myself included, are afraid to reveal the difficulties that they experience in different aspects of their lives. Considering that our difficulties tie in with influencing our ability to excel academically, that fear, or inability to confide or trust or share such confidences in a non-judgemental zone, transcends all boundaries into most aspects of our academic and social lives. With stress comes fear and desolation that impacts not only on our psyche but on our sense of self-worth and identity, as well as our ability to function at optimal academic potential.

There is currently no single existing theory of student vulnerability in HE. The theoretical cases for student support need to be refined in order to include the missing voices of the vulnerable into literature and policy-making. The efficacy of various retention models, operational in overseas contexts, needs to be established, adapted and tested within a South African HE institutional context. Student support models are often reviewed in literature as a separate issue to retention. A combined integrated support and retention model for at-risk students would be more logical. By honing in on the institutional mechanisms in HEIs in SA and reviewing institutional policy documents, and support strategies, the study found that support structures, strategies and policy are not unified or controlled across institutions and that despite the initiatives, student dropout rates are on the increase.

The study used empirical findings to show that the current student support structures, strategies and policy, have still not addressed the needs of vulnerable students who also contribute to the wastage phenomenon in HE. Evidenced through the student narratives, there exists a university wide policy implication with regards to faculty conduct. Furthermore vulnerable student experiences, necessitates training for faculty on how to deal with students where gender, race, nepotism and stereotypes might be a sensitive issue. There is also a need for university governance and leadership to have systems in place to monitor and remediate situations of malpractice as well as to monitor the follow up on support systems that are in place but not followed through by faculty intervention or support in reality. There is a need for policy review which will enable the HEI to better support at-risk students in order to improve retention and throughput.

This chapter presented the conclusions from the study and implications for further research. This study fits around previous research and extends the debates raised. The study argues for further investigation into the link between the conceptual framework of vulnerability, student support and retention. Such policy needs to revise HE institutional ethics policy and practice. The chapter argues that some insight can be gained from the perceptions of at-risk students, reasons for their vulnerability and how they have coped. The study thereby contributes to existing bodies of knowledge on at-risk students, by conceptualising

vulnerability as a key factor that contributes to an increase in student dropout. In addition, there is currently no dominant existing theory of student vulnerability in HE linked to understanding student support and retention strategies. The key purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which the narratives of students fit into the constructs of an integrated approach for understanding vulnerability.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned limitations, the study suggests that there is merit in researching and understanding student vulnerability in order to ameliorate the phenomena of dropout and wastage. In spite of what is often reported about the benefits of at-risk student early identification and support, in practice, very limited intervention exists to accomplish this. Pastoral Care at the university needs university wide commitment to document, record and take action in order to ameliorate incidences of cases such as attempted suicide, depression, aggression and so forth. There is a need for the further empowerment and training of student unions or representative councils, which are comprised of an independent student body who lobby for students welfare and their rights. Such training should encourage the student representative who sits on Faculty board or management meetings, to represent student voice from across the respective Schools and departments.

Only some solutions to the prevailing and persistent increase in student dropout and attrition statistics are offered. The benefits of theory-building research on conceptualising student vulnerability indicates that to identify 'the' appropriate student support policy, structures, and strategies is more complex than the literature suggests. This study accordingly establishes a foundation for further research about the changing interface of student vulnerability and the support required to achieve improved targets of retention and throughput.

It always seems impossible until it's done.

Nelson Mandela

APPENDIX A

A.1 Student invitation letter

A.2 Student consent form

A.3 Invitation poster sent via email to encourage participation

A.4 Interview biographical data

A.5 Narrative interview protocol

A.6 Additional probing questions - protocol

A.7 Gate-keeper invitation letter

A.8 Gate-keeper consent form

A.9 Confirmation of Candidature

A. 10 Ethics clearance letter

A.1 Student invitation letter

Wits School of Education

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 • Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa
Tel: +27 11 717-3007 • Fax: +27 11 717-3009 • E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za • Website: www.wits.ac.za

November 2012

Dear Student,

Research Project: Stories of students about their experiences at university: insights into student retention and support at a South African university.

My name is Nevensha. I am a PhD student from the School of Education and I would like to personally invite you to participate in the above-mentioned research project. The project aims to:

- Collect and analyze stories about the experience of students at university and how their progress and achievement is influenced by these experiences,
- Identify a range of issues around student experiences and subsequent interventions required to increase the participation and success of students; and,
- Investigate a range of strategies and support that best translate student experience and participation into retention and throughput.

I am interested in how the university's values and traditions, policies and practices influence the lives and success of students. I will be exploring the following issues: the stories of students regarding their academic and social experience at university; the nature of support structures and strategies; and how the students negotiate academic performance and success within a diverse university environment.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to participate or not. Your student name and number **will not** be used. Your responses will be anonymous and will not be made available to staff members at the university. There is no penalty for you choosing not to participate. If you may wish to stop your participation at a particular time, you may feel free to do so. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to. If you do not wish your interview responses to be used in the study, you may contact me, and I will remove your responses from the study. If you choose to participate in this study, I will personally interview you during November 2012 – March 2013 and at a mutually agreed date and venue. Interviews are planned to last no more than 45 minutes.

The results will be primarily used in the development of my thesis and may result in publications in learned journals at a later stage. This study **will not** pose any risks **nor** result in any side effects, or have any direct or immediate benefits to you. If you feel that you have in any way been disadvantaged during your participation in the course of the study, or if you have any questions about this research project, or concerns about privacy, please do not hesitate to contact me, Nevensha Sing, on (011) 717 3325 or my Supervisor Professor Felix Maringe on (011) 717 73091.

I sincerely hope that you will be willing to participate. If so, in only one paragraph please summarize your learning experience at university thus far. Based on your mini story, I will contact you to further explore your story and experience with you. Please e-mail your summary to me, at: Nevensha.Sing@students.wits.ac.za with your name, gender, Faculty, e-mail address and a telephone number so that an interview time with you can be arranged.

Kindly keep this letter so that you have my contact details should you wish to contact me in future. Help me to help others who come after us to have a more rewarding experience at university. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm regards,



Nevensha Sing (Nevensha.Sing@students.wits.ac.za)

Student Invitation Letter & Consent Form

A.2 Student consent form

Wits School of Education

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 • Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa
Tel: +27 11 717-3007 • Fax: +27 11 717-3009 • E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za • Website: www.wits.ac.za

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Stories of students about their experiences at university: insights into student retention and support at a South African university.

I, (full name) _____

Hereby agree to participate in the research project: 'Stories of students about their experiences at university: insights into student retention and support at a South African university'.

I understand that I will be interviewed for about 45 minutes, that the interview will be tape-recorded and that tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet by the researcher. I hereby consent to the recording of the interview and to the use of my anonymous responses in the project. I further understand that my responses will be treated confidentially and that my identity will not be revealed. I will not be identified in any way on the transcript of the interview or in any of the published results of the study.

I may withdraw from the project without giving reasons at any time by contacting the researcher.
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that there is no penalty for not participating.
I have not been coerced or pressured into signing this consent form.

I have been informed of my rights: _____
Signature

I hereby consent to the narrative interview: _____
Signature

I herby consent to the audio recording: _____
Signature

Date: _____/_____/ 2012

Student Invitation Letter & Consent Form

A.3 Invitation sent via email to encourage participation

Stories of student experiences at university

My name is Nevensha. I am a PhD student from the School of Education and I would like to personally invite you to participate in my research project.

DO YOU WANT YOUR STORY TOLD?

Faculty	Year / Level of Student
Engineering and the Built Environment	1st Year Students and Masters Students
Humanities	2nd Year Students and PhD Students
Science	3rd Year Students
Health Sciences	4th Year Students
Commerce, Law and Management	Honours Students

Participation in this study is voluntary and your identity will be protected.

In only one paragraph summarise your learning experience at university thus far.

E-mail your summary to me, at: Nevensha.Sing@students.wits.ac.za with your name, gender, Faculty, e-mail address and a telephone number so that an interview time and venue can be arranged. Based on your mini story, I will set up an interview time and venue with you.

PLEASE Help me to help others who come after us to have a more rewarding experience at university.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm regards,

Nevensha Sing (Nevensha.Sing@gmail.com)

A.4 Interview biographical data

Interviewee Biographical Data

Interview No.		**Interviewer** Nevensha Sing	**DATE** / / 2012		**Venue**				**Duration**	: - :							
Interviewee Title, Name & Surname			**Institution**	Wits	**Faculty**		**Course / Degree**			**Year of Study**							
Marital Status	Single / Married / Divorced		**Number of Children**		**How are you financing your education?**		Bursary / Scholarship / Student Loan / Parents / **Other:**										
Staff Member	Permanent / Contract	**Position:**		**Support / Administrative Staff**		Permanent / Contract	**No. of Years Employed at Institution**		Qualifications & Institution Attained at								
Student	Local / International	Full Time / Part Time	**Have you studied before?**		Yes / No	What & Where?											
Day Student	Area / Suburb:	**Residence Student**	Name of Residence	**R a c e**	Black / Coloured / White / Indian	Nationality	**A g e**		**Gender** M F	**Religion Christian**							
E-mail Address			**Cell**				**Office / Home**										
Additional Notes																	

Interview No.		**Interviewer** Nevensha Sing	**DATE** / / 2012		**Venue**				**Duration**	: - :							
Interviewee Title, Name & Surname			**Institution**	Wits	**Faculty**		**Course / Degree**			**Year of Study**							
Marital Status	Single / Married / Divorced		**Number of Children**		**How are you financing your education?**		Bursary / Scholarship / Student Loan / Parents / **Other:**										
Staff Member	Permanent / Contract	Position:		**Support / Administrative Staff**		Permanent / Contract	**No. of Years Employed at Institution**		Qualifications & Institution Attained at								
Student	Local / International	Full Time / Part Time	**Have you studied before?**		Yes / No	What & Where?											
Day Student	Area / Suburb:	**Residence Student**	Name of Residence	**R a c e**	Black / Coloured / White / Indian	Nationality	**A g e**		**Gender** M F	**Religion Christian**							
E-mail Address			**Cell**				**Office / Home**										
Additional Notes																	

Record of Interviews: Private and Confidential: Names & Surnames will not be used in Results or for any other reason.

Compiled By: Nevensha Sing

A.5 Narrative interview protocol

Student Narrative Interview Schedule

1. **Preparation:** Set up the interview. Locate a safe, comfortable, and non-threatening environment.
2. **Initiation:** Start Recording and present the initial topic.
3. **Main Narration:** no questioning, only non-verbal encouragement.
4. **Questioning Phase:** only immanent questions.\
5. **Concluding Talk:** stop recording and continue the conversation as it comes.
6. **Construct a memory protocol** of 'concluding talk'.

Suggested Opening of the topic to lead into narration:

My name is Nevensha. I am also a university student. Please note that this is not a traditional interview. I will not be asking you a series of questions but I would like you to feel at ease to talk freely about your experiences at university and how these experiences may have hindered your progress. Please note that your story will be confidential and your identity will be anonymous. You also have the right to withdraw from this narrative interview, without providing reasons as to why, at any time that you may so wish to, by simply informing me of your decision.

There is a widespread acknowledgement that students' at any level attending university, experience serious challenges and problems or are faced with issues and circumstances that are sometimes beyond their control and these experiences affect their academic achievement at optimum levels. I am interested in how policy and the institution itself can be open to addressing and supporting the unspoken needs of students.

As a student, I have also been through my own unique issues, learning challenges and experiences at university. Also know that my purpose is not to judge your experiences or to use your narration to position myself as a star student or a student that is better or worse off than you or anybody else. However, the focus of this interview is on you and your experiences at university. To begin, tell me a little about yourself leading to how you eventually came to university.

Please share your experiences with me...

A.6 Additional probing questions - protocol

Depending on my evaluation of the richness of the narrative, such that it may not be full in description, I may use the following probing questions to elicit further details:

Draft: Probing Student Interview Schedule

A Focus on the student's background

Probing questions:

1. Qualification: What degree are you registered for? Why did you choose this degree?
2. How did you get to be here at this university? Why this university?
3. Describe a 'typical' day for you on campus / at home/ residence?

Accommodation

4. Where do you stay and are you happy with your living conditions?
5. What are the problems and benefits associated with staying there? Would you move if you had a choice? Why?
6. How would you describe a good living environment for you as student?
7. Describe the place where you prefer to study after lectures.
8. How does your living environment impact on your studies?
9. Who pays for your studies? Are you happy with this arrangement?

Finances

10. Have you had any financial problems? How have you addressed them? Has anybody helped you?
11. Do you feel that your financial problems interfere with your studies?
12. Do you work or have you worked throughout your studies? If 'yes' kindly elaborate on what kind of work and how many hours a week?

Adaption / Transition school to campus

13. Have you had to change anything about yourself in order to adjust to campus life at this university? What and why?
14. What does it mean to you to be a student at this university? Do you see yourself as a member of the university's community? How would you describe this university's community?
15. What kind of challenges do you face as a member of the university community?

Compiled by: Nevensha Sing Page 1

If the student is an International student:

1. Have you been to Johannesburg before you started studying at this university?
2. What was difficult about coming here?
3. Do you feel like an outsider or is it easy to fit in? Explain.
4. How has the International Office helped in your enrollment and adjustment to university life?
5. How could they help you further?
6. What other types of support do you need to enable you have a better experience at this university?

B Focus on the student's academic experiences

Probing questions:

1. What sorts of content and skills have you encountered so far?
2. How would you describe the 'level' of the work you have encountered so far?
3. Can you describe any experiences of 'new' learning on the course so far?
4. To what extent would you say you have enjoyed the course so far?
5. To what extent have you found the course useful so far?
6. What do you think of the courses that you are doing?
7. Are they interesting, relevant to your context, is the knowledge important to you?
8. What conditioned the choice of your course?
9. What is your experience in the lectures (interesting / boring / irrelevant / difficult to follow /confusing / helpful)?
10. Do you participate in lectures or just listen?
11. And what about tutorials/laboratories?
12. Who do you turn to for help with your studies and why (Lecturers /tutors /fellow students /others)?
13. Do you consult directly with your lecturers in their offices? Explain.
14. Is there a lecturer that left a big impression (good or bad) on you (kind-of-for-life)? Tell us about him/her.
15. What makes the environment in which you learn a positive or negative environment?
16. What kind of support makes or will make your academic experience worthwhile?

A.7 Gate-keeper invitation letter

Wits School of Education

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 • Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa
Tel: +27 11 717-3007 • Fax: +27 11 717-3009 • E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za • Website: www.wits.ac.za

September 2012

Dear _____,

Dean of the Faculty of _____

Research Project: Stories of students about their experiences at university: insights into student retention and support at a South African university.

Re: Request of "gate-keeper permission" to undertake research within your Faculty.

Kindly find attached: the Project's Ethical Clearance, a copy of the Interview Protocol, as well as the Invitation and Consent Form for the students'.

My name is Nevensha. I am a PhD student from the School of Education and I would like to personally invite you to participate in the above-mentioned research project. The project aims to:

- Collect and analyze stories about the experience of students at university and how their progress and achievement is influenced by these experiences,
- Identify a range of issues around student experiences and subsequent interventions required to increase the participation and success of students; and,
- Investigate a range of strategies and support that best translate student experience and participation into retention and throughput.

I am interested in how the university's values and traditions, policies and practices influence the lives and success of students. I will be exploring the following issues: the stories of students regarding their academic and social experience at university; the nature of support structures and strategies; and how the students negotiate academic performance and success within a diverse university environment.

The project is interesting in that it attempts to establish links between support structures and students experience of them. It will look at the narratives of students in order to provide insights into student retention and support in Higher Education.

At this point the Project requires your Permission to have access to your Faculty, staff and students.
I further request your assistance in providing me with statistics needed for finalizing data collection. Individual interviews are scheduled to take place during September and November 2012, and they will be approximately 45 minutes long. I also request your permission to email an invitation letter and consent form to your _____ students' ONLY.

The results will be primarily used in the development of my thesis. However, findings may be used in research papers / conferences and may result in publications in learned journals at a later stage. If you have any questions about this research project, or concerns about privacy, please do not hesitate to contact me, on (011) 717 3325 or my Supervisor, Professor Felix Maringe on (011) 717 73091.

If you are willing to allow me access to your faculty, staff and students', please complete the attached Consent form and e-mail me at: Nevensha.Sing@students.wits.ac.za with your name, Faculty, e-mail address and a telephone number of a contact person so that follow up arrangements can be made.

Kindly keep this letter so that you have my contact details should you wish to contact me in future.

Warm regards,



Nevensha Sing (Nevensha.Sing@students.wits.ac.za)

Dean of Faculty Gate Keeper Invitation Letter & Consent Form

A.8 Gate-keeper consent form

Wits School of Education

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 • Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa
Tel: +27 11 717-3007 • Fax: +27 11 717-3009 • E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za • Website: www.wits.ac.za

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Stories of students about their experiences at university: insights into student retention and support at a South African university.

Re: Request of "gate-keeper permission" to undertake research within my Faculty.

I, (full name) _____

Do hereby agree to participate in the research project: 'Stories of students about their experiences at university: insights into student retention and support at a South African university'.

Nevensha Sing has my permission **to access** statistics required, staff and student information and permission to make contact with students' regarding the scheduling of interviews.

Nevensha also has my permission to request my Faculty Administrators to forward her Invitation letter and Consent form to _____ students' via email.

I understand that the students' will be interviewed and that the interviews will be tape-recorded and that tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet by the researcher. I also understand that the research will use anonymous responses in the project and will be treated confidentially. The students' will not be identified in any way on the transcript of the interview or in any of the published results of the study.

I understand that my students' participation is voluntary, there is no penalty for not participating and that they may withdraw from the project at any time by contacting the researcher.

The faculty contact person _____ that will assist

Nevensha can be contacted via: E-mail _____

Or telephone number: (011) _____ or cell: _____

I have not been coerced or pressured into signing this consent form.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____/_____/ 2012

Dean of Faculty Gate Keeper Invitation Letter & Consent Form

A.9 Confirmation of Candidature

Faculty of Humanities: Education Campus

Room 208/9, Administration Block, 27 St. Andrews Road, Parktown **Tel**: +27 11 717-3021/18 · **Fax**: 0865536779 or +27 11 717-3267 E-mail: nombulelo.madikhetla@wits.ac.za

Ms N Sing
P O Box 17795
Norkem Park
1631

PERSON NUMBER: 0010372Y

25 July 2012

Dear Ms Sing

CONFIRMATION OF CANDIDATURE FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (FULL TIME)

I am pleased to inform you that the Graduate Studies Committee in Education has approved your research proposal entitled: **Stories of students indentified as at risk: Insights into student retention and support in Higher Education at a South African University.**

You have now been admitted to full candidature.

Please note that copies of the readers' reports have been given to your supervisor.

I confirm that Prof Felix Maringe has been appointed as your supervisor.

Your attention is drawn to the Senate's requirement that all higher degree candidates submit brief written reports on their progress to the Faculty Office once a year.

Please note that higher degree candidates are required to renew their registration in January each year. Please keep us informed of any changes of address during the year.

Yours sincerely

N Madikhetla

Ms. Nombulelo Madikhetla
Deputy Registrar
Faculty of Humanities: Education
cc Supervisor: Prof F Maringe

A.10 Ethics Clearance

Wits School of Education

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa
Tel: +27 11 717-3064 Fax: +27 11 717-3100 E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za Website: www.wits.ac.za

Student Number:
Protocol Number:
2012ECE188

Date: 30-Oct-2012

Dear Nevensha N Sing

Application for Ethics Clearance: Doctor of Philosophy

Thank you very much for your ethics application. The Ethics Committee in Education of the Faculty of Humanities, acting on behalf of the Senate has considered your application for ethics clearance for your proposal entitled:

Stories of students identified as at risk: insights into student retention and support at a South African university.

The committee recently met and I am pleased to inform you that clearance was granted.

Please use the above protocol number in all correspondence to the relevant research parties (schools, parents, learners etc.) and include it in your research report or project on the title page.

The Protocol Number above should be submitted to the Graduate Studies in Education Committee upon submission of your final research report.

All the best with your research project.

Yours sincerely

MMabeta

Matsie Mabeta
Wits School of Education

011 717 3416

Cc Supervisor: Prof. F Maringe

A.11 Narrative threads: combining restories and artefact analysis

Narrative threads: Combining Restories and Artefact Analysis			
	RISKS Hazard causes & consequences	**Political Economy Exposure Who & why Vulnerable**	**RESILIENCE how to COPE**
1	1st year was a hustle	adjustments to being in a new place	'We are the clients of this business'
2	acceptable and non-acceptable norms	adult students faced with challenges at work	administrators and faculty respond timeously to emails
3	accommodation far from school	afraid of getting lost	appeal decision of exclusion
4	alcohol abuse	all group members do not do sufficient work for participation	asked for help from lecturers
5	cancer / tumours	ancestors vs personal identity = cultural and spiritual conflict	ate humble pie and accepted the mistreatment
6	cooking and taking care of siblings	away from circle of intimacy	athletics challenges
7	cultural	away from country	Became a Leader and a Mentor
8	cultural beliefs /customs / traditions	away from home	Belief in the Church and God
9	damage cars	away from province	Believes on Journey of self-discovery
10	dehydrated – no water available outside toilets	battle to the edge is not yet over	CCDU for career guidance
11	did not know how to use university bus services	being a female and having to park outside university	chose teaching over Engineering
12	did not know of fathers existence	cannot attend family functions or funerals	Church
13	did not understand how timetable and tutorials work	challenges distract studying	Circles of intimacy with people of similar backgrounds
14	disadvantaged in group work	choice of leave study to go back home – while someone else raises your children	Community Service
15	dispositional	could not get international clearance timeously	compiled a personal paper trail of correspondence with university
16	don't know how to use student card to upload money to use for printing services	could not interpret bus routes or schedules	counselling by the family Pastor
17	don't let the racism win!	cultural demands / expectations / responsibility	counselling CCDU
18	dropping out of study to work = negative effects on research output	death of loved ones and cannot attend	easy enrolment process
19	duties of buying food & run the home	did not get advise on major options	external support structures
20	enrolment issues	difficult childhood	facilitate water bottles points and include it in fees
21	ethnic difference / bias	dispositional	family
22	ethnicity	does not wish to drink water from toilet taps	fear of humiliated by family in country of origin
23	failed courses / subjects	emotional due to unfair politics of the university	fear of not completing degree
24	failed first year	extreme pressure to excel = but can't find balance between study and looking for money to support siblings	fit in and belong to a social group at university
25	families in sa warn newcomers of blatant racism by institution, as a way discouragement	fear of background	focus on completion goal through perseverance
26	family expectations	fear of being homeless	found an excellent Mentor
27	family, cultural, financial, and spiritual issues had to be hidden from friends	fear of going home in the dark	found her strength to stand up
28	fear to speak out	fear of reporting supervisor else he would withhold her masters pass	friends
29	fear will be judged – rather be alone and tell god	feelings of isolation/ injustice	good personality helps overcome fear
30	felt suicidal with pressure and stress	financial – a constant battle to live – to eat – transport	heightened sense of responsibility and duty beyond

			the self
31	health, exclusion from course	First from family to attend University not a College	historical context = struggle / poverty / used to hard work
32	identity in question	FOMO (fear of missing out)	husband love and support.
33	institutional	friends that were not really true	if you present yourself as desperate – you get treated less
34	internal vulnerability	hard to find balance with cultural upbringing and academic path	institution support structures
35	issues around attendance	head of child-headed homes	institutional / department support
36	language barrier	identity conflict	joining faith groups
37	nationality	identity confusion as to who she wanted to be	keeping a diary
38	need of confirmation letter to process study permit	insufficient allocation of parking bays	lay down your expectations - you get treated better.
39	no concern by institution / supervisor / department / faculty	intellectual challenges – fear to get help / no source of help	made friends with a senior student in the same course
40	no decent standard of living	internal dilemmas	need to make a difference in standards of education in sa
41	not knowing how school system works	lack of balance: family life & research productivity	no choice – but to survive
42	not knowing how to use the library	lack of care or support from university	no time for friends – so no friendship or peer support
43	parking problem	lack of empathy – no concern for being a human	parents
44	partying / clubbing	lack of finances to support siblings	passion for profession
45	past identity issues were hidden	language and accent	physical exercise and workouts
46	peer pressure	limited / scarce skill job field	place and circumstance
47	physical abuse	no alternative route to seek assistance	prayer groups
48	poor administrative support	no balance with cultural upbringing and academic path	provided shelter / accommodation
49	poor results further depression	no balance with family life and research productivity	push feelings aside
50	post graduate studying is not easy	no postgraduate orientation	put your cards on the table
51	questioning career choice	No South African support or interaction with colleagues	rational and self-agency
52	racial prejudice: racism in sa is alive and well.	Not South African / Dual citizenship	relaxes with more than a beer
53	registered late	personal issues such as family pressure and expectations	remain invisible
54	self-blame	poor administration	sacrifice = willingness to endure new types of suffering
55	self-hate	pressure to excel	singing and prayers at church
56	self-pity = misery	racism by institution / people of the country - used as discouragement	sings at church
57	situational	rejection by supervisor on day of submission	social life overtook focus on student life and studies
58	six years to complete a four year degree	self-deficit image	sport
59	smoking weed / hubbly	SES – cannot break free	stick it out! show them!'
60	social class and identity	shortage of parking instils fear	succumb to peer pressure
61	social issues of acceptance	situational	time heals
62	socio economic status	social and support – no friends – no real people who care	to be able to apply knowledge and skills at a company on completion
63	spiritual	socio economic – hard to remove self-deficit image	university counselling
64	struggled to locate way around campus	spiritual demands / expectations / responsibility	university is the way out of problems and struggles
65	struggled with class and identity	status of exclusion from university that was unfair	volunteering at a counselling centre to help others
66	struggled with major taken	stereotypes	was not coping well

67	struggled with personal identity	stigma attached to being a B.Ed. student	writing poems / stories
68	struggled with social class	stigma surrounding physical appearance / as being dumb	
69	supervision	struggle to cope on own – CCDU = unavailable	
70	teenage pregnancy	student who plagiarised respondents work	
71	timetable clash in repeating different year level courses	supervisor was forced 'choice' / was key referee job applications ≠ success	
72	unfair exclusion	supervisors show prejudice and racism towards student	
73	unknown environment of university	unhygienic toilets	
74	wanted to dropout	university did not reply timeously	
75	warn family back home of racism by people of the country used to protect family	victim of bullying	
76	xenophobia	wanted especially to fit in at university	
77		workload overwhelming	

PERSONAL WRITINGS

Artefact 1: Poem: a part of me

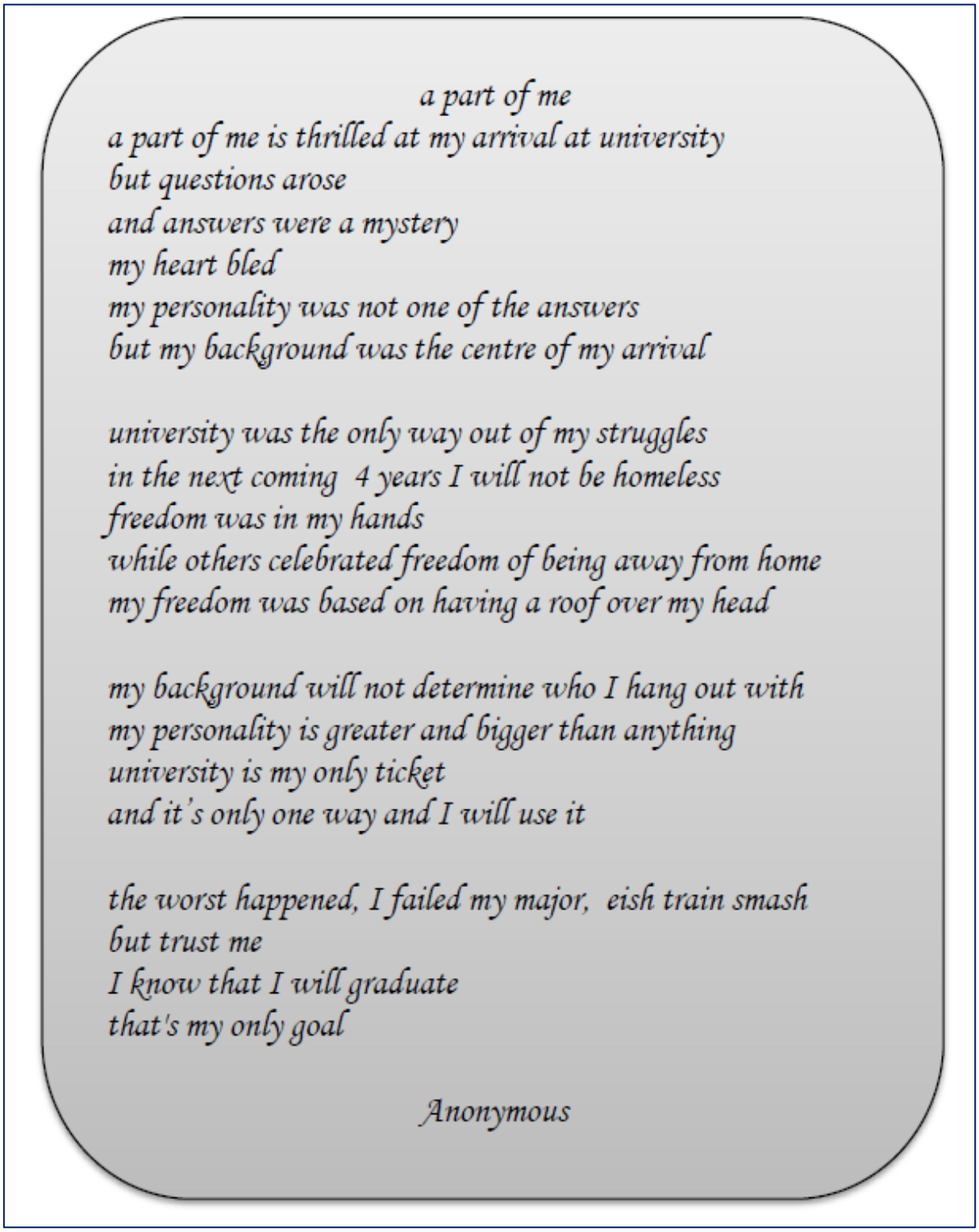
Artefact 2: My experience at University

Artefact 3: My issues at University

Artefact 4: UNIVERSITY has been wonderful

Artefact 5: It was never about being average

Artefact 1: Poem: a part of me



a part of me

a part of me is thrilled at my arrival at university
but questions arose
and answers were a mystery
my heart bled
my personality was not one of the answers
but my background was the centre of my arrival

university was the only way out of my struggles
in the next coming 4 years I will not be homeless
freedom was in my hands
while others celebrated freedom of being away from home
my freedom was based on having a roof over my head

my background will not determine who I hang out with
my personality is greater and bigger than anything
university is my only ticket
and it's only one way and I will use it

the worst happened, I failed my major, eish train smash
but trust me
I know that I will graduate
that's my only goal

Anonymous

Artefact 2: My experience of university

My Experience of University

Under -Grad

- *Upon getting my place at University, I had to come to University to ask them to ask them to furnish me with A Firm Confirmation letter.*
- *Only then would I be in a position to process my study permit*



- *I registered late, I was lost, didn't know my way around campus it took me two weeks to locate the matrix purely because I was afraid of getting lost.*
- *I struggled to understand how the timetable works, tutorials, and getting my feet on the ground.*



- *Generally the year was ok except for adjustments to being in a new place . .and the shock of trying to get used to the idea of " having " a father . . .the shock the horror, the tension, the drama, the non-acceptance by new relatives, the ugly snares, the list is endless. And then only to have him turn around and say he can't do this: father –child relationship.*
- *Struggling with a subject I thought I should major in . . . And making a decision without consulting with family first.*



- *Missing weddings, loosing loved ones having to struggle to cope on my own because CCDU was 'fully booked'.*



- *Finally completing the course and attending graduation made the perseverance all worth it*



Post- Grad

- *Honours: was exciting but as usual the University replied late . . .so accommodation close to school was extremely hard to come by. So I ended up living really far from school, leaving the house at 05:30hrs to be on time for an 8'o clock which I fortunately did not have, left school before 15:00hrs so I get home before dark.*
- *Struggled with school, getting a supervisor for my research half way through the year and them not liking my research idea and somewhat making me start over, pressure for other academic work.*



- *Masters: has been a bumpy ride as well trying to find my feet, being told my research idea is a PhD thesis . . And being told to change it . . . Time management, and getting things done when one is feeling discouraged but the journey continues . . .i sometimes say University throws u over the edge and gives you a thin thread to pull yourself back up!*



Artefact 3: My issues with University

Please find my issues with the University.

1. Have great Lecturers, and is really a pleasure to be associated with the University.
2. Excellent enrolling process (very easy)
3. Issues around attendance
4. Unhygienic Toilets
5. Expect at lease water points (bottle) on floors, can't drink water out of the toilet (can possibly facilitate this service in our fees)
6. The University should allow Lecturers to engage with student who failed with a 48%, why let a student fail, if there is something that can be done (additional assignment or other allow for re-write)
7. Postgraduate studying is not easy, as most of our adult learners are faced with major challenges in the work place that distract studying.
8. Parking is an enormous problem, small allocations - possibly cause damages to cars, or no parking at all (especially for female students, we have to park outside and that can jeopardise our safety.
9. Group for assignments, not effectively managed (as adults, leader of group should present to the University, the groups involvements, as some are not really active and can cause other students be disadvantaged).

Hope this helps (we are after all the client of this business).

Anonymous

Artefact 4: University has been wonderful

UNIVERSITY has been wonderful

My student experience at the University has been wonderful over all however there had been some challenges associated with being a University student. These challenges included for example: not knowing how the School system works, figuring out how to use library facilities, how to use the student card system for printing, typing and scanning and how to actually load the student cards with kudu bucks.

As a post grad student I had not received any orientation so I had to familiarise myself with all the institutions facilities, know where and how to find all the buildings for example libraries and faculty buildings and also figure out how the University school bus operated meaning its routes and times.

However other problems where that to register for my degree program was quite a challenge because I had to get into the process of getting international clearance which required a change of conditions on my study permit and this required a lot of time and effort.

One of the experiences I will always remember at the University was that the work load was overwhelming at first and actually struggled with keeping up with email from my lecturers but eventually I got used to the fact that the University is hard work all the way.

One of the good experiences was that when I registered at the CCDU for career guidance I discovered that the University had a very good standing with many large local and international companies which were looking for graduate students. This was very exciting, encouraging and motivating.

Another great experience was that the administration and all the lecturers and staff at my faculty respond to emails swiftly and are always willing to help

My ultimate goal is to work for a large company be it local or international doing what I learnt at University and like and be able to apply my knowledge and skills in the workplace

Anonymous

Artefact 5: It was never about being average

It was never about being average

I came to the University in the year 2010 to do my B.Ed. Degree.

1st year was a bit of a hustle because I had to make transition and settle in @ the University, on the other side I wanted to enjoy my life as a student, the good thing is that I managed to make friends with senior student who were also doing the same degree as mine and that eased off the tension. They managed to help me, support me and making sure I do find a balance in all my aspects of life.

Being a B.Ed. student was never easier as there is a stigma attached to it: people assume that we are average people hence we doing that degree and for me personally it was never about being average. I chose the degree I'm doing over engineering and law (of which I was accepted on) simply cause I wanted a way of having a significant impact and try by all means to improve the quality and the standards of education in our country cause from what I see, the country is promoting mediocre passing (30% below average).

The years went by as I was developing as a teacher and on the other side as a leader, mentor and a tutor in the Education Campus. I became involved because I wanted to challenge the stigma that "main campus students" have against us but being the top achiever I am, I ask myself why do I care about the labelling's that others give without knowing the reasons about our situations? The answer was, you are a rational being and you possess agency.

I then joined forces with the SDLU and CCDU, I went to the leadership camp then we were expected to do a project that seeks on making a significant impact. Working with the SDLU helped me so much that it exposed me to a lot of things helpful for me to develop and enjoy a holistic student life; it is through the SDLU that I managed to get a mentor.

Last year as my passion for change, I served as a First Year Experience Ambassador: working with 1st years so they bridge the gap between varsity and high school, for me the programme was very effective such that when I look back @ the people I mentored, I see the impact I had on them through their deeds.

Having all the roles never affected my performance as I always strived for excellence. My grades kept improving each year my vision is that, I want to be a teacher who is recognised by the quality of performance and the motivation I bring to the learners.

I want to be that unique teacher who always strives to make a significant impact regardless of the circumstances and lastly I want to remain the best version of ME and never lose my character. The battle to the edge is not yet over and my aim is to graduate at record time, every day at the University has its challenges and when I fail to overcome them I tell myself that failure is just an event, I always strive for excellence.
"I would rather be a failure doing what I love than succeed doing what I hate" that's my life motto.

Anonymous

Artefact 6: Poem: Irish Blessing

The poem that I like very much:

Irish Blessing

Lyrics by The Priests.

May the road rise to meet you,
May the wind be ever at your back.
And may the sun shine warm upon your face,
The rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you ever
in the palm of his hand.

May God be with you and bless you:
May you see your children's children.
May you be poor in misfortune,
Rich in blessings.
May you know nothing but happiness
From this day forward.

May the road rise up to meet you
May the wind be always at your back
May the warm rays of sun fall upon your home
And may the hand of a friend always be near.

May green be the grass you walk on,
May blue be the skies above you,
May pure be the joys that surround you,
May true be the hearts that love you.

http://www.maxilyrics.com/the-priests-irish-blessing-lyrics-bdc1.html

Anonymous

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