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Exploring the lived experiences of highly successful low socio-economic background students from community day secondary school in Malawi's higher education

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Exploring the Lived Experiences of Highly Successful Low Socio-economic Background Students from Community Day Secondary School in Malawi's Higher Education

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Tiffany Vincentia Sinthampi-Banda

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

Supervisors: Prof Felix Maringe, Dr Emmanuel Ojo, Dr Elizabeth Ndofirepi

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ABSTRACT

Policies to widen access in higher education have been extensively adopted globally, with the aim of targeting a wider population and being inclusive of those considered marginalised, among whom are those from low socio-economic backgrounds. Despite the efforts of inclusion of the marginalised into the system, they persistently fall through, in what Dawes, Yeld and Smith (1999, p.97) term the 'revolving door syndrome'. This, as the targeted students, who gain access into higher education, fail to obtain the intended results, due to high dropout and low throughput. While the academic legacy of students, from a low socio-economic background, in higher education has been characterised by high dropout, low throughput and incompletion, there have been pockets of students from this background that have defied the odds to show academic excellence in higher education. Little is known of these students. Using a qualitative research approach, this study adopted a phenomenological case study research design to explore the lived experiences of highly successful students from a low socio-economic background, in Malawi's higher education. Data collected, through individual interviews and shadowing, explored their experiences as students in a higher education institution, as well as their perception of the role of the institution regarding their lives as students from the specific type of background. Finally, data on the perceived non-institutional mediating factors in their success was also collected.

The study found that these respondents, just like literature explains, lacked necessary capitals that would enhance their academic attainment. Their lived experiences revealed resource constraints, compromised educational foundation, stigmatisation and lack of institutional support, as some of the challenges they encountered. Despite these challenges, some mediating factors acted as enablers in their ability to beat the odds and exhibit academic excellence. From the analysis of data, themes emerged that explained the constraining experiences of students from a low socio-economic background, including the captivity that came with their background; the challenges of overcoming barriers, that they encountered by virtue of their background; and the systemic gaps at the policy and institutional levels. Beyond these constraining experiences, data revealed opportunities that students exploited in mitigating the constraining experiences. Themes falling under these opportunities included personal initiatives, family/community resilience, peer safety net and institutional intervention. It can, therefore, be argued that, in order to address the academic plight of students from a lowsocio-economic background, effort needs to be made to strengthen these mediating factors, which, among others, calls for institutions to harness.

One of the contributions of this study was the ‘Success Against Odds’ (SAO) model that brings together all these themes into a coherent way of understanding both the plight of students from a low socio-economic background and as the mediating factors that explain their ability to beat the odds and succeed academically. As a contribution, this model would be used as a tool to explore this research area further, especially when relating to the context of less developed countries, where most of the theories that explain this phenomenon from the developed countries’ contexts were found to be lacking.

Keywords: access; dropout; higher education; lived experiences; low socio-economic background; resilience, success, shadowing; throughput

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own work and a result of my own original research. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for degree purposes to any other university.

Signature: 

Tiffany Vincentia Sinthampi-Banda

1st……day of July……in the year 2020……

DEDICATION

To Likondwa and Chimango for allowing mum some time away and for being her greatest fans along the way

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This PhD experience can best be described as a repeat of the 'Exodus' with all the victories, pitfalls, defeats, regrets and thoughts of going back to the comfortable 'Egypt'. Through it all, I was privileged enough to have sources that I could draw strength from, without whom, this journey would not have reached this far.

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ABBREVIATIONS/ ACRONYMS

CDSS	Community Day Secondary School
CoM	College of Medicine
CSS	Conventional Secondary School
DEC	Distant Education Centre
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DPA	Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis
EMI	Effectively Maintained Inequalities
FPE	Free Primary Education
GRD	Generalised Resource Deficit
GRE	Graduate Record Examination
GRR	Generalised Resistance Resource
HDI	Human Development Index
HS	High School
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPA	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MKW	Malawi Kwacha
MMI	Maximally Maintained Inequalities
MSCE	Malawi School Certificate Examination
NCHE	National Council for Higher Education
NESP	National Education Sector Plan
PIF	Policy Investment Framework
RAT	Rational Action Theory
SAT	Scholastic Aptitude Test
SoC	Sense of Coherence
SES	Socio-economic Status
TTC	Teacher Training College
UEE	University Entrance Examination
UNIMA	University of Malawi

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

Numerous studies on higher education have been carried out, in both developed and developing countries (Ayalon & Yogev, 2005; Becker & Hecken, 2009; Vikki Boliver, 2011; Cupito & Langsten, 2011; Donnelly, 2016; Hillmert & Jacob, 2003; López, 2009). Regardless of whether the focus was on access, retention or completion, the results have revealed a discrepancy based on socio-economic background, when it comes to who benefits the most. Most of these studies reveal how higher education benefits students who come from middle and high socio-economic backgrounds, compared to those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Bowl, 2001; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Noble & Davies, 2009).

Efforts to redress this, by extending access to the under-represented group, have led to other disturbing findings. Poor attainment, a high attrition rate and a low completion rate have been associated with these students (Jones, Coetzee, Bailey, & Wickham, 2008; McCoy & Smyth, 2011; Weiss & Steininger, 2013). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa noted the importance of not focusing solely on improving access to higher education, at the expense of success and throughput. Failure to adopt such a holistic approach results in what has been termed the 'revolving door syndrome:' where the higher the access rate, the greater the dropout and attrition rate (DHET, 2014). Morrow (2007) observed this tendency as a consequence of the contradiction between what he has described as the gaining of formal access against epistemological access, among other factors. While institutions of higher education might be registering an improvement in the enrolment of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (formal access), these students fail to access the knowledge of developing coherent ways of understanding and engaging in the new and mostly unfamiliar environment (epistemological access). This has resulted in loss through attrition and incompletion (Pendlebury, 2008).

Studies have endeavoured to explain the rationale behind these discrepancies, yet there has been little or no impact on resolving the issues. Despite the efforts and initiatives, which governments around the world seem to be adopting to address these problems in higher education, the gap has not been filled adequately. Higher education appears to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, higher education is perceived as contributing to development and social change for economic growth, by way of advancement in knowledge and technology; on the other hand, it creates disparities in wealth and opportunities between rural and urban students, genders, ethnicities, social classes and generations (Moore, 2004). The latter rolehas been based on the understanding that higher education works in favour of the already privileged

socio-economically. As such, it serves to maintain the status quo (Bourdieu, 1990). This is at the expense of those coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. These students appear to be side-lined in the process.

While most of the studies have approached this area from different angles, Prinsloo (2009) pointed out three levels of approach: individual, institutional and supra-institutional levels. The focus of the proposed study, on the first level (individual), is specifically on students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who have attained formal access and are highly successful academically. By exploring their life experiences, insights could be drawn on how they have managed to navigate higher education successfully.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The Malawi National Education Sector Plan (2008-2017) has, as one of its first priorities for higher education, "the setting in place of a system, which is well efficient and effective in its public purposes of ensuring access with consideration of gender, needy and vulnerable groups" (NESP, 2008, p. 24). On Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of higher education, NESP would ensure the achievement of the priority areas aimed at improving access and equity, quality and relevance, governance and management of education in Malawi. One means of achieving these aims would be by more research, which would explicate the different interventions. In theory, the plan appeals to the needs of higher education, but in practice, there is still evidence of great inequalities in access, as well as the success rate and completion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (World Bank, 2016). Evidence from literature proves that, even after students from low socio-economic backgrounds have been enrolled into higher education institutions, a significant percentage of them fail and are forced to withdraw. Thus, the efforts to extend access to those from low socio-economic backgrounds show a high attrition rate (World Bank, 2016).

Despite many efforts to redress the situation, there has been little attempt to engage the affected group (low socio-economic background students) in either confronting the problem or understanding their situation, based on their life experiences. There has been some work done in relation to students from low socioeconomic background in higher education. On the most part, the studies have revealed the plight associated with coming from low socioeconomic background which puts these students at a disadvantage. This particular study was a slight shift from what has been termed as the deficit perspective towards a dynamic perspective (discussed in chapter 2) into exploring their lived experiences and how these experiences explain their ability to succeed academically.

Failure to address this situation not only exacerbates the problem of inequalities, but also

wastes the meagre resources, which poor governments, like Malawi, have to invest in the development of human capital. According to Hall and Mambo (2015), the government of Malawi spent over US$3,300 per student per year. It is evident that the dropout and incompletion in higher education is an added burden to the Malawian economy.

This study is, therefore, an effort through research to contribute to interventions aimed at rectifying some of the issues being faced in improving the status of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education, as pointed out in the NESP. The study not only has the potential of contributing to the improvement, survival and success of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, but would also enable government to realise the full benefits of the investment in funding higher education.

1.3 The Research questions

The study had the following as its main guiding question:

What is the lived experience of students from low socioeconomic background, who are thriving academically in Malawi's higher education?

This main question was fleshed out through the following sub-questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Malawian undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds, that explain their encounter, as student, with higher education?
2. How do these students from low socio-economic backgrounds experience institutional mediation throughout their time of study in Malawi's higher education?
3. What evidence of non-institutional mediation helped through their time as students in higher education?

The first question focuses on the students' experiences while growing up. It looks at their family and educational background and how they perceived their lives in light of their socio- economic backgrounds.

The second question focuses on the perceived role that the institution played in their lives, as students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. This is in the context of institutions through existing policies have a role to play in ensuring the well-being of students in higher education institutions, especially those considered at risk.

The last question explores what the students, through their lived experiences, have considered as mediations that have come by or that they have encountered, which have moderated some of the negative experiences that they have been faced with.

1,4 Aims and objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of students from low socio- economic backgrounds who succeed against the odds in higher education.

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Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are:

• to explore the experiences of successful low socio-economic background students in higher education

• to relate the perceived role that institutions have played in the lives of these students during their time as higher education students.

• to analyse the lived experiences of undergraduate students with institutional and non-institutional mediation of their success.

1.5 Rationale

Methodological Rationale

Previous studies and reports on inequalities in higher education and the state of students from low socio-economic backgrounds have sprung from quantitative findings and have been helpful in providing the necessary statistics, which provide an understanding of the extent of the problem. The qualitative studies conducted have focused on the entire student body, irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds. They have uncovered the many challenges which students from low socio-economic backgrounds encounter in higher education. The qualitative approach in this study provides another dimension, by addressing the 'why' and 'how' questions about the phenomenon, which Agee (2009) points out as the main focus of a qualitative inquiry. The phenomenon being explored in this study is "succeeding against the odds". The study will provide a platform on which further studies could build. Manik (2015), in discussing access and completion, showed how research in the area has mainly been based on *statistical* aspects and how such discourses have been at the expense of a deeper *qualitative* analysis of the phenomena. This study seeks, therefore, to address a portion of this methodological gap.

Theoretical Rationale

As has been stated earlier, there is a vast amount of evidence on higher education inequalities and the challenges faced by low socio-economic students. While the evidence has been backed by theories, there has not been theory-based evidence which explains the phenomenon being researched for this study, that takes into consideration the context of developing

countries and their economic and cultural variations, in comparison to the developed world, where most of the theories originated. This is an omission and neglected piece of the bigger picture. There should be some acknowledgement of those among the under-represented group who thrive and succeed against all odds. These students deserve to share their stories. By capturing their life experiences, lessons could be drawn which could contribute towards improving the prevailing situation. The voices of the marginalised who succeed could form the building blocks from which new theories could be developed.

Policy Rationale

The Malawi NESP's priority areas for higher education include access and equity, quality and relevance, governance and management. Part of access is ensuring that, although formal access is achieved, there *has* to be the epistemic access, which ensures that the students are retained and successfully complete their education. One aspect of management is the effective and efficient use of available resources. While government invests in its citizens' human capital, the loss, through dropout, failure and incompletion, implies poor management. Despite the challenges faced in higher education, much of the literature in which policy decisions are made, relies on findings from elsewhere that may not be as applicable, considering the Malawian context. Fraser, Galinsky, and Richman (1999) emphasise the importance of gaining an in-depth understanding of what helps people function well in the context of high adversity, in order to contribute meaningfully to the knowledge, practices and strategies relevant to given contexts. The insights drawn from this study would, therefore, contribute to informing policies aimed at ensuring that priority areas are improved, based on the Malawian situation and those of other countries that share similar socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

1.6 Thesis Structure

This thesis is comprised of a total of 9 chapters.

In this first chapter, an overview of the study is provided. It gives the reader some background and then provides the aim of the study and the research questions that guided it. Finally, the rationale of the study is provided.

Chapter 2 explores literature that has been documented and studies that have been conducted that are related to the topic of the study. Firstly, in this chapter, some of the terms that will be used in the study will be unpacked and how they will be conceptualised within the confines of the study will be outlined. This is followed by a brief background literature on Malawi, as a country. Its socio-economic standing and educational system have been provided to give context to the study. There is a discussion on the relationship between socio-economic backgrounds and access to higher education, from which the gap in the study has been brought

to the surface. The engagement with literature is followed by an unveiling of the theoretical perspectives from which this study would be viewed and which brought out a customised conceptual framework as a lens for the study.

Chapter 3 unfolds the step by step procedure that was followed in deciding on the route that the study would take, as far as accessing data and arriving at findings is concerned. Among other things, the chapter discusses and justifies the decisions made about the choice of research methodological approach, research design, sample site, sample size and sampling techniques. It also explains the methods that were employed in collecting, managing and analysing data. Finally, it addresses the quality assurance measures taken into consideration during the study and finally, the ethical procedures to which the study adhered.

Chapters 4-7 present the findings of the study. The first three chapters are based on the three research questions that were set out to guide the study. The last of these chapters (7) presents the findings as they emerged from the shadowing exercise, which was the other method through which data was collected.

Chapter 8 engages the findings emerging from the four previous chapters in a discussion that brings out themes that emerged during the study. The discussion was executed in the light of literature, as well as the conceptual framework that was generated in chapter 2. A model is provided as a product of the discussion in the chapter.

Finally, chapter 9, brings the thesis to a conclusion. It begins with a reflection of the entire study, followed by the insights that were generated from the process, including a framework that comes in the light of the practical engagement and outcomes from the entire study. The following sections provide the contributions that the study has made to knowledge in the areas of theory, policy and practice, followed by the implications of the study. Finally, the limitations of the study are documented, as are the areas that could be explored further in this particular field.

1.7 Chapter Conclusion

The first chapter has so far laid the background, as well as providing an overview of what is to be expected in the subsequent chapters. The next chapter positions this study in the context of other studies that are related to the field. It also provided the theoretical lens through which the study will be viewed and interpreted.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEWED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 presented a background to this study, by unfolding the problem under research and pointing out what the study seeks to achieve following a set of research questions. As well as providing a justification and rationale of the study, chapter 1 laid out the structure of the whole thesis.

Cognisant of the fact that the broad area of this study is not novel, this chapter endeavours to bring to light what the body of literature has presented regarding the status of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education. The literature provides contesting views on why and how students from this background are perceived in a negative light regarding access, performance, retention and success. It is through such exposé that the gap sought to be filled by this study will emanate. The review also provides a theoretical and a conceptual framework, which are used to guide the study.

The chapter begins by contextualising the terms that will be used as key in the study. As a way of situating the reader in the study, a review of Malawi, with regards to its socio-economic context, educational background and the state of higher education, is presented to provide context. This is followed by the relationship between socio-economic backgrounds and access to higher education from both the local and the global outlook. The next section focuses on a critique of the deficit perspective from which students from low socio-economic backgrounds have been perceived, which brings rise to the justification of the current study. The subsequent section is an outline of the theoretical underpinnings that guide the study, the components of which combine to produce the conceptual framework through which the study would be viewed.

2.2 Allusive terminology

This section provides clarity on the meaning of some of the concepts used in this study. Understandably, these terms assume various meanings in different contexts. The use of them in this study will be exclusive of the other meanings applied elsewhere. The concepts include phenomenon, lived experiences, highly successful, low socio-economic backgrounds, access and resilience.

Phenomenon: In this study, a phenomenon will refer to what Moustakas (1994, p. 26) describes as an element that ‘appears in consciousness and means to flare up, to show itself to appear’ With reference to this study, the aspect that appears in consciousness is being academically successful as an undergraduate student from a low socio-economic background in Malawi’s higher education.

Lived experience: According to van Manen (2004), lived experience is a representation and understanding of a researcher's or research subject's human experiences, choices and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge. It also entails the first-hand accounts and impressions of participants in a study. The term will also refer to perceptions obtained from low socio-economic background students in this study.

Highly successful: Success is a subjective term, which could mean different things todifferent people. Various measures of success in higher education include retention, academic achievement, completion or graduation, as well as year-to-year persistence and high-grade point averages (Gardner, 2009). In this study, the term "highly successful students" will refer to those students who have shown consistency in their academic track records in examination results from first year to fourth year, with a performance above the overall class average.

Low socio-economic backgrounds: The measurement of a socio-economic situation entailsthe use of different variables, including family background, parental income, parental level of education, occupation - and others (Gaur, 2013). In this study, students from low socio-economic backgrounds will imply that those, who because of their circumstances, including some of the factors mentioned previously, have been registered on the institutional database as "students in need".

Access: Access would be considered in two ways: *formal access*, which is admittance to an institution of higher education; and *epistemological access* (Morrow, 2009), which implies the ability to develop coherent ways of understanding, engaging and navigating one's way in higher education.

Resilience: In this study, the term denotes the skill to overcome the odds (i.e. the ability to succeed, despite exposure to high risks), plus sustained competence under pressure, adapting successfully to negative high risk (Fraser, Richman & Galinsky, 1999).

Bellat-Duru (2012), in discussing the issue of inequality in higher education - whether from an access, success or outcome standpoint - has emphasised the need to view these aspects in the context of the entire educational system. According to Al-Samarrai and Bennell (2007) pre-tertiary levels of education have a bearing on what transpires in tertiary education. As such, a brief discussion that provides context for Malawi's education follows in section 2.4.

2.3 The Roles of Higher Education

Education in general has been widely accepted as a critical tool to promoting economic development in societies (Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2006; Grant, 2017). During the early years, post-world war II, there were debates on the extent to which higher education madeany additional contribution to bettering the lives of people. With economists, such as Friedman and

Friedman (1980), claiming that there was no evidence of social benefits yielded from higher education, but rather associating it with the promotion of social unrest and political instability. On the other hand, scholars, such as Max Weber, in the late 1960s, considered education as a mechanism aimed at allocating rewards through expanded differential credentials.

During the early 1980s, this perception was reinforced by the World Bank and IMF through their structural adjustment plans, that included a substantial reduction of government subsidy towards higher education in favour of primary and secondary education, which were believed to produce higher returns to investment, as compared with higher education (Bloom, Canning, & Chan 2006). Between 1985-1989, the World Bank's spending towards higher education in Africa was 17%. In the years that followed and by 1999, the spending had been slashed down to only 7%, as the bigger portion of its funding went towards Free Primary Education (FPE). By 2003, some African countries' higher education enrolment rate was as low as 1% (Statistics, 2005). Towards the end of the 20th century, into the beginning of the 21st century, attention began to turn towards higher education, as a means of ensuring development and innovations with the technological advancements occurring at a fast rate across the globe. Primary and secondary education empower the possessors with basic skills of survival, but, according to Haveman and Smeeding (2006), median income for a bachelor's degree holder in the USA was more than double that of a high school graduate. Although the relationship between qualification and earning is not as straightforward, anecdotal evidence to a larger extent tends to agree with Haverman and Smeeding's (2006) claims. They also highlighted how, with the passage of time, basic qualifications for job intake require university degree. This development is not only particular to the USA or developed world: demand for university qualifications has become a basic requirement for jobs across the globe (Jury, Smeding, Nelson, Aelenei, & Darnon, 2017).

Higher education has been considered to play numerous roles in societies. Brennan, King, and Lebeau (2004, p. 26) summarised the roles of higher education as encompassing the following dimensions:

- *Economy, through the formation of a robust human capital for a society.*
- *Polity, through the formation and sustenance of state and civil institutions, the selection and socialisation of political and social elites.*
- *Social structure: the basis of social stratification, the extent and mechanism of mobility for different groups.*
- *Culture: the production and dissemination of ideas, exerting influence upon and*

providing critique of, the above.

In this section, more light will be shed on the economic and social roles of higher education, in keeping with the scope of the study.

2.3.1 Higher Education and Socio-economic Transformation

Provision of education entails the development of human capital, which is a prerequisite for increased productivity and sustainable economic growth (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Lin, 2004). In other words, the role of education in a nation's socio-economic transformation cannot be side-lined. In improvised societies, especially in the global South, where socio-economic inequalities are prevalent (Bloom et al., 2006), the provision of tertiary education for the wider population provides an opportunity for socio-economic transformation and prospects of upward mobility for those low socio-economic backgrounds. Chamorro-Premuzic and Frankiewicz (2019), in their debate on the relevance of higher education to the job market, make a distinction between the difference that the possession of a higher education qualification makes to the global north, as compared to the global south. According to them, a college degree holder in sub-Saharan Africa boosts their income earnings by 20%, compared to a 9% boost in Scandinavia. This is as a result of the rarity of degree holders in the global south, which makes the demand for them higher, thereby resulting in the marginal differences in earnings. This further highlights the importance of this study, as it pertains to Malawi, which is considered among the most poorest countries, with the lowest university enrolment rate, where the majority of those enrolled come from the already privileged section of the population.

2.3.2 Social Justice and Equity in Higher Education

It is in light of the above role of higher education that the observance of social justice and social equity comes to play in the discourse of the role of higher education. In their discussion, Haverman and Smeeding (2006) summarise higher education's goals as being those for advancing economic efficiency and social equity in society. Brennan and Naidoo (2008) argue about the extent to which higher education institutions consider the upholding of principles of social justice and equity as their responsibility, which has been split into two: the import role and the export role. The former refers to how internal operations of the institutions portray social equity and justice principles, while the latter speaks to how higher education institutions contribute to the prevalence of social justice and equity in the wider society. While the main focus of the study is on the lived experiences of students from low socioeconomic background who succeed in higher education against the odds, the import role of higher education institutions in ensuring social justice and equity will be looked at through students' perceptions and experiences with the institutions in this regard. I agree with Calhoun (2006), though, who

states that the import and export role of higher education in ensuring social equity are related, in the sense that failure to uphold social equity in accessing higher education only reproduces itself in the wider society, where the same groups that are excluded or under-represented, face the same plight in the wider society when it comes to accessing, benefiting from and the allocation of resources.

2.3.3 Widening Participation vs Equity of Access

As one of the solutions to addressing the inequalities and disparities witnessed in institutions of higher education around the world, there has been an initiative, by various governments, to increase intake in higher education. The effort has been considered deliberate, aiming at widening participation that is representative of the societies, considering various parameters: including gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status and geographical location (Jones, Coetzee, & Babbie, 2008). According to Essack (2013, p. 49), this initiative is a shift from considering higher education as being considered an "inherited merit, where a selected group of academically proficient students were admitted solely on merit, as a result of socio-economic and educational backgrounds."

Literature aimed at assessing how well this initiative has fared in achieving the intended goals has, to a large extent, revealed contrary results (Bibbings, 2006, Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014). Rather than widening participation to include minority groups considered as disadvantaged categories in some literature, the initiative has only pronounced the differences, giving those already privileged more opportunities to access higher education.

In her study on British higher education, Boliver (2011) argues that efforts to widen access into higher education work to perpetrate two forms of inequalities: the Maximally Maintained Inequalities (MMI) and Effectively Maintained Inequalities (EMI). According to Boliver (2011, p. 230), MMI: "causes quantitative inequalities in educational enrolment to decrease once the enrolment rate of the advantaged socio-economic group reaches saturation." On the other hand, EMI is perpetuated in higher education institutions, through "the qualitative inequality access to prestigious programmes and institutions and this is not likely to decline even with saturation point being reached" (Boliver, 2011, p. 230).

In the case of this study, both forms of inequalities were experienced, as was explained in chapter 1, regarding the percentages of student enrolments in Malawi's higher education based on socio-economic status, both as gross enrolment and enrolment in programmes deemed prestigious. Firstly, as the selection into higher education is competitive, due to a lower absorption rate, the majority of students that make it into these institutions are those from the

middle class that have been exposed to better quality pre-tertiary education (quantitative inequality of MMI). Secondly, the choice of programmes is based on prerequisite subjects passed in secondary school. Lucrative programmes, such as Medicine, Engineering and Pure Sciences, require a sound grounding in science at secondary school. The majority of the respondents in this study, who indicated having aspired to enter those fields, were denied, due to failure to meet the prerequisites because of the lack of science teaching and learning resources (such as laboratories) in CDSS (Qualitative inequalities – EMI). The result is a situation where the systems of higher education are strategised in a way that gives those from disadvantaged backgrounds little, or no, opportunity to benefit, in spite of the rhetoric on widening expansion, equalising opportunities and inclusivity used in higher education. In developed countries, where there is a diversity of universities, the debates revolve around access to prestigious institutions, which tend to be dominated by the middle-class elite. Boliver (2013, p. 345) qualifies this observation by discussing the UK's higher education access as follows:

> Underscoring the need to consider access to more prestigious UK universities in particular is the fact that more prestigious universities tend to be those in which social groups with historically low participation rates are least well represented. People from lower social class backgrounds, besides being chronically under-represented in higher education generally in the UK are known to be particularly poorly represented in Old universities.

2.4 Background Context to Malawi Education

Formal education in Malawi dates as far back as the last half of the nineteenth century, with the arrival of Christian missionaries. Before then, education among the local people took the form of oral tradition, through which folktales were told with the aim of instilling values in the younger generation. The principal goal of these groups was to spread Christianity and tobring civilisation. The missionaries believed in education as a powerful tool for achieving this goal and for giving new content to the changing native life (Banda, 1982).

During colonisation, the agenda for education took on a different role of promoting and instilling a subordinate nature among the colonised. As Dudley (1973, p. 38) put it, 'the colonial state in Africa did not only need an 'educated native' but 'a loyal educated native.' As was argued in Masaka (2016), the agenda behind education in most African countries, during the colonial era, was to maintain subservience and loyalty of the colonised towards the coloniser.

Following independence from the British colonisers in 1964, Malawi remained under strong dictatorial regime for thirty years, within which education was a vital tool of strengthening the dictatorial tendencies. Emphasising the 'Four cornerstones' of Unity, Loyalty, Obedience and Discipline, the education system was closed and prescriptive, suppressing and crushing any signs of critical thinking and questioning of what was taught. Although factoring in the agenda of economic development as one of education's aims, this was also closely scrutinised to ensure that people did not become so economically empowered as to threaten the authority of the day.

In 1993, Malawians took part in a referendum, where the decision to adopt multiparty democracy resulted in the collapse of the dictatorship. Following the 1994 democratic elections, Malawi adopted a new democratic constitution, which called for a reform invarious political and social institutions. It contained principles that obliged the state to promote the welfare of the people of Malawi, through policy and legislation aimed at providing adequate resources for the education sector.

This could be appreciated by contextualising the education system in Malawi, following the political wave of transition that hit most African countries, including Malawi, in the early 1990s. Although seen as being largely political in nature, the wave impacted all spheres of life. In the case of Malawi, the move from one party dictatorship to multi-party democracy brought with it (among other things) changes that were far reaching, with regards to mapping the education system that we have today. One of such changes was the declaration of Free Primary Education (FPE). One of the effects of this declaration was the visible decline in quality education, through what was deemed as promoting democratic values. With most children out of school, due to fee payment, the move to FPE opened an opportunity for scores of children to enter the education space for an experience that offered them a sub-standard educational background as reflected in the study's findings. This expansion in primary intake would later affect the secondary sector, as it would be expected to absorb the primary school leavers. This is where the Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) emerged. CDSS offer a greatly compromised the quality of secondary education and the fact that almost 70% of them were located in rural areas indicates the category of people that it catered for (Phillip, Stephens, Townsend & Goudeau 2020). In this study, as has been shown in the biodata table, almost 86% of the respondents were CDSS graduates, indicative of the compromised pre-tertiary education they underwent.

2.4.1 The Education System in Malawi

The education structure in Malawi is generally divided into eight years of primary, four years of secondary and between three-five years of tertiary. Following the 1994 adoption of democratic governance in Malawi, one of the policies and legislation changes in the education sector was making primary education compulsory and free–and offering greater access to higher learning and continuing education (Section 13, Constitution of Malawi).

Free Primary Education (FPE)

Pursuant to its Constitutional obligations, the Malawian government implemented radical reforms to the educational sector, starting with the introduction of free primary education (FPE) and the adoption of the Education Policy Investment Framework, 1995-2005 (PIF, 2001). The PIF was first developed in 1995 to accommodate Free Primary Education and related educational policy reforms. This first document was criticised for not covering the whole education sector. Its emphasis was on primary education with a little information on secondary education, while completely ignoring tertiary education (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003). This led to the development of a revised PIF, the objectives of which include maintaining and improving educational quality and relevance and increasing access to educational opportunities for all Malawians at all levels, minimising existing inequalities in the educational system (PIF, 2001).

These developments were translated into practical reforms, including the abolition of fee paying in primary schools. The first radical change to the education system, following the transition to political pluralism, was the introduction of FPE and the elimination of the requirement for school uniform (MacJessie-Mbewe, 2004). According to Kadzamira and Rose (2003), the reforms made were undertaken with little or no planning at all, following international organisations and donor pressure. The haphazard implementation of FPE was also a political move by the newly elected government, to be seen to have fulfilled its election pledge, confirming the assertion by Stasavage (2005) that, in most democratic societies, they moved to introduce FPE in order to fulfil an electoral pledge.

Secondary Education

The pressure on the bottleneck of accessing secondary education, due to increased enrolments, resulted in the transformation of the structure of the secondary education system in Malawi.

The Malawian public pre-tertiary (secondary) education is divided into two major categories: the conventional (district and national schools) and the Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS). There is a significant difference in the learning experience in these two categories.

The reason is the background to the establishing and operation of the CDSSs. Unlike the Conventional Secondary Schools (CSS), whose history dates as far back as the 1940s, CDSSs were established in the late 1990s, following the move to widen access to secondary education to match an earlier policy of Free Primary Education (FPE), in 1994. Primary enrolment increased threefold (MacJessie-Mbewe, 2004). This resulted in the conversion of what were previously Distant Education Centres (DEC) to CDSS. Unlike the CDSSs, the conventional schools are both well-established and well-funded by government. The majority of CDSSs are in the rural areas, servicing 85% of the population, where the majority live on an income below the poverty line of US$1.25 per day (Ellis, Kutengule & Nyasulu, 2003). The World Bank (2008:116) reported that the urban population in Malawi (12%) benefitted from 53% of public expenditure for education, while an urban person benefitted 8.4 times more than someone from the rural area.

CDSSs have been faced with ongoing challenges, in terms of the quality of outputs to date. Mlangeni, Thembakako and Chiotha (2015) presented findings from a study which pointed to academic challenges that students from CDSSs face, owing to inadequacies both in the schools and at home. Among these challenges is the shortage of qualified teachers. In the in initial stages, 93% of the teachers were Primary School trained. To redress that situation, the teachers were given short crash courses and in-service training programmes to upgrade them. Apart from the huge proportion of unqualified teachers, CDSSs face the challenges of poor infrastructure, including the absence of libraries and laboratories, overcrowded classrooms (with an average of *114 students* per classroom) and lack of teaching and learning resources (with an average of *1 English textbook* per 15 students) because of insufficient government funding (MacJessie-Mbewe, 2004). The differences in allocation of funds between CSSs and CDSSs, according to the World Bank (2010: 93), serve to exacerbate inequities across the types of schools, to the detriment of CDSSs. For the reasons mentioned above, the study's main focus will be on students from low socio-economic backgrounds and particularly on those whohave a CDSS background.

2.4.2 Does Pre-tertiary Background Matter?

The current study though focusing on students in higher education does shed light on the pre-tertiary background of the students, in particular, those that came from a CDSS background based on its history, as presented in section 2.4.1 above. Within the discourse of higher education success, completion and attrition, the pre-tertiary experiences of students do playan important role. Most young people have ambitions of going beyond high school but, as

Venezia, Kirst and Antonio (2003) point out, such ambitions are frustrated, due to the experience that the students have during their pre-tertiary education. Among the factors that explain this is the lack of resources by pre-tertiary institutions to prepare the students for higher education. In their study, Venezia, Kirst and Antonio (2003) discovered that, among students marginally qualified or underqualified for a four-year university programme, the highest percentage comprised those from low socio-economic backgrounds. While in most institutions in the developed world, such challenge is mitigated through remedial or bridge courses, the situation in most developing countries, including Malawi, is such that students graduate from secondary schools and go straight into higher education, regardless of the level of preparedness. Pre-tertiary experience of students determines the extent to which they are equipped with relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes with which to navigate higher education. Bettinger and Long (2006) explain how the lack of rigour in pre-tertiary education, manifested through lack of information and competence observed from students, affects how they prepare for higher education and the skills that ensure their successful progression. While the situation could not hold true universally, literature points out the relationship between preparedness, with regards to information and competence equipping and the quality of the school (Stephens, Hamedani & Destiny 2014; Banerjee, 2016). Similarly, there is a strong correlation between the quality of education schools offer and the monetary investment that goes into it. Most of the high-quality schools tend to be costly in terms of fees, attracting those that can afford to send their children. In the case of Malawi, most families from low socio-economic backgrounds cannot afford to send their children to public conventional secondary schools, leaving them with CDSSs as the only option, where the quality of education, due to resource constraints, is compromised (MacJessie-Mbewe, 2004; Mlangeni & Chiotha, 2015). This results in access issues into higher education by students with a CDSS background.

2.5 Socio-economic backgrounds: Access and success in Higher Education

Most of studies conducted on access to higher education have established a strong correlation with socio-economic backgrounds (Donelley, 2016; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; James, 2001 & Maras, 2007). This is evident in what Reisel (2011) refers to as the 'status maintenance thesis', where the educational aspirations of the child tend to resemble that of the parent and that those, who obtained privileged forms of education, are also more likely to secure it for their children. As a result, children coming from privileged backgrounds have a higher probability of accessing higher education.

Debates on access to higher education in the developed world range from the general access of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (including those from low socio-economic

backgrounds) to the types of universities that students access. With other institutions being regarded as elite, children of the wealthy have a higher chance of entry into the top-ranking universities, compared to their counterparts from poor backgrounds. Issues around the under-representation of certain groups or categories of people in higher education institutions have been a topical issue, with different authors pointing to the elitist nature of higher education institutions that serves to perpetrate social inequalities among different classes (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Agasisti & Longobardi, 2014; Yang, 2010). Reports from 2001 and 2004 on access into prestigious universities in the UK reported the following,

> In 2000, a student from an independent school was 25 times more likely to get into one of the leading thirteen universities than a state student from a socially disadvantaged group. Also, a 2004 study found that, whilst 45 per cent of students who obtain the equivalent of an A and two Bs at A level go on to study at a leading university, only 26 per cent of state school students with the same grades do so. The access gap is even more alarming in relation to Oxbridge. (Bibbings, 2006 p. 78)

Other schools of thought have explained the disparities in access to higher education as a factor of decisions that those from low socio-economic backgrounds make in consideration of the cost benefit analysis of opting for higher education. Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) and Need and De Jong (2001) have used the Rational Action Theory (RAT) in suggesting how the under-representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds results from their perception of the cost of failing in higher education over not attending in the first place. In the case of countries like USA, students from disadvantaged backgrounds end up opting for less competitive universities of two-year colleges, over the four-year or prestigious universities.

In the developing countries, the debate on access to higher education revolves around whether or not one gets actual access into higher education, due to restricted spaces, ability to pay and the limited number of institutions. For most of the literature, there has been a general agreement on how socio-economic background has a bearing on the students' chances of accessing and succeeding in higher education. Allard and Santoro (2008, p. 204) summarise this general view: "*students' socio-economic status remains one of the strongest predictors of educational success and life chances.'*

Becker and Hecken (2009) argue about how access to higher education is not only a factor of intellectual ability, but also, to an extent, is dependent on social conditions and opportunity structures that put the middle and high socio-economic background students at a more advantageous point. Tucker-Drob and Harden (2012), in their research work on how genetics and environment interact with regards to academic achievement, concluded that the influence

of genetics and environmental factors on academic achievement is almost equal. With factors, such as motivation, self-concept and interests coupled with economic wellbeing to enable sourcing of resources, children from socio-economically well-off backgrounds tend to have higher chances of academically achieving better than their counterparts.

To this end, the findings from Tucker-Drob and Harden (2012) seem to offer an explanation for the trends observed by the World Bank report: although students from low socio-economic backgrounds managed to negotiate their way into formally accessing higher education, a significant percentage of them dropped out or withdrew and did not complete their education. In relation to this, the report attributed the more than 21% of students dropping out or withdrawing to mainly financial constraints, or poor performance. While these statistics are not presented based on socio-economic backgrounds, anecdotal evidence through the personal experiences of those in higher education suggests that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are at a higher risk of dropping out for either reason. A related study carried out in seven of South Africa's universities revealed how the percentage of non-completers from low socio-economic backgrounds was as high as *68%,* compared to *18%* and *12%* from the middle and high socio-economic backgrounds respectively (Letseka, Breier and Visser, 2010). In the case of Malawi, a World Bank report on higher education revealed how access to tertiary study is highly competitive, restrictive and conspicuously unequal in nature. The gross enrolment rate is 0.4%, ranked as one of the lowest in Africa. The absorption rate into higher education is 30% (students entering higher education over those qualifying for entry) and an enrolment rate of 80 per 100,000 inhabitants. Of those enrolled, 91.3% of students belong to the top richest quintile and 0.7% from the bottom poorest quintile, mainly the rural poor. According to results from the University of Malawi (UNIMA) 2015-2016 selection, only 0.09% of students selected for higher education were from CDSSs (UNIMA, 2016). The outcome of CDSS, in relation to accessing higher education, is consistent with studies that were carried out in China on higher education selection and socio-economic participation (HU & LI, 2013). Findings revealed how rural based students performed unfavourably, due to a lack of opportunities and resources during their pre-tertiary experiences. Among such resources are the social networking and information that would equip and prepare these students for higher education. Phillip, Stephens, Townsend and Goudeau (2020) underline how, with most of the CDSSs (70%) in Malawi located in rural areas, the plight is similar: expectations of competing with their counterparts from urban areas becomes bleak and manifest through the university selection results. In a country like Malawi where the gap between social classes is so wide, the

chances of perpetrating such differences through the education system becomes apparent, as Das (2013, p. 3) observed:

> *In a society which is rigidly stratified, it becomes very difficult for the formal institution of education to remain unaffected or unbiased. Under those circumstances, it ends up maintaining the status quo and reinforcing the socio-economic or cultural divide between people.*

The failure to access, or successfully complete, higher education has a reducing effect on chances that individuals have in life to progress upwardly both socially and economically. The statistics presented above on Malawi's higher education, therefore raise concerns about the prospects of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who already have a reduced chance of accessing higher education, being faced with challenges that threaten their survival at this level of study. (Removed the misleading aim)

In the quest to explore the lived experiences of students in this study, an eclectic theoretical approach has been adopted. The aim is to provide a lens through which the study would be both approached and interpreted. The subsequent section, therefore, unveils the theoretical framework.

2.6 Theoretical Framework: Why such inequalities? – Deficit vs Dynamic Perspective

This study has positioned itself within the confines of four theories that will provide perspective within which the reader can both view and understand the argument. These theories are viewed in light of the discourse on inequalities as understood from what I have borrowed from Ford and Grantham (2003)'s deficit versus the dynamic perspectives.

Literature and discourses on higher education and the plight of students from low socio-economic backgrounds have dominated the academic debate for the past decades (Donnelly, 2016, Forsyth and Furlong, 2003**).** Studies to understand the inequalities in higher education have come out from the 'deficit' and the 'dynamic' perspectives

2.6.1 Deficit Perspective

This deficit perspective has explained inequalities as being a function of the inadequacies of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Some of such inadequacies include the insufficiency of resources (Fan, 2014), parental level of education (Harackiewicz., Canning, Tibbetts, Giffen, Blair, & Hyde, 2014; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014) and lack of

preparedness for university (Barnes, Slate & Rojas-Le Bouef, 2010; Van der Merwe & De Beer, 2006). These inadequacies, according to this perspective, will continue to put students at a disadvantage (Jury, Smeding, Nelson, Aelenei, & Darnon, 2017). Such a perspective has been explained through theories such as Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, among others.

Inequalities from Bourdieu's Lens

According to Pierre Bourdieu's theory, inequalities in higher education are a factor of resources, which children from high socio-economic backgrounds have handed down through the generations (Bourdieu, 1990). These resources, referred to as capitals, take the form of economic, social and cultural capital. The possession of economic capital enables these students to access goods which their peers cannot afford, including better quality education, extra or remedial tuition. Fan (2014) illustrates how possession of economic capital enables children to access better quality education. The children also have material security and educational resources, which those from low socio-economic backgrounds cannot afford. In her work on reproducing social inequalities through higher education, Tsui (2003) maintained that those from rich backgrounds use their economic resources to access structural opportunities - things that their counterparts from poor backgrounds cannot afford.

The situation with educational resources is grave in developing countries, where governments are unable to fully subsidise services that would enhance learning, for instance provision of well-equipped libraries and ICT resources. This situation is evident in Malawi, where 50% of the government funding allocated to higher education goes towards emoluments and benefits, resulting in insufficient funding to invest into acquisition of resources (Mambo, Meky, Tanaka, & Salmi, 2016). Consequently, students bear the costs of accessing relevant academic resources, which the students from high socio-economic backgrounds have a greater chance of accessing.

The use of the internet, for example, is one of the commonest student resources. As well as requiring finances to access internet services, there is also the knowledge of how to navigate the internet. While students from high socio-economic backgrounds have prior exposure to the technology, most students from low socio-economic backgrounds would not have been exposed to this, either at home or at their former schools. The government of Malawi has an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policy framework, which includes the introduction of ICT across the different levels of education. This has been faced with challenges that have resulted in ICT as only being taught in a few secondary schools, mainly in urban areas, where there is access to electricity and telecommunication infrastructure (Farrell, Isaacs

& Trucano, 2007). Students from low socio-economic backgrounds in rural areas are in a no-win situation, making them not only unable to afford the resources, but also lacking theknow-how of operating such.

The economic situation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds is further exacerbated by the National University Student Loan Trust for needy students, which does not discriminate in as far as 'means test' is concerned. As a result, students who benefit from the loans include those from among the wealthiest backgrounds (World Bank, 2010).

As with economic capital, social capital has had a positive effect on attainment of higher education as well. Coleman (1990) described it as a set of resources inherent in family relations and community social organisations, which are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person, including strategic networking and alliances. Leonard (2004) split social capital into two: bonding and bridging social capitals. The former involves networking and sharing among homogenous groups, the latter, goes beyond the homogenous grouping to extend outwards. According to Szreter and Woolcock (2004), bonding social capital, common among the poor, is an obstacle to their upward advancement in what Putnam (2000) refers to as a 'prevention from entrepreneurship and realisation of one's full potential'.

The students from high socio-economic backgrounds enter university with suitable forms of social capital, which they use to succeed and deal with the challenges in an academic environment (Tzanakis, 2011). The ability to adjust within a new environment and community depends, to a large extent, on possession of the bridging social capital. Clopton (2011) and Putnam (2000) observed that bridging capital is more common among those from high socio-economic backgrounds, while Putnam (2000) associated bonding capital with those from low socio-economic backgrounds. Putman attributes the lack of upward mobility to the reliance on bonding capital that is common among minority and marginalised groups. Thus, the failure to adjust to a new environment, which has been associated with students from low socio-economic backgrounds due to their reliance on the homogenous group (one that they are familiar with), might influence their failure to complete their education, even after gaining formal access (Bowl, 2001; Becker and Luthar, 2002; Ayalon; 2005). According to McQueen (2009), the lack of relevant social capital by low socio-economic backgrounds studentsresults in failure to cope, leading to premature exit.

The possession of cultural capital, which Bourdieu described as the familiarity with the dominant culture in society, and the ability to understand 'educated' language (Bourdieu, 1990) enable students from high socio-economic backgrounds to integrate with ease into the higher education system. Closely associated with the cultural capital is the 'habitus' – dispositions

through which individual people behave, make decisions, think and view the world. Related to culture and habitus is the 'field', which Bourdieu implies an unbounded social space that possesses distinct characteristics, rules and norms (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). This field, which in this study represents the high education space, has its own culture and disposition. Bourdieu (1990) claims these are fashioned in a way which upholds high socio-economic status culture and values. Consequently, those coming from low socio-economic backgrounds lack such assets, resulting in their being disadvantaged. A study, conducted by Watson, Nind, Humphris and Borthwick (2009) on understanding the early experiences of students in higher education using Bourdieu's lens, found that students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who made it into higher education, struggled to get their footing in this quite unfamiliar environment and expected disposition, which demanded a transformation of their worldview. Boughey and Mckenna (2016) point out how certain practices in higher education emerge from unfamiliar disciplines and backgrounds, yet students were expected to master them with the assumption that these practices were natural and common knowledge to all. Studies reveal that this is not the case. As a result, quantitative studies, regarding the role of cultural capital and education attainment, revealed a positive correlation (Sullivan, 2001; Noble and Davies, 2009; Tzanakis, 2011).

Literature on capitals has, therefore, indicated that the possession of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990) gives an advantage to those who have them through easy access to resources, quality pre-tertiary education and a high level of preparedness for higher education (DHET, 2014, Van Zyl, 2016, Donelly, 2016). Barnes, Slate and LeBouef (2010) have summarised the preparedness for higher education as an epistemological access lacking among students from low socio-economic backgrounds. According to other studies by Holm and Jæger (2008) and Berker and Hecken, (2009), this lack of capital and knowledge to navigate higher education, has resulted in capable students giving up higher education, viewing it as a liability. Brennan and Shah (2003) argue that acquisition and possession of social and cultural capitals enables the possessors to map out their career paths clearly, as far as where to study and what to study, which has a bearing on their life chances. This is an opportunity that those from disadvantaged backgrounds lack. A study by Weiss and Cipollone (2013) underscores how difficult it becomes for those from low socio-economic backgrounds

to compete with the rest, as a result of lack of both materials and cultural assets that partly explain social class differences in educational attainment.

Another observation is that, even with availability of funds to support students from low socio-economic backgrounds on gaining access into higher education, their success rate remains low. Manik (2014) noted that there would be a need for more than just financial intervention to turn the tide. This is where this study brings in the dynamic perspective of inequalities as a possible way of exploring means of changing the status quo.

2.6.2 The Dynamic Perspective of Inequalities

Three theories have been used as a lens to understand the dynamic perspective in response to the question of inequalities. These include Antonovysky's Salotogenesis theory of resilience, Bandura's Self-efficacy theory and Yosso's Community cultural wealth.

Salutogenesis Theory

Salutogenesis is a theory borrowed from the medical field by Antonovysky and is based on resilience principles. According to Rak and Patterson (1996), theories of resilience are associated with the reduction of emphasis on pathology or weaknesses and an increase in emphasis on the strength to rise above the pathologies and adversities, or the capacity to overcome against the odds. While, for a long time, the term has been associated with systems being maintained or bouncing back in the face of adversities, such as natural disasters and environmental hardships, social scientists have begun looking at resilience not only from a systemic perspective, but as one which could apply to individual people and groups in the context of a community.

Resilience through the latter lens has, therefore, been conceptualised by several authors as:

• The capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of major life stressors (Kaplan, Turner, Norman, & Stillson 1996, p.158)

• The self-righting capacity and ability to respond with resourcefulness and tenacity, when confronted with outward challenges (Fraser, Richman & Galinsky, 1999, p.136)

• The skills, abilities, knowledge and insights, which accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges… an ongoing and developing fund of energy and skill, which can be used in current struggles (Saleebey, 1996)

Sivilli and Pace (2014) have argued against the perception of resilience as merely the ability to bounce back after facing adversity. For them, resilience goes beyond a rebounding process to one which is associated with adaptation. In their argument, they propose that bouncing back

might imply a return to the original state which exposed one to the adversity in the first place. As such, resilience is to be considered as a forward progression in making an individual person better than they would have been.

Two aspects of resilience directly related to this study as discussed by scholars are:

• Overcoming the odds and implying the ability to succeed, despite exposure to high risks.

• Sustaining competence under pressure, which relates to the ability to adapt successfully to negative high risk.

The aspect of overcoming the odds relates to the state of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, as has been depicted in the literature and in the research that this study aims at undertaking. These are students who literature portrays as having a high probability of underperforming in their education, but who have succeeded, despite such odds. As the study explores the lived experiences of students from low socioeconomic background who are succeeding academically, the criteria for eligibility will be those students from low socio-econimc backgrounds who have shown consistency in their academic achievements and are, thus, considered as highly successful, according to the context of the study.

The study will borrow from Antonovsky's Salutogenesis theory. Although it emerged from, and is orientated towards, the field of public health, Lindostrom and Eriksson (2005) agree that the theory is not limited by disciplinary borders. The concepts underpinning the theory are highly applicable in understanding the phenomenon being explored in this study. The concept of Salutogenesis refers to a response as to why people, despite stressful situations and hardships, stay well (Lindstrom and Eriksson, 2008). In relation to the public health field, it focuses on answering the question of *why* people are healthy, rather than why they get sick (Pathogenesis). The theory emerged following a study carried out by Aaron Antonovsky on the survivors of the holocaust and how, despite the extremely cruel and harsh conditions they faced and the impact it might have had on them physically and psychologically, they maintained healthy lives. In the case of this study, the focus will be on what makes students from low socio-economic backgrounds thrive and succeed, not on what makes them underachieve and drop out. The latter has been the focus of most of the earlier studies. The theory ties in well with Woodley's (2004) observation of the danger which lies in pathologising students, when it comes to discussing their success.

The proponents of the theory argue that the ability of a person to withstand and overcome grave adversity, or what they refer to as stressors, requires two main aspects: Sense of Coherence (SoC) and Generalised Resistance Resources (GRR)

- Sense of Coherence

The Sense of Coherence (SoC) refers to the extent of one's ability to liberate oneself from the fixation of *victim* perspective to that of a *doer* (Buch, 2006). It speaks to the extent of proactivity of individuals in dealing with the situation they find themselves in. According to the theory, a person who succeeds in the midst of hardships has a strong SoC. The sense of coherence is based on three aspects: comprehensibility (one's understanding and appreciation of the situation they are in and the challenges thereof), manageability (the extent to which one convinces oneself, so that one can overcome the stressor) and meaningfulness (the value attached to the intended outcome, which acts as a driving force). According to Lindström and Eriksson (2005), the SoC could either be inherent in an individual person, because of socialisation, or drawn from the environment surrounding that person. The latter source is what motivated this study in that, upon exploring the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds that are successful in higher education, it may reveal lessons and driving factors that could be transferable in ensuring that other students from similar backgrounds follow the success route in higher education.

- Generalised Resistance Resource

The GRRs are characteristics, phenomena and relationships of an individual person, which make it possible for that person to either avoid or resolve tension generated by stressors or adversity (Antonovsky 1987). Like SoC, GRRs could also be either inherent or external and are found within the immediate or distant environment of an individual person. Lindströmand Eriksson (2005) argue that what is more important is not the availability of these resources, but rather the capability of an individual person to make meaning and purposive use of them. In the conceptual framework, some GRRs have been linked to the various capitals that Bourdieu refers to in his theory. These include the economic, social and cultural capital, which are inherent for those from high socio-economic backgrounds, but are external to those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Lindström and Eriksson (2005) used another term related to GRR: the Generalised Resource Deficit (GRD). This describes a lack of certain GRR characteristics, which, in this study, could describe the situation of the students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In this Salutogenesis theory, the author further stated that the GRRs could be substituted with others, when it came to the successful management of tension and stressors. As is the case in this study, the aim is to identify the strategies and resources that participants possess and draw on, which contribute to their success in higher education and, if transferable, would benefit students in a similar situation (socio-economic backgrounds) to improve their success in higher education.

The proponents of salutogenesis, therefore, have contested the approach that aims at blaming the 'victim' in the case of this study, blaming the student in trying to explain the existence and prevalence of the plight of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (McKay and Devlin, 2015). According to Smit (2012), this conception has associated these students with low entrance scores, decreasing standards, academic struggle and failure. In their study on trying to challenge the 'deficit discourse', McKay and Devlin (2015) found that the students deemed as having deficits were assets and made valuable contributions to higher education.

One such valuable contribution brought by students from low socio-economic backgrounds is 'resilience,' which Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) admitted is a quality more associated with the working class as opposed to the middle class. It is this resilience and ability to cope which enable these students to deal with adversities and challenges they encounter, as they negotiate higher education. Reay, Crozier & Clayton (2009) further argue against Bourdieu's idea of considering habitus as something which cannot be internalised. They identified the ability of this group to adapt or transform their habitus in keeping with the institutional habitus. By using their resourcefulness, students were able to readjust their culture, drawing from their surroundings to fit in with what Bourdieu referred to as the new 'field.' (Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn & Platt 2011).

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory

The theory of self-efficacy relates to the Salutogenesis theory, in that it assumes that the conviction that an individual person has, in order to produce an outcome, is what enables them to act successfully or behave in keeping with the goal (Bandura 1977). Self-efficacy, like resilience, comes into play when confronted with threats to one's wellbeing, or to deal with the situation effectively. Bandura mentions characteristics vital in relation to self-efficacy. These include:

Mastery experience: involves approaching difficult with an attitude which aims at controlling the situation, rather than allowing it to dictate one's fate.

Vicarious experience: described as one's ability to draw inspiration from others who have succeeded in a similar task.

Verbal persuasion: - relates to the impact that other voices surrounding an individual person has on their perception or capability to handle challenges.

Psychological and emotional states: the confidence and belief that each person has in themselves, which determine how they confront challenges. Weak and stressful states of mind

result in defeat, while a strong emotional state and belief in one's capability promotes perseverance, producing the desired outcomes (Bandura, 1994).

From these explanations, there is, therefore, a close relationship between a Sense of Coherence (SoC) and Bandura's self-efficacy components, on the one hand, and the Generalised Resistance Resources and Bourdieu's capitals, on the other, regarding how stress or challenges are perceived. These, in turn, would determine an outcome. Fig1 illustrates this relationship.

Fig 2.1 illustrates the Relationship between SoC, GRR and perception of stressor

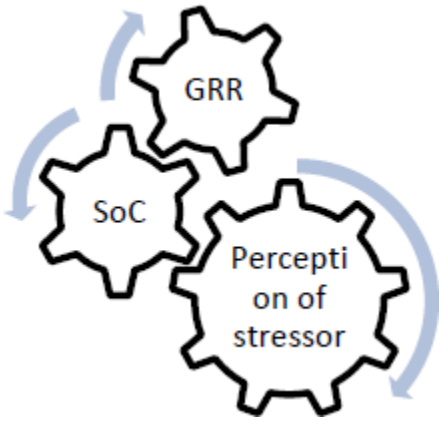


Fig 2.1: Relationship between SoC, GRR and perception of stressor

A strong Sense of Coherence will enable an individual person to use the surrounding resources to overcome stress or obstacles, thus perceiving stressors as opportunities to succeed. Conversely, a weak sense of coherence results in failure to recognise opportunities from resources around, thereby resulting in being overcome by the stressors.

Antonovsky further perceived life as operating in a continuum between "health-ease" and "dis-ease". Successful management of the stressor (demand made by the internal or external environment, over which a person does not have automatic control or a ready capacity to respond) results in a health-ease, whereas the failure to manage stressors would result in dis-ease and death. The direction in which an individual person or group heads towards depends mainly on the strength of their SoC in the presence of GRRs, which would determine how they perceive the stressor.

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth

The concept of community cultural wealth, as coined by Yosso (2005), is a reaction to the advanced justification of the plight of students from low socio-economic backgrounds as a result of the lacking capitals, as espoused by Bourdieu. In his defence of community cultural wealth, Yosso shows how, while students from low socio-economic backgrounds may not access the capitals that Bourdieu refers to, through their respective communities, they are able

to acquire ‘compensatory’ capitals that enable them to advance in their education. This was a result of studying first generation college students of colour. Out of her study, she identified six such capitals that propelled these marginalised students in their education:

1. *Aspiration capital*, which is the ability of the student to have ambitions and dreams of achieving the best, as a means of achieving the ultimate good. In the case of students from poor backgrounds, the end goal is to break the social barrier and find their way up the social mobility ladder.
2. *Linguistic capital*. This is a result of the students’ experiences in communicating within their culture, which results in refinement of skills, such as memorisation, attention to detail, especially through cultural activities, such as storytelling, riddles and other communicating means.
3. *Familial capital* speaks to the intervention of extended family, as well as the larger community in coming to the rescue of these students who would otherwise be unable to continue with their education.
4. *Social capital* in the context of community cultural wealth emphasises the moral support that family and community render to students, which provides them with the needed push to fight on in trying to achieve their academic dream.
5. *Navigational capital.* This alludes to the ability of the students to find their way through an unfamiliar environment in the higher education space.
6. *Resistance capital* which manifests through the persistence and endurance that marginalised people possess. It is this capital that enables them to withstand the challenges and setbacks that threaten their ability to make progress in life. According to Yosso (2005), this is one of the capitals that is passed down from generation to generation.

Like Yosso (2005), Reay, Crozier & Clayton (2009) dismissed the emphasis placed on Bourdieu’s capitals and habitus on higher education, by arguing how the underprivileged, through resilience, are able to overcome these barriers and align themselves with the institutional habitus, by drawing from what Yosso (2005) described as community cultural wealth and compensatory capital respectively.

Burney and Beilke (2008), in their study on the constraints of poverty on high achievement, point out the importance of developing resilience in students from low socio-economic backgrounds. For example, Dweck and Yeager (2012) illustrate how students, faced with academic challenges, might misinterpret this as their being intellectually incapable, when what they need is resilience to overcome the challenge, rather than intelligence. A study by Kitano

and Lewis (2005) portrayed resilience as an aspect, which could be transferrable to individual people. They made a clear separation between cognitive abilities and the ability to cope with adversity. This, they claimed, was an aspect which could be developed in students to enhance their self-efficacy. Therefore, the traditional way of considering students from low socio-economic backgrounds as having deficits has a way of compromising resilience in academic settings, even among high- achieving students.

The framework, therefore, comprises mainly the resilience theory of Salutogenesis and the components from Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, Yosso's community cultural wealth and Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

2.7 Relationship of Theories to Study

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are successful in higher education. Numerous studies have regarded their position as disadvantaged in many ways. In the majority of these studies, the focus and theoretical underpinnings have been orientated towards a deficit perspective, for example, studies carried out based on social reproduction theory (Becker and Luthar, 2002); Rational action and other Relative Risk Aversion theories (Weiss and Steininger 2012; Becker and Hecken 2009); Effectively Maintained Inequality (Ayalon 2005) and Maximally Maintained Inequalities theories (Cupito & Langsten, 2010). These studies have looked at the inequalities from a negative/deficit standpoint, which Antonovsky likens to the pathogenic perspective. The proposed study is an attempt to approach the subject from a more positive standpoint, by focusing on what makes these students, who are perceived as being in a disadvantaged position, thrive against all the odds surrounding them (i.e. the salutogenetic approach.)

Using the concepts from Bandura and Bourdieu's theories to explain SoC and GRR respectively, as applied in the original Salutogenesis theory, this study will work with an adapted framework to guide it. The adoption of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory comes in against the understanding of the communal culture that exits in Malawi and most developing countries, where interdependence thrives over independence and individualistic culture that dominates the developed world. The use of multiple theories, also known as the eclectic approach, was a shift from the previously single theory approach. This was criticised for being too restrictive in trying to understand a phenomenon, whereas the multiple theory approach offered options with which to explain and identify matches (Norcross, Karpiak, & Lister, 2005). In using the eclectic framework therefore, the main thrust will be to

gain an understanding of how the participants live, and live well with stressors - and possibly even turn their existence to work towards their advantage (Antonovsky, 1984:116). The downside of using the eclectic approach lies in the choice and compatibility of theories which make the study meaningful. In the case of this study, clear explanations have been provided to illustrate the nature in which the four theories complement one another and how they relate to the achievement of the aim of the study. The Salutogenic approach to this study will be beneficial in more than one way, including what Lindström and Eriksson (2005) have outlined as the ability to appreciate the ways in which individual people understand the situations in which they find themselves, as well as identifying the necessary power and resources, which are employed to cope with the adversities inherent to life.

Fig 2.2 is an illustration of the conceptual framework, which has been adapted from Antonovsky's Salutogenesis model to fit with this study.

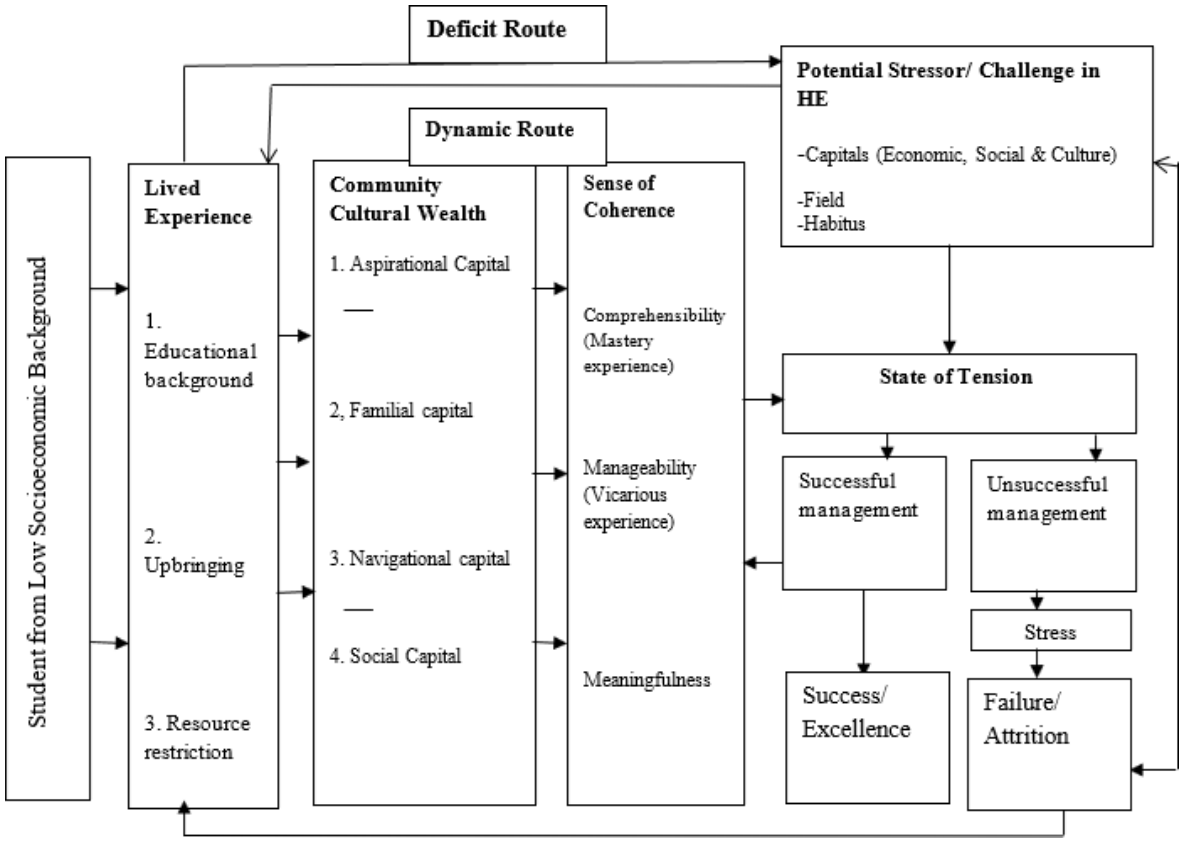


Fig 2.2: Conceptual Framework

2.8 Chapter Conclusion

As well as providing the contextual background literature for the study regarding Malawi's socio-economic and educational background, the chapter has reviewed how the two notionsof socio-economic backgrounds and access and success in higher education interact in both the

local and the global contexts. The chapter concluded by presenting the theoretical standpoint from which the study would be viewed and from which a conceptual framework has been drawn. The ensuing chapter provides the step-by-step means through which the study went about collecting data with reference to where, from whom and how data was analysed. It also describes the quality assurance and ethical clearance measures that were undertaken in the study.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter Overview

This far, Chapter 1 presented the introduction to the study and Chapter 2 provided a review of literature related to the study, as well as a conceptual framework that provides a lens for the study. This third chapter aims at providing a guide to the readers through the procedures and processes that were employed in order to obtain the data that addressed the concerns of the study. It also enables readers to arrive at a reasonable judgment, in the event of transferability to similar contexts, hence the in-depth description provided for in the earlier chapter, regarding the context of this study. The chapter addresses areas, including: the paradigmatic considerations involved in the choices of methodology, research design, sampling processes, data collection methods and analysis. The quality assurance measures and the ethical considerations have also been addressed.

3.2 Introduction

The choice of research methodology and design is based on a number of factors, including time, availability of resources, researcher's expertise and research questions and objectives. Based on the research question and aim and objectives, I made a decision to qualitatively approach the study. A qualitative, as opposed to a quantitative, approach seeks to understand and interpret social phenomena that emanate through interactions between researcher and participants (Clark & Creswell, 2014). The goal of a qualitative approach to research is to enable the researcher to gain access into the world of the participants, with the sole aim of understanding the essence and meanings that participants attach to their experiences (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Unlike a quantitative approach, that asks the question "what?", a qualitative approach goes further to address the "how and why" questions. A quantitative approach to research in social sciences dominated the world of research until the 1960s, when the qualitative approach began to emerge. One of the criticisms levelled against a quantitative approach was its emphasis on objectivity and seeking to duplicate the way research is done within natural science tradition (Alasuutari, 2010). This created a problem in social science research especially, which sought to extract meanings from social phenomena which, by their nature, cannot be duplicated as was the case in quantitative research. The other point of contention was about the objectivity of truth, which qualitative proponents argued on the basis that what is considered as truth today was at one point debatable and has evolved over time (Fink, 2000). As such, the overemphasis on objectivity, while excluding the social players in the equation, was what prompted the emergence of a qualitative approach.

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of successful students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education. Unlike theoretical and pure or basic research, where the aims are to generate or test theories, this study was more of applied research, where knowledge acquired would be used to contribute to the understanding, or resolving of modern-day issues (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). Studies have been conducted in the recent past and around the world on issues of access, retention, success and throughput of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, as was discussed in Chapter 2. The one thing that had been apparent in the majority of the studies was how this group of students had not fared well, compared with their peers from middle or high socio-economic backgrounds. Although not in the majority, there have been cases where, against the odds, those from low socio-economic backgrounds emerged at the top, competing with their counterparts from high socio-economic backgrounds.

It was this section of the population, which is not usually brought to the limelight, that prompted this study as a way of not just acknowledging the plight of low socio-economic backgrounds students in higher education, but also to bring to light those who, against the odds, had proven to be successful in higher education. The other thing was the need to understand the phenomenon under study within a particular context (Malawi – developing country), as compared to studies that have occurred elsewhere, bearing in mind that there are no fixed meanings to human experiences, due to their subjectivity in time and place. Lewis and Ritchie (2003) argued about the problematic nature of researchers attempting to capture a social world of another, or make a blanket statement on a phenomenon based on their own findings in their own context.

Based on the understanding that meanings are socially constructed and interpreted (Merriam, 2002), I set out to understand the meaning attached to being from low socio-economic backgrounds and academically thriving as it applied to the Malawian context. It was, therefore, through focussing on the lived experiences of these students that this study hoped to draw insights, which could contribute to efforts of ensuring that other students from similar backgrounds thrive and succeed. The main research question in this study was: “How might an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of academically successful students from low socio-economic backgrounds contribute to efforts of ensuring that other students from similar contexts, who access higher education, thrive and succeed? The idea behind the study, as Merriam (2002, p. 5) put it, was to get an insight into “what it means for the participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what is going on for them, what their meanings are and what the world looks like in that particular setting.” In this case, the study sought to find out

what it meant to be a student from low socio-economic backgrounds and being successful academically in higher education, in the context of Malawi.

Being qualitative in nature, the study was premised on the ideas of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" (1781), where he stated, among other things, that, "Our knowledge of the world is based on 'understanding' which arises from thinking about what happens to us not just simply from having had particular experiences." In this, he argued against proponents of positivism who viewed knowledge as emanating only through empirical enquiry. Kant was convinced that knowing and knowledge surpasses mere empirical enquiry (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003, p. 6).

The study sought to address issues that would be guided by specific paradigmatic considerations, which will be discussed in the next sections.

3.3 Paradigmatic considerations

Studies conducted, within the qualitative research, stem from particular paradigms that are dependent on the ontological, epistemological and methodological stance. The term 'paradigm' was coined by Thomas Kuhn in his book 'The Structure of Scientific Revolution', in which he describes a paradigm as "*the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community*" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 175). Over the years, the concept of paradigm has mainly hinged on philosophical beliefs and assumptions, with the former being regarded as forming the basis of research practices (Maxwell, 2013). In social science research, there are four main research paradigms that are used: post-positivism, constructivism, pragmatism, advocacy and participatory (Bakkabulindi, 2015).

This study was based on the constructivism/interpretivism paradigm. Silverman (2013) explained these as theoretical models, where the two overarching ones are the positivism and the non-positivism, of which the former is mostly common in quantitative research, but not to the total exclusion of qualitative research, which is mostly non-positivism. Within the non-positivism theoretical model, Silverman brought up different languages of qualitative research, which he coined as the naturalism model of qualitative and the constructionism (Silverman, 2013, pp. 104-105). The determining factor between the two lies in the questions that they seek to answer. Holstein and Gubrium (2008) illustrated that, while in naturalism, a researcher would be interested in addressing the question of what is going on in a situation or within a given social setup, a constructionist would focus on how the situation comes about. The focus of analysis of constructionism as Holstein & Gubrium (2008, p. 375) put it is "not so much on the dynamics within social realities as it is on the construction of social realities in the first

place." The core of this study was in gaining an understanding of how students from low socio-economic backgrounds, against the existing odds, achieved the success they did in higher education, using one of the universities in Malawi as a case.

This constructionism/interpretivism position, therefore, assumes that the social world, as we know it, is constantly being constructed and deconstructed through interactions that go on, therefore in order to understand reality, one has to depend on the views of social actors that form part of the meaning-making activity (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Scott and Usher (2011) further argued that what is considered as knowledge is generated through collectively held conceptions and as such, knowledge production is a social practice, requiring interactions. Each of these research paradigms embody different philosophical ideas of what is considered reality (Ontology); the nature of knowledge as in 'how we know what we think we know'; (Epistemology) and how one goes about acquiring the knowledge (Methodology).

In this paradigm, the ontological stance was relative, with realities considered as a product of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based - and specific and dependent to the holders of it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As such, reality was constructed through interaction and the intention is to understand and draw meanings out of the world of human experience. This was presented as being multi-layered and complex, premised on people's creatively constructed reality based on their experiences (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). It was, therefore, on this basis that this study sought to involve and engage a number of participants who would share their individual stories based on their first-hand experiences, which could only be judged against themselves rather than against some single truth, as is the case with the positivism paradigm. It is the multiplicity of realities, according to Cohen et al (2011), that adds richness to the study and is in sharp contrast to the positivism paradigm, where *reality* is viewed objectively, and the '*object*' exists independently of the '*knower.*'

On the epistemological aspect, the interpretivism paradigm, based on its understanding of knowledge as resulting from meanings constructed through interactions with the surroundings, takes on a subjective approach to 'how we know what we know'. The proponents of the paradigm justify the subjective approach, by stating that, "the object cannot be adequately described apart from the subject, nor can the subject be adequately described from the object" (Crotty, 1998, p. 79). As such, within the interpretivism paradigm, the researcher and participant are attached and knowledge is generated from the process of interaction between them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). By contrast, in the case of positivism paradigm, there is a

strong sense of objectivity and detachment, where the researcher and participant do not have such relationship.

As far as methodology is concerned within an interpretivism paradigm, new knowledge is sought through interpretation (Hermeneutics) of constructions obtained from individuals, which are then contrasted with other constructions on which there is some level of agreement (Guba, 1990). The interpretivism paradigm, as such, depends on consensual language and occurring in a natural setting, using naturalist means, including interviews, observations and analysis of data. This ensures sufficient exchange of ideas between the researcher and participant (Adam, van Manen & Givens, 2008). Meanings and knowledge begin to emerge through such interaction.

It is this philosophical basis that determines the various aspects of the research process including the phrasing of the topic, formulation of the research question, the approach and implementation of the study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). According to Scott and Usher (2011), it is these philosophical issues that constitute what the researchers 'silently think' about their research.

3.4 Research Methodology

I decided to approach the study from a qualitative standpoint based on the title, aim and research questions guiding it. By its nature, qualitative approach has some defining characteristics which were aligned to the aim of the study. Firstly, qualitative approach requires data to be collected within a natural setting, where the phenomenon being explored occurs. In differentiating a quantitative approach from a qualitative approach, Creswell (2009) illustrated how, in the former, the setting is manipulated by the researcher, for instance through conducting experiments in laboratories where the environment is altered or tampered with. In a qualitative approach, on the other hand, the researcher follows the participants where they are – and where the phenomenon being investigated is experienced. As well as following the participants in their natural settings, the researcher engages with them. either through verbal interactions (interviews) or observing the participants as they go about their daily routines. Yin (2011) justified the engagement with participants in their natural setting as a means of enhancing the wholeness or integrity of experience and for interpreting and explaining the significance of experience. Sherman and Berg (2005, p.5) quoted Shimahara: "human behaviour and experience is shaped in context and that events cannot be understood adequately if isolated from their contexts." Therefore, in this study, I sought to investigate the phenomenon within its natural setting.

Secondly, as a qualitative study, the researcher is considered the key instrument for collecting data. While in a quantitative approach, researchers use impersonal means of collecting data, such as questionnaires and surveys, qualitative approach capitalises on the face-to-face interaction with participants as a way of generating in-depth and enriching data through observing reactions and perceptions. As such, the nature in which the researcher approaches the respondents in the case of interviews and observation, or the manner in which documents and artefacts are reviewed, will, to a large extent, determine the trustworthiness of the study. This characteristic has been a point of criticism from the positivists on the grounds of bias and the difficulty in generalisation. As a way of controlling for the type of bias that comes with the researcher being the main instrument, I adopted an approach recommended for the type of research design that is discussed below. This enabled me, as the researcher, to set aside (Bracket) my assumptions and biases as much as possible (as will be further elaborated on later in the chapter). With the lack of generalisation, Babbie and Mouton (2001) argued that, while the generalisation cannot be done wholesale for qualitative studies, the reader is able to draw some lesson from a particular situation that they can transfer to theirs.

Thirdly, qualitative approach focuses on extracting meaning and understanding from the respondents' encounters. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15) have described this characteristic as one that aims to:

> Achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making and describe how people interpret what they experience.

As such, the type of data that is collected in a qualitative study ought to be both coherent and in-depth to provide the understanding and adequate information, from which meaning would be extracted. A number of measures were, therefore, taken in this study in order to ensure that rich and coherent data was obtained. These included the choice of data collecting methods, which will be discussed in details in the latter sections, as well as the relationship that, as a researcher, one ought to establish with the respondents (good rapport) that ensures them of trust, which allows them to open up and express themselves freely.

3.5 Research Design

In conducting any study, it is important for the researcher to outline clearly the logical processes that they employ during the study, from start to finish. Marshall and Rossman (2014) refer to the specific procedure or logical process of stages or tasks involved in research, from the

formulation of the problem to generation of conclusion or theory, which is necessary in planning and executing a study, as research design.

Within the qualitative methodology, there are various research designs that can be applied, including case study, grounded research, ethnography, narratives and phenomenological research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The choice of any given research design is dependent on the aim and research questions of the study. In keeping with the title, aim and research questions, I adopted a combination of two designs: case study and phenomenological designs.

3.5.1 Case Study

As a research term, 'case study' has been used synonymously with qualitative research, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), although Harrison, Birks, Franklin and Mills (2017) argue whether a case study could take on either qualitative, quantitative or mixed approaches, depending on the researcher's choice. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out that, in a qualitative case study, just as the other designs outlined above, the 'case study' approach has its own attributes that make it unique and an independent type of qualitative research design. This study qualified as a case study on the basis of a number of criteria. First, a case study could either be looked at in the context of a process as Yin (2014), describing is as a study that empirically sets out to explore a phenomenon within its natural setting. In this situation, what makes such an exploration a case study is the particular phenomenon that is being investigated.

Second, is the principle of *'bounded system'* (Merriam, 2009, p.40). This has been referred to as the delineated area (physical or otherwise) within which the study's focus would lie. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) exemplified such bounded systems as including a particular individual, a single group in a community or a specific institution. Harrison et. al (2017, p, 12) summarise the attributes of a case study as a bounded system. stating that:

> Bounding the case is essential to focusing, framing, and managing data collection and analysis. This involves being selective and specific in identifying the parameters of the case including the participant/s, location and/or process to be explored, and establishing the timeframe for investigating the case.

This study's focus was on a single phenomenon that has been summarised as 'succeeding against the odds.' This phenomenon or case was confined within a specific context, where the phenomenon would be explored, which formed the eligibility criteria for the study. These included choice of final year students only; students that came from a low socio-economic background; and students from a specific institution of higher education in the Malawian

context. Stake (1995) points to the application of a bounded system as a benefit of qualitative case study that stems from its emphasis on the uniqueness of the selected case. (This uniqueness of the case in this study has been elaborated further in section 3.6 of this chapter.)

3.5.2 Phenomenological Research design

Phenomenological design is based on a theoretical viewpoint that advocates for the study of direct experience taken at face value, which sees behaviour as being directly linked to an aspect of experience, rather than by external objectives and physically described realities (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). It examines human experiences through the descriptions provided by the people involved (Ungar, 2003). There are various types of phenomenological designs in research. Langdridge (2007) identifies seven of them: the descriptive or transcendental constitutive; naturalistic constitutive; existential; generative historicist; genetic; hermeneutic, or interpretive; and realistic phenomenology. The most common of these are descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. Mertens (2005) highlighted phenomenological design, as opposed to other qualitative designs, as one that has the 'subjective experience' of respondents at the centre of the inquiry. Its main purpose is to extract reality from participants' narratives of their encounter with the phenomenon in question to come up with in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). As a research design, it seeks to identify a shared experience, that extrapolates to a semblance of a universal form of shared experience, thereby enhancing the realisation of a better understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). My choice of this particular design was as a result of its beneficial outcomes, which Harvey and Delfabbro (2004) outline as its ability to reveal the processes relevant to the lived experience of participants and exploring minority voices. Such benefits are summarised by Ungar (2003) as he points to:

- Its suitability in discovering unnamed protective processes relevant to the lived experience of research participants. In the case of this study, the focus is on seeking to uncover the truths behind what would be described as 'succeeding against the odds' by these students that, according to much of the literature, have few chances of succeeding in higher education, but they do.
- Its ability to provide a thick description of the phenomenon in very specific contexts. Just like in the narrative design, phenomenological research provides deeper and thick descriptions, but as it relates to a particular phenomenon.
- Its ability to elicit and strengthen the 'voices' of the minority, which account for unique localised definitions of positive outcomes. The study's choice of participants was based

on the understanding that these were in the minority who fitted the category sought for and as such, run the risk of their voices going unheard. Giving this minority group the voice, therefore, brought out some insights that may have otherwise remained unknown or unexplored.

- Its requirement for researchers to account for their biased standpoints. The choice of phenomenological research design was also because it gives careful consideration to the preconceived biases that they harbour regarding the area of study.

Being someone that has gone through a similar experience of coming from a low socio-economic background, it is easy to mix up the participants' views with one's own past experience. In the case of phenomenological design, the researcher is expected to bracket themselves (epoche), as it helps to increase the trustworthiness of the study's findings (Moore, 2018).

The focus on lived experiences is one that has been advocated for as a means of gaining a deeper understanding between social aspects and the meanings that society attaches to the world. In his view on this, German writer, Wilhem Dilthey (1860-70s) advanced the need for social researchers to study lived experiences as a means of exposing the connections between social cultural and historical aspects of people's lives, thereby seeing the context in which particular actions occur (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003, p. 7). It is through phenomenological research design that, as a researcher, one gets an opportunity to 'put themselves in their respondents' shoes and by way of interacting with them and gaining an understanding of their subjective experiences (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 226).

As well as just gaining an appreciation of the human lived experience with a phenomenon, phenomenological approach goes further into drawing out essence from the lived experience of the respondents. Dahlberg (2009, p.11) understood essence as a structure of vital meanings that clarifies a phenomenon of interest. Natanson (1973, p. 14) borrows from Husserl's view, of essence as implying "aspects or qualities of objects-as intended."

3.5.1 Bracketing

As was mentioned earlier, one of the elements that distinguishes phenomenological research design from the rest of the qualitative research designs is the significance it places on bracketing. Carpenter (2007) defined bracketing as a methodological tool within the phenomenological inquiry ,that calls for a conscious effort by the researcher to put aside their

own beliefs about the phenomenon, based on what one already know about the phenomenon throughout the whole research process. While there have been debates on the practicality of bracketing oneself, with some authors suggesting strategies, such as leaving a literature review to the end to avoid its influence of the researcher and increasing the likelihood of bias (Hamill & Sinclair 2010), I employed three of the strategies suggested by Chan, Fung and Chien (2013) in this study.

- The first strategy was the use of a reflectivity diary, in which I was able to document my preconceptions regarding the study. Through asking myself questions suggested by Chang, Fung and Chien (2013), I was able to position myself in a place where my own biases were addressed as much as possible. Some of the questions I had to interrogate myself with included: whether I was humble enough to learn about the experiences of respondents and whether I could equip myself to adopt an attitude of conscious ignorance about the issue under investigation.
- The next strategy was in the techniques I used in collecting my data, especially through the interviews. By using semi-structured interviews, the interview schedule was strictly used as a guide of the open-ended questions that were administered to the respondents, rather than having questions that led them on, based on my preconceived notions of the phenomenon (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). By allowing the respondent to lead the conversation, the opportunity to step in with my biases was lessened.
- The last strategy was employed through the manner in which the data was analysed. As will be discussed in more details in section 3.11.1, data was analysed using Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis (DPA). One of the elements of this form of analysis is the need to return the study to the participants for them to ascertain whether what has been stipulated is a true reflection of their experiences as presented during data collection (Polit & Beck, 2010). Following my analysis of findings, I sent my respondents the compiled findings for their views on the validity of the presentation. While I was able to get feedback from nine out of the sixteen respondents, their feedback was positive with regards to the presentation reflecting their experiences.

Having given consideration to the research design and measures to be instituted, the subsequent decision was about the choice of research site.

3.6 Site Selection

The decision on where a researcher conducts their study is as important as the other decisions, such as the methods of collecting data, the methodological approach and what the study aims at producing. The choice of research site has implications for the quality of data that would be collected with regard to what the study aims to achieve. Wrong choices, therefore, have negative effects on the final outcome of the study. While factors, such as convenience, do contribute to the decision on site, Walford (2001) emphasises the importance of picking a site whose attributes are those that directly relate to the aim and aspects that the study seek. For this study, therefore, consideration was made of the selection of the site, as is discussed below.

3.6.1 Country choice

The choice of Malawi as a site for conducting this study was based on the positioning of the country in relation to the Human Development Index (HDI), which is a measure that is used to position countries according to human development indicators. These indicators include life expectancy, per capita income and education. According to the 2019 HDI, as reported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Malawi's ranking among the 189 countries stood at 172, based on the mentioned indicators. While there have been criticisms about the use of the HDI, in the absence of standardised measures of development, it provides an insight into the conditions prevalent in different countries. Malawi is in the position where provision and access to education, especially higher education, is a challenge that created a need for this kind of study. As was pointed out in chapter 2, in the World Bank report on Malawi's higher education, the absorption rate is among the lowest in the world and among those that gain access, only 0.7% represent the poorest quintile. As such, the desire to explore survival and success of those from this 0.7% made Malawi a relevant site. Besides, studies of this nature have not been conducted within a context such as Malawi, which made it a suitable choice.

3.6.2 Institutional choice

I decided on choosing the university of Malawi, in particular Chancellor College, as a site for the study. This decision was arrived at because of its history, its status as a public institution and the diversity of programmes offered.

The University of Malawi is the oldest public university in the country, established in 1964 and later divided into constituent colleges. Chancellor College situated in the Zomba district was the biggest of them, offering the most diverse programmes ranging from the Sciences to the Social Sciences, Law, Education, Political Science and others. It was therefore the diversity of programmes that resulted in the site being selected. This was to draw a wider range of

respondents representing different programmes to share their experience within those various programmes.

As a public institution of higher learning, The University of Malawi is open to anyone, as long as they meet the criteria for entry into university. While there are private universities around, their patronage is restricted to those that can afford the fees, who, in most cases, are from middle class and would not offer the targeted population for the study's focus.

3.6.3 Convenience

Having selected the site based on the justifications that have been presented (based on the level of importance). Convenience was another justification, although not primary, but just as necessary. Walford (2001) mentioned factors that constitute convenience, when a researcher is considering a probable research site. These include time, financial and personal costs, as well as the level of ease or difficulty in gaining access. In the case of this study and my choice of the site, most of the considerations were favourable. Coming from Malawi originally put me at an advantage as a researcher having the background understanding of the site, in terms of location as well as culture. Rubin and Rubin (1995) explained how prior knowledge and appreciation of the culture of people, one is supposed to interact with in research, makes a big impact on the success of the study. Secondly, as the study area was that of my home, I would not worry about extra costs, such as accommodation and transportation. The proximity between the study site and where I resided was a reasonable distance. Finally, having ties with the institution (employee) made access easier, especially after producing the ethical clearance from the university of Witwatersrand and explaining my study to the authorities. These factors made the site convenient for me to carry out the study.

3.7 Target population and Sample Frame

In qualitative research, there are decisions that one makes as a researcher that, to a large extent, determine the success of the study, as far as the realisation of the intended results is concerned. Rubin and Rubin (1995) outlined some of them, among which is the choice of respondents and why, as a researcher, you go for such rather than the rest. This is what I try to explain in this section.

Base on the study, my sample population was going to be university students and consideration of which university to choose was based on Lewis & Ritchie's (2003) criterion of deciding on a population for study. First, was on the basis of convenience and the likelihood of extracting data that would be rich and relevant to my study.

3.7.1 Sampling technique

Unlike in quantitative research, where probability sampling is carried out, in which each member of the targeted population stands a chance of being picked for the study, in qualitative research, non-probability sampling was followed, where units are selected to represent features being sought for and where possible, the researcher deliberately goes for the most suited units that will provide the needed data (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). In qualitative research, the three commonest sampling techniques are purposive, quota and snowball sampling.

The first step in the sampling process was to decide how I was going to select my subjects. I set out to employ purposive sampling, which allowed me to choose my sampling units. These were chosen because they had unique features that enabled me to explore and gain a deeper understanding of what the focus of my study was (Patton, 2002), which was their lived experiences as students, from low socio-economic backgrounds, who were successful in higher education. In which case, such features included students from low socio-economic backgrounds in their final year of university, who showed academic rigour through their GPA results, from second year through to fourth year. Robson (2002) discussed different types of purposive sampling that a researcher would opt for, depending on the kind of study they set out to conduct. For purposes of this study, I employed the homogeneous purposive sampling. This entails a selection of samples that gives a detailed picture of a specific phenomenon. The sample, therefore, consists of units that possess similar characteristics and sometimes subcultures (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003).

The next step was two-fold in identifying students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Firstly, by use of a proxy that entailed socio-economic status of students. This was based on a selection of students that came into university from Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS). These were of interest, seeing as most of the CDSSs in Malawi are in rural areas, serving rural populations and even those in urban areas are poorly resourced. As such, most parents and guardians are willing to pay extra money to get their children from CDSSs to better quality secondary schools. The majority of those in CDSS, therefore, are students whose parents and guardians could not afford to get them out, leaving them there as the only option. The identification of these was done through accessing the university selection list for 2013 (This cohort was the one who would be finishing in 2018), through the proper channels of communication that have been discussed in-depth in the section under ‘Gaining access.”

Second, the identification of students from low socio-economic backgrounds was through accessing the database of students classified as 'needy', based on a baseline study aimed at identifying students deserving bursaries. This database factors in aspects of students, such as who their guardians were, their occupation, how much they earned annually and what made them qualify for bursaries. A reference letter from an authority confirming their status as unable to meet the costs of being a student was required as validation and proof of the claim. Due to insufficient funding, not everyone would get financial support. My interest was in those that proved to be in the position of deserving the bursary but were not able to get it.

Following the identification of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, I then had to draw out of these those who had proven to have academic rigour. At this point, the registry office was able to identify students from the list of low socio-economic backgrounds, that had a track record of success from their second year up to the point at which the study was being carried out in the first semester of their final year. For this stage, the cut off point for determining success was a GPA of not lower than 3.0, which is where the cut-off for a credit (upper second class) begins. Out of those I got, I was able to pick out those with higher credits and distinctions, whose cut-off point was 3.75 and over. Secondly, using the 'dean's list' record, which is a system of awarding students that performed outstandingly during the year, I was able to identify some of my prospective respondents.

From this information, I identified a sample size of eight (6 males and 2 females). Considering that this sample size was less that what I had planned for in the initial stages of my study, I decided to employ another technique to compliment the purposive technique. I therefore decided to opt for snowballing technique: using the existing sample, I was able to inquire from them additional relevant contacts that met the criteria for the study whom they knew (Patton, 2015). Through this technique, I was able to identify an additional eight prospective respondents (5 males and 3 females), bringing my sample size to a total of sixteen. Of the total sample size, fourteen respondents were interviewed and the two were shadowed, as will be expounded on in the later sections.

3.8 Data Generation Methods

The qualitative nature of the study demanded that I use data collecting methods that could allow for in-depth extraction of information from participants. While there are a number of methods that could afford me this kind of data, I resolved to employ in-depth semi-structured interviews As a complementary means of collecting data, I used a shadowing method, which will be explained later in the chapter.

3.8.1 In-depth Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are the most common means of collecting data in research, especially the interpretive qualitative methodology (Basit, 2010). Interviews have been widely looked at as a means of accessing information from respondents, through conversations that allow the interviewer the opportunity to step into the mind of the respondent and both see and experience their world though conversation(s). Semi-structured interviews involve the researcher introducing a topic, then guiding the discussion by asking specific questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The decision to opt for in-depth semi-structured interviews for this study was based on some of the reasons that Mason (2002) summarised adequately. First, being a qualitative study and based on the ontological and epistemological perspectives, the use of interviews would flesh out the experiences and views that are within the chosen methodological approach and the necessary elements of forming social reality. Secondly, the means through which I would explain and construct meanings from the social phenomenon of interest in the study was through accessing deeper and more complex data, which would ideally be realised through in-depth semi-structured interviews. It is also through in-depth interviews that I had the opportunity of collecting ample data from which to identify patterns, as they emerged from my interaction with the respondents (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010)

Employing interviews as a way of generating data is not without its challenges. These arise from both the respondents' and the researcher's side: for instance, the respondents' willingness to set aside time for the exercise, or the nature in which the researcher administers the questions, avoiding either leading questions or derailing from the intended course. Most of these challenges can be resolved at the onset, if proper preparations have been made. These include establishment of rapport with respondents, being truthful at the outset as to what the study is about and a true estimation of how long the interview would take, as well as piloting of the instruments to ensure they realise the intended outcomes, as far as the research questions are concerned (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Henning, Van Rensburg, and Smit (2004, p. 52) have highlighted other dimensions that an interviewer could look out for when conducting an interview. These include: how the interviewee perceives themselves in the interview, which has an effect on the type of data that would be generated; the meanings that interviewees attach to their lives and how these are represented; and also the body language that sometimes reinforces the emotional aspect attached to the content being relayed.

I employed this data collection method, also referred to as a conversational interviewing style, which involves a pre-arranged set of questions that act as a guide through the interview. According to Silverman (2013), the guide is not to be looked at as 'cast in stone.' A departure from them is not to be considered as a big issue, as they offer guidance to the researcher, but, due to the dynamics occurring during the interaction with the respondents, the researcher would have the liberty to manoeuvre through the guide, as they deem fit. The conversational aspect of this method allowed me to have the opportunity of establishing rapport with my respondents and in exchange for this, I had the potential of soliciting detailed information with such depth.

Some of the considerations to be borne in mind by a researcher when conducting interviews is the struggle to be as neutral and objective as possible during the exercise, beginning with the actual data collection, through the analysis process to the interpretation and presentation of findings. In the case of this study, I had to adopt certain measures to ensure the objectivity of the findings, as well as the neutrality of my position. These will be discussed further in the section on quality assurance.

One of the weaknesses raised in relation to interviews is that, rather than collecting naturally occurring data, interviews tend to setup scenarios for respondents to which the respondents should react to providing information (Silverman, 2013). In the case of this study, that is aimed at generating data from students' lived experiences, creation of a scenario, as Silverman (2013) puts it, does not negatively affect the study but rather reinforces it, as such scenarios trigger memories of the respondents from which such experiences would be drawn. Besides, following the Rubin and Rubin (1995) guide to interviews, I had to allow for the respondents to have ample opportunity to relay their stories and experiences, rather than appearing to be dominating the interview process as an interviewer.

Preparatory procedures and considerations to bear in mind

In qualitative research, there is a variety of methods that one could employ to access data. The decision to opt for a particular method lies in the researcher's judgement of how far the method goes in addressing the main issues in the research (Patton, 2015). Although this may be the case, in qualitative research, there are some other external factors that may entail the feasibility of the perceived 'most' suitable method. Miles and Huberman (1984) advance the need for researchers to be open to unexpected events or conditions that may arise while in the field, which would result in the prior instrumentation (original plan of action). In my case, alongside

conducting the face-to-face in-depth interviews, I had planned for shadowing as a supporting method, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative, unlike quantitative, research, the role of the researcher is central to the processes undertaken, including data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting. The expectation of a researcher in qualitative research, as Fink (2000) put it, is to consider themselves as the main instrument that has the capability of understanding and drawing lessons regarding the existence of humans. Pezalla, Pettigrew, and Miller-Day (2012, p. 18) argued that:

> After all, it is through the researcher's facilitative interaction that a conversational space is created where respondents share rich information about their lives.

As the key person in the study, therefore, I ensured that, from the planning stage, I had some clear direction on what I was seeking, as I went to conduct the field work. This included ensuring that my approach to gatekeepers and respondents in the study would give the impression of my familiarity with the work I was involved in. In the formulation of my research tools, I ensured that there was some coherence and a clear link between the aim of my study and the research questions, which would speak to the theoretical framework that I devised as a lens through which to interpret my data.

During the data collecting exercise, I ensured that I engaged my respondents in a way that would allow me to delve deep to extract their lived experience for my interpretation. Among other factors, this involved being able to carry out a quick assessment of the respondents, in terms of their characteristics and personality, to approach them in a way that would create a conversational space for them to express themselves freely. In a study, done by Pezalla, Pettigrew and Miller-Day (2012), one of the observations that come out clearly is the differences in personality traits of respondents who will respond to different approaches for an optimum outcome. Although their study involved multiple researchers, each having their own approach, as a single researcher, I decided to adopt the various approaches suiting my respondents. Rubin and Rubin (1995) asserted, as a characteristic of qualitative researcher, especially in interviews, the flow of conversation usually changes to match with individual's 'knows' and 'feels'. The three approaches that I used, which I found fruitful, are the empathetic approach, affirmative approach and the self-disclosure approach. The variations in interviewer characteristics in terms of approach techniques proved as helpful in my experience as was the shown in Pezalla, Pettigrew and Miller-Day's study (2012).

3.9 Field Experience

My experience in the field included the observation of all protocols of gaining access to gatekeepers and respondents; setting up appointments with my respondents; familiarising myself with my research tools; conducting a pilot exercise; revising the research tool following feedback from pilot exercise; carrying out the actual data collection; and participant validation

3.9.1 Gaining Access

In order to access the qualitative data for this study, there were processes and procedures that I had to go through. These included establishing good rapport with the gatekeepers (institution) and respondents; ensuring that respondents have a clear understanding of what the study was all about; and reassuring respondents of undivided and non-judgemental attention during the interviewing process. Maxwell (2013) underscored the importance of giving a careful thought to how this can be done, as it becomes the determining factor of success or failure of the study. The process usually differs from setting to setting. Gobo (2008, p. 18) distinguished the closed or private setting from that which is open or public. In the former, a researcher has to go through some kind of gatekeepers before accessing the respondent, while in the latter, access is readily present. Whichever the case though, one important aspect borne in mind, when trying to gain access, is an establishment of good rapport with the gatekeepers and the prospective respondents. Adam, van Manen and Givens (2008) described rapport as the means of establishing an open and trusting relationship between the researcher and participants in a study. As a researcher, one has to consider how they approach both the gatekeepers (where necessary) and the respondent in a way that instils trust and openness between them. In this study, I went with Ritche and Lewis' (2003, p. 62) guidelines for negotiating access, including: "*Being sensitive to hierarchies especially when getting clearance from gatekeepers"*

Considering that the study aimed at interviewing students at an academic institution, after obtaining ethical clearance from University of the Witwatersrand to proceed with the study (which has been attached in the appendix 1), I wrote a formal letter to the head of the institution. In it, I provided detailed information concerning the study, its aim and objectives, the targeted sample, means of data collection and how the data would be stored and managed. Upon getting approval from the principal, who referred me to the Registrar, I set off to Malawi to begin the fieldwork. There, I was assigned a staff member from the registry office to work with.

With the assistance of the gatekeepers, I was able to identify my respondents, as indicated earlier in section 3.7.1.

Upon getting a go-ahead from the gatekeeper, I had to also ensure that proper processes are followed, in order to gain the trust, confidence and openness of my respondents, who were key to my study. Weiss (1994, p. 119) echoed the value of establishing a good working relationship, when he illustrates how a researcher cannot get away with a failed relationship between them and their respondents, as partners in the production of vital material. This therefore called for careful consideration of steps that I could take in ensuring that, as a researcher, I got my respondents on board regarding the study processes and intentions. While in quantitative research, the expectation from the researcher towards the respondents is not central, due to the distance created between the researcher and respondent, Mallozzi (2009) pointed out how the neutrality promoted in quantitative research could become an obstacle to accessing important information in qualitative research. The call for interpersonal connection between researcher and respondent is what Mallozi (2009) and Matteson and Lincoln (2009) perceived as the essential ingredient in realising the "essential self" from the respondent, which through good rapport could be actualised. Weiss (1994) came up with approaches that would enable a researcher to gain the needed access, when dealing with respondents. These approaches include the impression one gives at the first meeting. A threatening impression, depending on the area of study, would result in respondents shunning participation, or at least not giving out information they feel does not implicate them in any way. In the case of this study, I knew that, as a lecturer in the institution, there was already a power difference that I needed to resolve. I, therefore, endeavoured to clarify that, although I was a lecturer in the institution, for purposes of this study I came in my capacity as a student/researcher seeking to collect data for my PhD study, the aim and scope of which I had explained in detail. With such an explanation the participants felt more at ease throughout the process. In addition, due to the nature of the study, the participants seized the opportunity to freely express their lived experience, from the point of view that whatever their experiences were, they might have an impact on other students with similar backgrounds and challenges.

The clarity of purpose of the research also affects the level of openness that respondents are likely to exhibit (Ghazinejad, Hussein, & Zidane, 2018). Where a researcher fails to articulate the aims and scope of their study, there would be a higher chance of respondents offering half the story. The researcher must also reassure the respondents of the interest and desire they have in hearing them out without passing out any judgements, through empathetic listening. There have been debates on the use of researcher empathy in qualitative research, as some have viewed empathy as creating a superficial relationship that has an effect on the data that the

respondent provides (Partington, 2001). As a researcher, myself, I decided to approach my respondents depending on how I perceived their personalities. As such, the establishment of rapport for each was unique to their persona. I attempted to understand the participants from their standpoint (Eide & Kahn, 2008). In either case, I had to balance the skill of being a good listener and the ability to offer responses.

3.10 Familiarisation with research tool

Upon observing all the necessary protocols on the ground, with gatekeepers and prospective respondents, I took some time to go through the research instrument (Interview guide), familiarising myself with its content, structure and flow. This exercise is recommended to enable a researcher to consider and imagine how the interviews would flow, with regards to the direction of the conversation (Lewis & Ritchie 2003).

3.10.1 Pilot Study

At the end of the preparatory processes of setting up the interview protocols, gaining access and consent from the respondents, my next step was to setup a mock (pilot) session. This was my way of ensuring that my tools, approach and questioning techniques worked towards addressing the aim and research questions in my study.

Basit (2010) outlines some of the benefits of a pilot study to the researcher. In my case, carrying out the pilot study, where I conducted 3 interviews with students, allowed me to improve on a number of areas. First, I was able to test my interview protocol and make some adjustments to ensure that it was properly aligned to address the aim and research questions and also linked to my theoretical lens. The pilot also assisted me in rephrasing my questions where I had askeda long and loaded question, as well as in situations where I ended up asking a closed question that required just a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. One of the common errors encountered during interviews, that I was able to look out for, was desisting from asking leading questions, especially when trying to probe for more information. Henning, van Rensburg and Smit (2004) have referred to such practices as contaminations of data. Most of the interview guide was rearranged to create a flow in the interaction with my respondents. Second, I was also able to establish a rough idea of how long the interviews would take for purposes of my daily planning. Lastly, the exercise gave me an opportunity to practice with the actual data gathering, as well as analysing of the data collected, which was a preparation for the real work ahead.

3.11 Data Analysis Tool

The choice of method of analysing data in any study is was determined mainly by the research Approach. My description of data analysis will be adopted from Flick's (2014, p. 5) definition as: "the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning making in the material and what is represented in it."

In the case of this study, as a qualitative phenomenological study, there were a number of considerations that had to be made to ensure that data would be analysed to reflect the intended outcome of the study, which was to uncover the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds that were thriving academically
in higher education. According to Yüksel and Yildirim (2015), The intended outcome of a phenomenological study is to extract reality from respondents' accounts of their experiences and feelings, from which in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon are produced.

The data, generated during the study through semi-structured interviews with students as well as modified shadowing, took the form of discussion notes as well as audio recorded data. The analytical process started as soon as the first interview was conducted. This involved verbatim transcription from audio to textual data. Thereafter, what follows in the effort to make meaning from data depends on the researcher's intention in carrying out the study. With phenomenological research, there are two main approaches to analysing data: The Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis (DPA) and the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

3.11.1 Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis (DPA)

This study opted for (DPA) and, in particular, has adopted Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. According to Matua and Van Der Wal (2015), the descriptive approach to analysing phenomenological data is used to shed some light on poorly or misconceived aspects of experience. In the case of this study, based on the majority of existing literature, the case of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, in relation to academic achievement in higher education, has been perceived negatively.

This study decided to take on a different approach by focusing on this category of students from a different angle (from deficit to dynamic), thereby shedding more light on the understanding of this category of students' experiences in higher education. The Colaizzi method of analysing phenomenological studies consists of seven steps, as most qualitative analysis processes are iterative in nature. Below was the plan of action on how data analysis in this study proceeded.

Step 1: Reading and Re-reading original text

Following the data collection and transcription. There was a need for me to put aside my preconceived ideas or feelings about what the outcome of the investigation would be, in what phenomenologists regard as the process of bracketing, as was discussed in section 3.5.1. The rationale behind bracketing is to reduce bias during the extraction of meaning from the respondents' experience, thereby mitigating the negative effects of preconceptions that compromise the trustworthiness of the findings (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Upon successfully bracketing the existing presuppositions, the reading and re-reading of transcripts began. This process enabled me to immerse myself in the data and get more acquainted with it in order to achieve the three goals:

1. Reading the text literally, while focusing on its literal content and form
2. Reading reflexively, to focus on how one's own orientation shapes their interpretations and focus
3. Reading interpretively, so as to construct one's own interpretation of what the text means (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Step 2: Extraction of Relevant Segments

While immersing oneself in the data, the subsequent step is to identify portions within the text that are relevant, or speak to the phenomenon being explored. In the case of my study, identification of such relevant segments was guided by the research questions that had been set out to be addressed. By looking at my data against my set of research questions, I was able to identify segments within the text that spoke to the phenomenon. Using highlighters, I was able to pin-point these segments. It would be these portions of the text that would be used to provide information that substantiates the findings of the study.

Step 3: Formulation of Meanings

From the segments that had been identified and highlighted in step 2, the following move was where, in a separate book, I wrote down what I perceived were the meanings of the segment. Each of these segments was assigned some code (identifier) with an indication of the page number for ease of tracing back during compilation. The purpose for doing so is to bring out some of the hidden meaning regarding the phenomenon that is central to the study. This formulated meaning is meant to be accurate enough as to not change the essence of the respondents' experience. As such, Streubert (2007) suggested two processes to be applied during formulation of meaning: the eidetic comprehension or accurate interpretation and reflexivity, which entails going back to the respondents' words and comparing them with the

formulated meaning. Where the meaning changes the essence of the experience, such formulation is to be considered inaccurate and thereby eliminated.

Step 4: Categorising of Codes into Themes

After establishing the various codes within the transcripts, the next step was to categorise, or group the codes into themes. The themes would imply a collection of codes that had commonalities within them. This would, in turn, reduce the sections of the analysed data into clusters that speak to the same theme. This involved an integrating of converging ideas.

Step 5: Development of an Exhaustive Description

Having established the themes of the study, the next step was drawing up a detailed description of the phenomenon, based on the formulated meanings extracted from step 3 and the themes that had been generated in step 4. It was during this stage that reduction of data was done through the removal of repeated notions, or misplaced and exaggerated descriptions. The rationale behind this was to come up with an accurate and straight-to-the-point description of the phenomenon that would not weaken the final description.

Step 6: Validation of Findings Through Respondents

As a way of ensuring that the interpretation and formulation of meaning and essence from the data generated had not been adulterated by researcher bias in misconceptions, thereby ensuring trustworthiness of the findings, copies were sent to respondents. The aim of returning the findings to the respondents would be for them to confirm that the analysed data reflected what they had initially indicated during the data collection exercise and that the findings have maintained the intended meaning, as has been discussed earlier in section 3.5.1.

Step 7: Incorporation of respondents' feedback

The final step in the data analysis was to take into consideration the feedback obtained from the respondent, also known as member-checking, exercise. There are debates surrounding the implementation of stage 6 and 7 on member-checking, with the argument that the validation process is untenable as the presented findings are a combination of two perspectives, that of the researcher from a phenomenological standpoint and that of a respondent from a natural stand point. As such, the process of validating would only be more or less a rubber-stamping exercise lacking objectivity from the respondent (Giorgi, 2009). Proponents of Colaizz's approach justified the role of member checking on the ground of increasing rigour and trustworthiness of the findings. In the case of this study, while the findings may have a reflection of both the respondents and the researcher from a phenomenological standpoint, the employment of stages six and seven were to ensure that the findings captured the essence of the higher education experience of these students from low socio-economic backgrounds was.

As with qualitative analysis, the process was not looked at as being linear and rigid. The seven steps acted as a guide through the process that involved back and forth movements (iterative) in order to get the rich and detailed findings from the data.

3.12 Quality Assurance Procedures

As is the expectation in qualitative research, I had to ensure that every step of my field experience was complying with measures set in place that ensure a high-quality study. This included steps in ensuring rigour of the study. While quantitative studies emphasise validity and credibility, qualitative measures the quality of the study through the extent of trustworthiness. The second measure was that of ensuring that the study was in compliance with ethical consideration. Adherence to ethical issues is what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010) considered as the major component of ensuring that the research and findings are trustworthy and valid.

3.12.1 Trustworthiness of the Study

In qualitative research, quality of the research is of utmost importance, if the study is to prove its academic rigour. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that all measures have been taken in ensuring that the research in question is beyond any doubt of rigour and objectivity, as far as qualitative research goes. While in a quantitative study, issues of validity and reliability are used, while qualitative studies ensure quality of finding by measuring the trustworthiness of the findings. Trustworthiness includes aspects such as credibility, dependability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Trustworthiness of a qualitative study could be undermined mainly by biases, both from the researcher's, as well as the participants', side.

One of the issues that arise in qualitative research is the extent to which objectivity of the findings is achieved, as well as the neutrality of the researcher during the period of data collection, analysis and presentation of findings. In the case of this study, as a way of ensuring objectivity of the findings, especially during the data collection exercise, I had to be mindful of the nature in which I presented myself to the participants. One does run into the danger of giving out too much information to the participant prior to the interviews, sometimes as a way of establishing rapport. Lewis & Ritchie (2003) cautioned how such practice would compromise the intended objectivity of the study, through influencing the participants' responses. Bahr, Albrecht and Chadwick (1984) advised that researchers need to refrain from providing so much information about themselves, especially as if this gives the respondent a hint of what the interviewer's attitude and stand is, with regards to the topic under investigation. For this study, I therefore made an effort to maintain a neutral position, where the respondents,

if they fell into the temptation of trying to answer to please the researcher, would have to guess what my stand was, which, as Bahr, Albrecht and Chadwick (1984) put it, would have to be random.

In a phenomenological study, one of such requirements is that of bracketing or 'epoche', where the researcher creates a distance from previously held perceptions to prevent them from getting in the way of the investigation (Moore, 2018). One way in which this was ensured in the study was by having my own journal, where I entered my thoughts and views. In this regard, (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014) stated that:

> Committed qualitative researchers keep a journal or notebook documenting their own hunches, intuitions and emotional responses to interviews and emergent information, and lateral questions or thoughts that arise en passant. Such self-reflections allow the researcher to trace ideas, understand their own thinking and develop further insights; it also provides a thinking-doing trail analogous to a concept map that displays researcher processes, how the project was shaped and the findings arrived at… (2014:712).

Through the use of a reflection journal, I was able to put down my preconceived ideas and try to find ways in which these preconceived notions could be minimised. Following my personal reflections, I decided to switch from using individual semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews as my data collection methods, to replacing focus group interviews with shadowing. The idea behind the change was my attempt to do as much as possible to have the respondents' views and experiences come out as prominent over my initial biases and perception. By having data collected, both through verbal engagement with respondents and having them allow me to experience their day-to-day lives through the shadowing experience, I was able to achieve the prominence of respondent experience over my biases. Finally, the validation of findings through respondents was to ensure that the findings truly reflected the information that respondents had provided.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

Research involving human and animal subjects has, over time, raised the great need to have ethics guiding them. Past ethical issues, including the Tuskegee syphilis study in 1932 as well as revelation of the maltreatment and inhumane treatment that Jewish people suffered during the Second World War period under the guise of scientific research, among others, raised an

outcry about this need of ethics to govern any form of research (Resnik, 2012). By 1949, the first code of ethics was documented ethics has been considered as an integral part of any research. Feminists look at the importance of ethical consideration from the standpoint of power relations, that exist between the researcher and respondents, which call for measures to be in place that ensure protection of respondents' rights and dignity during the entire research process (Lichtman, 2009)

Considering that the study involved interacting with human beings and, over a period of time, ethics protocols had to be applied in order ensure protection of the rights and integrity of the participants. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010) underscore the importance of having ethics at the forefront of the researcher's mind, from inception of the research through to the end, when reporting and disseminating finding. As such, the following procedures were followed:

3.13.1 Institutional Permission

As has been explained in section 3.9.1, an ethical application was submitted to the Wits School of Education to conduct research on 20th August, 2017. The application was approved on 12th September, 2017 (copy of ethics certificate in Appendix 1). Following the approval, I wrote to the institution (see Appendix 2) where I would be doing my research to seek their formal permission and, on 25th September, I received the formal permission to proceed with my fieldwork.

3.13.2 Informed Consent

Basit (2010) describes informed consent as the go-ahead that the participant gives for them to be part of the research project. Following the identification of my prospective sample of respondents, I handed them an information sheet that explained the nature of the study followed by a consent form, seeking (attached in Appendix 3 and 4 respectively). In seeking consent, I handed the respondents the consent letter and had them read it. A detailed explanation of what my study was about and their role in the study was likewise explained. Basit (2010) advised that consent be sought from people of sound mind, who were old enough to offer consent. The requirements of the study were for final year university students and they were assumed to be of a sound mind - and all the respondents were above the age of eighteen, thus not requiring parental consent. Apart from the written consent, I used Waldrop (2004)'s recommendation of not just obtaining a one-off consent, but considering consent as an ongoing process throughout the research journey. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010) outlined the importance of properly executed inform consent as serving to:

- Double-check the position of the respondent as far as willingness to participate is concerned, especially at the beginning of an interview.
- Give the respondent the liberty to answer only the questions they are comfortable answering, to avoid unnecessary duress.
- Reassure the respondent of confidentiality of data collected.
- Offer the respondent the liberty to withdraw from the study at any point, if they feel uncomfortable or reluctant to continue.

Letters of request and consent were sent to prospective participants, briefing them on the nature and objective of the study. It also reassures them of confidentiality with which the data collected would be observed, as well as the use of pseudonyms. Participants were also be made aware of their right to withdraw at any point, if they felt uneasy about being part of the study (Clandinin & Connelley 2000).

3.14 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter set out to provide step-by-step procedures that were followed in conducting this research, beginning with the planning process that involved deciding on the research approach, research design and research site. There was further discussion on the nature in which data was both collected and analysed and some of the measures that were put in place to ensure that both quality assurance and ethical considerations were adhered to. The four subsequent chapters unveil what transpired from the data collected, through both the interviews and shadowing exercise. The interview findings have been presented based on the three research questions that the study set out to address, while the shadowing findings address all three questions together.

CHAPTER 4: THE EXODUS

4.1 Introduction

The aim of the three consecutive chapters (4-6) is an attempt to present the findings from the data collected to explore the lived experiences of highly successful undergraduate students, from low socio-economic backgrounds, from Malawi's higher education.

Acquiring university education is a key to unlocking many doors of opportunity in the life of an individual. This is especially so as it pertains to students that are from low socio-economic backgrounds, who literature considers as lacking resources and capitals to inherit, thereby being left with little to get on with in life (Bourdieu, 1990; Fan, 2014). The journey to acquiring the credentials in higher education across the world has been marred by casualties to failure, dropout and low throughput. Most of these casualties originate from disadvantaged or low socio-economic backgrounds students (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Devlin, 2013). The scarcity of resources, when coupled with the pressure to perform against such perceived challenges to then emerge successfully in higher education, bring in a dimension that this study set out to explore. While statistics have shown and attempted to explain why these trends occur, this study set out to look at the other side of the coin, by focusing on those students that originate from low socio-economic backgrounds, but who, against the odds, are academically thriving.

In this chapter, the guiding question is:

What are the lived experiences of Malawian undergraduates from low socio-economic backgrounds that explain their encounter with higher education as students?

4.2 Research Question One: Lived experience of students from low socio- economic backgrounds

This research question set out to explore the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, based on their background and upbringing, as it relates to their success and failure along their journey as university students.

The brief biodata provided by respondents formed part of determining their background and upbringing. Respondents were asked to explain their general background in relation to the type of family they came from; the environment they grew up in; and the occupation and role of guardians and parents in their growing up. Below is a table that summarises the information that was sought to determine the upbringing of the respondents.

Table 4.1: BioData of Respondents

Code	Gender	Age	Support source	guardian Occupation	HE family History	Secondary School	Rural/Urban
#01	M	25	Parents	Carpenter(F)	1st generation	CDSS	Urban
#02	M	27	Parents	farmers	1st generation	CDSS	Rural
#03	M	25	Uncle	Civil Servant	1st generation	CDSS	Rural
#04	M	28	In-law	Soldier	1st generation	CDSS	Urban
#05	M	25	Mother	Farmer	1st generation	CDSS	Rural
#06	M	34	Self	Farmers	1st generation	CDSS	Rural
#07	M	36	Self	Farmers	1st generation	CDSS	Rural
#08	M	25	Brother	Retired	1st generation	CDSS	Urban
#09	F	23	Mother	P. Teacher	1st Generation	CDSS	Urban
#10	M	24	Mother	P. Teacher	1st generation	CDSS	Urban
#11	F	25	Husband	S. Teacher	1st generation	CDSS	Rural
#12	F	47	Husband	Unemployed	1 graduate	Night Sch	Urban
#13	F	23	Mother	Maid	1st generation	National	Urban
#14	M	25	Grandparent	Farmer	1st generation	CDSS	Urban
#15	F	23	Parents	Vendors	1st generation	CDSS	Rural
#16	M	26	Mother	Pieceworker	1st generation	CDSS	Rural

The age range of the respondents was between 23-47, which will be looked at later in the chapter. For most of them, the age factor was a result of discontinuing, then restarting school, due to financial hardships. Three of the respondents came into higher education as mature entries and, for the purposes of the study and having met the criteria for eligibility, they were co-opted.

In responding to the first question on their personal experiences, respondents highlighted poverty and lack, which in a way impacted on and characterised their lives growing up and later in higher education. The acknowledgement of poverty and its impact on their lives was one aspect that came out, with some considering it as a major impediment to their achieving more in life, while others considered it as a 'blessing in disguise' that enabled them to press on and aim at breaking the cycle of poverty, as was the case with the following respondents:

Coming from deep poverty made it so hard for me to do what I always wanted to do. Right away from my primary school, I was used to not having things that others had, going to school without food. My parents could not afford to send me to a well-resourced government secondary school after being selected to a CDSS.(#M006)

Seeing that all my efforts to square my fees proved futile…my mother, I didn't know that she was trying then she said, 'well you can just surrender your stipend for your fees since they are saying that is the only way for you to register, after you pay school fees. I will be sending you some money for you to survive so 1st month and 2nd month I survived in that manner. I knew she was getting loan from the women's banking groups but of course, I will have to pay back...[Laughs] (#M005)

The general experience of the respondents was of resource constraints, which literature alludes to, having a way of affecting their academic progress (Blanden & Gregg, 2004; Breier, 2010; Dynarski, 2003). The question went further to inquire what sort of background the respondents were raised in - in terms of rural/urban dichotomy.

4.3 Urban/Rural Dichotomy

The contrast between a rural and an urban settlement, especially in developing countries, is an obvious one. Among the marked differences is the distribution of resources. The former is usually better resourced than the latter and the assumption is that urban dwellers would have a better access to resources than their counterparts in the rural areas. Part of exploring the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, therefore, factored in where the respondents hailed from. The sample had a fair mix of rural/urban respondents. The respondents' experiences of their urban/rural upbringing, in the words of respondent #M006, #F013 and #M004, were:

My mother struggled but supported me through doing piecework to fund my education. Being raised in a rural setting, it was not easy for my mother to do enough piece work to raise enough money for us to survive. I grew up with my mother as my father passed away. After not doing well during my first attempt and MSCE, I decided to go back for the second attempt but this time, I funded myself. (#M06-rural)

So, I used to stay with both my parents in city X. My father was doing business, he was selling paintings in South Africa and he died in 2001 when I was 7 years old. So, I had to go and stay with my uncle in the same area. My mother took care of 4 of my siblings. So up to the age of 12, I stayed with my uncle who had 5 children, so we were 6 of us

there. Life in the city was hard growing up. We did not have even the basic things that people take for granted (#F013-urban)

Although we lived in the city, the quality of life that we lived was sometimes worse when compared to people who lived in the village. Not having basic things like 3 square meals a day; shoes to wear even at church. What bothered most was seeing some of my peers that had these basic these basic things. At least in the village, everyone suffers the same but growing up where you know you are the 'poor' one was a torture… (laughs) (#M004-urban)

The outcome of responses showed that, while the respondents reported coming from either rural or urban areas, their living standards based on quality of life were similar, as has been attested to above. My perception, prior to the data collection exercise, was that there would be a difference in terms of levels of need between those originating from rural areas and those from urban areas, with the rural students being worse off. The study revealed no difference, though, and if there was any, the rural students were better off. One of the explanations for this was the sense of community with which rural communities lived, which is unlike urban dwellers who tended to be alienated from the family network and operating on an individual basis, about which one respondent made the following comment:

Although being brought up in rural area was hard, one thing that I noticed later on upon coming to urban area was the lack of care between people or neighbours. In the village, you could never lack at least salt. You knew you could always count on your neighbours. Even when there was no food at home, as kids, we knew we could go and pretend to play at the neighbours and were guaranteed something to eat. Here [in town], you can die while your neighbour is watching. [laughs]. (#M007)

In all of the above scenarios, regardless of whether one grew up in an urban area or came from a rural setup, the conditions under which they were subjected to growing up were characterised by a general lack of the basic necessities of life. This, either directly, or indirectly had an effect on their successful and failed encounters in higher education. The next finding revolved around the educational experiences of the respondents.

4.4 Educational Experience

The next aspect of lived experience, that was explored, was the educational background of the respondents in the study. Literature has shown how the lack of certain prerequisite skills, knowledge and attitudes in students, during pre-tertiary education, has a high correlation with the access and success of students in higher education (Donnelley, 2016; Noble &Davies, 2009) The calibre of the respondents in the study was such that could be termed as having had a compromised pre-tertiary experience. In one of the responses, the respondent shared the following regarding their educational experience:

> *Coming from a CDSS meant teaching yourself 50% of the syllabus. Lack of libraries, laboratories and disgruntled…sometimes unqualified teachers meant them teaching only what they were comfortable with. The difficult topics were ignored and we had to teach ourselves by consulting with others from better resourced school.* (#M001)

In response to the lived experience, with regards to secondary school education, the unanimous responses spoke about the inadequacy of resources, such as libraries, science laboratories, qualified teachers and teachers in general. There were also issues arising from distances that had to be travelled to get to the schools, or the nearest resource place, such as library. Typified by a high teacher pupil ratio; lack and scarcity of basic teaching and learning resources, including books and classrooms, as well as teachers, the rural areas tend to suffer the most (MacJessie, 2004). Some of such responses included the following:

> *I cannot say that things were easy because at CDSS's in Malawi, there are so many challenges that we face for example absence of laboratories. Our laboratories were theoretical. We were learning practical things in theory like…'this is what happens when you mix starch and this...' We were just told this is what happens. In terms of books, we had limited books to the extent that near to my school, there is a conventional secondary school which is a walkable distance… 3-4hours walk so during the.. when I'm free, I would go to there to find books.* (#M003)

While being selected to secondary school from primary school is something to be excited about, there was the feeling of resentment from being selected to a CDSS for some of the respondents. This was due to poor state and quality of CDSSs, which meant that most people did not look forward to these schools.

> *When I was selected to KY CDSS, I was a bit reluctant to go there because err..I felt like I didn't deserve what I got. I just stayed at home, hoping that my father would try to secure me a place at some well-known school within the city or somewhere, where I could feel like yes, this is what I deserved but because of the financial standing, I just had to make myself go.* (#M001)
>
> *And as if that was not enough, there was the embarrassment that came with being at a CDSS. I was being ridiculed by fellow school mates that we went with to primary that had either gone to private schools or conventional schools on why we were passing through other better schools to go to a CDSS.* (#M010)

The initial general feeling of these respondents was that the CDSS experience would impede their chances of doing and achieving more in life, due to the sheer lack of what would be considered basic provisions for proper learning to occur.

One of the respondents lamented about how his dream of pursuing a particular career was shattered, as a result of going to a CDSS. In some respect, the feeling of excitement of making it into higher education from a humble background was marred by the inability to pursue the 'dream career':

> Because there were *no science laboratories, subjects like Physical Science, Biology which needed a lab couldn't provide for that. Because of that, the school did not provide for Physical science and that had an impact on me because then, it made change my career from wanting to go into medicine to what I am doing now, which initially was frustrating but I have to make good of what I have now and happy with my progress so far* (#M005)

A few of the respondents attributed their failure in the first attempt at secondary leaving exams to the poor quality of the CDSS:

> *The schools were of poor quality. For some of them, having 35 points was the best they could do. My brother got close to that and he became a celebrity even though it was nothing close to qualifying for university. In my case, I had to repeat the year because of failure to secure a credit in English which was a requirement for entering university, The issue though was that when English Literature was introduced, our teacher who was qualified for primary teaching did not know how to handle the subject so we just*

read the whole book without explanation. As such most of us did not pass well only in the English subject. (#F011)

While there was this general feeling of shock and resentment towards the inadequacy of CDSS and the negativity that came with it, when asked in retrospect what their feelings were about undergoing the CDSS experience, there was a shift in feelings that seemed to have been overridden by reconciliation within themselves and an embrace of the experience that they had previously despised.

I should say my prior experience in CDSS prepared me to work under insufficient resources and be resourceful enough to handle the situation I was in while in university. I think even with just a course outline and basic guidelines, I would find resources and understand the course. While some of my schoolmates resigned to the fate of being at a CDSS, I decided to change my point of view to see what good would come out of this. (#M007)

I would say CDSS are far much better than national secondary schools in the way that we are groomed coz we are groomed to be independent students where teachers would just come and say, 'today, we are covering this topic' and just say 'A,B,C and D.'You had to go and do your own research and not just relying on what the teacher is doing or saying. (#M008)

Most of the responses were characterised by the ability to extract positive outcomes from seemingly negative experiences. Respondent #M007 explains how the change of mind set and refocusing on drawing something positive out of the CDSS experience benefited him. For most of the respondents, the hardships and hard work yielded positive outcomes and entering higher education presented a different level of challenges they had to grapple with.

4.5 Higher Education Experience

4.5.1 First Generation graduates

First generation graduates, as described by London and Zwerling (1992), refer to students whose parents and grandparents were non-college-educated as blue-collar workers. The majority of students in the study were themselves the first to get to higher education. When asked about their experiences as first-generation students, the majority expressed the struggle that they encountered having no prior knowledge of what to expect in university. Sandefur,

Meier and Campbell (2006) pointed out the vital role that family plays in both encouraging and informing students about university expectations. They discuss how siblings and parents influence the student's choice of career path. In the absence of such a family resource for the respondents, when asked what their motivation was to get to university some of their responses were that:

> *getting into university never occurred to me until I was in form three when I discovered it was possible for a chap coming from a needy background as mine to pursue university education. In my mind, only the rich and famous made it to college. During my time, I was not only the first student to be selected to university in my family but also the first from the CDSS that I was at. In a way, it opened a way for other after me to say, 'if so and so did it, why can't I?* (#M002)

> *As I said, the next educated person educated after me is a standard 4 dropout, It meant the whole family putting pressure on the available resource which is land in order to feed ourselves, as well as feeding our dependents because the whole family depend the little land for subsistence farming. So after seeing that all these people will need the same land and therefore put some pressure on it, I thought that I should at least get an education and detach myself from this and fight to get to the highest as far as education is concerned* (#M007)

The responses point towards ambitions and aspirations that these students, although considered as having little chance of making it to university. However, because of a lack of reference points in their family background, they were able to draw inspiration from elsewhere. Yosso (2005) and Luna and Martinez (2013), attributed such ability to aspire, and be inspired, to a type of capital that people from low socio-economic backgrounds possess. Although not acknowledged by the majority, who view students from low socio-economic backgrounds as lacking in economic, social and cultural capitals deemed as relevant for surviving higher education, Yosso and Luna and Martinez considered this as an important aspect in explaining the presence and survival of these students in higher education.

4.6 Access into Higher Education

As was indicated in Chapter two, Malawi lies at the bottom of rankings with regards to accessing of higher education, due to the low gross enrolment and absorption rate. As was also stipulated, over 90% majority of those that access higher education are from the richest quintile,

[4] Respondent #F013

while the 0.7% minority are from the bottom quintile (Mambo, Meky, Tanaka, & Salmi, 2016). The sample drawn for the study comprised the latter group.

From the biodata information gathered, accessing higher education, for the majority of the respondents, was neither a simple nor a straightforward process. Nine out of the fourteen respondents who were interviewed, reported having had to undergo a second attempt at the secondary leaving examinations to qualify for higher education. Four out of these nine had to enter higher education through Primary Teacher Training Colleges (TTC). This observation validates what Horvat (2003) calls outcomes from a study, that provided evidence of the continued inequality in access to higher education among students, based on socio-economic backgrounds, noting that students from low-income families were far less likely to enter college directly from high school - as opposed to their counterparts from affluent family backgrounds.

The issue of access into higher education among those from low socio-economic backgrounds has been studied from what is termed the rational behaviour perspective. This implies that the choice of an individual to pursue higher education is based on the foreseen cost and benefit analysis of higher education (Brand & Yu, 2010). The proponents of this standpoint aimed at justifying why those from low socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented. Although this view held true, to an extent, in developed countries, in the case of this study, there is both a divergent and convergent view to this premise as it applies to those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The divergence comes from the outcome that reveals the value that students from these disadvantaged contexts attach to the pursuit for higher education. On the other hand, the convergence is that this decision is indeed driven by cost benefit analysis, in that the scarcity of alternative opportunities from which an individual could improve their livelihood in developing countries, prompts them to consider pursuing higher education, compared to the cost of not doing so, which would imply reproducing the poverty livelihood. As such, like most of the respondents in the study, the pursuit of higher education was their "*only ticket out of poverty and deprivation*[1]resonating with Beattie (2002), who views pursuit of higher education by low socio-economic backgrounds students as purely for the foreseen economic gain.

4.6.1 Pre-arrival Experience

This describes the experience of the respondents to the news that they had secured a place in an institution of higher education. The following phrases summarise the general feeling: '*a*

[4] Respondent #F013

dream come true',[2] *'the happiest day of my life',*[3] *'…marked the end of the road to poverty'*[4]. For the most part, the news about being admitted to higher education had promising prospect.

> *I thought to myself that my coming here was not just to finish a course but the knowledge I get from here is to help me to become a job creator so that others can also benefit. That's the first thing. Second is that since my family is poor, most of them would be coming to me for assistance but I think giving them money of which they can spend then come back, I would ask them what they needed to help them sustainably assist themselves. Kind of empower them rather than give them money to spend so they can rely on that rather than keeping on coming. I also look forward to getting employed just as a start but would want to be a job creator.* (#M005)

> *When I got the news, my thoughts were that getting a place in the University of Malawi for me was the biggest huddle I had fathomed. Now that I am guaranteed a university place, all I needed to do was to actualize by lifelong dreams, which were, to pull myself and my family out of the hole of abject poverty.* (#M006)

For most of them, higher education entailed a sure exit from the life characterised by lack and need, to that of sufficiency and abundance. The experience of securing a place in higher education promised success to them. There was the sense of accomplishment and fulfilment of one's desired goal. This feeling for most of them was short-lived because of the reality that followed their arrival on campus.

4.6.2 Arrival Experience

The arrival experience of the majority of respondents could be characterised by fear and anxiety on different counts. This echoes the result of the study, by Bui (2002), on background characteristics of first-generation college students: that this group of students, who also were from low socio-economic backgrounds, when admitted into higher education expressed, among other things, the fear of not making it in college. Some of the sentiments from my study included the following:

[2] Respondent #F012
[3] Respondent #M014
[4] Respondent #F013

When I was coming to college, I started hearing about how tough being a university student was and how many students failed to finish and graduate. During the first week, continuing students would be chanting the words "pano timaweeda…ichi ndichipeta" [this is the place where weeding occurs…it is a winnowing basket].To a large extent, looking back, I think it was this fear and anxiety that affected my performance in the first year and more especially the first semester when I failed a course and had to come for supplementary exam (#M008)

At first, it was the excitement that I had made it, then was the anxiety and fear of whether I would manage university without being weeded. (#F012)

This feeling of anxiety in the above responses was on account of several factors: 1) the lack of exposure 2) lack of information 3) lack in linguistic eloquence 4) fear of failure. On all counts, these factors resonate with what those who advocate for the deficit perspective towards students from low socio-economic backgrounds claim as justifications for them lagging behind academically. The lack of epistemic access that encompass a lack of exposure; linguistic competences, confidence and relevant cultural capitals contribute to such negative outcomes from students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1990; Morrow, 1992; Sullivan, 2001; Noble & Davies, 2009). In the course of doing so, schools seem to be systematically rewarding the cultural capital of the advantaged classes, while devaluing that of the disadvantaged (Brand & Yu, 2010).

On the other hand, though, as respondent #M008 explained, the underperformance and ultimate failure that led to writing supplementary exams was attributed not so much to his inadequacies, but more to the fear instilled in him about his survival in higher education. This speaks, then, to the psychological preparedness of the student amidst contrary views working against their ability to achieve their goal (Banerjee, 2016).

Whereas most of the respondents revealed anxiety upon their arrival on campus, there was a marked difference in the experience between the majority who had a negative experience and the few that did not. The marked difference was two-fold. First were those respondents who, although coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, grew up in the urban area; and second were respondents that did not attend CDSSs.

The following, were their contrary experiences upon arrival on campus:

My arrival and settling here was ok because I had so many friends who assisted prepared me on what was to be expected of me in university so I did not struggle like some people that I know of (#F009)

My homie helped me by telling me how life was like on a university campus in terms of the independent learning that went on and the importance of working hard. The fact that someone prepared me before hand, gave me a head start. (#M004)

Those respondents that showed easiness, upon arrival on campus, attribute this to the role that friends played at the point of their entry into the system, which enabled them to successfully settle into the new environment. Proponents of deficit perspective argue how students from low socio-economic backgrounds lack the social capital that provides a cushioning effect as one navigates the education system, which they restrict to those from high socio-economic backgrounds. To this, Cross and Atinde (2015) and Yosso (2005) counter argued that, although not possessing the social capitals stated by the former, students from a low socio-economic status improvise their own. Cross and Atinde (2015) refer to this capital as compensational capital and Yosso (2005) described it as 'community cultural wealth', both referring to provisions that one acquires along their journey, that enable them overcome obstacles. Equally interesting to note was how these students blended into the university space.

4.7 Integration Experience

While the above section focused mainly on the initial arrival of students on campus, this section looks at what actual integration into the university environment was like for the respondents. I engaged with Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory that brings up the concept of 'habitus'. This refers to the physical embodiment of cultural capital, deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that people possess, due to their life experiences (Bourdieu, 1990). According to cultural reproduction theory, institutions of learning promote dispositions that are upheld by the middle class. As such, where these dispositions are consistent with those of the institution; chances of success are higher than the absence of them. Results in this regard revealed struggles with which the students experienced settling into higher education. These struggles included stigmatisation and stereotyping and the feeling of being the 'odd one out'.

4.7.1 Stigmatisation

As was discussed in chapter 2, the classification of secondary schools in Malawi, based on quality and prestige, leaves CDSS and the bottom of the table, with the designated private school, also known as high school, at the top. In the course of the interviews, in discussing the

issue of stigmatisation, a notion of 'HS' vs 'Tradi' emerged. This spoke to the 'camps' that were operating on campus. The HS referred to the High School graduates, who were characterised by their 'posh' way of life and more than anything else, their articulation of the English language. On the other hand, the 'Tradi' referring to the predominantly rural background students, were mainly associated with those visibly needy students and more especially those with a CDSS background. For the majority of respondents, the label, 'Tradi', was one that they encountered during the integration process into the campus space, as expressed by the following respondents:

> *It was my first time to find myself in such an environment. There was pressure. Coming from CDSS there was a culture of HS vsTradi. One thing that I learnt in school was how to write English. We were not so much into speaking English and so when I came it was more the talking especially those from HS and how you spoke it mattered. And because of that lacking, I was classified as tradi and as a result of that, they did not expect much from us.* (#M003)

> *In first year, I was associating only with people from same background as mine. Mixing with HS was hard because of the language so sometimes we were segregating ourselves. I remember I had a friend from HS who had no intent of segregating based on background and was just that one guy.* (#M004)

> *Well.. I was overwhelmed mostly because I was taking myself as a student who was disadvantaged, especially during the orientation, 'I thought maybe I was displaced coz people around me were speaking very good English, myself….(Laugh) and for most of us, 'tradis' it made us worried* (#M002)

The challenge of language, especially as it applies to higher education, has been highlighted as one of the issues that puts students from low socio-economic backgrounds at a disadvantage. In Bui's (2002) study, one of the challenges that made students, especially those with no history of university graduates in their families, vulnerable upon entering university was the use of language that they were not accustomed to from home. For their counterparts from middle class families and families with graduates, this was not a problem as, for most of them, English is either spoken at home or acquired through the better-quality pre-tertiary education that they had received. In this case, the distinguishing factor between the two camps was mainly the habitus that the students brought with them from home, mainly determined by their socio-economic backgrounds and manifested through their use of language. The experience of being

stigmatised created, in most of the respondents, a sense of despair, self-doubt and low self-confidence:

> *I was disturbed, thinking I was displaced in this environment. It was later that I discovered I belonged to the 'tradi' camp* (#M002)

> *In terms of comparing myself with HS, you think they are the best, the most intelligent even the English they speak, you ask yourself, 'am I even speaking English?" (laughs) and this undermines you to think maybe this is not a place for me.* (#M006)

4.7.2 Stereotyping

The study found that stereotyping was among the most common experiences that the respondents in the study raised. On enquiring about the source of the stereotyping, two main factors arose: the socio-economic backgrounds of the respondents and their CDSS background.

The label of 'CDSS' on most of the respondents attracted negative expectations regarding both their performance and chances of survival in higher education. When asked what the source of the stereotype was, the general feeling and anecdotal evidence from the respondents was that the majority of students, that either failed and were withdrawn or invited for supplementary exams, fitted the two categories of low socio-economic backgrounds and CDSS graduates. Such stereotypical tendencies were exemplified in the following responses:

> *Just because I did my secondary school at a CDSS, it was difficult for people toaccept that I would beat the odds and make it to university. I had been told more than once that people from CDSS are never picked into university and the few lucky ones that do never survive the four years. When I made it into university, they now say 'mafana onse a CDSS ndi taka taka ya dull, ingopelekeza enafe'* [All those from CDSS are a dull bunch who are only here to escort us who are destined to graduate] (#F011)

> *One of my first disappointing moments was when we attended my first class whichwas TRS (Theology and Religious Studies). We had a group task to do and the group wasa mix of the 'HS' and a few of us 'Tradi's. In the discussions, I seemed to be the one that was bringing in most points but when time came to decide on who would present on behalf of the class, a good number of them thought since I contributed more and seemed to understand the issues, I should do the presenting. One of the ladies, an 'HS' said while laughing, 'why should 'tradi' represent us? What impression would this give to*

our group?' To my surprise, everyone agreed with her and had an 'HS' present, who ended up failing to address issues raised by the audience. (#M002)

One of the respondents that had switched courses from a general one to a professional and 'prestigious' programme, was quoted as saying:

I think the same challenge is that of people thinking that because I was coming from a poor background, I'm not capable and couldn't make it. People used to ask why I was risking it switching to a challenging programme and to some extent, that was putting me down, though not much but I used to think, 'but why are these people looking at me so low like this? Don't they think I can make it?' So people's perception was also a challenge and considering where I was coming from, to associate with people who had already established themselves and had confidence in what they were doing was a big challenge. (#M001)

It was also noted that those stereotypes were not only coming from fellow students. The negative view which students, fitting the categories of low socio-economic status and CDSS background, had was also held by some members of the academic staff.

During the first week of lectures, one of the lecturers [name withheld] came into the lecture room and asked those that came from CDSS or night schools to identify themselves by show of hands. It was embarrassing because already we had this label hanging over us but we did any way. After we did, he only sighed and commented that output for the course would be slightly low. I began to lose hope as I started seeing myself among those not making it. (#F012)

An article by Durante and Fiske (2017), on socio-economic class stereotype, explained how the negative perception of students from poor backgrounds serves to perpetuate and maintain inequalities. They argue that the effects of perceiving high SES students as being competent, smart and hardworking, above their counterparts, who are described and considered as lazy, incompetent and low achievers, are visible through the reinforcement of *"a chronic self-concept of lower competence has a major impact on individuals' academic aspirations and achievements, especially on those who believe their personal characteristics are fixed*" (Durante & Fiske, 2017, p. 4).

In the study, Durante and Fiske (2017)'s observation resonated with the respondents' feelings towards the stereotyping that they had experienced. As one of the students commented:

Knowing that this was how my friends, the community in general and worse still, the people entrusted to impart knowledge to us viewed me and the slim chances of going through university successfully because of my poor background, shattered me. It made me begin to doubt myself and more and more, believe that I was only here by chance and only to have a feel of what the rich children had as university students. (#M005)

4.7.3 'Odd One Out'

The study also found that, for most of the respondents, during the integration phase on the university campus for the most of the first year into half of the second year, there was the feeling of not belonging and being more like strangers in that environment. This feeling was, in part, attributed to the lack of preparedness with regards to what university environment was like and what some of the expectations were, as well as the mismatch between the culture they were conversant with and the one they found in the institution.

Coming from CDSS into university can be very difficult and frustrating. As you walk in the corridor, you find everyone speaking English and very good English because in school, we learnt how to write English more than speaking and you'd become anxious thinking, 'will I be able to make friends here'. It felt like a totally different world from the one I had known all my life (#F011)

It is these 'subtle modalities' that Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p.82) refers to when he explains how the education system maintains social and cultural reproduction that manifests through the choice of linguistic styles, mannerisms, tastes and preferences that are akin to those from a middle class background (Donnelly, 2018). The selection of subjects offered in secondary schools was among the subtle means that served to alienate some students, especially those from a CDSS background upon being admitted into higher education, as was expressed by one of the respondents:

Everything was alien to me. I am doing Education language but my background in literature was poor as I had to do it on my own in secondary school and the programme I was selected to pursue has to do with exactly that but I was not properly prepared for it. Even the computer, I did not have any knowledge of it. Did not even know how to switch it on, or how it works…[laughs]. I was not the only one though, you almost feel like the odd one out (#M005)

The experience can be explained, using Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field', where the clash is between one's disposition and the space in which certain rules apply. In the case of the

respondents' experiences, the disposition with which they entered the space of academia did not align with the culture of the institution. This, according to Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009, p.1105), has a high probability of creating "*disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty."* Phillips et.al (2020) elaborate how mismatches in culture experienced by students, especially from low socio-economic backgrounds, have a negative effect on their ability to fit in. They state that evident mismatches result in 'diminished fit and flounder.' While this was true for the majority, some of the respondents indicated how inwardly they experienced this feeling, but managed to either mask it, or battle it out and acclimatise themselves as quickly as possible.

> *Finding myself in this new space where everyone minded their own business and the culture and way of doing things being different from what I knew, I had to make a quick plan on how I could snap out of this lest it became an obstacle to my progress. So, I had to sneak into the know-it-all crowd and observe and learn how they were manoeuvring their way, unlike isolating myself like some of my fellows from needy background were doing.* (#M014)

The experience of alienation has been re-echoed in literature, taking on various expressions, including: 'strangers in paradise' and having an 'Out of field experience' (Reay, Crozier, Clayton, 2009); 'Imposter syndrome' (Gardner and Holley, 2011). These all are a direct reflection of the experiences and perceptions of what respondents in this study had of themselves upon entering higher education.

4.8 Chapter Conclusion

This far, the findings from research question one have revealed how the general experience of students from low socio-economic backgrounds is characterised by a lack and inadequacies, both in terms of material and exposure. These, in turn, affected their experiences with regards to the type of pre-tertiary education they were subjected to and, later on, the actual higher education experience that saw them stigmatised, stereotyped, alienated and feeling the loss of the confidence and enthusiasm that they had prior to actually entering into the higher education space. With each experience, the respondents' explanations were made in the light of whether they entailed success or failure along their journey, as students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education.

This then ushers the findings into the next level, which focuses on how the students' lived experiences shaped their lives into what they ended up becoming: academically successful students.

CHAPTER 5: PERCEIVED ROLE OF INSTITUTION

5.1 Introduction

The aim of chapter 5 is to address the second research question on "*How these students from low socio-economic backgrounds experienced institutional mediation through their time of study in Malawi's higher education?"*

Literature has highlighted the issues of dropout, throughput and completion in relation to disadvantaged students, or those from low socio-economic backgrounds, based on various factors. The institutional role must be foregrounded and given as much attention as the other factors, if there is to be some objectivity to the discourse surrounding this area. Gale and Parker (2014) argue about the importance of institutions in playing a mediating role of ensuring that students' transition into higher education happens with some level of ease. They highlight three forms of transition that students require in higher education: transition as induction, where orientation and familiarisation with facilities is conducted; transition as development, which includes aspects such as mentoring; and transition as becoming, where students have internalised the functions, roles and responsibilities that come with being a university student. Sennett, Finchilescu, Gibson and Strauss (2003, p107), in discussing student adjustment to higher education, highlight how:

> This process of adjustment is multidimensional, requiring students to develop effective coping strategies for adapting to a host of substantial new demands including those found in the academic, social and emotional spheres of development.

The role of the institution can, therefore, not be underestimated to ensure the above. The term 'institutional mediation' entails, among other things, constitutes the intervening roles that an institution plays, or is expected to play, in ensuring that students' holistic wellbeing is catered for in a way that will foster academic success. Such interventions include the adoption of a responsive curriculum that serves the interest of diverse students (Cross, Shalem, Blackhouse, & Adam, 2009), with pedagogic approaches and student support systems in place (Essack Sabiha, 2012). According to Jones-Darlaston, Cohen, Haunold, Pike, & Young (2003), it is a moral obligation of an institution to ensure that students are offered as much help as possible, especially while settling down in higher education institutions, in order to ease the adjustment process.

The findings from this research question came from different perspectives, that portrayed both the positive and negative perceptions of institutional mediation in the academic experiences of the respondents, during their time as students in the institution. The respondents' experiences regarding institutional mediation included pre-arrival, arrival and post arrival institutional mediation. The areas that respondents touched on included pre-enrolment intervention; orientation intervention; the access to lecturers and pedagogic issues; institutional intervention in bridging gaps; financial intervention; and student welfare, as evidenced in the following sections.

5.2 Pre-Enrolment Mediation

For most of the respondents, institutional mediation was perceived as something that could have begun a long time before they even enrolled in the institution, through orientation week and during the entire time they were there as students. There was unanimous agreement on the role that institutions played, or had to play, to ensure that students, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds, both make it into higher education as well as graduate successfully, as one of them noted:

> *Unlike our friends from private schools and those with a family history of university graduates, most of us from rural and poor family background miss out on the exposure to the expectations of university while in secondary school. If only universities would reach out to us, briefing us on what university is about, I think more students from a background like mine would be incentivized to work towards getting to university. But as it is, we still have a mentality that university is for certain groups of people of which we are not a part of.* (#F011)

The perceived the role of institutional mediation was in filling the information gap that respondents claimed existed among the low socio-economic backgrounds and rural based students. This information ranged from programmes, from which they could choose for university, to the necessary prerequisite subjects.

> *I know of one or two of my friends who were just as good academically while in secondary school but were not able to make it into university. They did get good grades but because they were not properly guided in their choices of programmes to do in university, they ended up going for mismatched choices to their areas of strength and probably because of the high cut-off entry for those programmes, they were unlucky.* (#M010)

Respondent #M010's narrative resonates with a study that was conducted by Reay, Davies, David, & Ball (2001), who, upon analysing the selection process into universities in the UK between 1997 and 1998, found out that, in spite of the widening and expansion policy by the government aimed at reducing race, gender and social inequalities, entrance of students from low socio-economic backgrounds still remained a challenge. The observed reason behind the challenge was a lack of information regarding university requirements. This restricted some of the respondents in the range of choices which they could have made, regarding their career paths.

> *In terms of choice of programmes of study, it was difficult to make. We just had to go by what the crowd was going for. So because not many people chose for example Social Science…which I did not have much idea what it consisted of, I desisted from doing so even though that was another avenue through which I could have pursued my best subject, History. We all ended up choosing education because at least we knew it could end us up as teachers but if there was some information or someone to explain clearly what each programme was about and its prerequisites, we would have had a wider choice.* (#M002)

> *While in secondary school, I only knew about teaching, law, engineering and medicine as programmes offered at university. Had I known that there were other things like Architecture, Political science and others, I would have definitely opted for those but because there was no information in form of prospectuses or even university people coming to brief us, out choices were restricted. I am meant to believe that even one visit from university people to those village schools that don't have access to knowledge of what goes on in town, would arouse the interest of young people to aspire to get to university. It is not like we all do not have the capacity to work hard to make it to university but for some, they need such external inspiration.* (#M006)

The above three extracts speak to the gap in information pertaining to university requirements. For students coming from rural and poor backgrounds, the only information on programmes and careers available was that with which they were in contact. For the majority, the careers that they reported being aware of were: teachers, clinical officers, nurses and magistrates. Second, was the match that there needed to be between the choice of programme one made and their area of strength. As with respondent #M010, had the friends been well versed with information on programmes offered and the prerequisite subjects that one needed to have to

pursue particular programmes, the story may have been slightly different. Most students from low social economic backgrounds - and especially those that are considered first generation to attain college education - tend to be less prepared and equipped for higher education and (Zalaquett, 1999) attributed this to the poor academic preparation they get from high school. A study, carried out by Kirst & Venezia (2001), highlighted the need for an established working connection between institutions of higher education and secondary (or high) schools, as one way of bridging gaps that exist during the transition between secondary to higher education, including the information gap referred to by the respondents in this study.

5.3 Mediation at Orientation

The next area where respondents noted the vital role of institutional mediation was during orientation. At the beginning of each academic year, the institution allows for students beginning their first year to arrive on campus a week or two earlier than the rest of the continuing students, for an induction into what the institution is all about and what the expectations are. It is also during this time that different faculties present themselves and advertise what future prospects the programmes on offer hold. Krause and Coates (2008) consider the first year of university as being most critical, when it comes to student adjustment. One of the comments that came from students' experiences can be summarised through the following response:

> *Inasmuch as there was all this information flooding is during orientation week regarding what programmes different faculties were offering, this information camein late. I had already made wrong choices and was selected based on the wrong or let me say misguided choices. So what good will letting me know of the other better choices that I would have made make if I am not even allowed to switch programmes. There, I strongly feel that the institution failed us. The only ones that benefitted were those that knew what they were doing when they were making choices…[laughs]. I think the information they give students during orientation would have helped us more if they came to us say when we were in form 3 so that as we prepare for form 4 university exams, we know quite well what we are hoping for* (#F012)

The failure of institutions to coordinate a smooth transition for students, as they begin higher education, would make a difference between success and failure of some students in higher education (Bunnet, 2007).

For students coming from high socio-economic backgrounds, obstacles such as these are alien to them, because they come from urban areas, where information is more readily available and, as Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson and Covarrubias (2012) argued that, for most of the students coming from well-off backgrounds, there is a high chance of them being continuing-generation graduates, with one or both parents having gone through the university system. As such, they equip their children with the necessary information that prepares them for what they aspire to and for what to pursue in higher education. On the other hand, their counterparts from low socio-economic backgrounds mostly happen to be first-generation graduates, who are having to be the first to have the university experience and are, thus, deprived of some of the exposure and information. In his book on articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold first year students' learning experience, Kift (2009) observed that the complexity of adjustment of students entering higher education was more pronounced among students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Of the all the respondents to this study, there were only two that found this information beneficial. These were students that ended up pursuing the law programme. When asked why they found the presentations by faculties helpful, one of them explained the following:

> *Although I was selected to come and pursue a programme that I had chosen because everyone else was, for the first time I realized that there was a way of me moving to a programme that I had received information of and that was Law. The goodness with law is that you only go in after a year's study of a general programme so for me, all I had to do is work hard to escape the misery of the programme I was selected to do. But had it been that entry to Law was like all these other programmes, I would never have known. So for me, orientation was helpful.* (#M001)

There was a general feeling from a section of the respondents that, in their effort to assist the students adjust to the higher education environment, the institution based the orientation activities on the assumption that all the students were equal in terms of knowledge, exposure and skills. As a result, most of the students, especially those from rural backgrounds, felt left out and lost. Some of the sentiments included the following:

> *From the word 'go' we were bunched into one group as equal, when we are not. There are those coming from better schools and backgrounds and have already acquired skills so they are aware of technology and how it works while those of us from CDSS, especially from rural areas do not. And so in the presentations when referring to*

technical terminologies and what they considered common knowledge, for some of us, it was Greek….was a bit frustrating, the whole exercise when you have to jot things down then inquire afterwards from those that seemed knowledgeable. (#M010)

Another respondent echoed what the above said:

In all fairness, …. this institution treats all students as equal regardless ofbackground and exposure and that is how some of our friends that we began with fell along the way…they could not cope, or can I say catch up with the fast life and changes that we from underprivileged backgrounds had to undergo. (#F011)

The findings tend to agree with Cross et al.'s (2009) observation of how poorly communicated rules and expectations create anxiety in students and '*throws them to the deep end',* resulting in respondent #F011's comment about her peers who ended up dropping out or being withdrawn.

5.4 Access to Lecturers and Pedagogic Issues

One of the areas that was touched on, with regards to institutional mediation, was the respondents' perceptions of how well they were able to access lecturers and navigate the teaching and learning experience. In the following cases, institutional mediation in this regard was positively acknowledged.

In my experience with my faculty, I found lecturers in the faculty open that you can go and ask. I don't think there is a lecturer I could single out that this one is close-minded. Most lecturers are open-minded and they keep on saying 'once you have an issue, come.' So that has also helped me to achieve what I have achieved so far. Because lecturers were accommodative, and they were approachable. (#M001)

One thing that I knew and discovered was what Prof X would tell us during class time that if you do not understand something, come to my office, I would be able to assist you. Similarly, Prof Z used to say, I know this course is very difficult but if you get lost, that is what we are there for. I was able to gather courage and confidence to go and ask. I do not regret and appreciate for their support. (#M010)

The term 'pedagogic distance and social presence', coined by Richardson and Swan (2003), was been included by Cross et al. (2009) in their discussion on what constitutes institutional mediation. These refer to the extent to which an institution will endeavour to narrow the understanding gap between themselves and the learner. This would include the language used

and the method or strategy of delivering knowledge, among others. Social presence, on the other hand, speaks of the availability, openness and approachability of lecturers to students, when they are needed to help.

The next respondent singled out one particular lecturer whose approach contributed to her success.

> *The difference that one person can make to your life is amazing. I found problems approaching most of my lecturers. They always seemed to be so busy and even when you manage to catch them seemingly not busy, they did not really give you that attention when trying to engage with them in a conversation. As such, it put most of us off although we were struggling with some of the stuff they were delivering in lecturer. But there was this one lecturer who was so different from the rest. He was approachable. He listened to what we had to say and rather than just giving a quick answer, he made you think and come to a common understanding of what it was you did not understand by throwing the question back at you and making you find your way with hisguidance. This enabled me to get a deeper understanding of concepts rather than the spoon-feeding way where someone just gives you an answer.* (#F009)

In a study by Conchas (2001) on the structuring of failure and success among Latino students, one of the findings was how teachers' low expectations of their students and the perceived lack of institutional support of them affected their performance and *vice versa*. As part of ensuring that students adjusted into the institution as smoothly as possible, there was also the issue of clearing myths surrounding certain programmes, that tended to create fear and anxiety in students. To this, respondent #M001 showed how a positive intervention by a member of the institution yielded a good harvest.

> *The dean came in our first class to address us. He welcomed us and told us about the myths that people held about Law school and how difficult it was with a good percentage of students being weeded. But he did not stop there. He explained to us some of the factors that led to people believing these myths and how as students we could demystify the whole thing about pursuing Law. He gave us tips that up until now have helped me in my journey.* (#M001)

One of the respondents attributed her passing of a supplementary exam to the approach that one of the lecturers used.

> *When I learnt that I had to come for supp, I cried. I did not know what to do. I thought this was my way out of university. I went to see one of my lecturers. She sat with me and counselled me, reassured me that just as it was possible to write supp, it was equally possible to pass. She helped me realise that what led to my failure was not because I did not have what it took to pass but I kind of got distracted with the social stuff around me. And sure enough after the talk, I went back, sorted myself out, passed and now just about finishing.* (#F013)

The above extracts give a picture of how their experience with the institution as a mediating factor contributed to their success. This resonates with the concept of teacher immediacy, described by Allen, Witt, and Wheeless (2006). They say it implies "a set of behaviours portrayed by the teacher that create a feeling of physical or psychological closeness between them and their students." Teacher immediacy, as seen through the narrations of their respondents and confirming the findings in their study, increased the motivation of students to learn and the confidence in what they were doing (Allen, Witt & Wheeless, 2006).

On the other hand, some of the respondents had a different story to tell, regarding the experiences they had encountered, both in pedagogical distance and social presence.

> *I have discovered that some students will fail to realise their potential because they lack the reassurance based on the perceptions that lecturers have on some students, especially in first year when lecturers come and ask which secondary school you were at and if you mention places like St Mary's or Marymount, it is ok but for us from CDSS, it puts us down and we seize to believe in ourselves making it.* (#M002)

Although not explicitly laid out by the lecturer, this respondent was able to deduce the idea behind the lecturer asking the question. Whether rightly interpreted or not, the message sent had a negative impact on the student. In a way, this resonates with Mehrabian (2017) in the power of silent messages that, without being overtly expressed, still send strong messages to the receivers. While some of the experiences of respondents were deductions from silent messages, others experienced explicit reactions that have negative effects on them as students, and especially coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. In referring to students from CDSS that had been redirected to programmes that they did not put on their list of choices, one dean is quoted to have said:

> *I was redirected. I never applied for that course and was not picked on all those three. During the week of orientation, the then dean of student .. have forgotten her name,*

said, 'some of you who have been selected for courses you didn't apply especially those from CDSS, it was just that we just picked you out of pity instead of leaving you since you had barely passed. Mind you, not many will reach the finish line.. (#M001)

I felt bad because I fitted in both categories of CDSS background and being redirected. It set me off on a bad start… (#M007)

With reference to pedagogic distance, there was a general feeling among the majority of a disjuncture between the lectures, lecturer's expectations and assessment, which most found to have affected their performance. For instance, the matter of providing objective feedback for either a failure or a pass was one thing that came up a number of times. One of the respondents commented that:

After getting a failed grade in an assignment in course X, I tried to look for comments from the lecturer explaining where I had gone wrong but apart from the grade, there was nothing to guide me into realizing where I had gone wrong. I was used from primary and secondary school where the teacher would show you your weakness, sometimes even summon you. So I decided to go to the lecturer to query my grade. Instead of getting something concrete, I was only told how not just myself failed but a lot others did. I was told to approach my peers who had done well to see how they tackled the question. I went back with more questions than answers…(#F009)

Still on the same point, was the issue of working out individual lecturers' recommended styles of approaching problems. For some of the respondents, the disjuncture between lecture presentation and exam expectation was something they struggled to work around.

Identifying what the lecturer wants or expects from us was something that I failed to figure out. You work so hard on an assignment and tick all the boxes qualifying you for a distinction, then in return, you say, 'wow, is this what I get?' such a discouraging grade. It is very painful because what you expected originally is not it and you ask yourself the question, 'Why?' but because the particular lecturer's expectation either keeps changing or is something so unclear, you have not figured it out yet. (#M006)

On matters of approach to learning and assessment, there was an outcry about why the institution did not put emphasis on, or encourage, teamwork or group assignments, which most of them were conversant with and through which they thrived. Some of the sentiments were as follows:

> *During my secondary school times, may be because of not having resources, we worked a lot in teams and found it so beneficial as each one was able to tap into the others knowledge. When I got here, one of the first things I discovered is how the culture of the place is so individualistic. The emphasis is on me doing things on my own, independent learning and all…but in the real world the saying, 'man is not an island' holds true and so if higher education socializes us into functioning people in the real world, why should the institution promote systems that run contrary to what is happening out there?* (#F012)

The experience of having to reconcile the institution's way of doing things individually and the culture that most of the respondents had been brought up in was one that brought despair to them. For most of the respondents, the thought of surviving in such an environment became an illusion. Such a feeling strikes a note with the observation that Phillip et.al (2020) made on how the differences in expectations, that result from institutional culture formed part of the explanation, as to why most, especially first-generation, students dropped out of college in the first part of the year.

They also attributed the mismatch to why institutions undermined the academic performance of these students. For some of the respondents, both the institutional culture and that portrayed by their counterparts from middle class were considered inappropriate, as was stated in the following:

> *The difference between us (tradis) and the (High School) ones is that they, I think are self-centred in the way they operate. We do things in groups, be it school related or survival issues and we see good results. Our friends would rather struggle on their own and are too proud to ask for help but that also is what our college is all about. If only they encouraged more group work and team spirit, am sure most students would gain a lot. What is the problem with giving an exam or project where people work in groups anyway…[laughs] that is how we survive in the village.* (#M007)

For the most part, the feeling was that the lack of promotion of group engagement on tasks robbed them of doing better in their work. There seemed to be a difference in culture between those from low socio-economic backgrounds and their counterparts fromhigh socio-economic backgrounds, in terms of style of working between individual and group engagement. The responses collaborate with Bourdieu's (1986) line of argument that institutions of learning take on a culture that aligns with the middle class. In this case the preference of independent over

interdependent approach to learning. In their study on how American universities' focus on independent learning disadvantaged first generation college students, Stephens et al. (2012) argued that independent learning comes naturally for students from the middle class that have all the resources at their disposal, unlike those from disadvantaged backgrounds that thrive by pooling the little resources they have. As such, this demands for the latter to adjust their culture in conformity to the institutional (middle class) culture. To a large extent, this adjustment from a culture of interdependent living to one of independent living affects most students coming from the communal interdependent background. The responses that came out of this study resonate with the findings of both Stephen et.al (2012) and Tseng (2004), where the latter study, on family interdependence and academic adjustments among migrants and U.S-born youth, revealed the conflict between family culture and obligations with college responsibilities and expectations.

5.5 Institutional Role in Bridging Gaps

Another area where respondents felt the institution failed them in mediating was in filling or bridging gaps that were especially apparent for them with the sort of educational and socio-economic backgrounds they had come from. These gaps manifested themselves through inadequacies in skills, knowledge and information. There was a general consensus among the respondents that, in comparison to students who come from socio-economically well-off backgrounds and, to some extent, those that attended either conventional or national secondary schools were strides ahead of students from a low socio-economic status and those with a CDSS background. With regards to skills for university, the frequently mentioned skills included Information Computer Technology (ICT), note taking, critical thinking and academic writing. For the most part, they attributed this gap to the compromised education that they had undergone. Some of the comments included:

> *one of the main challenges that I faced as a first-year student was an ICT problem. I came with no experience of computers, so being asked to go and do assignments using internet, typing and printing out assignments was a major challenge to me. I do think the institution is aware of the handicap that people like us come with. If only there could be a way of stepping in and offering even short crash courses during orientation week instead of all those other things that they were presenting…[laughs]"* (#M006)

> "*I am to blame for the failed grade but so is the college as well. This assumption that we were all born with a silver spoon in our mouths in terms of having everything is wrong. Surely they could do something to rescue us.* (#F012)

The narratives above resonate with the experiences of students in a study by Cross et al. (2009) of students at the University of the Witwatersrand, which focused on academic performance within a diverse university environment. Students' concerns revolved around issues of ICT and skills for learning in higher education institutions. For the other skills, sentiments from respondents were similar:

> *During our first year, one of the struggles that I experienced was keeping up with the lecturer during lecture time. Coming from secondary school, I thought it would be the usual giving of notes until I saw the lecturer who just stood in front preaching to us. A bit later, I saw others taking notes. For me, it was more dictation way of taking notes than the note taking I know now. As a result, I failed to keep up with the speed at which the lecturer taught. When I went to ask the lecturer afterwards, I was told that I was supposed to have learnt note taking skills way back in secondary. In a way, she was almost like telling me that it was none of her business that I did not acquire this skill earlier on.* (#F011)

Jury et.al. (2017) argue how culturally biased higher education is in its promotion of culture that consists of unwritten codes, rules and expectations that are taken for granted as familiar, among those middle class. In the process, those from low socio-economic backgrounds have to struggle to catch up. This is the case with the education in Malawi, where certain skills are inculcated in those that attend certain schools, especially those middle-class schools, such as the private and designated schools that use the Cambridge curriculum rather than the local Malawian curriculum. The same principle applies to the level of exposure to equipment teaching and learning equipment, which to some was alien.

> *I thought science was a tough faculty because the approach they used was new to me. The use of projectors, skeleton notes and where one was supposed to go and search for information were all things I was meeting for the first time. Things were easier for our HS friends who had prior exposure to all these. If I were to suggest to the college, it would be that they have special programmes that cater for people with a rural background and zero exposure to technology.* (#M004)

This type of scenario is not uncommon, both in developing and developed societies. The existence of a gap in knowledge and skills for higher education among students from low socio-economic backgrounds has been documented (Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; Kirst & Venezia, 2001; Yang, 2010) and one of the recommendations to remedy the situation has

pointed towards the institutions of higher education doing more to address these gaps, to ensure that students are apportioned equity of access.

5.6 Financial Intervention

As would be expected, the foremost challenge faced by students from low socio-economic backgrounds, which, in a way, is the springboard from which the majority of challenges originate, is in the area of financial inadequacy. In relation to institutional mediation in this area, respondents had both positive and negative experiences. As an institution, there are a number of interventions that are in place, that are related to financial matters. These include student loans and, depending on whether a student is government sponsored or not, they are entitled to a monthly stipend.

5.6.1 Stipend

All except two of the respondents in the study were government sponsored and thereby entitled to the stipend. For most of them, this was a welcomed development considering their socio-economic state. The stipend catered for more than what it was intended for. For instance:

> *The college has helped me a lot in terms of upkeep allowance. The ability to pay u on time means I can be assured of a meal and pay my rent, which keeps my mind focused on my studies than on other basic need concerns. Had it not been for the stipend….I don't think I would have survived.* (#M002)

For some, the stipend served as part payment of school fees. One of the respondents admitted to the fact that, due to the inability to raise money for school fees, a big portion of their monthly stipend went towards fee payment.

> *I am not receiving the stipend because I have had to surrender it towards paying my school fees. So out of the MK50,000*[i]*, I only get MK3,000 to take me through the whole of the month.* (#M004)

Similarly:

> *The tuition fee was at MK55,000. It had a great impact on my budget as well, coz I knew my parents could not afford that so I had to trim part of my budget to pay for the school fees so I paid for my school fees from my stipend. I am also able to assist with my younger brother's school fees who has just been selected to start secondary school.* (#M008)

For some, it even extended to helping family back at home.

> *…during the time that my father was sick in 2016, I used to send part of the stipend home, so I would send something like MK10,000/month and then live off the remaining amount.* (#M010)

On the whole, the provision of a stipend relieved the respondents from concerns of their daily needs, ranging from rentals, stationery, food and, as has been alluded to above, it also extended to assisting families back home.

There was a lot of controversy regarding the loans that the institution disbursed to students. The majority of respondents faulted the institution on several counts, including the lack of information, or nature in which it was accessed; the lack of clarity on eligibility criteria for potential recipients of the loans; the non-discriminatory manner in which loans were disbursed; and the unsustainable system in which loans were awarded.

5.6.2 Loan information

The failure to access information about the loans by the institution was one issue that was raised by a number of respondents. For some, this information got to them too late to apply. For others, they just accidentally bumped into the information - as the following respondent narrated her experience:

> *Even for the scholarship opportunity, it was not like properly advertised. It was just something that I luckily bumped into, which I think if it were properly advertised, the people that most needed it could have benefited from it.* (#F013)

The other issue was the eligibility criteria for those deserving the loan. For most of the respondents, they felt the loan disbursement was non-discriminatory in the sense that, instead of targeting those that needed it the most, it ended up being given to those who had the means.

> *If you look at the loan scheme, the choice of who is eligible lacks objectivity as some of the beneficiaries are those who already have and can afford* (#M014)

> *somehow, the institution helps the disadvantaged but to some extent, no. because here there are a lot of loans but only people coming from well to do parents or those with networks that access them as a result, it does not target the ones that need them most. The loans are not discriminatory in terms of identifying the really needy ones. I have a certain friend who when I look at, I say to myself, I am struggling but this one is struggling more. He could not even afford to pay fees when it was MK55,000 but was left out. The system does not consider each person's situation.* (#M006)

The last issue concerning the loan scheme was the unsustainable way in which the loans were disbursed. Students had to apply every year for the loan and there was no guarantee that, just because one gets a loan in their first year, it would continue until they graduated. To this, too, respondents had dissenting views.

> *The mere fact that there is uncertainty as to whether you will be eligible for loan in the following year raises concerns and anxiety to me as a student especially towards the end of the year, knowing that you may be among those being chased from class because of failure to pay up fees. For me, it does not even make economic sense when you are given a loan, say in first and second year then come third year, you are left out. If you dropout completely, what happens to payment of the loan since you end up where you were, as a popper.* (#F009)

Only two out of the total number of respondents reported having been "*the lucky ones*" to have been recipients of the loan since their first year to the time of the interviews, when they were in their final year.

5.7 Student Welfare

The last issue to be discussed under institutional mediation is the area of student welfare. As students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, their defining feature was the lack or scarcity of basic resources. If that was the case, in order for most of them to survive, there was a lot of compromising on minimum or basic quality of life expectations, including accommodation (location and rentals). It was mainly in this respect that most of the respondents felt that the institution could have done more as a way of mediating. Among the responses given in this regard were:

> *But now it is about each one doing what they can to survive. Talk of rentals, they are going up every month but in poor conditions. The institution does nothing about looking into the conditions that these students live under. In terms of security, nothing is done but am sure if the college decided to step in by liaising with these landlords on the minimum standard of a habitable house and minimum and affordable rentals for students, some of our concerns would be reduced. .* (#M008)

> *The conditions of accommodation of students has been left out and I think this would have improved if the institution mobilized the owners of these rented houses to set a basic standard in terms of sanitation and other conditions. Students are living in*

horrible conditions and paying for substandard services. If a body was established to monitor the conditions of housing, there could be an improvement. (#M007)

In Cross et al. (2009), one of the remarks made was how institutional responsibility tended to be lower when issues related to students' personal problems were concerned. A similar observation has been made in looking at institutional mediation on issues related to student welfare.

5.8 Chapter Summary

The chapter focused on the manner in which the students perceived institutional mediation, either as contributing to their success, or frustrating their chances of succeeding. Respondents highlighted both areas where the institution succeeded in fulfilling their moral obligation of ensuring that students adjust to, and fit into, the academic space - and those areas where they perceived that more could have been done, on the part of the institution, to mitigate some of the challenges that they faced, as students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The subsequent chapter goes further to unfold the non-institutional mediation factors that played a role in the lived experiences of these students from low socio-economic backgrounds, through their studies.

CHAPTER 6: 'THEY' MORE THAN 'I': NON-INSTITUTIONAL MEDIATION

> *"This 4-year journey has been long, painful and uncertain, but a worthwhile one. I can truly say that all I have managed to achieve up to this point has been a result of partly my initiative but to a reasonable extent, those around me; family, friends and my community both here and at home…"* (#F012)

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the focus was on the institutional mediating role in the lived experiences of the respondents, which revealed both positive and negative aspects. In this chapter, I present the views of the respondents on the support systems that they perceived as having propelled them through their journey as university students. The above quote typified the general sentiments that most of them had, with reference to their lived experiences up to the time of the interviews, when they were in their last semester of the final year of university.

This chapter aims at unfolding respondents' thoughts, opinions and feelings regarding the non-institutional mediating factors that had contributed, either positively or negatively, to their experiences of being a student in higher education and coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. From the responses provided, these non-institutional mediating factors were three-fold: the personal/individual intervention, family and community - and peer mediations.

The findings presented a general consensus on how tough the respondents' lived experiences of students from low socio-economic status had been and how, through it all, the strength from within, coupled with external support, enabled them to confront the various challenges and emerge even stronger to be able to face adversities that came ahead. With almost each of the hardships described in chapter 4 (research question 1), regarding their lived experiences, the respondents pointed out how, in order to succeed, they had to '*challenge the challenges*[5]*'* *'counteract the bad with the good*[6]*, depended on each other for extra strength to move on,*[7]*'* *and 'not disappoint those that believed in them*[8]*'.* Each of these would be looked below.

[5] Respondent #M008
[6] Respondent #F009
[7] Respondent #M006
[8] Respondent #M010

6.2 Personal/Individual Intervention

In this study, I use the term 'personal or individual intervention' to describe how the respondents perceived their role in getting so far in their academic journey. The term could be borrowed from the field of organisational management, where, among other things, it is used to imply an individual's attempt to put in their own effort to grow themselves (Jain, 2015). In the case of the respondents to the study, there was an indication of an attempt on their part not only to grow themselves, but also to beat the odds that they were up against, in order to attain their goal, which, in this case, was completing their degree and graduating successfully. Most respondents pointed towards attributes that they claimed to have possessed as having played a positive role in the journey, as they struggled through higher education.

The possession of an inner drive appeared to have played a role in determining the journey of all the respondents through life to this point in university, when they were on the verge of completing their tertiary education. The acknowledgement of a lack of external motivation and positive incentives around them made them realise the power of motivation from within. Surrounded by negativity, but having the strong desire to change and spearhead this change in their surroundings, was what for some steered them towards succeeding in their student life, as was the case with this respondent:

> *I first of all had to take stock of who I was and what I wanted to become. I am yao, a woman and a muslim and I saw myself as being an agent of change, one to represent these categories of people and change all the stereotypes associated with those three attributes. So far all that has been said about yao, muslim women is about them not going to school and not being productive. I want to change that.* (#F013)

For this respondent, the inner drive was to be a pioneer of change and spearhead a legacy changing people's perception of the particular ethnic, gender and religious group – from negative to positive. Bandura (1997) refers to this positive attitude towards oneself to successfully execute a required behaviour and get an outcome as 'self-efficacy'. It was this ability to maintain a positive attitude that enabled most of the students to persevere through the hard times. As was presented in chapters 4 and 5, the major challenge for the respondents included their adjustment to the life in a new space with an unfamiliar culture and how this had a knock-on effect on their academic performance. In the case of some of the respondents, the attitude they possessed enabled them to adjust in the academic space with ease, as well as positively affecting their performance academically, thereby resonating with findings from

studies that revealed the relationships between inner strength and ease of adjustment and academic performance. (Petersen, Louw, & Dumont, 2009; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2011)

Sometimes the motivation sprang from the experience of hardship that they had undergone. As those coming from a background characterised by resource constraints and a struggle to survive, the resolution was to shift their attention from the stressful and less promising surrounding towards an inward focus on the strengths from within. Gardner and Holley (2011) allude to this, when they discuss the challenges faced by first generation students, who, due to a lack of the 'perceived' necessary capitals, are able to succeed in their education, through drawing from inner motivation and aspiration. Some respondents observed the absence of role models in their immediate surroundings and, for most of them, the inherent desire to change their status in their community was what they needed to succeed.

> *My secret is getting reminded of where I have been brought up. Although my family was hardworking as they were farmers, they did not make it. We are tobacco growers and although we sell, the income is not satisfactory, so I concluded that education is the only means. For me, I could hear of people making it in life and in my case, I also wanted to make it and become financially stable. I try to focus on that and where I want to be by believing in my inner capabilities. Greatest motivation is what comes from within instead of waiting for someone to motivate you. So, for me, I have motivated myself. It is not a straightforward path but one has to accept that.* (#M003)

In the case of some respondents, the motivation came with setting themselves targets and goals. In a number of situations, respondents in this study were able to trace their ability to be goal and target driven from an early age. The success that came from the targets they set for themselves gave them the confidence for being able to overcome the obstacles that surrounded and threatened the realisation of their dreams. The respondent below illustrated this point:

> *In my case, I set a target of excelling and making it to the 'dean's list' and true to it, in my second year, I appeared on the dean's list. The targets you set for yourself with motivate you to go far….well depending on how high they are..[laughs].* (#M004)

In a way, this reinforces what VanTassel-Baska, Olszewski-Kibilius and Kulieke (2010) found in their study, where they identified goal-setting among the personality factors that

distinguished students from disadvantaged backgrounds among their peers, with regards to academic success and achievement.

For some of the respondents, being able to get by with what they had was proving impractical and, in some instances, posed a threat to their very existence as students in the institution. Rather than succumbing to such challenges, they looked for ways of overcoming the challenges. In some cases, it involved taking drastic measures, which in themselves equally threatened the chances of their existence in the institution. In defence, some argued to have gone ahead '*upon calculating the costs and benefits of my moves*[9]*'; 'had to do so as a last option'*[10]*; 'needed to survive the tides*[11]*.'* Faced with the various challenges, the respondents revealed ways in which they had to '*creatively overcome the huddles*[12]*'*. One respondent explained how, faced with the threat of losing his place in university due to financial constraints, he took a serious risk:

> *I made a decision to take on a 45-day temporary job and had to miss a couple of weeks of the semester. Luckily, they gave us tablets to work with and with it, I was able to link up with my colleagues back at college and they updated me on what they were doing, including assignments. I got the assignment, did my research around it and sent it to my friend for printing and handing in while I was still in the field. At the end, I got enough money to pay the fees, send money to my family and passed the assignment.* (#M005)

Such experiences were not uncommon among the respondents, who claimed that they had to find a means of surviving and overcoming '*lest I lose the only opportunity I have of heading towards a promising future'*[13]. In other instances, respondents had to show some resourcefulness to overcome the obstacles that they encountered. For some, it was the lessons drawn from their 'bitter experience' that made them identify opportunities that they could seize, as was with the following respondent:

> *For this semester, the challenge is that I am not receiving the Stipend because it is all going towards payment of my fees. So I sat down to look for alternatives, that was last*

[9] Respondent #M004
[10] Respondent #M007
[11] Respondent #M014
[12] Respondent #F012
[13] Respondent #M010

semester so I decided that based on the experience I had and the struggles I underwent in 1st and 2nd year academically because of lack of guidance and coaching, I decided that we start an organisation made up of four guys to be conducting part-times. I was the founder of that thing. There are 2 other guys and we started. We call it Maths Ambassadors. In the first semester we were conducting them outside campus but at present, we are on campus. In total, we can get up to MK180,000 [US$ 243.00] / *month. We charge MK3,000* [US$4.00]*/ month. As of now, that is what is making me survive.* (#M004)

The above extracts from the study concur with the findings from a study by Collis & Reed (2016), who considered resourcefulness as being one of the predictors of student belief in their academic abilities, university adaptation and higher grades, in the sense that those students with high levels of resourcefulness are more likely to adapt and exhibit signs of progress in their academic pursuit, compared to their counterparts with little or no resourcefulness. Although another study by Kennet and Reed (2009) showed that non-traditional, or, in the context of this study, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, tend to score low on resourcefulness. This particular study revealed some high level of resourcefulness on the part of this category of students, which, in agreement with Collis and Reed to an extent, explains their success.

The findings also seemed to suggest some fighting spirit on the part of the respondents in dealing especially with their own inner fears, that came as a result of either feeling like they did not fit into the university environment, or the myths that surrounded being a university student. This manifested itself through phrases like '*making a pact with myself', 'being determined', 'come rain of sunshine, doing what it takes'.* The respondents expressed an awareness of the reality of the challenges that they were up against, including financial constraints, stigma and stereotyping, due to their background and the stress of academia. While there was evidence around them of some of the fears they harboured within, most of the respondents admitted to have made up their minds to face up the challenges and overcome them. Among such, were respondents that stated the following:

I prepared myself psychologically by saying I could work hard and not be weeded. I think if I managed in an environment that did not have a lot of things, I could do better where the resources are available. There would still be some fears of whether I would manage or was fit. But ***I made up my mind*** *that I would manage* (#M006)

"I will not claim to have been among the smartest during my growing up but I had made ***up my mind*** *that I would to what it took to see my dream come to pass"* (#F012)

For respondent #M006, the reality of being weeded (withdrawn) was acknowledged, but against such reality, he had to *prepare himself psychologically* and *make up his mind* to challenge the challenge. Similarly, #F012 made up her mind to realise her dream.

In some instances, this drive to face the challenges and the confidence that accompanied it came from past experiences. For respondent #M002 below, the belief in one's inner strength to press on in the struggle was fuelled by his success in previous tasks. Academic success was an incentive to give it all he had. It was the major thing, making any other obstacle that came as something that could be dealt with:

I said I would not give up coz this is like a shame to have reached this far and be sent back home because of fees.. I ***prepared myself*** *to struggle. The fact that I had done well in my first exam gave me courage that if I had started like this, all I needed was to 'pull my socks further up' and I would be there..* (#M002)

A related study, carried out at the University of Western Cape, also revealed how self-empowerment and self-belief accounted for, and led to, success of students, who would otherwise be considered as being at risk of failure and incompletion of higher education, based on their socio-economic status (Ngalo-Morrison, 2017).

For others, the fighting spirit came as a result of a setback and, while some would give in to setbacks, these students devised some means of bouncing back and reassuring and convincing themselves that they could rise above the tides. Phrases such as: "*I don't believe in giving up,'*[14] *'I needed to struggle whatever the case,'*[15] *'I never expected to fail'*[16] came up during the interviews, with one respondent expounding on this:

Initially, yes..performance was a challenge. I remember the first test I sat for in Maths, I got 30% when the highest got 93% and the fears of being weeded from others made me feel discouraged. I thought I would get weeded…after the first test. I later accepted the defeat and looked for ways of solving it. The target after getting the 30% was to

[14] Respondent #F011
[15] Respondent #M014
[16] Respondent #M008

work hard to make up for it and indeed, that was the last time I ever scored that low. The next exam, I scored 71%. (#M004)

The experience of being free and not accountable to anyone, associated with getting into university, was both a blessing and challenge that affected some of the respondents' social adjustments into the institution. This was especially the case with coming from strict and conservative backgrounds, which was common to the majority of the respondents. Finding themselves in a space where there were no 'out-of-bounds' demarcations and where there was flexibility as far as planning one's time was concerned, their reaction and sentiments were those signifying some level of liberty that respondent (#M001) described as follows '*no one keeps an eye on what I do and where I go..' I was free to do as I will, with no bell or siren to regulate my movements..'.* In the course of enjoying this the newly found freedom, some noticed a drop in their performance, which collaborates with Mudhovozi's (2012) study findings highlighting how university 'freedom' threatened and became a cause of distraction for most students while studying. For respondent #F013, below, the decision to self-reflect and assess resulted in a reversal of events, bringing in success:

Being a muslim and coming from a place that was not developed, the social life appeared so interesting and I got caught up and it took most of my time. I almost forgot why I was here and in 2nd year, it affected my performance, but I could not see the cause. I just thought it was school being tough and started regretting having gone taken on this challenging program. I got supp in 2nd year which affected my overall GPA and I started thinking, this was what people meant when they talked of being weeded. So, I went and reflected on how I was spending my time. I changed and wrote and passed my exam and things went back on track. (#F013)

Like the respondent above, some of the respondents used their negative experiences as springboards to launch their journey to success. This entailed, among factors, the full appreciation of their disadvantaged position and the determination to challenge the status quo. Some respondents confessed to having made more than one attempt at getting a place in higher education. Five out of the fourteen respondents reported having had to repeat their secondary school leaving exam, in order to make it to university. Without being deterred by the negative outcome, they decided not to give up until they had fulfilled their dream, which, for most of them, was to lead a better life for both themselves and their families. The respondent below was determined to change both his and his family's destiny:

On that part..erm.. I think one has to accept the existence of the challenges and identify means of dealing with them while maintaining your dream and disrupting the status quo and this was my driving passion. Seeing how my mother, as a single parent suffered and sacrificed a lot to provide for us, made me decide to become the game-changer in the family. (#M004)

Of the five, respondents that re-sat their end of secondary examination, three of them had to go through to Teacher Training Colleges (TTC). All three of them admitted to being dissatisfied upon completing their teacher training programmes - as one of them attested:

I would not consider myself a genius because during my end of secondary exams, I did not do as I expected and got 23 points which I thought I would not find myself in college so I went through TTC where after finishing, I was posted to a rural in 2009. It was while there that I decided to go back to school. I was working while going to school and I registered at a CDSS as an external student, where I got 16 points and this is how I got myself here.(#M006)

The excerpt above seems to point to the idea that a university qualification is esteemed as having a higher potential for improving one's status and, thereby, having the potential to reduce the existing inequalities in society, as is claimed in literature (Blanden & Gregg, 2004; Bui, 2002).

For some, even after achieving this ambition and finding themselves in university, the challenge of meeting financial demands meant that they had to continue putting up a fight, until they got what they had as their goal. This entailed using all the means at their disposal to get themselves out of their predicaments:

I almost missed a supplementary exam because I was denied access to my portal for results due to failure to square my school fees. Being withdrawn would negatively affect me as I already had outstanding fees. ***I just had to do what it took…****I pleaded with the course lecturer who agreed to give me a paper to write on condition that my results would be released after producing proof of fee payment. I only had two days to prepare for the exam.* ***I convinced myself*** *that I would pass in spite of the pressure and I did.* (#M007)

There were respondents that stated that, in the midst of the uncertainties that they faced and had to anticipate, over time these resulted in them developing strategies that could enable them to cope, rather than succumbing to the challenges faced, respondent. Marshall and Case (2010), in their study on the rethinking of 'disadvantage' in higher education, argue on how coping strategies that students deemed as disadvantaged play a major role in determining their success in higher education. For one of the respondents, overcoming the various challenges required them to brace themselves:

> *When I started as a university student, there was no manual on how I was supposed to go about my life as a student. Most of my moves had to be calculated as I was confronted by the challenges. My poor background did not help much as this meant more challenges than what others were experiencing. I just had* ***to develop a thick skin*** *and either find a way to overcome the challenges or coexist with them, hoping they wouldn't affect my being a student.* (#F011)

The study also presented how uncertainty about issues confronting most of the respondents forced them to come up with ways of managing the situations. Most of the challenges that they encountered, as was discussed in chapter 5, were a result of the level of unpreparedness with which they found themselves as students at the university. While some of these obstacles were such that could be overcome and dealt with, others required the readjustment and adaptation on the part of the respondents and the discipline to demarcate one's area of operation. This was mainly the case when touching on resource-related issues:

> *Dealing with the challenge of not having the basics as a student sometimes affects your self-esteem and how people look at you. As a young person on a campus like this one, the pressure is high to conform to what the majority is into. I knew my limits and stayed away from those environments that would expose my vulnerability. I had to develop a hobby that would keep my mind away from all the distraction. Reading became my free-time activity and with it I was able to excuse myself from all the social stuff that was going on around campus, where I knew even if I went, I would not afford the fun.* (#M004)

As was mentioned in chapter 4, the issue of identity is one that students entering the university space must face and find themselves in some sort of category. Coming from a disadvantaged background, therefore, entailed being lumped with those whom people looked down on and were associated with more negative attributes than positives. With other respondents,

especially the older ones, this was not a big problem, but the younger respondents seemed to have been affected by how the people around them perceived them. As such, being identified as *'Tradis'* was a thing that bothered them. One of the respondents narrated how, as a way of establishing himself, he decided to create his own unique identity that made him conceal the real identity category that he was meant to have (i.e; being identified as a "*tradi'*)*:*

> *I developed a habit of wearing suits, so people used to identify me through that. So I can even say that in the whole campus, people know me as someone who likes putting on suits and when am not putting on a suit, people will ask, what has happened today? So I think people also got to know me based on* ***my unique identification****. So one factor that helped to make me easily identified and sneak into the system is* ***my unique identification.*** (#M001)

One of the respondents spoke of how resource constraints and the pressure it put on some of them and how they had to train themselves to separate issues as a means to enhance their focus on studies:

> *As the oldest in my family the was headed by my mother as a single parent, everyone seemed to look to me. I do not blame them since they did not appreciate the pressure of school that I had and how difficult it was to concentrate on my studies when I am being bombarded with all these problems from home. In my second year when I failed a course, I knew it was because of this external pressure. I had to devise a way of living with the reality of problems at home. This is when I had to draw a line and separate the issues I was faced with. Where I felt I could intervene, I did but if the situation was beyond my ability, I shelved it and let my studies bother me.* (#F013)

6.3 Family and Community Mediation

The role that family and community played in the lived experiences of the respondents in the study was one that was central. To most of them, the very essence of who they were and who they had become was attributed to their families' and communities' role in socialising them. They pointed out how family values, that had been instilled in them while growing up, sustained them through times and situations, where others failed. Gofen (2009), in his study on family capital, pointed to the finding that, although students coming from a low-income background are considered to be lacking in material resources, if their families possess nonmaterial resources, such as belief systems, habits and values, these would enable them to

withstand the adversities that they are likely to encounter. Linked to this finding, one respondent in this study made the following comment:

> *Had it not been that my family trained and nurtured my in the way they did, I think I would have either been dead or some criminal harassing people somewhere. We were not the only poor ones in my community but my family held on to the belief that a better life does not come easy. One has to work and prove to the world that they deserve a place among the well off. So while my peers were out having fun and into mischief, I held on to what my family upheld. Today, almost 90% of my childhood friends are either dead, in prison or suffering somewhere.* (#M007)

The role that the family (not just restricted to the nuclear family) had played in instilling values for most of them, shaped them into what they had become, in spite of the challenges. The respondents pointed to the role that family and, in the case of this study, the mothers played in encouraging the respondents and supporting them in their pursuit of higher education. This entailed both moral and financial support. As families coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, sometimes it involved making sacrifices of the little that they had, in order to ensure that the respondents stayed in school. Out of the fourteen respondents, nine of them attributed this to their mothers as the main' cheerleaders' on their academic journey. The value that the mothers put on education as an investment into a better life propelled the respondents to also invest their efforts to acquire it. The following quotation captures the general essence of the respondents' views:

> *I would say my mother taught me how to live not through words but also through her actions. As a single mother, she was determined in what she did. She did not have it all (actually, we may have been the poorest of the poor in our village) but she worked so hard so that even when there was not food in the house, we all understood that she had done her very best to try and work things out. She has a couple of time gone into debt just to make sure I get to school. During land preparation time, she goes and does piece work to give back the debt. she vowed to do what it took to ensure that I pursue my education This has taught me to cultivate that attitude in everything I do including my academic work.* (#M005)

All of the above quotes are consistent with findings from a study on the participation the disadvantaged have in Australian higher education that observed that, among other factors that

led to students from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in higher education, the values that they brought with them from home did play a contributing role (James, 2001). Another study by Davis-Kean (2005) argued about the importance of encouragement and creation of high expectations from family motivating children to work towards achieving impressively. This is in sharp contrast with the view held by Bibbings (2006), who claimed that, "*Young people brought up by parents with few or no qualifications and no familial experience of further, let alone higher, education tend to have low educational aspirations.*" Similarly, in Kean's (2005) study, he touches on positive encouragement as it pertains to families with parents that are highly educated. The study shows that, even with parents who have not attained a high level of education, encouragement and expectation have the potential of bringing out similar outcomes.

In the above quotes by the respondents in this study, they narrated how the positive values and expectation from the family contributed to shaping who they were. One of the respondent's experience with family values and expectation was in sharp contrast to this. Her case was the negativity that the family attempted to instil in her:

> *Because my family is predominantly uneducated, they thought having to part with the little they had to assist in my school was a lot to ask. There were times when I was compared with my peers who had not gone far with education but resorted to getting married and some to men that were well off. Sometimes even hinting that I reconsider my decision to 'waste' money on a venture that never promised sure security in a country where graduates move around with certificates and no jobs* (#F011).

In the cited case of #M005 (in this section above), the influence of family values and expectations created a positive attitude in the students' lives. For respondent, #F011, the impact of the values and expectations that the family had towards education may have had detrimental effects on their attitude towards furthering their education. When asked what it was that shaped her life amidst the negative influence, respondent #F011 attributed it to her inner drive.

The study also revealed the impact of family expectation in shaping the lives of most of the respondents. Expectation in this case referred to a 'pay forward' arrangement. Though not explicitly put in some of the cases, most of the respondents felt indebted to their families, due to struggles and the sacrifices that the families had gone through, to ensure that they got an education. For some, the responsibility was already on them as university students. Some of such explicit instances included the following:

By that time when I was in form 4, my brother was in form 1 so it was very challenging for my parents to pay for school fees for both of us. My parents were looking to me to assist upon finishing my studies. So I know that this is my responsibility and so I need to make things work. As a student, I have to chip in where possible. I get into debt but never promise when I would be able to repay because there is need for me to feed, I have the youngest brother who is in form 1 now and I need to finance him. Because he is also not government sponsored, he is on self-sponsored and says he also needs the money. (#M002)

While the expectations are explicitly stated, other situations had implicit expectations. Respondents strongly felt the obligation to pay back to their families in some form, as an indication of their appreciation for the sacrifices made for them. To some, taking over responsibility of being breadwinners was an automatic reaction:

I am in a family of 4 boys, I am the first, the last one is the most genius among us. He was selected to go to a national secondary school but because of financial problems, he is just staying at home so considering the family that I come from, I realise that I have a great responsibility for me to be playing around. So that factor has also helped me to remain motivated to work hard. (#M007)

The general impression, from most of them was that, having gone through the deprived life of poverty with family (both nuclear and extended family), contributing to their education and successfully finishing their studies would symbolise their gratitude and appreciation, manifested through some form of a '*returned favour'*[17]. The study also showed that this expectation from the family was not only after they had graduated and started earning a living. For most of them, the families expected them to set apart some support, from either the stipend they were getting from the institution, or even in cases where they managed to secure loans. As such, the respondents knew what responsibility they had and this, for the majority of them, is what drove them to aim at finishing their education successfully to assume the role of '*sole breadwinner'*[18]

6.3.1 Community Mediation

For me, the proverb about it taking a village to raise a child applies 100% to my life's story. I sometimes think had it not been for the community around me, not just family

[17] Respondent #M007
[18] Respondent #M005

and the extended one but just people living around, I would have not reached where I am now. Thanks to them! (#M002)

The quote from respondent #M002 agrees with the sentiments that most of the respondents held regarding the role player by the community. There was a feeling that the community fostered most of the respondents' success, although some respondents had contrary narratives to tell about their experiences with the communities in which they had both grown up and currently inhabited.

Community mediation took the form of financial and moral support of the respondents, which, for some, went as far back as their childhood days. Some respondents considered their communities as having played the central role in motivating them in the higher education journey. The culture of togetherness, which Yosso (2005) referred to as the 'community cultural wealth', plays an important role in most of the respondents' experiences, due to the cushioning effect that it seemed to have, offered a number of respondents in the midst of the challenges discussed in chapter 4.

My community has been the centre of my motivation. There was that feeling of being one big family where my parents' problems were the whole village's problem. A couple of times when fees was hard to come by, random people in the community, seeing how intelligent I was were able to collect enough money to send me back to school. Not like a loan for my parents to repay. I feel I owe it to them for all their sacrifices…[emotional] (#M005)

After failing to get a loan in my first year, I had to go back home. I went to the Social Welfare office where I was unsuccessful, then, a gentleman from my village that overheard my story called his daughter who lived in Blantyre and arranged to give me a cheque of exactly the fees I needed…. I still think I may have met angels not humans. He did not know me and I did not know him.. (#M002)

While there was the positive side that community mediation played in the lived experiences of the respondents, there were some narratives that portrayed the community's role in a negative light. The pressure to conform to the *status quo* was, for some an obstacle that they had to overcome in a way that would not appear as them being rebellious or arrogant. Societal expectations, such as one taking responsibility by finding a job upon finishing secondary school to support the family, rather than expecting family to spend more on them post-secondary education. To some of them, the choice was hard to make - for instance respondent #M007,

who was offered the choice to go to South Africa and get a job over going to university. Yet for others, the pressure to start families and abandon university education was the pressure exerted from family and community.

> *In my village it is not strange to find young men in their late teens being married. Pressure from the community began to rise for me to get a wife. Rather than having me pursue further education, they were trying to convince me that marriage was the way to go. Some of my friends that had dropped out along the way in secondary school were married with children or even marrying more than one wife. I had to insist against their wish to come to university to achieve my dream of becoming the first graduate in my village.* (#M003)

In some circles, there was some resentment from the community towards respondents opting to go to university. The reasons included viability of meeting the high cost of education and also the misconceptions surrounding the abandonment of one's culture for a foreign one. This observation agrees with Gofen's (2009) findings of how, in some cases, families and friends, especially of those coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and with no history of a university graduate in the family, tended to discourage students from attending college. As Inman and Mayes (1999) observed, most of these students go against the family and community advice and proceed to pursue higher education, as was the case with the following respondent:

> *I was called aside by some of my neighbours and asked if I had really made up my mind to go. They told me how my family was already struggling without the university fees in the equation and for me to imagine how much I would be stretching them just because I was to pursue my dream. It made me feel a bit guilty and like a selfish person. I reported at college half-heartedly but later made up my mind that I would do my best and give back to my family for all the sacrifice made for me.* (#F011)

The case of respondent #F011 does resonate, to an extent, with Brand and Yu's (2010) arguments on how, among those from low socio-economic backgrounds, decisions about whether to pursue a course of education or not hinges on economic justification. This speaks to the rational behaviour model, by Boudon (1974), that sought to explain educational opportunities and the existence of social inequalities. In the study, while this attitude has been observed in relation to communities' outlook on pursuing education, among those from low socio-economic backgrounds, the general perception of the pursuit of higher education, as observed in chapter 4, is that of higher education being a means of escaping poverty.

6.4 Peer Mediation

Stephens et al. (2012) looked at how important interdependent working was among students from disadvantaged backgrounds both in their academic endeavours and sourcing of resources. There have been studies, that were carried out in earlier years, which were unable to establish a strong correlation between peer support and academic performance. Zimmerman (2003), in investigating peer influence on academic achievement, found that the significant influence was higher in verbal scores than anything else. Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2006) suggested that one of the reasons why there was a weaker relationship between the two may have been that the findings were being sought out in the wrong places. In their study, that specifically focused on disadvantaged students, findings showed a strong relationship between interdependence among students and academic performance. In this study, interdependence among students proved to reap meaningful returns. Respondents, (#M001) and (#M005) alluded to benefiting academically through supporting each other in group setups, where they would discuss academic issues and tease out areas that proved generally problematic. It also served as an emotional safety net, where students experiencing similar challenges would share their experiences and explore ways of resolving them as a group. It enabled them to have a family-like setup to which they had been accustomed at homes. The other aspect highlighted was the ability to reach out to each other and expose one's vulnerability without fear of being judged or exposed. For some respondents, the realisation of benefits of working with each other, especially as students coming from a similar background, saw them overcome some of the challenges that, on their own, could have proved impossible.

> *So we used to work together and encourage one another to say, 'my friend, I have been told that in this environment no one is an island, we need to assist one another. After the experience of failing a course and coming for supp, '**we sat down and told each other to watch out and watch out on each other'** so that none of us if left behind. Up to now, we have discussions, and this has assisted us. In most of our courses, we have been doing quite well.* (#M001)

Coming from similar backgrounds characterised by constraints enabled the respondents to develop a feeling of empathy towards each other. In situations of dire need, especially finance-related hardships, because they each would relate to the experience, some admitted to making sacrifices from the little they had, in order to reach out to another whose need was more dire than theirs. One of the recipients of such gesture explained:

After failing to secure money for fees, my mother suggested that I surrender my stipend while she looked around. It was very challenging. I discussed with my friends whom we shared rent money with. Luckily, because we understood each other's background, they were able to exempt me from contributing the full amount. they paid for the rentals upfront. Similarly, if one of us was struggling and unable to contribute, we were willing to sacrifice and make ends meet with whatever we were able to collect among us. (#M005)

These findings further confirm Stephens et al.'s (2012) claim about how interdependence among students from low socio-economic backgrounds works to their advantage, through the pooling together of the merger resources they have in order to survive. The ability to relate to each other's situation is another aspect that made their interdependence functional. Those from well off families have everything they need at their disposal and, as such, would manage to live an individualised life. Piff, Kraus, Coˆte´, Cheng, and Keltner (2010) found out how, unlike popular expectation, low social class people are more likely to portray what they describe as 'prosocial behaviour', due to their commitment to communitarian values and sense of compassion, unlike those from high socio-economic backgrounds. Stephens et al. (2019) later pointed out some of the factors that lead to what they have termed the cultural mismatch between the middle class and the working class, which has a bearing on the expectations in higher education. The interdependent culture prevalent among low socio-economic backgrounds students is a result of '*fewer financial resources, greater environmental constraints, lower*

power and status, and fewer opportunities for choice, influence, and control' (Stephens et al. 2019, p. 68). With those from middle class background, the situation is the opposite with regards to financial resources, power and status: opportunities for choice, influence and control that are in abundance, thereby seeing no need to rely on others but rather operate independently. The absence of this communitarian spirit makes it difficult for them to be in a position to empathise with the plight of their counterparts from socio-economic backgrounds. As one of the respondents commented:

Only when you are dealing with a person who is or has been in your shoes can they understand your situation. I don't think if I had this type of friendship with one from HS or rich family, they would understand our situations. They would may be take us for crooks who want to eat their money…[laughs] (#F012)

While there was a general positive effect of peer mediation on the respondents, the study also revealed how some respondents had different stories to tell, with regard to the role that peers played in their lives as individuals, both in their academic performance and pursuit of their goals. For some, the challenge involved standing up against the negative perceptions and stigmas from their peers that surrounded their coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. One of the respondent's narrations in this regard:

> *We were from similar backgrounds and with similar challenges but different mindsets. They had a defeatist mentality…believing less in themselves and I had to decide to rather roar alone that surround myself with mediocre friends. It made me unpopular but helped me focus on the goal.* (#F009)

6.5 Chapter Conclusion

The chapter set out to present the findings, with reference to the non-institutions' mediating factors that played an instrumental role in the lived experiences of the students from low socio-economic backgrounds, that took part in the study. Respondents admitted to personal and individual traits as having enabled them to succeed. Overall, however, in comparison to the role played by 'others,' the respondents tended to put more emphasis on the other players in their lives as having contributed to their success. By and large, this agrees with studies that have highlighted the big role that communal dependency among low socio-economic backgrounds communities play. As was alluded to in Yosso's community cultural wealth and the role of interdependence among the low socio-economic background communities, by Stephens et al. (2012), roles played by family, community and peers reinforced the personal traits that the respondents have. To a large extent, the non-institutional mediating factors positively impacted on the respondents, in situations where the impact was perceived as having detrimental effects on the respondents' success, this called for the personal or individual traits to override such opposition, The general perception, therefore of respondents of their success in higher education was "They, more than 'I' led to my success in higher education.

Chapter 7 unpacks the findings that came out of the shadowing exercise in addressing the three research questions, discussed in Chapter 1, which provide details of how the shadowing process was conducted and the findings thereof, in what has been termed 'Walking in their shoes.'

CHAPTER 7: 'WALKING IN THEIR SHOES'

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 is the last of the data findings chapters of this study. Unlike the three previous chapters that presented the outcomes from individual in-depth interviews, this chapter presents findings from the shadowing exercise that was conducted alongside the interviews.

The data generating exercise involved following a participant for a period of time, with the aim of getting a deeper insight into what their life experience is like with reference to the phenomenon of interest (Quinlan, 2008) - in this case, their experience as students from low socio-economic backgrounds. As well as offering a means of triangulating the findings in the study, shadowing was opted for as one way of allowing the researcher the privilege to enter into the space of the participant and access a holistic view of their life, through both observing, as well as interrogating them, on the rationale behind the activities observed (Gilliat-Ray, 2011). As was mentioned earlier in Chapter 3 (the methodology chapter), following the ethics approval to conduct the study, two students who had met the eligibility criteria, were shadowed for a period of two days each. These were limited to daytime (7:30hrs to 18:00hrs) and excluded attending classes. The decision to exclude lecture experience was two-fold. Firstly, the practicality of getting consent from both the lecturer and other classmates, which Johnson (2014) pointed out as being an ethical factor to consider, as not only the participants need to consent, but all those that they would come into contact with. Secondly, also tied to ethical considerations, was the implication of disclosing the aim of my assignment to the whole class and the impact that this would have on the participants. Upon discussing the shadowing procedures, both participants showed hesitation about being followed in class. Apart from the feeling of being over-observed, it turned out that there would be a possible stigma that my disclosure of the study to their entire classes would have on the participants. I therefore opted to modify the time frame. The biographic data of the two participants has been outlined in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: BioData of Participants

Code	Gender	Age	Support source	guardian Occupation	HE family History	Secondary School	Rural/ Urban
*S#01	M	23	Grand Parents	Unemployed	1st generation	CDSS	Rural
**S#02	F	22	Parents	farmers	1st generation	CDSS	Rural

***Pseudonym for participant S#01- Spikey**

****Pseudonym for participant S#02- Tupo**

Throughout the four days that I shadowed the two participants, issues arose that pointed to addressing all the three research questions, both through observing how the participants lived their lives, as well as through the plenary discussions that we had at the beginning of the day following the shadowing (Morning of day 2 of shadowing and day after end of shadowing). By using the field notes and evening reflections following the day's shadowing, I would engage the participant in a discussion regarding some aspects of the previous day (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001). This is where shadowing differs from observation, in that the aim of the researcher is not only to document what has been observed in the field, but also to gather as much first-hand information as possible from the participants, regarding the views and interpretations of the actions and activities they engaged in during the exercise (Bartkowiak-Theron & Robyn Sappey, 2012).

The initial plan was to shadow my participants while the went about their day on the campus premises, but it turned out that both participants invited me to accompany them to where they resided, which was off campus (Approximately 30 minute and 40-minute walk respectively). Agreeing to the invitation was a further eye-opener into the lived experiences of my participants that later addressed the research questions that I had set out to explore. To an extent, this experience is echoed in what Quinlan (2008) expressed in highlighting how participants may seldom direct the researcher into their own domain, which the researcher never anticipates, but ends up unpacking insights that enrich one's work. Some of these insights are presented below.

7.1.1 Drawing the Participants from the Sample Pool

When I arrived on campus for my data collection exercise, I followed the procedures to gain access into the institutions outlined in Chapter 3. Upon running the eligibility criteria assessment, also outlined in Chapter 3, the prospective participant number had exceeded the sample size I had planned. I then closely examined each participant to identify those whose situations aligned with all the eligibility criteria (outlined in section 3.7.1). In this case, the results of the first year were not factored in, considering that most literature argues about how students, especially from low socio-economic backgrounds, struggle during the first year as they acclimatise to the university environment, which affects their academic performance. In the case of this study then, based on this factor the first-year result would not have given an accurate reflection of the students' academic potential. Upon narrowing the selection criteria, I managed to get sixteen potential respondents. Out of them, and following their indications on the consent forms, and upon explaining the nature of data collection, two out of the sixteen

agreed to being shadowed without any hesitation. Three others gave indications of being available, only if no one was willing. The remaining eleven only agreed to being interviewed, rather than being shadowed, leaving me with fourteen respondents to interview and two participants to shadow.

7.2 What followed

Following the initial meeting with the two participants during the general briefing and consent-signing exercise, another meeting was setup with each participant at their convenient time. It was at this meeting that the logistics of the shadowing exercise were further expounded. I outlined my intentions with the exercise and emphasised the importance of them being themselves and not trying to alter the way they did things because of my presence (Gilliat-Ray, 2011). We agreed on how comfortable they would be with my presence. Both participants were flexible, except for during lecture time, where, although agreeing out of what I perceived as respect for me, showed a bit of hesitation and for the ethical reasons explained in section 7.1 above, I chose to omit lecture time in my shadowing. At the end of the meetings with each participant, I had to again confirm their position regarding consenting to what we had agreed upon. Johnson (2014), in his article on ethical issues in shadowing, underlined the importance of renegotiating access on a continuous basis due to the seemingly intrusive nature of shadowing and in ensuring that, at all times the participant is comfortable being part of the exercise.

7.3 Day 1- Shadowing Spikey

We agreed to meet on campus outside the main library building at 7:30hrs. When I arrived, he was already there waiting for me. Upon inquiring how long he had been on campus, he indicated that he usually arrived by 5:00hrs. The first two hours prior to our meeting was used to get the day started, studying. When asked what he was working on, on this particular day, he indicated that one of the assignments was due and he was finalising and proofreading the draft. He pulled out an A3 notebook and showed me the assignment.

At 7:50hrs I followed him as he headed towards the library entrance, where there was a group of students already queueing. He explained that most of them were rushing for books that were on the reserve counter of the library, which were in demand and on short loan. He also indicated that a good number of them, just like him, were queueing early to find a free computer from the ICT resource room in order to do their work.

"*If you noticed, madam, my assignment is handwritten. This is because I do not have my own laptop; and borrowing one from a friend especially when we have multiple assignments to submit becomes difficult. So I decided to be working on a handwritten draft and when it is all done, I use the college resources to do the final typing. So far, it has worked for me."*

After securing one of the 28 computers, as the rest of which were already in use, Spikey was at his working station typing out his assignment for close to three hours, nonstop.

At 11:00hs, we left the library building and walked towards the main road leading to the nearby location, where there were people selling foodstuffs. He bought a bottle of *Thobwa* (non-alcoholic sweet beer made from maize and sorghum). He indicated having a lecture between 11:30-12:30hrs.

"*This, madam is what we have as breakfast and lunch…this or bananas, sugarcanes or fresh maize cobs, depending on the season and affordability"*

Upon probing further, Spikey indicated that, due to the limited resources, he and a few of his '*buddies'* discovered how this drink is able to fill them for a reasonable part of the day. They, therefore, did not need to have breakfast and lunch, which enabled them to be able to stretch their meagre resources to meet their daily bread.

"*For the past three years, this is what we depend on. Except for weekends and some good days when we can afford to buy a decent meal. Otherwise, for proper meals, it is in the evening after classes and when we go home for holiday…[laughs].*

This observation resonated with some of the sentiments that the respondents in the interviews made, regarding the resource constraint challenges that they encountered and how they devised ways of mitigating these challenges. In a discussion that ensued, following the shadowing of day one and in reflection of my observation of negotiating the dietary needs, Spikey used the knowledge from Maslow's hierarchy of needs to highlight how the challenge to access proper diet had a way of affecting one's academic performance. There has been a general consensus on this relationship between financial lack and concentration on academic work (Bruening, Argo, Payne-Sturges, & Laska, 2017; Patton-López, López-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, & Vazquez, 2014).

In the afternoon of day 1, around 13:00hrs, we met again outside the main library. Spikey indicated that they had a group meeting with a couple of classmates for class discussions. As was discussed during the briefing, I had to inquire from him if he was comfortable with me

being there for the meeting. Using the metaphoric concept of 'Peter Pan' shadowing, where you make the participant know the freedom they have to make you 'disappear', when they are uncomfortable with your presence (Quinlan, 2008; Gill, 2011). In the case of Spikey, he was more than willing to have me around. We got to the venue for the meeting, which was in one of the classrooms. There were seven other students that joined (five ladies and two gentlemen). Spikey began by introducing me to the group and explaining what I was there for. Then he introduced the members. He asked them whether they would mind my presence and they were all fine with me being there. I asked if they could sign consent forms, with which they agreed and signed, in keeping with guidelines set out in the ethics of shadowing that emphasise the need for getting consent for secondary observation (Johnson, 2014).

The discussion lasted for 2 hrs, out of which 1 hour and 20 minutes were discussions to do with the course (Mathematics). The remaining time was general discussion of what they were experiencing in their individual spaces. The observation made from the latter was how they were able to relate to each other's challenges, including the need for financial resources. One of the members raised the issue of the challenge she was facing to access a computer to type her assignment on after the one in the resource room, that was infected with viruses, deleted her original assignment. Another member offered to ask a friend who had a laptop if they could assist.

At the end of the meeting, according to a schedule that they had, they reminded each other what course and area they would focus on and who would be leading their next discussion.

Three points came out from the above experience. First, and linked to the findings from Chapter 6 on non-institutional mediating factors, was the role that peers played in the academic life of Spikey. During the discussion we had following the group discussion, Spikey indicated how it became difficult to ask questions in a large class and during lectures, because of the approach used in lectures. He also highlighted how, as a team, they had different strengths and how one, or a couple, would understand a concept that the rest found problematic in the lecture and by coming together, they drew from each other's strength. The interdependent nature with which they approached their work reverberates with Stephens et al. (2012), who highlighted the role of interdependence among students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education.

The second point is on what constituted their second part of the discussion, which did not have much to do with the coursework they were there to discuss, but played an important

psychosocial role that Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) argue has an influence on the academic well-being of students. In the follow-up discussion regarding this part of the group meeting, Spikey related that sharing his problems with the team members helped him psychologically. He quoted the saying, "*madam, I have found how a problem shared could indeed be half solved."* He cited the situation where one of the members, by sharing their struggles about needing a computer, ended up being assisted. Even without the problems being addressed, Spikey explained how just getting issues off his chest helped and, more so, knowing that others also faced similar struggles.

The third point was my observation of the homogeneity of the team. Spikey later mentioned it and further explained how it was easier and more comfortable for him to be shadowed in such a setup, rather than in a lecture situation, where there was a diversity of students. In his words: "*I have no shame in exposing my vulnerability to people that can identify with my life and understand what people like us go through. With the wider group, there would be some that look at us as weirdos.."* The use of the term 'vulnerable' implies how the state of coming from a low socio-economic background has an impact on the way the students perceived themselves. Going back to the interviews, there was a mention (in Chapter 4) of the identities that students assume by virtue of their socio-economic backgrounds (*the HS vs Tradi*). The formation of *cliques* based on family background was not unusual. Zacharakis (2010) advanced his argument on how, through formation of cliques and social networks, students are able to mitigate some of the challenges they face that would threaten their survival in institutions of learning.

It was around 15:00hrs when the group dispersed. Spikey had a lecture from 15:30-16:30hrs. As was the agreement, I did not shadow the lecture, but met up with him at 16:45hrs. The students came out discussing with classmates about the lecture and centred on the joke that the lecturer made in the course of the lecture that helped them understand the concept.

We began heading to Spikey's place, which was approximately a 20-minute walk into a nearby high-density location. As we walked away, I probed more to find out about the lecture. Instead, Spikey commented on the lecturer:

"*If there is one lecturer that inspires me and makes me want to do more in life is Dr (name withheld). He is so down-to-earth and approachable unlike others that make you feel as if they deserved to be where they are and the rest of us have to treat them as semi-gods"*

The comment made by Spikey and the discussion that followed the lecture pointed towards the role that institutions play in either fostering or hindering progress of students in an institution. In Chapter 5, access to lecturers and pedagogic issues were referred to as aspects that affected students during the interviews. Studies on lecturer competence and attitude and their impact on student performance have shown some positive correlation (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012; Muzenda, 2013; Stephen, O'Connell, & Hall, 2008). In a study on the student-teacher relationship in university, the following was found, with regards to lecturer approachability: "*Approachable lecturers and tutors were described as very helpful for students' success in learning and adjusting to university."* (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014, p. 378)

It was deduced, therefore that the nature and attitude, through which this particular lecturer conducted himself both in and out of the lecture room, not only facilitated learning of the students, but also became a source of inspiration to some of the students, including Spikey.

We arrived at a block of rooms, where Spikey occupied one of them. The toilet and bathroom were outside and so was the communal tap. His room's front window was broken and had to be sealed with cardboard. A friend, to whom I was later introduced to as his roommate, had already arrived and prepared dinner. I later gathered that it happened to be his turn to cook and thus had to come home early. The room was small and dark and, because this was their private room, I chose to wait outside while Spikey went in and came out within a short time. The two roommates sat on the verandah floor and had their dinner of nsima (local pap) with boiled bonya (small dried fish). They served the meal in one dish. At first, they seemed embarrassed and apologised for the type of food served:

"*Sorry madam, but we eat like bachelors. Just boil the fish and drain out the bitter water then add a bit of water with salt for the sauce, then, that's it!! Although once in a while, we treat ourselves to same recipe but with fried tomatoes and onions…[laughs]"*

After dinner, Spikey took a candle and sprinkled salt on it before lighting it and entering the room. He later returned freshened up, together with the roommate to head back to thecampus. As we walked, I inquired about the use of candles and was told that the place where they stayed had no electricity, although the landlord promised. but the thought of raising rentals after installing electricity made them prefer the use of candles. When asked about the sprinkling of salt, Spikey explained it as a way of ensuring that it lasted longer.

We arrived at campus around 18:15hrs. Spikey headed to the library, where he indicated he would be working until closing time at 22:00hrs. We ended our day 1 of shadowing then.

The walk to Spikey's place, the observations made and the discussions raised issues that spoke to the experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education. First, was their conditions of living, which, considering their status as university students, was inconducive and inhabitable. The absence of electricity implied restrictions to the extent to which they would devote their time to academic work while at home. Kasule (2000) presents the challenges faced by non-residential students at a university in Uganda and highlights the interconnectedness of challenges similar to those experienced by Spikey with their academic performance. Another study conducted by the association of African universities in Ghana established this relationship in a study conducted in Namibia (Njoku, 2002).

7.3.1 Day 2 with Spikey

On the second day of shadowing, we agreed to meet up at the same spot as the previous day. Spikey had an appointment for 9:00hrs with the administration personnel to inquire about the availability of bursaries or upcoming sources of funding. The meeting was short and I did not go in as a shadow, but Spikey later disclosed that he was told that there were no bursaries or other forms of funding available.

His demeanour changed from what he had been like the previous day, to when he came out from meeting with the administrators. As is the requirement with shadowing and the ongoing negotiation of access, I asked Spikey if it was alright with him that I continued with the exercise. He was positive and apologised for the change in mood. We took a detour from heading to class, as he explained that he was not in the right state of mind to sit in a lecture and listen.

We headed towards the sports complex and sat outside the building. He began explaining the dilemma that he was faced with following the outcome of the meeting on bursaries. From the explanation, there were some issues that arose and spoke to some of the research questions.

First, were the struggles that he had been facing in the first year of study. Spikey explained how erratic and haphazard the disbursement of loans and bursaries was. Having qualified for a loan during his first and second years, things were fine, as his tuition fees were paid and the only struggle had been be with accommodation and living costs, for which the stipend they got, if used wisely, was sufficient. During the third year, which was when tuition fees were hiked by almost 600% from MKW55,000 (US$75) to MKW350,000 (US$473), he was not on the list of those eligible for loans and bursaries.

It went without saying for me that this was the end of my time as a university student. No one in my family has ever handled such an amount of money at one goal and to think that this was what I was expected to pay just for fees was unthinkable. Although my academic results were such that would not see me lose a place in university, my poverty was definitely going to usher me out

The anxiety that came with pressure to access money for fees and not knowing where this would come from affected Spikey's overall life. The first semester of the third year yielded his lowest results since becoming a university student. Spikey admitted to this being a direct result of the stress over tuition fees. During the interviews, some of the respondents alluded to the same negative effect that resource constraints had on their overall academic performance. Spikey later admitted to having to convince a number of relatives to get loans that together added up to the fee amount and that was how he paid his fees for third year. The outcome of the meeting with the administrator regarding possible loans or bursaries brought back the memories of the previous years' experience. Additionally, admitting that the loans that had been taken for the previous fees had not been paid up made him lose hope of finishing.

This is what we have to put up with, on top of the academic pressure, whereas our colleagues from well-to-do families only have school to worry about…. Funny enough, some of the people that access the loans and bursaries are people that at least are well off than us, which surprises me as to how the selection of eligible recipients is conducted

This quote resonated with the other respondents' sentiments towards the allocation and disbursement of loans and bursaries. Both the eligibility criteria and information preceding the disbursement of the funds were described as being unclear and 'mystified'. Spikey went on to explain how complicated the issue of failure becomes, as it affects one's academic life in that. Having failed to pay the full the tuition fee by the end of the year, one's results were withheld and could not be accessed through the student portal. The question that arose then was 'What if the student had failed a course and needed to re-sit a paper?' He cited an example of a friend to whom this had happened and, in the end, had to proceed to the following year with a carry-over from the previous year, when this would have been dealt with had they had the means to pay their fees. He concluded:

"*I may not be accurate but if you look at a good percentage of the students that get weeded from here, it is not because they are not smart. Most of them have a lot to deal with that affect their mind and reflected through their poor performance."*

After our discussion, at 12:50hrs that also covered issues that arose in the previous day, I went with Spikey to the place where he had bought his *Thobwa* (Sweet beer) the previous day. On this day, he bought 3 bananas, two for him and one for me, and that was his breakfast/lunch.

According to Spikey's timetable, he had classes for most of the afternoon, from 13:30-16:30hrs. Thereafter, he needed to head home, as it was his turn to prepare dinner for him and his roommate. As such, we decided to spend the minutes before the afternoon lecture discussing some of the issues that had not been touched on. At 13:20hrs, I thanked Spikey for his time and participation in the exercise, marking the end of my first shadowing exercise.

7.4 Day 1- Shadowing Tupo

Tupo, my second participant, and I agreed to meet outside the Great hall at 8:00hrs. As with Spikey, I did brief her on the idea of shadowing and the importance of her to not alter her way of doing things because of my presence. She indicated that having a lecture-free morning, she would utilise the time to go to the market to do some shopping. Together, we walked for almost 30 minutes to get to the market. She apologised for not being able to hire a motorbike to take us to town, explaining how this would affect her budget.

We have learnt to forego certain luxury such us transportation in order to save however little there is for the most important needs.

For her, and generally among the respondents in the interviews, budgeting was an important element in ensuring that they survived the semester.

Inquiring how the budgeting was done, Tupo explained how, during her first year, she met some students that were experiencing similar hardships financially, as well as socially They decided to form a group, where they shared resources. The managed to secure a two-room house. Each month, they contribute MKW1,500 (US$2) each towards rent that summed up to MKW9,000 (US$12). They also agreed on a contribution of MKW3,500 (US$4.70) each, towards foodstuffs (mainly for lunch and dinner). Breakfast was to be on an individual basis. At the beginning of each semester, there was an understanding that each of the 6 members bring with them at least 30Kg of maize that could then be processed into flour for Nsima (pap).

When we got to the market, Tupo met with some sellers that seemed to know her well. They had already kept her merchandise wrapper in newspapers. We proceeded to buy four tomatoes and two sachets of oil, 100ml each. Next, we headed to some nearby shops where she bought a bale (20 packets) of soya pieces. While in the shop, Tupo was approached by a young man,

who I learnt later was a classmate. They had a private conversation and Tupo gave the young man an amount of money.

We thereafter walked back to the place which Tupo and her five housemates shared, taking us almost 40 minutes. From the outside, it looked inhabitable, because of a crack that was on the front wall. I was welcomed into the house, which, though crowded, looked tidy and well looked-after. Tupo dropped the groceries, then offered me some water in a plastic cup. She later explained that we had to go back to campus, as she had a class from 14:30hrs to 17:30hrs. As we arrived on campus, around 13:40hrs, we were met by two ladies who were introduced as some of the housemates. They handed Tupo a plastic bag, in which were two boiled cobs of maize to share. I took half of the cob and Tupo was left with the remaining one-and -a-half. As she was then heading to her lectures and finishing late, we decided to end the shadowing then and meet again the following morning.

On reflecting on the first day shadowing experience, there were a number of pointers that were drawn to guide the discussion with Tupo on day 2 of the shadowing exercise.

7.4.1 Day 2 with Tupo

Day 2 of the shadowing exercise began with a recap of the previous day and elaboration on some of the observations made. Among them was the nature in which Tupo and her housemates operated. To this, Tupo explained how their team had been since they formed it towards the end of their first year.

> *We started as a team of 8. So far two were withdrawn on academic grounds. Had it not been for the solidarity among us, some of us could have dropped out. Not because of failing in our courses but due to poverty. On the contrary, with the little we have among us, we have been able to cover each other up to this point that we are in our final year. The thought of finishing, graduating, getting a job and being able to acquire things that we have been dreaming of, all along is also what drives us to push on regardless of the hard life we experience.*

The above narration echoes the challenges cited in literature regarding some of the reasons leading to dropping out of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. While academic failure attributed to the numbers of students dropping out, the economic inadequacies of some of these students threatened their survival and place in higher education (Breier, 2010; Letseka & Maile, 2008)

The mention of 'solidarity' of the team is another aspect that reflects the interdependence and community nature, which these students from low socio-economic backgrounds used to cope with their personal challenges, which also affected their academic performance. Ainsworth (2002); Foster and Frijters (2010); and Stephens et al. (2012) highlighted the positive effects of the collective nature, with which students from disadvantaged backgrounds work to their advantage in mitigating the challenges they encounter - mainly economic, but having ripple effects on their academic performance. The non-institutional mediation role that peers played, as was in the case of the respondents' perceptions during the interviews, came up during the shadowing and was reflected in the way the team organised themselves with regards to fending for themselves. The gesture shown on the previous day, when Tupo got back onto campus from shopping to find that the mates had organised what would be her lunch before attending to the day's lecture, also demonstrated this.

With regards to the shopping experience, Tupo explained that, with the groceries bought, which included Kapenta (small dried fish, Soya pieces, tomatoes and some oil,) would last them up to two weeks, further elaborating that they, like in the case with Spikey, depended more on one decent meal a day, which was in the evening. During the day, they would buy food items, such as maize, bananas or Thobwa (sweet beer) to keep them going.

While acknowledging that they had these challenges, Tupo explained how they are aware of other fellow students that were equally challenged, or in a worse off situation than them.

"*We can relate to others needs and even with the little we have, we are able to assist others outside our circle."*

This was made with reference to the young man that we had met during shopping on the previous day.

The issue of accommodation was raised, with regards to the state of the house that Tupo and the others were renting. She explained how, as a group, they complained to the landlord who promised to fix the crack, once the rent was slightly raised to cater for the maintenance. Tupo later admitted to being resigned to living under those conditions, as the prospects of raising rentals would put more strain on their budget. On inquiring what her thoughts were about the state of affairs, Tupo put the blame on the institution as not putting much effort in ensuring that their students were living under the basic recommended living conditions.

I feel frustrated at the stance of the college on our living conditions. Although we cannot afford proper housing conditions, the situation could have been better if the institution took a step to inspect the houses that some of the landlords are offering us. They take advantage of our poverty and failure of the institution to set standards and expectations for prospective landlords and enforce them.

The sentiment ties in with the general feeling of most of the interviewed respondents, regarding the role of the institution in mediating on some of the challenges they were facing as students from low socio-economic backgrounds. While there was an acknowledgement of the institution playing a part in ensuring the well-being of students in general, there was a feeling similar to what Cross et al. (2009) found in their study on how undergraduate students negotiated academic performance within a diverse university environment: they observed a reduction in institutional responsibility, when it came to issues affecting students' personal problems.

The discussion and reflection on the previous day took Tupo and me up to 10:00hrs. Like the previous day, Tupo had a lecture-free morning that she used to work on her assignment that was due later in the week. I followed her to the ICT resource room, where she managed to secure a computer and began working, for three hours straight. At 13:15hrs, we left the ICT room and she passed through the mini marketplace, where she bought three bananas, then proceeded to join a group of fellow students for work-related discussions. As was with Spikey, I had to negotiate access and get consent from all the members before I could sit in. This group, unlike Spikey's, was all females. During the whole 2-hour discussion, it was all centred around academics. With this group, there seemed to be some kind of order in which members were contributing and one person stirred and moderated the discussion, with each member taking notes. There were points when members failed to agree on certain aspects and, for these, they would put issues on hold until they consulted with other groups.

At the end of the group discussion, I asked Tupo who else they consulted when they were stuck - apart from fellow students. She indicated the use of the library and the internet and pointed out how reluctant they were to go back to the course lecturers, especially after a lecture.

"*It seems to me that if you do not ask during lecture time, that is it…. The lecturer would not have time to address your needs thereafter."*

While this was the case with Tupo and her group, during the interviews a good percentage of respondents commented on how certain lecturers and, in particular, faculties were open and

approachable. Such students mentioned this relationship between them and their lecturers as positive and facilitating their chances of succeeding, as students in higher education.

Following this discussion, it was time for Tupo to go for her afternoon lectures that went on to the end of the day. It was then that I concluded my shadowing, leaving Tupo to continue with the rest of the day in the lectures.

7.5 Chapter Conclusion

While there has not been much documented on shadowing as a means of collecting data that is separate from mere observation, I went on to consider it as a way of triangulating my findings. I was able to go beyond narratives from interviews to walk with the participants and share in their daily movements. I found it to have provided a deeper appreciation of what the lives of students from low socio-economic backgrounds are like. Although most of it had to do with the way they went about mainly fending for themselves, there was also an aspect of how, together with the pressure of ensuring their survival, they were able to balance these with their academic demands and still succeed. From the exercise, that included both observing and interrogating, a number of factors stand out, including: personal resilience of the students in withstanding the challenges up against them; the safety net coming from fellow students, in particular those that shared similar characteristics with them and, finally, the hope that lies beyond their completion of studies that keeps them going strong.

CHAPTER 8:DISCUSSION

8.1 Introduction

So far, this study has explored the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are academically successful in Malawi's higher education. Using a qualitative approach and phenomenological design, I collected data using interviews and shadowing. The findings have been presented in the last four chapters (4-7).

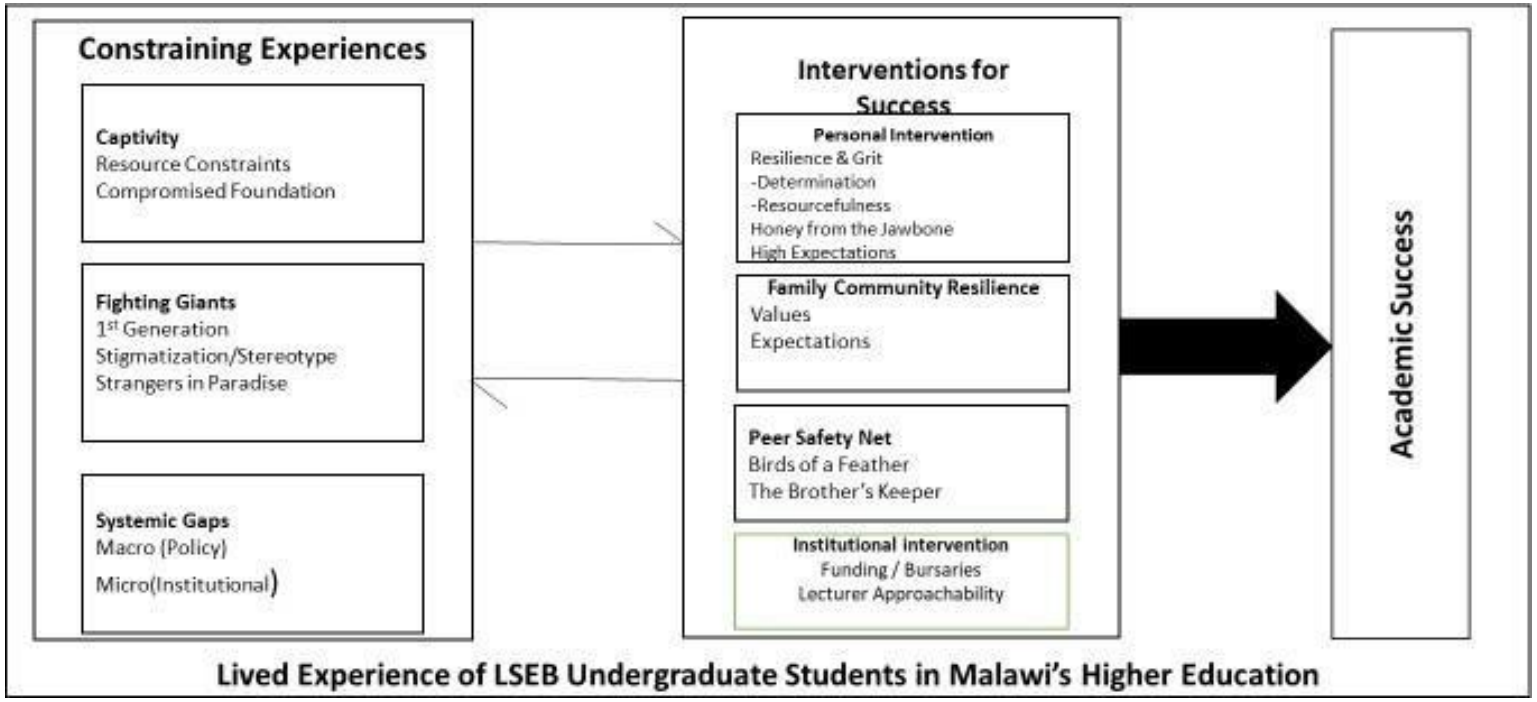
The aim of this chapter is to discuss these findings, in line with the research questions that guided the study and in the light of literature and the conceptual framework that was generated in chapter 2, as a lens through which the study would be viewed. This chapter endeavours to provide a robust view and picture of the targeted students' lived experiences. Most literature has contributed to highlighting the academic plight of students from low socio-economic backgrounds as struggling academically and at risk of failing and dropping out (Aina, Baici, Casalone, & Pastore, 2018; Andrabi & Jabeen, 2016; Cardak & Ryan, 2006; Letseka & Maile, 2008). This study's focus on the other hand is on those students that showed academic brilliance. The intention was to shift from the deficit perspective, from which students from low socio-economic backgrounds have been viewed in the majority of literature. This study has gone further to look at what it was that made the students in this study beat the odds and show academic excellence, in spite of their socio-economic backgrounds. While there have been some studies that have approached this area from various angles (Ngalo-Morrison, 2017); Petersen, Louw and Kitty, (2009), this study focused on the students' lived experience in relation to successes and the institutional, and non-institutional, mediation factors within their lived experience.

These findings revealed, among others, the constraints that undergraduate students, from low socio-economic backgrounds in Malawi's higher education experienced. These experiences were an accumulation of ongoing challenges, most of which were a result of the backgrounds they came from. Amidst these constraining experiences, the findings captured elements that acted as interventions in responding to the challenges, which respondents attributed to having contributed to their academic success against the odds.

The heart of Chapter 8 brings together the findings from the previous four chapters into a discussion that fleshes out the themes that emerged through the analytical process. The consolidation of these findings in the discussion chapter have been captured in the following model that has been described as the 'Exodus' version of low socio-economic background

undergraduates in Malawi's higher education, whose components form the focus of this discussion chapter.

Fig 8.1: The EXODUS model



8.2 Constraining Experiences: The Exodus Through to Higher Education

The term 'Exodus', as used in Biblical times - referring to a journey from a life of slavery to the promised land 'flowing with milk and honey' - fits in well with the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in this study. This expedition sees the respondents starting as captives in poverty, having a promise of a better life through pursuing education. Along the journey, though, they are faced with giants that threaten their chances of reaching their destiny. In the face of all these challenges, there are some interventions that, upon engaging with, push them closer to their 'promised land' as successful graduates of higher education.

Each of these concepts in the Exodus model will be discussed.

8.2.1 The Captivity

Coming from low socio-economic backgrounds entails a number of implications that are not only restrictive in the nature in which an individual can reveal their capabilities, but also the extent to which they can realise their potential. In relation to education, and more specifically higher education, poverty plays a substantial role in restricting individuals from both pursuing their dreams, and fully realising their inner potential (Blanden & Gregg, 2004; Breier, 2010; Fan, 2014; Letseka, 2007). It is the lack of access to what Bourdieu (1986) described as 'capitals' that manifest themselves in the form of economic, cultural and social capitals that literature has mostly focussed on, when determining the socio-economic background of an individual. The cumulation of inability to secure funding to pursue their dreams, perceived lack of networks that would act as enhancers and the unfamiliarity with the culture governing institutions, which leans more towards middle class culture, traps students from low socio-economic backgrounds in this state of captivity.

In this study, most respondents indicated being cognisant of how far they could stretch their dreams and hope for things far much better that what they had. These dreams, according to one of the respondents were '*more of a fantasy than something I knew I could realise looking at what I had against what I lacked in order to get to my dream or fantasy.*[ii]*"* This feeling of being enclosed within confines was more evident in the choices they made about potential programmes of study. Four programmes stood out that, although the respondents wanted to have pursued, did not because of their inadequacy in satisfying the requisite requirements. These programmes included: Medicine, Engineering and pure science. The respondents coming from a CDSS background felt inadequate for having been exposed to secondary science

that did not meet the standards required as prerequisite for those programmes, such as the lack of exposure to a laboratory and hands-on scientific experimentation. The other programme was Law. Prior to 2005, the faculty of Law had, as an entry requirement for students, a written and an oral interview. Because of the nature of the interviews, most candidates that benefited were those who were eloquent in the English language: the middle class. As a means to ensuring that the selection was not class-based, they later scrapped oral entry interviews, as a means of accommodating all. While this was considered a positive development, respondents that had the desire to pursue law reported having been hindered from doing so because of the inability to comprehend the reading materials in the programme. One of such aspirants commented on how,

> *…although it is all English that we use in communicating at university, getting to understand the sort of English used in cases and articles in Law is not the everyday English we already are struggling with. I therefore gave up on seeing myself being a lawyer one day.*[iii]

In the above scenarios, respondents could see and imagine what 'freedom' would be like for them, but the walls of poverty reveal the shortfalls that they had in trying to reach that place of freedom. The study uncovered three forms through which this captivity manifested itself: resource constraints and compromised foundation.

The inability to possess the capitals, alluded to earlier, played a role in the situation in which most of them found themselves. Such absence or inadequacy of these capitals, according to Fan (2014), denied individuals from fully benefiting from education. In her study that focussed on Chinese students, Fan argued how children coming from middle class, as opposed to those from the working class, have greater advantage with regards to the possession of resources that give them an edge over their counterparts, who cannot afford or access the prerequisite knowledge, resources and dispositions that foster quality learning. While some of these students may have the potential for excellence, a lack of conducive environment for this to flourish becomes an inhibiting factor.

Resource constraint

In both the interviews and shadowing conducted during the collection of data for this study, the extent of poverty, as reflected in the lifestyles and diet that the respondents adopted in order to get by, characterised individuals that were constricted in their ability to lead a decent life.

The inability to afford three square meals per day was one characteristic common to most of the respondents. The quality and nutritive value of their diet, as was explained in chapter 7, was another indication of a lack of resources that would ensure a healthy and balanced diet.

Research conducted elsewhere has established a connection that exists between possession of resources and likelihood of succeeding academically (Andrabi & Jabeen, 2016; Blanden & Gregg, 2004). In Levin's (2007) report on schools, poverty and the achievement gap observed the negative influence that they have had on students' success, behaviour and retention in school. These effects of poverty and resource constraints on respondents in the study had far reaching effects for their lives physically, socially and academically.

Chapters 4 through 7 provided information regarding the challenges that respondents were up against, due to the limited resources that they had. These included having to miss part of their academic time in search of funds and failure to deliver up-to-standard work, due to lack of necessary tools, such as stationery, ICT knowledge and equipment. For some, the burden of not knowing where the next tuition fee would come from was a distraction that they admitted was an obstruction to them delivering more and better-quality work. Ferguson, Bovaird and Mueller (2007) elaborated on how stress and worry, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, about where the next provisions would come from affect their concentration on academic work and, in return, negatively affect their academic outcome. Such worries and stress may not affect their counterparts from the middle class to the same degree, as they have adequate provision of resources.

Compromised Foundation

Related to the above form of captivity that students from under-resourced background. find themselves in, is the shaky educational foundation that they undergo that reflects on how they fare in higher education.

The role that pre-tertiary education plays in determining the fate of students once in higher education cannot be understated. Studies pertaining to the same have shown how, as a result of low quality or compromised pre-tertiary education exposure, students end up struggling in higher education (Barnes et al., 2010; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Kirst & Venezia, 2001).

In the case of the current study, the quality of secondary schools that fourteen out of the sixteen students, that participated in both the interviews and shadowing, came from CDSSs (whose profile has already been provided in chapter 2). In all sixteen cases, science subjects such as

Physical Science (Chemistry and Physics) and Biology were taught without any laboratory experience. Due to the absence of science labs and lab equipment, sciences were learnt from a theoretical point-of-view. Due to this compromised approach to science, some students shied away from choosing science programmes in university. As a result, students pursuing science-based programmes, which happen to also be lucrative ones, tend to be minimal. The Malawi National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), for instance, reported that, out of 197 students that were selected to pursue different programs at the prestigious College of Medicine, only 7 came from CDSS, representing just 3.5% of College of Medicine's (CoM) 2016/2017 intake. Among other factors, the failure to meet prerequisites for entry into the medical school explains the low statistics. Sandikonda (2013) attributed the low intake of students from CDSS into higher education as a result of poor quality of education that they offer. He observes how national secondary schools and grant aided schools (discussed in chapter 2) offer better quality education, resulting in many students excelling academically, or seconded by the district conventional secondary schools, while the community day secondary schools offer poor education, resulting in poor academic achievement.

There was another category, though, who, even after avoiding science-based programmes, found themselves being redirected to this avenue of study, because of their good grades in science. These are the ones that indicated struggling to catch up with those that had a well-grounded foundation in sciences and were conversant with the practical (laboratory-based) side of the subject. These respondents admitted to having done well in sciences during the end of the secondary exam because of rote memory, without a grounded understanding of scientific concepts.

Studies conducted, both in the developed and developing countries, show how there is a marked difference in terms of performance of children across the socio-economic status continuum (Wilks & Wilson, 2012). Ferguson, Bovaird and Mueller's (2007) study of the Canadian context noted the marked difference that there is in terms of readiness for school among children from affluent families and those from poor families. As a result of exposure and availability of resources, that are conducive to fostering learning, children from affluent families showed signs of being prepared for school and an understanding of what is expected of them in the school setup owing, among other things, to access to resources as well as the at-home support. On the other hand, those from poor backgrounds, due to the lack of resources, exposure and inconducive environments, found themselves struggling to fit into the education

system. This situation is not only witnessed in Malawi, Spreen and Vally (2006) narrated how poverty, both at the micro level (household) and on to a locational level (township, rural) in South Africa was a factor to consider when engaging in discourses around educational inequalities. In their study they reported that:

> ….poverty was a major obstacle blocking access to education, and because the costs of school fees, uniforms, shoes, books, stationery and transport imposed too heavy a burden on the family some pupils were forced to discontinue schooling. The lack of electricity, desks, adequate water and toilet facilities in schools. p. 354

As a result of these constraints on the part of students coming from under-resourced backgrounds, Haveman and Smeeding (2006) argue that students coming from poor backgrounds enter university strides behind their counterparts from middle class. This is a result of less academic preparation, ill prepared skills to select colleges and programmes of study and discourse of thought. Horin (2010) highlighted the importance of governments intervening in assisting children from disadvantaged backgrounds long before they got to higher education. In his article, he explains how students from poor backgrounds, who maybe performing well at the start, tend to lag behind with the passage of time, in comparison to their counterparts from middle class families. This is attributed to, among other factors, the quality of education to which they are subjected. The positive correlation between accessing quality education and the socio-economic standing of an individual is what explains this difference among children from different socio-economic backgrounds. In this current study, owing to the fact that the respondents all came from low socio-economic backgrounds, the lack of one of the important capitals that Bourdieu mentions was pointed out as attributing to academic well-being.

A study carried out in the US reported how most of the students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds struggled in higher education, as a result of missing out on certain courses in high school, that would have given them a higher chance of coping well in higher education (Choy, Horn, Nuñez, & Chen, 2000; Engle, 2007). An example of this was Advanced High school Mathematics, which was not offered as compulsory in the schools that catered for low socio-economic communities.

Both resource limitations and the compromised educational backgrounds that students coming from low socio-economic contexts have, therefore act as these confinements that hold them as captives in their attempt to break free from the cycle of poverty.

8.2.2 Fighting Giants

First-generation graduates

The experience of being a first-generation graduate in higher education, for most of the respondents in the study, came as a "wake-up" call to the challenges that they would have had to face. As was explained earlier in chapter 4, almost all the respondents reported being the first to be selected to pursue higher education, not just in their immediate families, but also extended family and, for some, in their local communities.

Due to not having had a university graduate in their families, respondents had no frame of reference when contemplating higher education and what its requirements were. While three out of the sixteen respondents reported having benefited from their previous secondary school alumni who visited the school to share some of their experiences, the rest did not have such an experience. Some described how, in previous years, schools would organise career talks from the work sector, as well as from university institutions where students like them, with no prior knowledge of university would have an opportunity to learn and ask questions. With the passing of time, schools reported being unable to organise such talks, due to a lack of funding from both host schools and the institutions that would be represented.

For most of the respondents, the excitement of breaking into the 'elite sphere' was short-lived, due to the reality that they encountered upon arrival on campus. For others, the shock came from realising what it took to be enrolled in higher education, including the cost implications. The supplies that they required for their survival created this dilemma of whether or not to go ahead in the pursuit of their dreams.

Wilks and Wilson (2012) argued how such challenges impacted on students with no family history of university graduates, coupled with general poverty:

> Irrespective of academic achievement level, students whose parents had not attended university, live in a remote area, and attend a government high school, have the highest chance of all of developing a preference not to attend university. p. 79

The above quote, although attempting to shed light on the struggles that first generation graduates go through to access higher education, also highlights the deficit view, with which

students from such backgrounds are perceived. It gives an impression of the absence of personal expectations or aspirations that children from low socio-economic seem to lack. This is owed to the fact that their backgrounds lacked motivators or role models, either due to the literacy level of the parents, or their state of (un)employment (Alon, 2009; Letseka, 2009). In the case of the current study, though, there has been evidence of personal aspiration on the part of these students that accounted for their being found in higher education as first-generation graduates. This resonates with other research findings, that highlight how these students have to invest more effort, energy and resilience to ensure that they both secure the place in higher education and maintain their status as university students, during the entire duration of study (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2011).

Some of the factors that explain these challenges of being first generation graduates include the lack of encouragement from family (Engle, 2007). In the findings of this study, there were respondents that reported having been discouraged to go further into higher education by family members. The justification was mainly due to familial financial constraints, either because they perceived that they could not afford to pay for higher education, or because they would prefer the family member to find some employment, to contribute towards fending for the family.

With regards to those that make it into higher education, the challenges come as a result of what Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010, p. 1) referred to as a 'college- going *habitus'.* This, they describe as the '*unconscious constellation of preferences, behaviors, and styles of self-presentation shaped during childhood'.* According to Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, individuals that come from middle class backgrounds, where the parental level of education is higher, tend to instil values and dispositions into the oncoming generation that prepare them for higher education (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). On the other hand, those from the working class tend to lack those predispositions and exposure, leaving them with nothing to pass on to their children, in terms of preparing them for higher education - and, as such, giving their counterparts from a middle class background a head start (Munro, 2011). For instance, from the findings of this study, most of the respondents admitted to having made choices about their program of study haphazardly, with no sense of purpose. For the most part, this was due to their being pioneers entering university, with no guidance. This resounded with Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb's (2010) findings that the differences in how choices about university were made and the role of having parents that had been exposed to higher education, favoured students from the middle class, over those from a low socio-economic background.

In their book on how socio-economic factors influence decisions made by students, Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1999) observed how children whose parents attended college were better equipped and experienced enough to prepare their children, regarding the operations of the college system and how, as students ,they could gear themselves up for university life. Pugsley (1998, p. 11) made these assertions earlier.

> Middle-class groups have used education as a key method through which to reproduce social advantages….whereas middle-class parents had decoded the 'rhetoric of equality' and attempted to guide their children towards 'good' universities, working-class families lacked this knowledge and competence, which placed them at a relative disadvantage in the HE marketplace.

This corresponds with Coleman (1988) in arguing how students, whose parents received a high level of education and had access to greater forms of capital, tended to have increased economic and educational opportunities, thereby giving them an edge over their counterparts. Having looked at the theme of being first generation graduates, the next to be discussed in the theme 'strangers in paradise'.

Strangers in Paradise (Stigmatisation, Stereotyping)

The notion: 'stranger in paradise', borrowed from the title of the article by Reay et al. (2009), best described the experience of respondents in this study, upon entering higher education. Owing to their background being characterised by lack of exposure to the higher education habitus (cross reference) and culture, respondents expressed how the university environment seemed alien to them, without any reference point. The feeling of alienation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds has been pointed out in literature as adding to low retention and students dropping out (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). Darlaston-Jones et al. (2003, p. 3) have described the experience as being:

> …associated with stress, anxiety and tension, which in the case of students from low socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that are radically different from the learning culture of the university they seek to access, leads to students failing or withdrawing from university.

Although the findings of the above study were documented in the context of Australia, the relevance of the findings have far-reaching resonance with the Malawian context and most developing countries. In this study, the history of respondents as belonging to low socio-

economic backgrounds and the culture that came with it were in dissonance with the institutional culture in higher education. Trying to reconcile the two seemingly irreconcilable cultures left most of the respondents frustrated and in despair, with regards to their survival. Students from a middle-class background are better able to manoeuvre in higher education with ease, due to the compatibility of the at-home culture of the middle-class and that promoted by educational institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Among aspects that exacerbated the situation was the *lingua franca* used on campus. Most of the respondents, although coming from secondary schools where English was the medium of instruction, felt less confident in higher education, where there was less of codeswitching when lecturers taught, unlike in secondary schools where, in order to clarify a point, teachers would switch to the vernacular to enable students to understand.

Respondents also mentioned the level of difficulty of the recommended readings. Some attributed this problem to the lack of exposure to literature as a subject in secondary, which they regarded as assisting in comprehension, analysis of reading materials as well cultivation of a reading culture. The result of such a gap made students feel behind the rest of the class and affected their self confidence about how well they would fair in such courses. Two particular cases of respondents, who were pursuing a Law degree, mentioned how difficult they found it to understand cases and legal writings, but that their peers, especially those from a private school background, who had a better grasp and command of the English language, understood the readings with ease.

Coming from a background of compromised quality of pre-tertiary education and lacking information on how higher education systems operated meant that students had to find a means of adapting and integrating into this seemingly alien culture. This gap in knowledge of navigating the system is what Morrow referred to as the epistemological access. The absence of this he alluded to as one of the explanations behind '*devaluation of achievement and fatal self-imposed impediment to success.'* (Morrow, 2009, p. 77). According to Morrow, gaining formal access into higher education was one, and probably the easier, form of access. Epistemological access was what determined whether an individual would survive the full term of higher education until graduation. It was this form of access that provided an individual with the know-how and skills of navigating higher education and successfully becoming a *'participant in a practice*' (Ibid) - in this case, the practice of being a university student. While likening it to learning how to speak a language, epistemological access formed a foundation on

which acquisition and understanding of other forms of knowledge, within higher education, would be built on. With the case of the respondents in this study, the compromised pre-tertiary exposure to education denied them this foundation, later to be manifested through the struggles they underwent. For instance, Muller's (2014) description of epistemological access ties in well with the challenges that respondents faced, especially relating to the choice of programme and their prerequisites, when he states that, " *epistemological access as knowing that and knowing how to learn in a manner suited to the discipline.."* Wingate (2007) viewed it as the process of '*learning to learn where students are made to be independent learners and making them competent in constructing knowledge in their discipline'* (p. 403).

Wheelahan (2012) attributed the lack of such knowledge to the reproduction and perpetration of social inequalities, as it side-lines and reduces the chances of those who do not have this knowledge, of succeeding, while favouring those that possess it (the already privileged ones). While to some extent, the acquisition of epistemological access, as an individual responsibility, (Morrow, 2009; Muller, 2014), (Jansen, 2001) highlights the role that institutions ought to play and how they tend to shun this obligation, resulting in a deficit in epistemological access – especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Bozalek and Boughey (2012) considered the failure or inability of institutions to get rid of such obstacles as a form of injustice, as it works to the detriment of those that need the service the most - as a means of transforming their socio-economic stand. Cross (2018, p. 100), therefore, summarised the means of acquiring epistemological access as follows:

> A balanced interplay between student engagement and institutional/academic support is an essential requisite for a sound pedagogy of academic and normative induction of undergraduate students, towards enhancing the conditions of possibility of effective epistemic access.

Through their own initiatives, respondents were able to work out ways of accessing this form of knowledge. As one commented, however, not all students had such self-enquiring qualities and, in the absence of institutional support, fell along the way. This partially resonates with Muller's (2014) observation of how epistemological access was linked to success and survival in higher education. These sorts of challenges were experienced by respondents in the study and further compounded by the stigmatisation and stereotyping that came with it.

The study found how students from low socio-economic backgrounds suffered this stigmatisation and stereotyping. The *HS/Tradi* dichotomy of grouping students in the institution, based on socio-economic backgrounds (discussed in chapter 4), gave the respondents the feeling of being the odd ones out, as the label '*tradi'* had the connotation of someone being misplaced and not belonging. Magolda (2000), in writing on institutional rituals and communities in higher education, observed how stereotyping and stigmatisation are devised and determined by the dominant institutional culture that determines what is 'normal' from the 'other'. The conceptualisations of a 'normal' student, therefore fitted the likes of a middle-class student and the question of feeling alienated and out of place is not a problem that students from middle class background are likely to grapple with (Read et al., 2003). The same study (conducted in the UK by Read et al) revealed how the reputation of the university was a determining factor as to who the 'ideal' students for the institution were. As a result, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, also referred to as non-traditional students, had to avoid certain institutions of higher education, especially the prestigious ones, to opt for less prestigious ones in order to fit in and have a sense of belonging.

For the case of this study and in the context of Malawi, that has few public universities, students had a limited choice of where to go. The respondents reported having to find means of resolving the challenge. The question of whether or not an individual felt comfortable and had a sense of belonging within the institution is one that was grappled with by almost all the respondents. The uncertainty of their fitting into the institution would later manifest itself in the feeling of fear and self-doubt. The experiences of respondents, discussed from section 8.2 to this point, together form what the salutogenesis theory of resilience in chapter 2 refers to as 'stressors'

8.2.3 Promise-Glimmer of Hope

One of the aspects that transpired from the data collected in the study was the level of hope and expectation that the respondents had, despite the hardships encountered in section 8.2.2 above. The hope sprang from the mere fact of finding themselves in university. The acknowledgement of the role that further education played in socio-economic transformation and the likelihood to ascend the mobility ladder for most of the respondents made the challenges encountered feel less stressful.

Making good of the bad

The study's focus was on students from low socio-economic backgrounds and, as has been discussed in the previous section, most of these respondents encountered and continued to

encounter challenges. These are similar to those that studies revealed as leading to students encountering and failing to cope with, resulting in the withdrawal and dropping out of a proportion of students (Barefoot, 2004; Bennett, 2003; Breier, 2010). Some of therespondents also alluded to a number of their colleagues having gone through the same experience of withdrawing or dropping out. One of the factors that transpired from the findings was the positive attitude that most of them reported having, despite the impeding challenges. As was earlier presented in chapter 4, the ability of respondents to see beyond the present challenges to what they saw themselves becoming acted as part of the drive to strive for the top against the odds. Amatea, Smith-Adcock and Villares (2006) noted the impact on the academic achievement of students that had a positive outlook. In their study, students and families that, irrespective of challenges being faced, maintained a positive attitude, tor the most part ended up being successful. Another explanation for such an attitude was that students drew inspiration from others that were in a similar situation to them and were successful. By drawing strength and confidence from past victories of their own and others, respondents were able to face more and bigger challenges successfully. This outlook on life is what Bandura (1997), in his self-efficacy theory described as the 'vicarious experience'; and Eriksson and Lindström (2008), on Antonovsky's Salutogenesis theory referred to as 'manageability' (as referred to in the conceptual framework in chapter 2). For the majority of respondents, the setbacks that they had encountered leading up to finding themselves in higher education contributed towards cultivating a fighting spirit that enabled them to overcome the adversity. As such, faced with the challenges in higher education, though daunting, they were able to draw strength from past encounters. Liu, Reed and Girard (2017) found similar results, with regards to marginalised students who, upon facing various disappointments along the way, developed a 'thick skin' and determination. Both of these are the conviction that an individual faced with a challenge or adversity will have to work towards overcoming it, at whatever cost.

In the study, respondents referred to their adversities as having taught them lessons and contributed towards the development of skills. It was these that came in handy at university. For instance, respondents' reference to the lack of resources in their former secondary schools, such as libraries, laboratories and even well qualified teachers. For some of the respondents, this did not deter them from the goal of getting an education. It was through these experiences that they developed resourcefulness and creativity, including having to travel distances to access material; networking with others, that were at better resourced schools, to borrow some of the texts; and enquiring and accessing materials from students who had gone through the

system before them. Such practices enabled them to survive in higher education. Where. unlike in secondary schools, they now had to develop resourcefulness and access information and knowledge on their own. Stephens et al. (2012) point out the emphasis of independent learning in higher education and the trouble that this presents to non-traditional students, because of their culture of interdependence For the respondents in the study, part of this was mitigated through the lessons on resourcefulness that they had learnt through the under-resourced pre-tertiary education.

8.2.4 Systemic Gaps

Institutional systems are expected to play a role in ensuring integration and transition of students into higher education institutions. This is considered as an important element both in ensuring retention of students and the development of a healthy community of practice among students themselves, as well as between staff and students (Cross, Shalem, Blackhouse, & Adam, 2009; Jones-Darlaston, Cohen, Haunold, Pike, & Young, 2003; Masika & Jones, 2016; Tinto, 2000). This is more so as it pertains to students considered disadvantaged, or at risk of dropping out of higher education. Some of the reasons that this category of students qualifies as 'at risk' or disadvantaged are: their socio-economic backgrounds (low) and history of exposure to higher education (first-generation) students. Because of these, the respondents found themselves struggling to adjust, and settle in, to higher education, due to a lack of capitals, including economic, social, cultural. The intertwining relationship between student effort and the role that the environment (Higher education institution) play, has a considerable bearing on the extent to which students are retained and progress to graduating from higher education (Tinto, 2001).

The systemic mediation by institutions can be looked at both at a macrosystem level, as well as microsystem. The former, speaks more to the policies that govern higher education in ensuring access, retention and completion of studies for all students. The latter relates to the role(s) that the individual institutions play. The findings of the current study revealed both macro- and microsystemic gaps that the respondents pointed out as being unfilled by the institution, in mediating their lived experiences as students from low socio-economic backgrounds in the institution, as will be discussed below.

Macrosystem Gap

In Chapter 5, the respondents mentioned a couple of occasions where policies played a negative role in making their chances of both accessing, and surviving in, the higher education system

more difficult. While the Malawian policy document on education (NESP) points out issues of access to education with consideration to gender and various forms of vulnerability (including socio-economic status) as priority, practice on the ground, with regards to this study, showed gaps that exist which, rather than promoting access and survival of these groups, tend to constrain them. This is not an isolated case regarding education policies and specifically widening participation that have been critiqued for producing conflicting results. A cross-country study into such policies shows how, though taking different forms and approaches, policies on widening participation to ensure inclusivity have been counterproductive to an extent. Some of such country-specific policy focus, as outlined by Morley, Leach, and Lugg (2009), included: South Africa's redress and transformation; USA's affirmative action; UK's focus on access as a social justice issue.

In the case of Malawi where the enrolment rate is one of the lowest in the world, with an absorption rate of only 30% out of all students qualifying for university after the secondary leaving examination (MSCE), widening access has result in benefiting the middle class more than those from low socio-economic backgrounds. To resolve this situation, a university entrance examination (UEE) was introduced in 1996, that comprised Mathematics, English and Logic aptitude tests. Over time, this examination received criticisms, due to its elitist nature. One of the observations made was about how the examination was designed. At its inception, there was some level of mystification with regards to the requirements for university entrance examination. Respondents ascribed the requirements and prerequisite knowledge required to increase chances of doing well during the UEE to a belief that higher education in Malawi fostered inequalities, through giving the middle class more chances of being admitted into university by the nature in which the entrance examination was set. The idea of administering the UEE, which was also referred to as an aptitude test, appeared to work in favour of those from middle class backgrounds that were exposed to English and were eloquent in the language, as well as being well-versed in critical thinking skills - from their educational backgrounds that were mostly private or designated schools. As was discussed in chapter 4, most of the respondents lamented the poor-quality education that they were subjected to, which created a wide knowledge gap between them and other students, who came from well- resourced families and schools. The lack of these skills in rural schools were attributed to their being least represented in university.

Debates around administration of aptitude tests or standardised tests have been ongoing. In the USA, the administering of post-secondary aptitudes, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and others, have received similar criticism of favouring the middle class. Sackett, Kuncel, Arneson, Cooper and Waters (2009) carried out a study where multiple data sets were examined to establish, among other things, the relationship between test scores and socio-economic status. In their findings, as well as establishing the relevance of test scores to academic performance, they also established the correlation that was there between socio-economic status and test scores. Strong criticisms were raised by Zwick (2002), who considered such tests as 'wealth tests' more than aptitude tests. In their later study, Zwick and Sklar (2005) established the statistical significant influence that ethnicity and first language had on predicting test scores in aptitude or college entrance examinations, with the white and English students having higher odds of doing better than other ethnic groups and those for whom English was not their first language. In the Malawian context, the odds were similarly in favour of those from the middle class who spoke English at home, as opposed to their counterparts who only encountered English in school and '*scantily*'[iv].

Secondly, during the years that followed the introduction of the entrance examination, some institutions began to offer preparatory tutorials for it. Again, this was benefitting those who could afford and gave them an unfair advantage over their counterparts, who could not afford to pay and, as such, lacked the information to enable them to succeed. Studies have documented the benefits of coaching or pre-testing for tests, regardless of whether they are high-stakes or low-stakes. In both cases, for instance, Brunner, Artelt, Krauss and Baumert (2007) foundthat students, that received coaching and pretesting, showed an improvement in their performance of the tests. Although there was not much difference in verbal tests, it did have significant difference in mathematical tests scores. In the case of this study, all respondents reported having to struggle to raise money for their school fees in both secondary school and university. As such, they did not have the luxury that their peers from middle class backgrounds had concerning coaching opportunities. The students that could afford it were exposed to such preparations for UEE. It was debated by scholars in the country whether the seemingly drilling exercises did give a true reflection of the capability of those that performed better as a result of coaching. As one of the respondents put it during the interview:

> *I had to re-sit the University entrance examination twice after failing the first time around. I did not have an idea of what was expected of me and I think that is why I*

failed while some friends that I knew who did not perform as well as I did at the MSCE examinations, because of coaching ended up passing. (#M005)

Following the criticisms in the administration of the UEE, it was finally scrapped in 2015 Selection into university currently follows a quota system, based on districts of origin. The underlying idea behind this was to ensure equitable representation of students across the country. While this was viewed as a step towards equitable access to higher education, the criticism still remained that those accessing higher education and who were likely to complete were those from the middle class. The heavy criticism centred on the promotion inequality in side-lining the poor was pointed by Benedicto Kondowe, one of the renowned education activists in the country, following a review of university selection, according to category of secondary school, as was mentioned in chapter 2 (Mtawali, 2018). Findings revealed that 43% of students selected into university were from conventional secondary schools; 33% from private schools; and those from CDSSs only constituted 14%. This is similar to the findings of MMI (referred to in chapter 2), where university places are occupied chiefly by those from middle class and only a minor portion taken by those from low socio-economic backgrounds. This is in the context that two thirds of secondary schools in Malawi were CDSS (Mtawali, 2018). This was re-echoed in an interview on quota system, as is being implemented in Malawi. In the interview, one of the leaders of the Civil Society Organisations championing the "Quota Must Fall" movement in Malawi explained how oversimplified the quota system in the country has been. This, in turn, has resulted in groups of people needing to be included in the system being left out (Makondetsa, 2019). So, while the equitability of district of origin is achieved, there still remains a lack of those belonging to the bottom poorest quintile, who onlycomprise 0.7% of university enrolments (World Bank, 2014). In a study by Strathdee (2013), similar criticism on policies that did not fully take into consideration all other implications was made of New Zealand's higher education policy, aimed at ensuring tribal balance in access to higher education that, in the end, failed to consider the socio-economic dimension as a whole, resulting in a system that still left out those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Microsystem Gap

The transition from high school to university entails a considerable leap and change in pedagogic approaches and level of social interactions, both with peers and teaching staff, which beg for an adjustment of mindset from freshmen entering university (Cross, et.al, 2009). While it is expected that students entering higher education ought to have prerequisite insight into

some of the systems and changes that go with higher education, literature shows how there is this gap in knowledge, attitude and skills. These gaps are even more evident among students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who, as a result of upbringing and lack of exposure, experience this deficit in requisites that allow for smooth adjusting and transiting into higher education. Chapter 5 raised specific gaps that respondents zeroed in on, which they supposed the institution would have mediated, but did not.

Apparent Disjunctures

In this study's findings, the main area where the disjuncture was visible was in the area of information, that is aimed at equipping the students as they enter high school. Such information included: processes of admission into higher education; career talks, with reference to choices of programmes to pursue; and the combination of subjects required for specific programmes in higher education.

The transition from secondary/high school into university involves a major shift in the life of a student (Petersen, et.al, 2012). This acknowledgement from literature has highlighted challenges that students are up against, which, if not resolved in time, have detrimental and long-term effects on the academic life of the students (Kirst & Venezia, 2001). The disjunctures that surfaced in Chapter 5 included the high school-university transition disjuncture and the pedagogic disjuncture.

Factors that determine the success or failure of this transition involve, among others, the type and quality of school, where the student graduated from; the level of exposure, with both information and people that have experienced higher education; and the personality traits of the individual. As was discussed in Chapter 4, the level of educational exposure of students from low socio-economic backgrounds puts them at a disadvantage as they enter higher education, because of the incompatibility of both culture and expectations from the institution and from the students. A study by Zozie and Kayira (2012), regarding transition and tertiary education in Malawi, revealed how the disjuncture between secondary and tertiary education posed as a challenge to both students and lecturers, calling for a soul-search in how the transition would best be effected to ensure retention of students. Stephens et.al. (2012) observed how interventions were important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds during the transition from high school into university:

> First-generation students typically attend lower quality high schools than continuing-

> generation students. As a result, in transitioning to college, they often need additional tutoring, mentoring, and social support. (Stephens et al., 2012, p. 1180)

Similar to the disjuncture discussed in the previous subsection, pedagogic disjuncture is one that is a reality for students entering higher education. Roberts (2011) highlighted the need for institutions of higher education to consider the mode of delivery of knowledge in university as one of the factors that has the potential of promoting dropout, especially among the non-traditional students, who experience the sort of learning for the first time and are not conversant with it from their prior experiences. Gorard and Smith (2006) echoed what others highlighted concerning the same, stating how, at every point, students referred to as non-traditional, coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, have to play the catch-up game with those traditional students, who, either through exposure or status have an idea of the operations of higher education with reference to the pedagogic approaches. From the findings of the study and other related literature, there appears to be a disjuncture between what institutions focus on as suitable in ensuring learning of students. The need to offer pedagogic approaches that benefit students, regardless of diversity, where "academic staff need to not only concentrate on what is taught in a course but also how it is taught" (Ogunde, Nel & Oosthuizen, 2005, p. 14) through what has been described as pedagogical responsiveness. In Chapter 5, pedagogical responsiveness was described as one that responds to students from "diverse educational and cultural backgrounds" (p.13), which they acknowledge is a challenge in itself for institutions, but something that ought to be worked towards. The respondents in this study, as with those generally coming from low socio-economic backgrounds in principle, have challenges that affected their odds of succeeding in higher education (Blanden & Gregg, 2004; Fan, 2014; Yang, 2010). Cross et.al (2009) consider the need for institutions to ensure that even this category of students are catered for. Slominsky and Shalem (2006) acknowledge how students coming from non-traditional backgrounds, either through socio-economic backgrounds or other factors that have been subjected to pre-tertiary education that is restrictive and mostly authoritarian in nature, experience *"far steeper learning curves at the level of the form of knowledge than their fellow students"* (p.36). As such, the need to make teaching and learning approaches accommodative cannot be overstated. For instance, most of the respondents in this study indicated how they struggled with adjusting to analytical ways of thinking and approaching university content. For most of them, Moll (2004)'s observation accurately described their experience, where, rather than being analytical in their thinking, they struggled to switch from prescriptive and judgemental thinking, as a result of their background. The

inability to internalise the expectations and approaches to acquisition and utilisation of forms of knowledge resulted in what Wingate (2007, p. 395) observed as "the unrealistic perception of learning at university that forms a major part of why students fail."

Information Gap: Financial Intervention

Coming from a low socio-economic background, for the respondents in this study, financial support was the paramount intervention that they hoped for. As discussed earlier in the chapter, most of the respondents were first generation students and most of the information regarding the operations of the higher education institutions was something that they had to take an initiative to access, as it was not readily available to them. The struggle to access such information was real for most of the respondents, especially those from rural areas, where such information was hard to get. In the event that the information reached them, it would either be out-of-date or distorted. As one of the respondents expressed himself:

> *Realising that I could not afford to pay the university, let alone get myself to the institution, I decided to go to the DC's [District Council's] office to inquire about possible funding. I was given information on which organisations to contact only to my disappointment to find that they either funded secondary school students or orphan and needy children in primary school. So, I had to go back to square one and time was running out…I was really desperate.* (#M002)

Such information gaps that exists among students entering higher education from low socio-economic backgrounds is an issue that is not only restricted to the findings obtained from this study. Studies around the world allude to information deficit as one of the challenges that students from poor backgrounds grapple with. In their survey on the economics of university dropouts and delayed graduation, Aina, Baici, Casalone and Pastore (2018) pointed out how most students enter university not perfectly informed about both the monetary and non-monetary expectations. As a result, the realisation of how much is expected of them, in both monetary as well as non-monetary terms, has a negative impact on the respondents' focus and concentration on academics, leading to poor academic performance. The difference that exists between students from middle class and those from low socio-economic backgrounds showed how the former seemed to have access to more information regarding higher education, in both the academic and non-academic requirements. Bennett's (2003) study observed how the insufficient and ill-informed family support systems of students from disadvantaged background was one of the leading causes of students' withdrawal from higher education.

Similar to the findings in Bennett's (2003) study, respondents in this study expressed the absence of information regarding application for possible funding available in the institution. One respondent expressed how they only "*bumped into such information by sheer luck and managed to access funding."*[v] For the majority, such information only became available when the deadline for submission of applications had passed.

8.2.5 Institution's Role in Student Welfare: New Wine in Old Wineskins

In Chapter 5, findings revealed respondents' concerns and dissatisfaction in the role that the institutions played in ensuring that their welfare was taken care of. Following the move to widen access in Malawi's higher education, there was a general acknowledgment of the changes that have taken place in the institutions. The general observation was about how the institution has maintained the same way of managing and running the institution as it was before the changes. As a result of this, the institution's role in relation to student welfare has been considered irrelevant and obsolete. For instance, whereas issues of availability of accommodation were obvious, once a student was admitted into university, at present, students have to not only find their own accommodation, but also pay for the rental. For the respondents in the study, the general feeling was that the institution was not doing enough to intervene, especially considering that students struggling financially to reconcile their tuition fees would be highly unlikely to afford decent housing facilities. To most of the respondents, the institution's attitude resonated with Cross et al.'s (2009) study that observed a reduced institutional responsiveness, when it came to issues that dealt with students' personal problems. The main focus, for most institutions was on purely academic issues, with little or no regard to how the stress that arises from the other spheres in the students' lives have a direct impact on their academic wellbeing (Ibid).

8.3 Interventions for Success

Academic success for respondents in this study was attributed to several factors, including personal intervention, family and community resilience, peer safety nets and institutional intervention. Each of these will be discussed below.

8.3.1 Personal Intervention

Following the analysis of interviews and the shadowing, from which data for this study was generated, the theme that emerged from respondents' experiences of being a student from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education was 'resilience', which manifested itself in terms such as 'determination, resourcefulness, adaptation, internal motivation.' All of these

terms are consistent with the concept of resilience (Jowkar, Kojuri, Kohoulat, & Hayat, 2014; Martin, 2002; Sandoval-Hernández & Białowolski, 2016). Among the many definitions of student resilience, Alva (1991, in Gonzalez and Padilla, 1997, p. 301) described it as the ability to:

> sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school.

The findings from the study revealed how the respondents had been faced with stressors, ranging from lack of perceived capitals (economic, social and cultural) to the academic challenges, which, in part, sprang from the former. As was reported in Chapter 4, most of these challenges were the main reason why the majority of students in this bracket of low socio-economic backgrounds either withdrew, or were withdrawn. For the respondents, the realisation of the difficulty of the task ahead of them (Comprehensibility-refer to chapter 2), against the value they attached to getting the degree (Meaningfulness-refer to chapter 2), gave them the determination to go over and beyond what they initially regarded as their limits. Sandoval-Hernandez and Cortes (2012), in studying the concept of resilience across countries, observed the value that individuals placed on education manifested in commitment and persistence that led to success. Cross (2018) attributed such determination as one of the aspects that marginalised groups use to emancipate themselves from poverty, which was the rationale held by the majority of respondents.

Determination also manifested as a factor of the realisation of the responsibilities that laid ahead of the respondents. As was reported in chapter 6, most of the respondents' families had to make sacrifices for them to be in school, including having to withdraw siblings fromschool for a period. For such respondents, the obligation to take over and pay back was a driving force and a reason to be determined to beat the odds and graduate. Respondents portrayed an attitude of not willing to give up. In Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2009) study of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, that found themselves in elite universities, found that all nine students portrayed what they referred to as 'superhuman levels of determination', that, in spite of their being in unfamiliar territory, made them show good progress. Similar results were reported in a study that was conducted at the University of Western Cape where determination of students from disadvantaged backgrounds said that helped in explaining their academic attainment (Ngalo-Morrison, 2017)

It was this determination that drove respondents to develop resourcefulness in finding means of adapting to the unfamiliar space and mitigating against the stressors. While acknowledging that the odds were against them, the respondents reported having to devise ways to make progress. Such exposition is not uncommon, as was also observed by Collis and Reed (2016), where participants in their study showed applied self-management skills in the face of stressors, that they perceived as obstacles to their achieving of set goals. In this study, respondents portrayed possession of the navigational capital that Yosso (2005) referred to as part of the community cultural wealth. The navigational capital calls for inner resources that included personal agency and proactivity, which respondents utilised.

Two ways through which the resourcefulness was portrayed would be described as 'battering' and enhancing of bonding social capital, of which the latter will be discussed in-depth.

Battering as a form of resourcefulness came from a soul-search process by respondents, where they drew out their points of strength. Using their strong points as bargaining tools for the resources they could not access, but knew of others that could (mostly the middle class), they were able to negotiate a form of exchange. As was mentioned in Chapter 4, a number of respondents that were strong in areas, such as mathematics and other courses, were able to use this to gain access to knowledge, such as ICT, from their counterparts who were conversant in the areas. It was also through the expertise in particular areas that some respondents were able to generate funds to support themselves (through provision of informal tutoring). Such resourcefulness enabled the respondents to adapt and make necessary adjustments to the environment, thereby enabling them to channel their efforts towards pursuing excellence in their studies.

8.3.2 Family/Community Intervention

The role of personal intervention or initiative (discussed above in 8.3.1), as manifest through the high levels of determination, resourcefulness and resilience of the respondents, was but one of the intervening meditators for success factors in their lived experience. This section goes further into discussing the next mediating factor, which, in the case of the study and according to the respondents, weighed more than the personal role. In Chapter 6, the findings zeroed in on the value which respondents put on the role that family and community played in the realisation of their dreams of succeeding in higher education. Literature on the role of family and community of students, coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, has, to a large

extent been such that explains why the students do not perform, as it considers families in these contexts as lacking in information, culture and motivation, related to higher education, which they could transmit to their children (Blanden & Gregg, 2004). To a degree, this view could also be considered as springing from the deficit perspective with which these students are perceived.

This study exposed the dynamic perspective which families of these disadvantaged students played, despite the visible lack of the 'capitals', considered by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and Coleman (1988) as imperative determinants for student performance in higher education. Most families and communities, from which respondents came, were admittedly plighted by lack (financial), which to a large extent defined who they were. According to the findings discussed in chapter 6, though, most of these families and communities manifested a rich presence of aspiration, expectation and values that saw beyond the financial lack that would supposedly hold them back, stuck in the state and defined status of 'low socio-economic background'. The findings resonate with the claim made by James (2001, p. 459) confirming findings by Connell, White and Johnson (1991):

> Contrary to myth about the "culture of poverty", people of lower socio-economic backgrounds may strongly desire their children to receive more education than they received themselves though they may not be able to create an environment conducive to educational accomplishment.

As was presented in Chapter 6, families and communities of respondents showed a willingness to support respondents by pooling their resources together to ensure that nothing stopped their child from pursuing the dream of graduating from higher education. Respondents ascribed this gesture to the feeling of pride that their families and communities had in having one of them go that far in education. As two respondents pointed out: to their families and communities, their success as students was looked at as a triumphant act of the whole community.[vi]

Yosso's (2005) work on the critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, outlined the various forms of backing that families and communities of the so-called disadvantaged have that make a positive contribution towards their offspring's success. This concept of community cultural wealth was Yosso's attempt to challenge Bourdieu's (1986) conception of cultural capital theory, that considered the middle class as being the possessors of valuable capital that fostered social mobility. Four out of the six community cultural wealth

elements were alluded to in the findings of the study, when referring to the family/community mediation.

As an important element to their success, respondents acknowledged the encouragement and support safety net that family and community played, which will be discussed in-depth in the subsequent sub-sections. Different authors have studied the role played by family in the academic endeavour of their children and two descriptions that closely relate to the findings of this study are what Walsh (2002) referred to as family resilience, or Gofen's(2009) 'family capital'. The former relates to the ability with which families are able to work through a setback and have a turnaround effect on a stressful experience. On the other hand, Gofen (Ibid) has used the term 'family capital' as the systems that families already have in place to achieve an intended, or aspirational, goal. This is what Yosso has termed the aspirational capital, which is

> the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals… (Yosso, 2005, p. 78)

According to Gofen (2009), although both terms may result in similar ends, the former tends to be reactionary in nature. Family resilience is often seen as a response to external stressors. Family capital entails initiatives already set in place meant to catapult the child into their expected or aspirational ream, irrespective of the presence of resources. The study revealed a combination of both family/community resilience and family capital in explaining the role played by family and community in the success of the respondents. In family/community resilience, the role of family is portrayed through the rallying of family and community in efforts to address the challenges (mainly material and resource-based) encountered by the respondents. This is where the reactionary aspect of family resilience comes in, as the move being made is the result of an occurrence or impending setback. In the case of most respondents, this was following the threat of failure to pay for their university fees. On the other hand, family capital is embedded in how: "family can use and channel its nonmaterial resources, such as priorities, time, and behaviour, for the accomplishments that are usually achieved by using resources that are not within the family's reach." (Gofen, 2009, p. 116).

The hope and expectation which respondents' families and communities portrayed, to a large extent, was a great attribute to the explanation of their academic success. From the findings

regarding lived experiences of first-generation university students, the respondents argued about how parents, regardless of the low socio-economic status, held on to great expectations for their offspring. According to Gofen (2009), the distinguishing factor between families from high socio-economic and those from low socio-economic backgrounds was not the absence of what he has referred to as 'family capital', as the deficit perspective explains it, but rather the means through which such expectations translated themselves into results.

Family/ Community Resilience, Values and Expectations

The discourse on family resilience has been more outspoken within the health field in discussing how families faced with health-related issues, such as mental health, abuse experiences and other pathologies, have been able to work their way through the adversity and emerged as survivors (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Nichols & Schwartz, 2000). Patterson (2002) described family resilience as the ability of family to balance its demands against its capabilities to handle the latter. These demands, according to Patterson, manifest themselves as risks and capabilities include 'tangible resources (what the family has) and coping behaviours (what the family does)' p.236.

In the case of this study, the demand faced by the families and communities of the respondents was ensuring that their members (respondents) successfully complete their university education. The perceived risk with this demand was the resource limitation that they were faced with, by virtue of the socio-economic backgrounds. As a means of ensuring that this demand was met, both resources and coping strategies had to be engaged with. It is the combination of these two, according to the findings of the study, that qualified the families and communities to be considered resilient. Such capabilities included the pooling of resources by members of the communities (some of whom were not direct relations) to counter the risk of the member of the family/community from dropping out of higher education. For the respondents, the gesture shown by family and community members served as a drive and inspiration for them to give it all they had, so as not to disappoint them and frustrate their high hopes and the confidence that they (family and community) had in them.

In the course of collecting and analysing data for this study, though not health-related, sentiments which respondents used in explaining their lived experiences, in the light of the role of the family/community as non-institutional mediators, resonated with the concept of family resilience, as applied in the field of medicine and health. Amatea et al. (2006) touched on family resilience, in the context of children's learning, and highlighted the importance of shifting focus

on the family resilience aspect, in the discourse surrounding children's academic success, from the deficit or pathologic point, where families are only involved when there are issues between the child and the school. Amatea et.al (ibid) explains how families utilise their resourcefulness to come up with ways to enhance the child's education.

The second capability factor was the coping behaviour that was exhibited by the family and community. The impartation of values and norms to the respondents was considered the guiding tool, that kept most of the respondents on track through the different adversities they encountered from childhood through their time as students in higher education. Such values included: hardworking, persistence and resourcefulness. In the absence of material resources, these values that they had grown up respecting, *'kept them going during dry spells*[vii]'

Values and expectations from families and communities that respondents belonged to, therefore had a role to play in driving them towards working hard. For the most part, this urge was a result of not wanting to disappoint them and also the desire to live up to such expectation and be able to later give back to the communities, after breaking out of the cycle of poverty.

8.3.3 Peer Safety Net

Birds of a Feather' (Brother's Keeper)

The influence and impact of peers in the study could be described as a form of social capital, that they possessed at the core of their lives as students in higher education. The concept 'social capital' has taken on a number of meanings. Authors (such as Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Coleman & Coleman, 1994; Knoke, 1999; Putman, 2001) have define social capital considering a number of variables. Coleman and Coleman (1994, Leonard (2004) and Putman (2000) went further to look at social capital as either bonding or bridging. The former, refers to social networking that comprises a homogenous group (socio-economic, ethnic etc), while the latter is more integrative. In their view, the former was more common among low socio- economic backgrounds and considered restrictive with regards to accessing opportunities. On the other hand, Yosso (2005) found this form of social capital as being responsible for the success of oppressed groups, such as the African Americans and Mexican immigrants. She cites an example of coloured women that formed their own association, whose motto was '*Lifting as we climb'* – reflecting the solidarity and commitment they had in achieving a common goal.

The common realisation of the challenges that students from low socio-economic backgrounds were up against, referred to as '*comprehensibility* or *Mastery experience'*[viii], mentioned in the theories of salutogenesis and self-efficacy, respectively, formed the binding factor that brought respondents in the study together, as a collective means of overcoming both the academic and socio-economic stressors they were up against. In their cliques, they held on to the confidence of overpowering the challenges that came with being a university student with insufficient resources, fully knowing the sort of hurdles they had to overcome.

It is this similar kind of social capital, that is portrayed among the respondents in the study. The tendency to associate with people of their kind (from low socio-economic backgrounds) was one that they favoured. Putman (2000) describes bonding social capital as being beneficial for getting by, which was the situation that respondents in this study referred to. Realising the unfavourable conditions that they were faced with, based on their background, finding others in the same situation, to team up with, was the best way for them, as one respondent commented:

> *It was easier mixing with people that I knew were facing challenges such as mine because we understood each other's situations and were able to encourage and find ways of overcoming them. If you tried to share your life with those well-to-do ones, they would look at you as though you were crazy because they had never had such experiences.* (#M006)

This networking of students in the study appeared not to be tied down to the fact that they had common socio-economic backgrounds, although this appeared as the primary binding factor. There was also the indication of a shared goal, which was striving for academic excellence. As some respondents made it clear that not every student from a poor background would be '*networking material',* they had to have the passion for excellence. This explains why Conchas' (2001) study, on structuring failure and success in Latino schools, shows the bridging kind of social capital, where, rather than establishing social networks with fellow Latinos, academically successful students of Latino origin opted to network with students from other groupings. Though differing in socio-economic status and culture, the seriousness with academics was what made the networks thrive.

The concept of accountability arose in the discussion on the role of peers. The interdependent nature with which Stephens et al. (2012) characterised students from disadvantaged

backgrounds proved to benefit respondents in the study. This sense of accountability to one another provided the navigational capital that Yosso described as part of the community cultural wealth that was present among marginalised groups. Through pooling together the little that they had (both material and non-material), respondents were able to negotiate higher education, a thing that most admitted would not have been possible had they ventured solo. In their cliques, respondents reported holding each other accountable for academic progress, as well as general welfare. For instance, during the shadowing exercise, while observing the group discussions, there was a sense of comradeship where one's problem was not looked at as theirs alone, but for the whole group. The sense of wanting to move together as a team, without anyone being left behind, enabled them to manoeuvre through the diverse constraints, both institutional as well as personal. During the interviews, one respondent made the following comment:

> *As a student, I was not one of those very disciplined when it came to studying, but being a part of this working group forced me to organise myself….you knew that you were being monitored and tracked by friends, in a positive way, not wanting any to perish..[laughs]* (#F012)

This caring, sharing and seemingly prosocial depiction confirms the discussions that Piff, Kraus, Coˆte´, Cheng, and Keltner (2010) had in their paper, where they found that people from low socio-economic backgrounds and with far less resources had higher propensity towards looking out for each other's needs, compared to their counterparts who were well off. For the respondents in this study, the knowledge that they were being held accountable to each other was reason enough to push for excellence, especially as one respondent mentioned how it felt to them like '*some sort of competition…a healthy one where the aim was to have all at the top.."* (#M002)

8.3.4 Institutional Intervention

The role played by the institution in this study could be considered as that of a two-edged sword. On the one hand, as looked at in section 8.2.4, the institution was perceived as frustrating the efforts of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in the study. On the other hand, the same institution has been seen as playing some form of enabling role in the lived experiences of some of the respondents in the study. This was witnessed in two main ways: through how some of the respondents benefited from bursaries from the institution; and

through the specific ways in which some faculties and faculty members operated, that contributed to success of the respondents.

Funding/ Bursaries

As a way of controlling from the 'revolving door syndrome,' just like in other institutions around the world, there have been bursary opportunities that are disbursed to students. As was observed in Chapter 5, some respondents expressed frustrations with the perceived indiscriminate nature in which bursaries were expended, feeling that some of the beneficiaries were from well-off families, while those that genuinely deserved to benefit did not. Despite these criticisms, eight out of the fourteen respondents reported having benefited at one point or another from the bursaries. While there was not a guarantee of getting a bursary in the successive years once an individual secured a bursary, respondents expressed how the knowledge of tuition fees being catered for enabled them to concentrate on their studies more than when they had to search the money for their fees. For most of the respondents, inasmuch as other expenses (such as rentals, food and general living expenses) exerted pressure and panic on them, having their fees sorted out was primary. One of the respondents made the following comment:

> *The two occasions that I was lucky to secure tuition funding were the years when my performance was at its best. You have no idea of what it is like, staying awake at night thinking of where you should head to to beg for money to pay your fees, or the anxiety of what if it fails and I have to go back home and drop out…*(#M007)

The above quote concurs with the Andrews and Wilding's (2004) findings on effects that depression and anxiety, arising from financial issues, had on academic achievements. The respondents applauded the institution for the financial assistance towards fee payment. The only reservation was the sense of insecurity that still persisted, knowing that there was no guarantee that the same luck would come around the following year. For the present, though, they indicated being able to focus on their studies more.

One of the ways the efforts and actions could widen participation and equity in Malawi's higher education, according to the NESP (policy document), was to give access to students that qualify for university entry regardless of gender, creed, socio-economic status and age. While this is the case, there have been developments, over the years, that have been counterproductive towards this effort, as it has seen the same students, that had been afforded access into higher

education, dropping out in large numbers, due to failure to meet the economic demands of being a university student. This has resulted in the 'revolving door syndrome' (Nieuwenhuis & Sehoole, 2013 and Ross, 2010) where the efforts of including marginalised groups in accessing the system are frustrated by their failure to complete and falling along the way.

Lecturer Approachability

One of the experiences that respondents in the study encountered was the nature in which adjusting to the university space became a challenge, owing to the sharp contrasts in cultures between the pre-tertiary and tertiary learning environments. Earlier in this chapter, the apparent disjunctures, that students faced in settling into higher education, touched on pedagogic approaches that most of them were unfamiliar with. In the course of exploring the aspect further, the role that individual lecturers and particular faculties played came out strongly as one of the interventions that contributed to the success of the respondents. There was a split in how respondents perceived lecturers as was presented in chapter 5. Respondents indicated how the attitude of some lecturers instilled fear and loss of confidence in them, which had a negative effect on their well-being as students. On the other hand, there was also an acknowledgement of a different category of lecturers and, in the case of this study, a particular faculty in the institution, where its members of staff played a significant role in enabling the respondents to find their footing.

Hagenauer and Volet (2014) argue for the relevance of lecturer approachability as one of the means through which students developed a feeling of connectedness to the institution and, as such, prevented the feeling of alienation (which was alluded to under section 8.2.2). In their study of Australian higher education, Devlin and Helen O'Shea (2012) highlighted the role that approachability and availability of university lecturers played in the adaptation process of students, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The failure of students to connect to an institution and their study area has been considered as one of the leading reasons why they resort to dropping out of university (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2009). On the other hand, cultivating a meaningful rapport between lecturers and students, according to studies, brings about positive results, including commitment on the part of students to their work, motivation to strive for excellence, engagement in the learning process, academic achievement and intellectual development (Halawah, 2006; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010).

The respondents' conceptualisation of approachability of individual lecturers and faculties was through the extent to which lecturers were willing to spare time for students to consult with them. The lecturer's or faculty's welcoming nature of students, regardless of age, gender and socio-economic backgrounds, had a positive impact on the respondents.

As discussed earlier, though, such sentiments were expressed by the majority, with reference to two particular faculties in the institution, while other faculties and lecturers, as observed in Chapter 4 would either look down on the students or distance themselves from them to apoint where students would be unable to seek assistance, even when they needed it.

8.4 Chapter Conclusion

This Chapter set out to discuss the findings that were unveiled from the data that was collected. The discussion attempted to bring together the findings, literature and the theoretical/conceptual framework in a way that created a picture of what it was that transpired from the study. Among the aspects that came out of the discussion are the reality of the constraints that students coming from a low socio-economic backgrounds encounter both through pre-tertiary education and, more so, in higher education. These are challenges that literature has touched on, especially in light of the Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. Some of these challenges have been aggravated by the perceived failure of the institution to carry out the moral obligation of ensuring the smooth transition and adjustment of students into higher education. In spite of such challenges, the study has uncovered the enabling experiences that propelled the respondents to academic success, which fell into three categories: the individual resilience, the family/community intervention and the peer safety net. The theme that came out so clearly in the whole study was the acknowledgement of the crucial role that the family/community players input contributed to their success. As individuals that came from low socio-economic backgrounds, where communalism is more prominent than individualism, the realisation of the full support of family and community of the experience of higher education formed part of their turning point. Through sacrifices made, values imparted and the expectations laid on them, respondents felt indebted, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, honoured to be entrusted and looked up to in fulfilling such a noble assignment. Fully aware of the rough journey, they drew strength from both past successes and words of encouragement to press on. Coupled with the values attached to the attainment of a university degree and the prospects of breaking out of the poverty cycle, against the existing odds, they emerged successful.

CHAPTER 9:SUMMARY, CONCLUDING THOUGHTS & IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY

9.1 Introduction

In this study, I have so far endeavoured to provide comprehensive accounts on the following: background to the study (Chapter 1) where, among other things, the aim of the study, research question guiding the study and justification for venturing into the exercise have been highlighted. Chapter 2 engaged the reader with literature that relates to the area of study, including the conceptual framework through which the study was to be viewed. A step-by-step procedural phase on how methodological research decisions were arrived at to gather data, as well as executing the research, through to the manner in which data was analysed were discussed in Chapter 3. Chapters 4-6 presented findings from data that was collected, which were presented sequentially, based on the three research questions that were set out for the study. These were primarily findings from the individual interviews that were conducted with the fourteen respondents. Chapter 7, on the other hand, presented an account of the findings that were unveiled during the shadowing exercise, that was conducted with two respondents over a period of time. Chapter 8 was a discussion of the findings based on the themes that emerged in the analytical process.

In this chapter, I will be concluding the entire study, beginning with a reflective account of the research journey thus far. The chapter will also provide a summarised address of the key research questions, as reflected during the data collection findings, analysis and conclusion. An account of what I perceive as the contribution that the study has made to the existing body of knowledge will follow, which will include the implications that the study findings have, as they relate to theory, policy and practice. The latter part will also point out limitations of the study, which, in a way, create knowledge gaps upon which further studies could focus.

9.2 Reflective Account of the Journey

This section provides a brief recount of my thoughts regarding this study journey from the point of inception to this point, as I draw it to a close.

9.2.1 Reflecting on Topic of Study

This study was a product of my observation and experience with students in the university space, coupled with literature that attempted to elaborate situations related to access, survival and success of students through higher education. Of particular interest to me was the conditions of students that were coming from socio-economically humble backgrounds. Coming from a least developing country, such as Malawi, where poverty is not only a social

issue, but visible among the majority, getting an education is considered as the surest means of breaking away from poverty. Due to the collective culture that characterises most developing countries, such breakthrough does not only benefit the pursuer of education, but also his immediate, as well as extended, family. As such, witnessing students from such backgrounds being withdrawn, or dropping out was a concern that led me to dig deep in exploring whether there was a means of redressing the situation. In searching through literature, I noticed how the emphasis was on establishing the reality of the academic struggles that students from low socio-economic backgrounds encounter in higher education. There was also literature on how these struggles affect students in terms of decreasing their chances of accessing higher education and increasing the chances of drop out and incompletion of the programmes for those that gain admission into higher education. I found this strong emphasis in the literature on the plight of this category of students, as well as the accompanying explanation behind the negative outcome, as a gap and an opportunity for me to add on to the existing knowledge. While acknowledging the findings of studies and research in the area, my perceived niche was to focus my attention on those from low socio-economic backgrounds, who though in minority, showed outstanding performance academically, thereby beating the odds. The quest was to find out what it was about them that caused them to succeed as they did under their socio-economic circumstances, with the hope of arriving at insights and lessons that would inform ways of turning the tide for other students from this kind of background.

9.2.2 Reflecting on Methodological Issues of study

With these considerations in place, one of the significant decisions that I had to make was on the choice of research methodology to adopt as the best way of extracting the data needed for the study. Considering the novelty of the particular area that I chose and as a way of extracting more from it, I opted for a qualitative approach. This was on the basis of the quest to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of these students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who were academically successful in higher education, was like. The underpinning paradigmatic considerations in a qualitative approach that emphasise the subjectivity of reality and the nature through which knowledge is constructed also made the approach a suitable one to use. Additionally, most of the studies that had been conducted in this area had been quantitative and significant in that they provided knowledge, which was used as a background and supporting evidence to justify proceeding with a study of this nature. The choice of phenomenological design as a strategy of inquiry also lived up to the anticipated expectation of providing a detailed narration of the respondents' experiences, regarding being

a student from low socio-economic backgrounds in an institution of higher learning. As well as gaining in-depth data from respondents, the narrowing of the focus to their background and success brought about rich data that enabled me to decipher and come up with a model that wrapped up the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Malawi's higher education. Being qualitative in nature, the study cannot claim to have generated findings, from which a generalisation can be made. This is due to the size of the sample, which was both small (sixteen respondents) and not representative of the wider community (purposively sampled). Nevertheless, following the detailed processes provided in Chapter 3 on how the research procedure went, there are aspects of the study, which according to Shenton (2004), could serve as examples and lessons that other researchers could be informed about for their studies, resulting in transferability rather than generalisation of the findings.

The use of semi-structured interviews and shadowing served several purposes. First, semi-structured interviews, which was a combination of structured and unstructured questions, enabled triangulation to occur within the procedure. As Maringe (2003, p. 265) stated:

> What is important in the concept of semi-structured interviews is to triangulate data from two sources and to create opportunities for obtaining extended responses about the issue under investigation

This is what semi-structured interviews enabled me to achieve. I engaged respondents in the questions I prepared and were needed for confirmation or clarification. I was able to engage with the unstructured questions and obtain the best results from both the structured and unstructured questions. McIntosh and Morse (2015) commented on how the use of semi-structured interviews combines advantages of two data collection methods into one, where the findings from the structured research would be triangulated with the unstructured part.

Bringing in shadowing as a complementary method of collecting data was a risky decision, that I had to make, due to the scarcity of literature on shadowing, especially beyond collecting data to analysing and presenting of findings. Looking back at the experience, I gained more than I had anticipated in treading on these unfamiliar grounds, especially in the field of education. Most of the literature on shadowing is in relation to medicine and organisational studies. Using principles applied in these fields, I was able to transfer these to my study and yielded rich data, as has been presented in Chapter 7. The findings served to reinforce what had been unveiled during interviews. Being able to witness what the respondents' day-to-day lives were like and

comparing these with what had been alluded to during interviews provided the needed rigour to the findings.

Looking back on the whole process, I feel convinced that the chosen topic gave me an opportunity to uncover some knowledge that not only is unique in itself as a topic, but also comes from a unique context, as well as the manner in which data was collected. This will be further elaborated in latter sections.

9.3 Addressing the Key Research Question

This study set out to answer the following main research question: How might an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of academically successful students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Malawi's higher education contribute to efforts of ensuring that others from similar background thrive and succeed in higher education? The main question was raised against the backdrop that what literature has revealed overall is the struggles that these students are up against in higher education and how they fall victim to early drop-out and incompletion. While these findings cannot be disputed, there is another side of the coin that literature has been slightly mute about. This is the side that brings out those students whom one would consider as outliers, from considered disadvantaged backgrounds, who have gone against the tide and shown signs of academic excellence. This study, therefore, was an attempt to bring out the muted voices of this minority group of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who have succeeded academically against the odds.

9.3.1 Insights from the Study: The Reality of Being a Student from Low Socio-economic backgrounds in Malawi's Higher Education

Findings that emerged from the study brought to light the reality of hardship that formed part of the students' lived experiences. These hardships had their perceived roots, both at a personal level, as well as through systemic operations (micro and macro). Being born and raised in a family that is lacking economically meant having to learn from a young age to live without what would otherwise be considered basic necessities for livelihood. The study revealed how necessities, as basic as three-square meals a day, were a luxury for most of the respondents. They got accustomed to being satisfied with what the day brought their way. For most of them, the acknowledgement of the hard work that parents and guardians went through to provide for them was appreciated.

For these students, attending school was a 'must', because of the value that their families placed on education and the hope they had of their children getting an education that would later help

them to find a way out of the poverty that they were born into. This insight was of interest as it runs contrary to what most literature points out regarding the value that parents from low socio-economic backgrounds attach to education, as was explained in Chapter 6, attributed to their own history of being illiterate or semi-literate. As a result of this positive outlook towards education from home, the findings showed how respondents inherited a sense of value and hope of changing their situation.

The progress of their education, though, was significantly hampered by their lack of resources, as a result of their socio-economic backgrounds. For most of them, attending school on an empty stomach was a regular occurrence. Some reported having to miss school, because of failure to afford a school uniform or make payments demanded by schools, such as development funds.

With the majority of respondents coming from rural areas, they found themselves being selected to Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS), where the overall quality of learning, in comparison to the other categories of secondary schools in Malawi, is ranked as the poorest, as was discussed in Chapter 2. It was in secondary school that most of them experienced the struggle of coming from a poor background, as they had to face up with payment of school fees, having to travel distances every day to school and also buying school uniforms, which was a luxury to most of them. Through assistance from extended families, community members and sometimes external donors, they were able to overcome these challenges.

The hard work, resourcefulness, resilience and determination, on the part of the respondents, saw them excel at the end of secondary school exam, to find themselves among the 0.7% of those from the bottom poorest quintile to make it into university (Mambo et al., 2016).

Actual entry into the higher education institution brought about a daunting reality of what these students had to grapple with in the university space, mainly due to their background. First, was the lack of resources with which they would survive university life. Demands, such as tuition fees, accommodation, and living costs were challenges that seemed insurmountable for them. They witnessed some of their colleagues drop-out, as a result of failing to cope with the resource demands. There was also an acknowledgement of how the stress of resource constraints affected some, to the point of being withdrawn on academic grounds. This, the respondents observed as not being a factor of a lack of intelligence on the part of the withdrawn students, but the pressure of being overwhelmed with academic and personal challenges all at once.

While personal troubles played a role in the challenges facing the students from low socio-economic backgrounds, there was a realisation of the public or larger issue that also contributed to the existing challenges. This was the role that the institution played, or ought to have played, that aggravated their situations. Coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and having been exposed to a sub-standard pre-tertiary education, entailed a lot of catching up on the part of the students. To begin with, the culture of the institution was alien to them, which resulted in them feeling like outsiders or intruders, thereby presenting the institutional environment as the 'blurred space'. That is one where students endure alienation, lack of knowledge about the place and academic pressure and confusion, because they are overwhelmed in such an environment (Ndofirepi, 2015, p. 210). This came as a result of the conflict that exists between what the respondents expected to find as they entered higher education, against the reality on the ground. This was coupled with the attitude with which fellow students and at times staff in the institution had towards them, because of their background. The stereotyping and stigmatisation were an added pressure that had to be dealt with by the respondents.

The general feeling was on how their perception of the institution was that more could have been done by the institution to assist in them assimilating into this new environment and culture. Through lack of information, or scantily provided information, there was a strong feeling that the institution failed to reach out to this category of students, resulting in the dropping out and withdrawal of a significant proportion of them. To a large extent, these hardships account for the threats that students from low socio-economic backgrounds face of losing their places in higher education institutions.

In spite of the challenges and stressors encountered, the findings revealed some experiences, within the lives of the respondents, that acted as enabling agents in countering and coping with the challenges that they were up against, which were considered as explanations for their beating the odds to succeed academically in higher education.

These experiences included personal agency on the part of the respondents. Through their own sense of resilience, determination and resourcefulness, respondents confessed to having had the ability to manoeuvre through some of the hardships they had to face as university students. Other enabling agents were the families and communities where these respondents came from. They pointed to the family/community resilience, sacrifice and support as the main source from which they drew strength, to work through and overcome the unavoidable challenges and to aim for their ultimate goal of earning a degree in their areas of study. The role of peer pressure was another enabler to explain the success of these students. The choice of peers and the terms

of engagement within their communities of operation played a significant role in ensuring that, as a group, they sailed through higher education together; looking out for, and being accountable to each other. Finally, the institutional role, in as far as the disbursement of monthly stipends was concerned, went a long way to allow students that struggled not only to surrender the allowances towards payment of their tuition fee, but also, in dire situations, sending part of it to their families that were suffering. In addition to the stipends, academically, students found the conduct of some lecturers as positively enhancing their efforts to succeed. In particular was the extent to which some lecturers would avail themselves to offer support to students, especially during the initial years when everything seemed new. The approachability of lecturers was, for most respondents, one of means through which they managed to adapt and assimilate into the university environment.

9.4 Insights Generated from the Study

The study findings regarding the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are academically thriving in Malawi's higher education, uncovered two juxtaposing sides. The first speaks to the constraining experiences that these students encounter from the onset. These are the ones that, to a large extent, defined them and stood in their way of succeeding. The second side involves the intervening experiences that acted as enablers for the students achieving their goal of succeeding academically. The study showed how the interaction between the two sides played a determining part in the extent to which a student would reach their intended goal. While the first side of constraining experience appeared to be common across the students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, the enabling experiences varied from individual to individual and the manner in which the individual chose to seize the opportunities. Availing themselves through the enablers was key to the extent of their success.

9.4.1 The Uneven Playing Field

This study has, among other things, confirmed the reality of the struggles that people from low socio-economic backgrounds face, related to acquisition of an education. The insufficiency and lack of resources, also referred to as capitals, which act as enablers in one's endeavour in getting an education, puts these people at a disadvantage, giving their counterparts from high socio-economic backgrounds an edge over them. As perceived in literature and theories, this serves in widening the gap between those that have wealth and those that do not, thereby perpetuating the socio-economic inequalities.

While the economic aspect of resources could be looked at as being central, there are also the social and cultural aspects that add to the complexity of the situation. Coming from a low socio-economic background entails a particular culture and social networking, which is in sharp contrast to the one cultivated and advanced in educational institutions. As such, students that find themselves in the higher education space must, in addition to struggling with economic demands, work extra harder to adapt to the new environment that offers a culture that is unfamiliar to them. All the while, their counterparts are at home with the way the systems operate. As such, while things are seen to be seemingly progressing as usual in the students' lives in the higher education space, those from low socio-economic backgrounds are not only playing a catch-up game, but endeavouring to be above their challenges to keep up with the academic demands. The end result is what literature would then conclude to be the plight of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, that is evident through the high drop-out, failure, as well as incompletion rates. Based on this study, I would conclude this as being a result of an uneven play field that exposes one group to multiple hurdles to overcome and negotiate, while the other sails through with reasonable ease.

9.4.2 The Flipside of the Coin: Rescuer

The distinguishing factor between students from low socio-economic backgrounds that literature has focused on, because of their poor experiences in higher education and those (from this study), who come from similar background conditions, but have beaten the odds, is what I have termed the presence of rescuers. When presenting the state of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, literature has focused on the lack or deficit with regards to the necessary requirements that one ought to possess to make it in higher education. These have been looked at from a context where the big question is what the student has, as an individual. This study has uncovered the salient roles that both internal and external actors played in the lives of the students that contributed to their success. It has highlighted the role of agency that the students had to show in order to succeed. Of particular interest was their knowledge and acknowledgement of the challenges that laid ahead of them. According to resilience theory, this is a step towards confronting hardships and adversities. Having acknowledged such, a second characteristic was being able to place value on the goal that they had their eyes on. As a result of the high value attached to the dream, they were able to go to great lengths to ensure that they achieve this goal. Such determination and resourcefulness was against the understanding that, having come this far through struggles from childhood and through an education that was sub-standard, they had what it took to face the obstacle of higher education

and not only conquer it, but do so outstandingly. For most respondents, the argument was that, in comparison to their counterparts who had everything, they were better off considering the unlevelled playing field and how they were ably competing with the others. This realisation and confidence worked towards boosting their morale in working even harder towards success. Together with the personal agency portrayed, the study revealed more reinforcements that came through family and community. The value that respondents attached to family and community cannot be overstated and this is one of the pillars that this study highlights: the significant part that family and community play in collective or communal cultures, such as the Malawian culture. The nature of closely-knit communities becomes a mitigating factor for the absence of certain kinds of requisites that qualify one to fit into a particular set-up. As with the case of higher education, from looking at the inadequacies that students experienced, in the absence of the intervention of their families and communities in sacrificing what they had, most respondents admitted that they would have joined the statistics of dropouts and withdrawers. The cultural wealth, with which families and communities were able to grace their children, coupled with the determination and resourcefulness of the individual students went a step further into covering for the inadequacies that they were deemed to have had, which would warrant them to drop out and fail to achieve their goal of graduating from higher education.

In the absence of the social and cultural capital pointed out in literature, that positively correlates with academic achievement, the study findings showed how students from low socio-economic backgrounds used their resourcefulness in pooling together the meagre resources they had, both material and intellectual, to counter the deficit in the capitals. As with the collective nature that characterises the Malawian setup, peer teaming up served to provide the needed support that most of the respondents could not have managed without the safety net of friends. As was discussed in Chapter 8, the two features that were common to the discussion on the nature of peer grouping were like-mindedness and commonalities in the background. These features contributed to accountability that they had to each other, in relation to the common goal, as well as empathy during times of hardship - as each would relate to the other's experiences.

9.5 Unanticipated Findings

The study set out to explore the lived experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are thriving academically in Malawi's higher education. Through the exploration, several findings emerged. Among these findings, the one that stood out as 'unanticipated' or previously underestimated was the value that respondents attached to the

role that family and community played in their success. While there was a mention of the other rescue agents, respondents pointed out how, to a large extent, they owed their success to their own effort and hard work alongside family and community support. This underscored the worth that communal living plays among those from low socio-economic backgrounds. Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012) allude to the same when they discuss how there is a spirit of solidarity and interdependence characterising those from low socio-economic backgrounds, especially the first-generation students, compared to their counterparts from middle class that tend to be independent and individualistic.

The gravity of this strong influence of family and community on the experiences of the respondents was seen in how they put family and community needs before their own. The majority of respondents explained how their driving force in working hard was either to be able to give back to their families and communities, or to make them proud and give them hope. When asked where they placed themselves in the equation, the common response was that, when they had achieved their goal in fulfilling their obligations to their family and communities, they could begin to look at what it was that they wanted for themselves. For some, the sense of fulfilment that came from meeting this obligation to their families and communities was enough satisfaction in itself for their having achieved in life. For them, being part of a community meant being able to endure suffering and good times as a group.

9.6 A Review of the Lived Experiences of Students from Low Socio-economic backgrounds in Malawi's Higher Education

In Chapter 2, following the literature reviewed in the area and a search of theories to explain and through which to view my study, I came up with a conceptual framework. This enabled me, to a large extent, to keep my study within a particular scope. On reflecting on the framework and from conducting the actual exercise, the following model has come out that brings the lived experiences of these students in a model form, as depicted in **figure 9.**

Fig 9.1: 'Success Against Odds' model

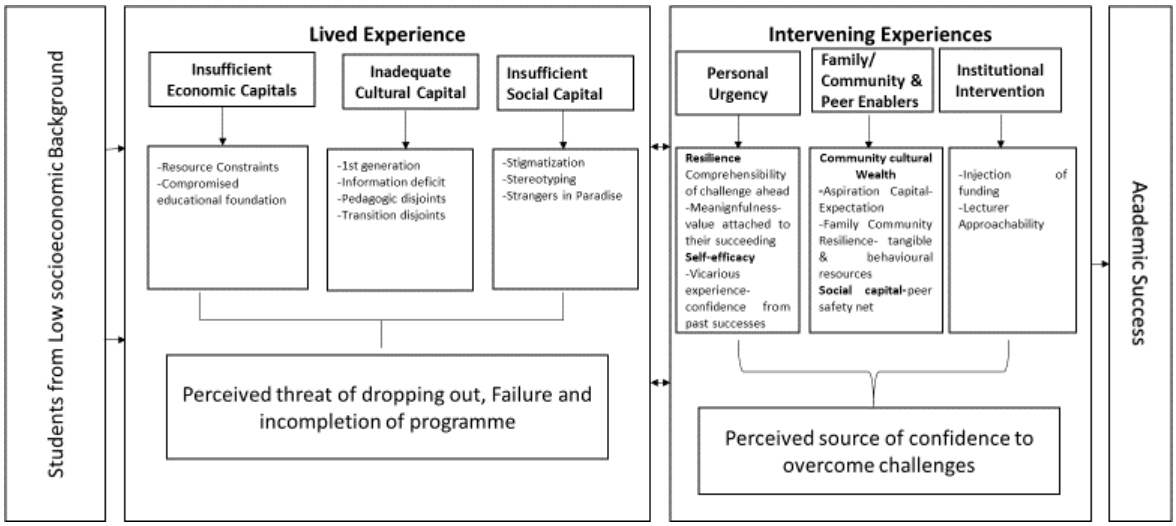


Fig 9.1: 'Success Against Odds' model

Upon executing this study both from the theoretical (literature review and conceptual framework) and the practical (fieldwork) perspectives, the conclusion of the study revealed the certainty of the challenges that students from low socio-economic backgrounds encounter, which range from material and social to cultural. It is these challenges that expose them to the risks of falling out of the system prematurely. While the situation is what it is, the study has also highlighted interventions that have come across as rescuers from the perceived risks. Each of these interventions have played a role to counter the challenges and these have included personal agency; family and community enablers; peer safety nets; and institutional involvement, in some cases.

9.7 Research Contribution

From this study, several components could be considered as the study's contributions to methodology, knowledge and theory.

9.1.1 Contribution to Methodology

Methodologically, this study has contributed, through the use of shadowing, as a method of collecting data that complemented the semi-structured interviews which preceded the exercise. Most of the studies that have been conducted in this area, prior to this study, have not only been quantitatively executed, but, for those that have been done qualitatively, interviews, both individual as well as focus groups, have been the main means of gathering data. Initially, I

decided to go the same route of using focus group interviews and individual interviews. While researching on data collection methods, I came across shadowing as a method. Upon further exploration into what this could yield in comparison to interviews, I made that alteration of swapping focus group interviews for shadowing.

While shadowing as a method is not so common in the education field, this study has proved the richness of data that comes out of using this method, which provides the depth of knowledge and appreciation of a phenomenon that qualitative research seeks to bring out. In my experience with shadowing, I felt that, while interviews uncovered respondents' thoughts and perceptions regarding their experiences coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and in higher education, the shadowing experience concretised what had been collected through the verbal engagement with the respondents. Being able to witness and observe what their experiences were like on a day-to-day basis, added rigour to the findings in the sense that the observed experiences, that were followed up by a discussion, confirmed what the other respondents had alluded to as being their genuine lived experiences.

The actual shadowing experience requires extra energy on the part of the researcher, because of what Ferguson (2016) and Meunier and Vásquez (2008) described as its nomadic nature that demands the researcher following the shadowee wherever they go, based on the agreed upon terms. Although, to some this would be considered a burden, the method on its own opens up avenues that other methods would not, as it allows the researcher into the actual world of the shadowee. As a methodological practice, I strongly feel that as one of the effective ways of exploring a phenomenon and how it plays in the lives of respondents: entering their world and walking in their shoes would uncover more and reinforce what comes out from their voices.

Contribution to Knowledge and Theory

The study adopted an eclectic approach, where concepts from various theories, together, formed a conceptual framework, through which the study could be perceived. It served to highlight the importance of considering context when deciding on theories with which to work. While theories are meant to apply widely, it should be acknowledged that the conceptualisation of theories does not occur in a vacuum. They are formulated within a given context and, by virtue of this fact, the extent of fit or applicability will vary. In the case of the current study, the use of Bourdieu's social reproduction theory set a platform to expose the deficits that students from low socio-economic backgrounds experience. While this purpose was served, the theory, by virtue of the context that it emanated from (developed/western), could not fully

explain the success of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who were expected to experience challenges as a lack of the capitals deemed requisite for higher education.

The points of departure in this study were two-fold; the economic and the cultural context in the developing countries that is in contrast with the developed countries.

Firstly, the variations between developed and developing countries, as far as resources availability and allocation are concerned, is a factor that this study brought to light. Being one of the poorest countries in the world, the extent of need among the respondents in the study was not one that could be compared to those considered as coming from low socio-economic backgrounds in the developed countries. The levels of need and lack in this study exposed the gravity of the challenges that the students faced, as was highlighted in Chapter 7 in particular, and how overcoming these warranted an exploration to unveiling how success stories came out of these grim conditions.

Secondly, this study, as opposed to the western studies, revealed the strong influence that communality plays in developing countries, which is not the case in developed countries that are predominantly individualistic in nature, where the culture of 'your problems are all your fault, and similarly, your privileges are all your own achievement' Brennan and Naidoo (2008, p. 291), which dominates most western countries. This being the case, the study highlighted how the intervention of the 'others' played in mitigating the perceived 'individual' challenges in developing countries, where communalism and collective living still exists. While literature showed some parallels with regards to the challenges facing students from low socio-economic backgrounds in both the developed and developing countries, such interventions, as observed in the context of Malawi where communalism is predominant, were not reported in studies that were conducted in the developed countries. It is the context of the culture of collectiveness in the Malawi set-up that brings out the weighty impact that family and community play in assuaging the impending consequences, that the low socio-economic background effects have, or would have, in threatening the students' survival in higher education.

Earlier studies on students from low socio-economic backgrounds and higher education tended to focus on, and draw conclusions from, the fact that these students lack necessary capitals to push them through higher education. Interventions that were suggested or identified had a lot to do with institutional and governmental input. While these also hold true for the current study, the role of community and family played a more prominent role. To a large extent, the value of family and community over government, in the study, was due to the realisation of the limitation and the restricted attention, which the government has shown in addressing issues in

higher education, when there are pending unresolved issues in both primary and secondary education that ought to be prioritised. As such, while the theory does provide useful insights, I second what Brennan and Naidoo (2008, pp. 289-290) stated regarding reproduction theories that, 'reproduction theories when suitably modified may still hold important insights and may be applicable to much that currently happens within higher education, which is what I endeavoured to do in this study.

To some extent, this could be explained within the discourse of 'progressive realisation of the right to education' that speaks to socio-economic related rights and how the realisation of such rights occurs over time and is subject to the availability of resources by a state (Chenwi,2013, p. 749). The study, therefore, revealed the extent to which government has carried out its obligations, as a primary duty bearer in ensuring realisation of the right to higher education. With some of obligations being seen to have been carried out, there still remain gaps that have been identified within the context of fulfilling the state obligation, owing not only to resource constraints, but also maladministration of such provisions. As referred to in Chapter 5, a lack of information and the manner in which bursaries are disbursed, resulted in benefiting of those that already had the capacity to pay. It is in this context that families and communities were seen as having played an integral part in providing a supporting role in ensuring the success of these students, as they encountered the challenges of being in higher education. The realisation of such variations, between developed and developing countries, in governments' abilities to meet their obligation on the right to education, serves to underscore the significance of understanding the context which studies and literature present for purposes of making either a generalisation or transferability of findings.

It was as a result of this approach that the 'Exodus' model in Chapter 8 was put together to illustrate a summation of the lived experiences of undergraduate students from low socio-economic backgrounds, that have shown academic brilliance, in Malawi's higher education system. This was followed by the refined conceptual framework in fig 9, for understanding the phenomenon that was being focused on in the study. Both the model and framework could serve as tool for other researchers who would seek to carry out comparative studies in the context of developing countries.

In looking at the outcome of this study, it revealed how no one theory (social reproduction, self-efficacy, Community cultural wealth or resilience) in isolation would explain the phenomenon of how these students from low socio-economic backgrounds were able to beat

the odds by succeeding academically. It took a blending of several theories to create a lens through which the study could be viewed.

9.8 Implications of the Study

The study has brought to surface insights that have implications, as far as practice and policy are concerned.

9.8.1 Policy Implications of the Study

The study has established a series of findings that form some sort of a vicious cycle, which, if looked at critically, would have implications for policy formulation, revision and implementation. The first of these is the reality of challenges that students from low socio-economic backgrounds face in higher education institutions. They have their roots in the resource constraints that they experience, by virtue of the contexts from which they come. The second is how the majority of these students are rural based and, as such, find themselves being selected to Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS), 70% of which are located in rural areas. Third, is that these CDSSs offer the poorest quality of education, due to the inadequacy with regards to teaching and learning resources and, to some extent, teacher morale that is low. From these findings, a deduction can be made about how the challenges that students, from low socio-economic backgrounds face, are a result of a chain of events that begin with them having insufficient resources, thereby finding themselves in a rural setup, where poverty prevails. This then sees them end up being exposed to an education that is sub-standard in quality and failing to prepare them adequately for higher education transitioning. Later on, these explain some of the challenges that students from these backgrounds experience in higher education. In view of this series of events, there is, therefore, a need for policy makers to revisit the policies regarding provision of quality education, as depicted in the NESP (Education policy document), especially as it relates to secondary schools – and CDSSs in particular. There is an acknowledgement of the challenges of material and human resource inadequacy in CDSSs that is indicated in the NESP (Ministry of Education & Technology, 2008). The findings from this study should, therefore, call for a revisiting of policies aimed at redressing these challenges, in view of the impact that they have on students coming out of these institutions, who find themselves in higher education. Such improvements in the standard and quality of secondary education in CDSSs would go a long way to redress a portion of the challenges experienced by these students, from low socio-economic backgrounds and, thereby, address the issue of equity that appears as a policy goal for Malawi's higher education (Ministry of Education & Technology, 2008).

9.8.2 Implications for Practice

The findings from the study have further implications for practice, as it relates to institutions of higher education and possible interventions, that could be explored in the quest to ensure the survival and success of students from low socio-economic backgrounds who make it into higher education.

Firstly, tertiary institutions should appreciate that students who enter higher education do so with different levels of exposure. This has a bearing on how well they adjust and adapt to the higher education space. While others have the benefit of being exposed to such spaces based on their privileged backgrounds, there are those from low socio-economic backgrounds who have spent their entire lives in the rural areas and are first-generation students to enter higher education. These are the students for whom institutions ought to make efforts to ensure that they find their footing in the institutions, as failure to do so, especially in the first year, has a detrimental effect on their survival as students in the institution. Measures, such as the type of information that students receive during orientation programmes, could go a long way in providing some form of initiation into what it is to be a student in higher education, what the expectations are, what likely challenges are to be encountered, the proper channels to go through in such situations and opportunities that are at the students' disposal - such asfunding and other logistics. These are all issues that emerged as lacking, in the respondents' narrations, which made them feel as though they were the only ones going through such challenges.

Secondly, considering the value that peer influence had on the respondents in this study, role-modelling would be another consideration to bear in mind in the effort to ensure that the number of students dropping out, and not completing their programmes of study, is reduced. By asking outstanding students from low socio-economic backgrounds, that have excelled in higher education in the orientation programme, to share their lived experiences, as was done in this study, would act as a motivation and an inspiration to those just joining the institution. It is this extra reassurance that would change the lives and attitudes of some of the new entrants into higher education, as most of them enter with fear, desperation and hopelessness from what they hear outsiders say about tertiary studies and the difficulties associated with surviving it.

9.9 Limitations of the Study and Areas for Further Research

In reflecting on the whole study from beginning to end, there has been a lot that has come out of it that reveals both opportunities and areas where the study still experienced some limitations.

9.9.1 Limitation of the Study

This study was focused on Malawi and limited itself to one institution of higher education. Although an attempt was made to spread the net wider by involving respondents from various faculties, the study cannot claim to have come up with findings that could be generalisable. By its very nature of being qualitative in its approach, the study does not provide some form of population representation. This notwithstanding, the findings do provide some lessons that could be taken on board, if the welfare of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, that find themselves in institutions of higher education, would take a turn for the better.

9.10 Areas for Further Research

As stated earlier, this study was confined to a single institution. As a way forward, therefore, the use of the outcomes from this study could form a foundation on which a large-scale study would be conducted to provide the kind of outcomes that could be generalised. This would not only serve as just contribution to the field of knowledge, but also a study that would provide practical measures that could promise a change or reversal, in what has been considered the 'fate of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education.'

One of the outcomes of the study is the model that was developed that provides a conceptualisation of the lived experience of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, that succeed academically in higher education. The use of this model as a lens to execute a study of this nature would provide an opportunity, where the rigour and transferability of it would be tested. Outcomes from such an exercise would result in the refinement of the study to a point where it could be used as an instrument of gaining a deeper understanding of this area.

9.11 Summary and Concluding Remarks

This chapter presented a brief recount of what constitutes the preceding chapters. This was followed by my personal reflection on the entire journey in executing this study. I reflected on the choice of the topic and the driving motivation behind it. I also reflected on the methodological route that I took to come to this point: arriving at what I perceive to be a small contribution made to the body of knowledge in academia. By going back to the main question that I began with, I have shown how the study has achieved its purpose in addressing the question. This has led to exposing the insights that emerged from the study, as well as some findings that would be considered as unexpected. Out of all of this, has emerged the model that reflects the nature of the lived experiences of undergraduate students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are academically successful in Malawi's higher education. This model, as

well as some insights, have been presented as my contributions to field of knowledge. A brief narration has also been presented on how, methodologically, the use of shadowing was a valuable method of data collection. There has also been an exposé of how the study, as a whole, would have implications, both at policy level and in practice, that would yield results. Finally, the limitations of the study have been presented, as well as opportunities that could lead to further research in this area.

In conclusion, I am convinced that this research has met the goal and expectations that were set in Chapter 1, with all the research questions having been adequately answered. The conclusion drawn from this study would be beneficial in providing direction for policy planners, as they work around addressing issues of retention and completion in higher education - in particular for students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds.

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APPENDIX 1: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



Wits School of Education

27 St Andrews Road, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2193 Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa.
Tel: +27 11717-3064 Fax: +27 11 717-3100 E-mail: enquiries@educ.wits.ac.za Website: www.wits.ac.za

12 September 2017

Student Number:
737308

Protocol Number:
2017ECE027D

Dear Tiffany
Vincentia Banda

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:

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Highly Successful Low Socio-economic Background Students from Community Day Secondary School in Malawi's Higher Education

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,

Wits School of Education 011

MMaseko

717-3416

APPENDIX 2: LETTER TO HEAD OF INSTITUTION

INFORMATION SHEET: PRINCIPAL CHANCELLOR COLLEGE

The Principal

Chancellor College

P.O Box 280

Zomba

MALAWI

11/08/2017

Dear Sir,

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT CHANCELLOR COLLEGE CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAWI.

My name is Tiffany Vincentia Banda and I am a PhD student at the University of Witwatersrand. I am conducting a research on the lived experience of highly successful, low socioeconomic background students from Community day secondary schools in higher education in Malawi.

I write to request permission to conduct this research at Chancellor College campus. My study targets final year students from the 5 faculties on the campus. My research is titled: "Exploring the Lived Experiences of Highly Successful, Low Socioeconomic Students from Community Day Secondary School in Malawi's Higher Education"

The aim of the study is to explore the lived experiences of successful students from low economic background in higher education and draw insights that could contribute to efforts of ensuring that other students from low socioeconomic background who access higher education survive and succeed. This is a qualitative phenomenological study and data will be collected through individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and shadowing. The interviews and discussions would take approximately 30-45 minutes. The shadowing would involve observing three participants over a period of 1 week each. The target group would be final year students.

It is envisaged that my research activities will not interfere with the students' lectures and other academic activities. All the ethics issues will be taken into consideration. It is hoped that the study will add knowledge to existing literature about understanding how students from low socioeconomic background and low-quality pre-tertiary education navigate their way through higher education successfully.

In the initial stages, letters of request and consent forms will be sent to respective participants inviting them to engage in the research process. The consent documentation will contain brief information about the research project and the research expectations. Effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of the data and to protect the privacy and anonymity of all participants. Names of participants will be

substituted with pseudonyms. All participants will be accorded the right to withdraw from the research project at any time if they feel so inclined.

All research data will be destroyed between 3-5 years after completion of the project.

Participants will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. Their participation is voluntary. If they choose to participate, they can withdraw at any time during this project without any penalty. There are no foreseeable risks in participating and participants will not be paid for participating in this study.

Please let me know if you require any further information. If you think you might need more details about this research project and therefore would like to know more details about it, you may contact my supervisors, Professor Felix Maringe on Felix.Maringe@wits.ac.za , Dr Emmanuel Ojo on Emmanuel.Ojo@wits.ac.za and Dr Elizabeth Ndofirepi on Elizabeth.Ndofirepi@wits.ac.za . Alternatively, you may contact me, Tiffany Banda on tiffany.banda1@students.wits.ac.za on

+27 61 251 3938. I will be more than willing to explain and provide any clarification where required as far as the purposes and procedures of this study are concerned.

Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,



NAME: Tiffany V. Banda

EMAIL: tiffany.banda1@students.wits.ac.za

TELEPHONE NUMBERS: +27 61 251 3938

APPENDIX 3: STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

LETTER TO STUDENT **DATE: 11/08/2017**

Dear Student

My name is Tiffany Banda. I am a full-time PhD student at the University of Witwatersrand. You are being invited to participate in a research study that will be exploring the lived experiences of highly successful, low socioeconomic background students from community day secondary schools in higher education in Malawi. You are among those that would be well suited to take part in this study based on the criteria within the study topic.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to is to explore the lived experiences of successful students from low economic background in higher education and draw insights that could contribute to efforts of ensuring that other students from low socioeconomic background who access higher education can navigate their way through higher education and succeed.

PROCEDURES

The study will employ three data generating methods namely: Interviews, Focus group discussions and shadowing. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you would be asked to participate in a face to face in-depth interview and a focus group discussion. Three participants who are willing would also take part in a shadowing exercise where the researcher will observe them for a week in order to observe how they go about their lives as students on campus. The whole exercise will take place between the months of January to April, 2018. The face to face individual interviews will precede the focus group discussions. The interviews will last for approximately 30 to 45 minutes and will be conducted at a time and place that suits you. The interviews will focus on your lived experiences as a highly successful student coming from a low socioeconomic background and from a community day secondary school. The interviews and discussions will be audio-taped and the tape recording will be transcribed for the purposes of analysing what will be said. All research data will be destroyed between 3-5 years after completion of the project.

By choosing to participate in this study or not, you will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. This letter serves to inform you that your participation is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in this research at any time if you so wish and there will be no negative consequences. In participating in this research there are no foreseeable risks.

Your anonymity in relation to my PhD study and in any publications arising from this study will be protected. Only my supervisors and I will have access to the raw data that I will collect.

For more details, you may contact my supervisors: Professor Felix Maringe on Felix.Maringe@wits.ac.za ; Dr Emmanuel Ojo on Emmanuel.Ojo@wits.ac.za and Dr Elizabeth Ndofirepi on Elizabeth.Ndofirepi@wits.ac.za . Alternatively, you could contact me, Tiffany Banda on tiffany.banda1@students.wits.ac.za on +27 61 251 3938. I will be more than willing to explain and provide any clarification where required as far as the purposes and procedures of this research are concerned.

I therefore kindly invite you to participate in this research. If you agree to participate in this research you may sign on the space provided below.

Your choice to participate in this research will be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,



NAME: Tiffany V. Banda

EMAIL: tiffany.banda1@students.wits.ac.za

TELEPHONE NUMBERS: +27 61 251 3938

APPENDIX 4: STUDENT CONSENT FORM

Please fill in the reply slip below if you agree to participate in my study called: "**Exploring the Lived Experiences of Highly Successful Low Socioeconomic Background Students from Community Day Secondary School in Malawi's Higher Education"**

My name is: _____

Permission to be audiotaped

I agree to be audiotaped during the interview YES/NO

I know that the audiotapes will be used for this project only YES/NO

Permission to be interviewed

I would like to be interviewed for this study. YES/NO

I know that I can stop the interview at any time and don't have to answer all the questions asked. YES/NO

Permission to be shadowed

I would like to be shadowed for the study YES/NO

I know that I can stop the exercise anytime or choose not to be shadowed Whenever I feel uncomfortable YES/NO

Informed Consent

I understand that:

- my name and information will be kept confidential and safe.
- the name of my school will be revealed.
- I do not have to answer every question and can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I can ask not to be audiotaped
- all the data collected during this study will be destroyed within 3-5 years after completion of my project.

Confidentiality

I understand that

- by agreeing to taking part in the interviews, focus group discussions and shadowing exercise, confidentiality of any information I provide would be observed.
- in keeping with the observance of confidentiality, all information provided by fellow participants in the focus group discussion would be kept confidential and that all discussions would remain within the group.

Sign_____Date_____

[i] US$1 equivalent to MKW740.00
[ii] #M006
[iii] #F009
[iv] #M001
[v] #F013
[vi] #M002 and #F012
[vii] #M007
[viii] Discussed in chapter 2