

**Promoting Student Success by Tapping into the Resilience of the  
At- Risk Student: A South African higher education Perspective**

By

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## Abstract

Throughput rates and student retention are a burning concern that all higher education institutions share, as student dropout rates remain high. Promoting student academic success has become imperative. This study is concerned with students who display innate resilience and overcome adversities in their personal lives, but fail to demonstrate resilience when it comes to being academically successful.

The objective of this study was to explore: (1) the personal resilience in at-risk students who overcome adversities in their personal lives, but fail to demonstrate resilience when it comes to being academically successful and (2) how their personal resilience can be tapped into to promote academic success.

A mixed methods approach was used, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. At-risk students at a particular higher education institution were identified using their study records. From these students a subgroup of resilient students were selected by means of a resilience questionnaire. This group completed a pre-interview questionnaire, resulting in 10 students being selected on the grounds of being information rich cases of the at-risk resilient student. Through the process of social constructivism and dialogue between the researcher and the participants, themes were identified and analysed using an inductive data analysis style. The data was finally linked to supportive literature.

The primary finding was that the same protective factors that can assist a student in developing innate resilience, can also cause the student to be placed academically at-risk. The study further revealed, that if the environment in which students find themselves does not allow them to negotiate for resources, these students' innate resilience alone cannot assist them to overcome the challenges of higher education.

The researcher concludes that higher education institutions in their attempts to retain and assist students should be encouraged to tap into students' innate resilience to develop their academic resilience.

**Key Words:** higher education; students; resilience; at-risk; academic resilience; academic success; motivation; academic self-perception; role models; support; teaching and learning.

**Abbreviations:**

OBE - Outcome Based Education

NCHE - National Commission of higher education

NQF - National Qualifications Framework

SES - Socio-Economic Status

ARI – Academic Resilient Instrument

Student number: 33145946

“I declare that **Promoting Student Success by Tapping into the Resilience of the At-Risk Student: A South African higher education Perspective**, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references”.

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## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, who taught me the value of hard work and perseverance. Your unwavering love and support sustained me.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1. Background to the Study

Much have been written about the importance of having an education. To have an education is an opportunity to secure a future. For many, having a higher educational qualification secures a future, not just for the individual but also for an entire next generation. However, the throughput and retention rates of students in higher education are alarmingly low and this is concerning. According to Mabelebele (2012), a number of studies show that 25% of first year students drop out or fail after their first year. A mere 21% graduate within the minimum time. South Africa is one of the countries with the lowest graduation rate (15%) in the world (Beck, 2011).

Since 1994, the landscape of higher education in South Africa has changed. Student numbers have doubled from 1993 to 2002 and are still expected to increase annually (Council of higher education, 2004). According to the minister of higher education in South Africa, Minister Blade Nzimande, it can be anticipated that more than 1.5 million students will enrol in higher education institutions each year, whereas the South African government would like to see four million students enrolled by 2030 (Hoffman, 1994).

In South Africa, access to higher education remains a challenge each year. How to retain students continues to be an important research focus of higher education. The complexities that higher education institutions face, include students' under preparedness, their first generation status, their family's social economic status and their language barriers. Degree programs are increasingly becoming the students' first choice of study as they associate this with better employment opportunities and a way to escape from socio-economic challenging circumstances.

Over decades, people on the African continent have encountered many challenges and overcame many adversities in their personal environment. Examples include

political conflict and instability, hunger, poverty, violence, low appreciation of human life, poor health, disease pandemics, war and genocide. In South Africa, inequalities in educational opportunities (due to apartheid) became a challenge in itself. In the light of this, many young people have had to show resilience to beat the odds (Abbink, 2009).

Many first year students are therefore already at-risk when they embark higher education. In addition to their family's socio-economic status (SES), they also have to face factors such as their parents' educational level, their living conditions and transportation issues. Students have overcome these realities in addition to being underprepared for higher education.

Those already at-risk students, therefore struggle to cope with the demands of higher education and this leads to high failure rates or students dropping out. Some of these students demonstrate resilience and succeed by beating the odds, while others change programmes and/or institutions repeatedly and eventually become part of the dropout and failure statistics. At-risk factors should be considered as pre-indicators as to whether students will fail or make a success when they enter higher education.

Various studies investigate the factors that lead to students being academically at-risk. These studies aim to show how students beat the odds by being resilient and becoming successful in their personal lives and in their academic studies. In line with Tinto's model of institutional departure, students need to be formally and informally integrated into the institution to make a success of their studies and to complete their qualification. This model further postulates that when students feel overwhelmed or feel that their needs are not being met, there is a higher possibility of them dropping out (Tinto, 1987). Extensive research has been done on at-risk resilient students who beat the odds and made a success of their education.

"Dr Vuyane Mhlomi, a medical intern is an example of such a student. He comes from a community well known for its gangsters. His support system was his sick father and his entrepreneurial mother who also took care of his two siblings. Having to eat dry bread at times, not always sure if the household will have electricity or how he will get to school, were some of the reasons he decided to become a doctor. When he told his mother about his dream she replied that it was dreams of other people due to a lack of finances and resources. Vuyane did not get the results in the materials he had hoped

for as his mother had a stroke, which added to the risk and stress factors in Vuyane's life. But he managed to get accepted into medical school with a bursary as a 'redressing inequalities' student. In his words "Day one at university I felt inferior being the guy who just made it... I then realised this was a privilege that I would not let go..." (Mazarakis, 2012).

Countless at-risk students show the same resilience in their personal sphere, but fail to demonstrate this in academia. But a question that has not been properly addressed in research is why some at-risk students demonstrate personal resilience but fail to demonstrate academic resilience? The research problem outlined below, emerged against this background.

## **2. Rationale and Research Aim**

The motivation for this study stems from concern about the alarmingly high failure rate of students in the higher education sector. There is a growing need for intervention strategies. Many of the large numbers of students who enrol in the beginning of each year in higher education institutions will either fail, drop out, change or repeat their courses.

The negative impact of failing on students' self-esteem and self-perception can be detrimental. Their perception that they cannot be successful is devastating to them and can lead to other downward spiral patterns in their lives, for example: behavioural problems, delinquency and substance abuse. These problems surface when these students try to cope with the challenges and failures they have to overcome in their lives. The financial impact on their lives can be overpowering, especially if they had taken student loans or borrowed money elsewhere.

A clearer understanding is needed as to how at-risk students, who overcame many adversities in their personal lives and fail to achieve academic success, can benefit from and contribute to higher education environments. This can help develop supportive strategies and interventions to aid at-risk students in a South African specific context.

These strategies can include meaningful, supportive systems, such as mentorship programs to help students connect with their already existing resilience, while

assisting them to achieve academic success. These strategies can also guide educators in helping at-risk students to develop resilience. Furthermore, to promote academic resilience in students:

- (a) Improved teaching and learning strategies to contribute to the learning environment should be implemented, and
- (b) Alternative interventional methods for educators, educational psychologists, counselling psychologists, student advisors, student counsellors and other role players should be used.

### **Research Questions:**

- Why do some resilient at-risk students lack academic resilience?
- Can the resilience that at-risk students have in their personal environments, be tapped into to promote academic success?

The aim of the study was to explore why at-risk students who are resilient in overcoming most adversities in their personal lives, fail to show resilience when it comes to their academic success. The rationale for this study was to gain insight into factors that influence and play a role in the academic outcomes of resilient at-risk students. This was done by analysing and describing themes according to the academic experiences and challenges that South African at-risk students in higher education have to deal with.

For students to cope with higher education, they need a degree of resilience to overcome the many challenges that they experience. If they can tap into their already existing resilience and apply it to the circumstances and challenges they face in their academic contexts, they may achieve academic success.

## **3. Design of the Study**

### **3.1 Qualitative Research**

A mixed methods approach was used, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. A quantitative approach was used to identify participants who qualify as resilient at-risk students. These participants were interviewed and the interviews were analysed using a qualitative approach.

In an attempt to explore this phenomena, a qualitative methodology formed the basis for this study. A qualitative research approach allowed for an interrogation into the experiences of students in higher education and the significance that they have attached to their experiences, as comfortable as the manner in which they constructed their lives in relation to their environment (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

### **3.2 Research Approach**

This researcher adopted a social constructivism approach. According to social constructivism, meaning and knowledge are socially constructed. Social constructivism focuses on learning that takes place while individuals interact within a group. Social constructivists analyse existing relationships and distinguish between the levels of observation and action, by focusing on the reflexivity and how knowledge affects the construction of reality that the individual constructs of his or her own life (Guzzini, 2002).

An idea connected to social constructivism, is that no concrete facts can be objectively observed (Hoffman, 1994). Knowledge is inter-subjectively constructed as concepts that are formed as part of the language. Guzzini (2002) states that “Language can neither be reduced to something subjective nor objective. It is not subjective, since it exists independently of us to the extent that language is always more than its individual usages and prior to them (language exists and changes through our use). It is inter-subjective”.

### **3.3 Research Design**

An exploratory, multiple case study design was used to study the subjective world of at-risk resilient students in higher education. The research approach enabled the researcher to receive a clear appreciation of the experiences of at-risk students in higher education who display resilience in their personal sphere, but not when it gets to their academia.

Case studies provided the researcher with an in-depth account of experiences, processes, relationships and events. “The actual value of a case study is that it provides the chance to explain why certain events happen – more than merely find out what those outcomes are” (Denscombe, 2007).

## **4. Research Techniques**

### **4.1 Research Participants**

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. This method involves the deliberate selection of participants, based on the qualities they possess. It is a useful approach for in-depth studies and information rich cases. A motivation for this strategy is that central themes can be derived (Patton, 1990). The aim was to select information rich cases of at-risk students who demonstrate resilience in their personal environment but fail academically.

The researcher had access to 980 potential participants who attended full time classes at a higher education institution where she was employed. The student database provided a list of first and second year students.

### **4.2 Participant Selection**

#### **Phase One:**

During the first phase of the research, first and second year students who failed their first year were identified by retrieving their academic records available from the institution's student database. Selection took place according to a purposive sampling method. The selected students were approached to complete a resilience questionnaire. Ethical research principles were adhered to. Participants were informed about their rights and were required to sign a consent form.

#### **Phase Two:**

Students who scored 70% or higher on the resilience questionnaire were selected after which further selection criteria were applied, namely:

- Students who failed three or more summative or formative assessments across modules for the first semester
- Results from class reports, for example, attendance registers, behaviour in class complaints, one on one consultations with various lecturers and logged sessions with the campus social worker. Details of the sessions with a social worker were not accessed, only consultation logs. This information was also

available on the student system

Finally a pre-interview questionnaire was used to identify information rich cases. Ten participants were selected on the basis of their pre-interview results. From this group, a smaller sample was selected according to the purposive sampling method.

### **Phase Three:**

During phase three, face to face, semi-structured one hour interviews were scheduled with each of the selected participants. This allowed the researcher to engage with the participants, which provided deeper insight into how they experienced higher education. The interviews were audio-recorded. In addition, the researcher made personal notes during the interviews, which included body language observations.

## **4.3 Data Collection**

Data was collected from multiple-data sources. The information came from students' transcripts, class reports for example attendance registers, behaviour in class, complaints, one on one consultations with various lecturers and logged sessions with the campus social worker (details of the sessions with a social worker were not accessed, only consultation logs), the resilience questionnaire, background information questionnaire and the in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Interview questions were formulated to guide the semi-structured interviews. During the interviews the researcher made notes of the body language of the participants. This contributed to a more 'realistic' picture of the interview. (Fontana and Frey, 1994). Fontana and Frey (1994) emphasised that "observation of body language and verification of shared meanings during the interview is important ..."

## **4.4 Data Analysis**

The researcher used an inductive data analysis style to analyse data, as this approach allowed her to identify significant themes that were derived from the data. Analysing data refers to selecting, dividing, filtering, classifying and categorising data (Wellington, 2000). An inductive data analysis approach helps a researcher to develop and summarize the themes from the data. This is also referred to as "data reduction" (Thomas, 2003).

The information obtained from background questionnaires, academic reports and transcripts were used to design the questions for the semi-structured interviews. The aim was to focus on central themes for these interviews. Central themes were identified by means of the open coding method. This implied the naming of conceptual categories into which the data were grouped (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The researcher used a software program (NUD\*IST) to assist with this process. The final data were analysed in terms of the themes that were derived from the interview dialogue between the researcher and the participants. The aim was to integrate the themes into theory to offer an accurate and detailed research interpretation. The data were related to existing literature.

## **5. Research Format**

This study consisted of a literature review and an empirical component. The literature review provided the context in which the study was situated and provided the context for each of the five chapters.

The study is presented in the form of the following chapters:

Chapter 1 introduces the topic and presents the basic layout of the ensuing chapters. This chapter provides background, outlines the research problem and briefly summarises the research design and methodology.

Chapter 2 comprises a literature review of higher education in South Africa. The focal point is on resiliency, academic resiliency and at-risk students.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and briefly clarifies social constructivism and how it applies to this inquiry. The data collection process and procedures to obtain relevant information are described in detail.

Chapter 4 presents the research participants and contextualises their lives. Individual themes are discussed.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter in which the findings are discussed and the related relevant literature given. The strengths and limitations of the study are also discussed and recommendations are offered for future research.

## **6. Conclusion**

South Africa faces unique challenges when it comes to higher education. Due to past inequalities, numerous suggested plans have been introduced to address these inequalities. Access to higher education remains one of the challenges. Interrelated to this are factors that can serve both as a protective shield or pose a risk to students. The background and a brief introduction to the study are provided in this chapter.

# Chapter 2

## Literature Study

### 1. Overview

The aim of this research study is to explore why students who are resilient to personal adversity fail to demonstrate resilience when it comes to academic success, putting them at-risk of academic failure. This chapter provides a background to the research study and is divided into four sections. The first part offers a synopsis of the historical context and accessibility of higher education within the South African setting. The second section discusses protective factors related to student success and student retention. The third section explores at-risk students and how their characteristics can be tied to academic performance and the fourth section discusses resilience which is split into two primary parts. Firstly resilience is defined and perspectives on resilience and types of resilience explained. Finally the characteristics of academic resilience are matched to resilience for academic success.

### 2. Introduction

On the 19th of January 2013, Professor Jansen made the following observation when addressing first year students at the University of the Free State:

"University is not school; more than half of you will fail or drop out. Others will have to repeat their courses. All because you cannot make the transition from high school to university..."

According to McMillan (2005), first year students at the University of the Western Cape experience their first classes as follows:

"There are words that I have never heard in my life and then you must take extra time because you must look it up and you must understand what the word means before you can go on and learn anything further. The lecturers forget that we have just come out of school and we are not in the least bit used to these ways of studying. Here (there) is a lot of work and you have to make notes for yourself;

you have to do everything for yourself.”

For many, student success in higher educational institutions are considered a matter of importance. For many individuals it is an opportunity to improve their quality of life. Academic success and obtaining a higher educational qualification are usually associated with the possibility of a higher income (Cloete, 2009, cited in Mentz, 2012). For the communities and the broader society, a higher educational qualification contributes to overall economic growth and to sustain healthy communities that in turn, promotes transformation (Council of higher education, 2004).

In addition, student success is also important for higher educational institutions responsible for educating students in that it provides a quality service in the teaching and learning environment. Principally, the government funds many of these institutions, which makes them accountable role players in educating the nation (Council of higher education, 2009).

The 21st century brought about its own challenges for education. Research varies, but it is generally agreed that the 21st century learner (also referred to as the Y-generation, millennial's or the net generation) is a generation who grew up with technology and that their expectation of the learning environment has shifted to a more collaborative and interactive learning style (McGlynn, 2007).

Understandably, higher educational institutions play a vital role in keeping up with the increased demand for education and with the change in the educational landscape. Higher educational institutions must pay special attention to the academic performance of the undergraduate student who embarks onto higher education. In particular, attention must be given to these students' level of preparedness. According to Scott (2004), higher education institutions have been poorly prepared in accommodating the increased numbers of diverse and at-risk millennial students.

### **3. The Transition from High School to University**

Making the transition from high school to university can be both an exciting and challenging time for students. Besides having to make an academic transition, students must also psychologically adapt, for example build new friendships, manage their time and finances, and making independent decisions. A number of

studies imply that students' psychological adjustment may in some instances be more essential than their academic adjustment (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo 1994). The transition from high school to university can be considered the most challenging phase of a student's life (Giddan 1998).

David Conley's model, drawing on 20 years' research, demonstrates that student readiness for university explains students' transition to university (Conley, 2008). This model highlights the gap between those students who are fit for university (those who have produced results to enter university) and those who are ready to study at university and succeed. This is particularly true in the South African context, where students battle at the beginning of each year to get a place in university and then struggle to make it through their first year. Conley (2008b) states the following:

“Because college is truly different from high school, college readiness is fundamentally different from high school completion.”

To contextualise the transition from school to college or university for South African students, one needs to revisit the history of the South African education system and its transformation since 1994.

#### **4. Historical Trends in Education: A South African Context**

Education is key to a healthy society. Already in 1785, Thomas Jefferson made a clear connection between education and democracy in his notes to the state of Virginia when he emphasised the role of public education (Berger, 2003).

Following the inequalities in the South African educational system, the post-apartheid government faced a daunting task to redress the educational system. This arena had to be transformed in order to become equally inclusive of and accessible to all South Africans. Equal access to higher education became the focus point and consequently an educational system that would enhance a knowledge driven economy of South Africa was needed, as it would create wealth and bring about social and economic development (Ratangee, 2007). To infer the challenges that many South African students have to overcome, it is important to briefly revisit the educational history.

## 4.1 The School System in South Africa

Before 1994, the school system in South Africa was segregated and resources were unequally distributed between the former black and white schools. Education was provided by separate systems for white, black, coloured and Indian youngsters, which led to inequality and a divided educational system. High quality education was limited to mostly white South Africans (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008b).

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, the school system was restructured and attention was paid to the curriculum and resource distribution. The aim was to create a school system free of division and to abolish any system that reminded of the apartheid education system. To accomplish this, the formerly segregated educational system was substituted with an outcome based educational (OBE) approach, which was carried out to breach the gaps that the apartheid curriculum left with regards to skills, knowledge and values. The OBE approach has since its implementation caused many controversial discussions as it moved away from instilling basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic towards a learner-centred approach. The negative impact of this approach is clear in students who enter university and find it difficult to read and understand the content that they are reading. These are the essential skills that students at a higher educational level need. (Malada 2010, cited in Mouton, Louw and Strydom, 2012). In 2009, the first students who followed this curriculum entered higher education. It was sadly evident that the new curriculum had prepared them inadequately for higher education (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2009, August 19).

Since the end of apartheid, the economic landscape and resource distribution have remained a problem. The same also holds true to the country's education. According to Steyn, De Waal and Wolhuter 2011 (cited in Mouton *et al.*, 2012), the ratio of people living in poverty has not changed dramatically since 1994 and many communities are still living in poverty. The influence of poverty on education is reflected in schools in poor and mostly rural communities. Most of these schools lack the infrastructure for conducive education. There are not enough classrooms; with lacking of sanitation and water and no or poor access to well-equipped science and computer facilities and libraries. Steyn *et al.*, 2011 (cited in Mouton *et al.*, 2012) point out three main problems in the South African educational system namely quality, equity and

relevance.

Adding to these challenges is the fact that South Africa has a diverse population. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA 1996B) recognises 11 official languages. Mother tongue education is restricted to the initial early years of young learners and in many cases, English is the preferred instructional language. This produces a barrier for learners to understand certain concepts in the classroom (Pretorius, 2010). One can conclude that although apartheid terminated the segregation of the educational system as it existed, socio-economic status has caused division and unequal opportunities and access in another sense.

On the 6th of July 2010, the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, announced an improvement of the curriculum (Mouton *et al.* 2012). In her announcement of the matric results for 2013, she stated that outcome based education would become “a thing of the past in 2014” (Women 24, 6th January 2014).

## **4.2 Higher education in South Africa**

When South Africa became a democracy in 1994, it was inevitable that the higher educational system would be transformed. Higher educational institutions were divided into different platforms, namely universities, technicons and colleges. Each of these platforms had their own qualification structure. Education was fragmented -- there were 36 higher educational institutions governed by eight different government departments. Each of these institutions attended to different race and ethnic groups. The first two years after apartheid ended, were devoted to founding a new policy followed by the development of White Paper 3, a programme for higher education (Cloete *et al.*, 2002, cited in Mentz, 2012).

In 1997 the higher education Act 101 saw the light and in February 2001 the National Plan for higher education in South Africa was released. One of the main goals of this plan was to improve throughput rates and provide quality education. The plan had to be a coordinated system in line with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which is a level descriptor of an individual's learning achievement. There are altogether ten levels in the South African NQF. Level descriptors assist in the

assessment of the national and international comparability of qualifications and part qualifications (South African Qualities Authority, 2014).

**Table 1: National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level Descriptors**

10	Post-doctoral research degrees Doctorate
9	Master's degree
8	Professional qualifications Honours degrees
7	Diplomas National 1st Degrees
6	higher Certificates
5	National certificates and Occupational Awards

**Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC)**

4	National skills certificates and occupational awards and Grade 12
3	National Skills certificates and Grade 11
2	National skills certificates and occupational awards and Grade 10

**General Education and Training Certificate (GETC)**

1	ABET level 4 GET certificate and Grade 9
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(South African Qualities Authority, 2014)

One of the immediate focus points of the Council of higher education was to make higher education accessible to all students while building a quality higher educational system to serve all South Africans. In promoting access to higher education, massification seemed to be the vehicle to help achieve this goal.

### **4.3 Massification**

Soon after President Nelson Mandela became president, he brought out a proclamation to appoint a National Commission of higher education (NCHE). One of the first proposals that the NCHE produced for higher education when apartheid ended

was to massify higher education in an effort to correct the inequalities of the past (Jansen 2003).

Massification had worldwide become an acceptable method to deal with the growing demand for higher education (Altbach, 1999). The plan was to increase opportunities to access higher education and at the same time produce high level skills needed for economic growth (Jansen, 2003). In particular, massification attempted to make higher education more accessible to students who wanted to study further. Massification increased the diverse student population who embarked onto higher education. This national plan for redressing higher education influenced the enrolment numbers of students in higher education institutions. (Draft Ministry of Education, 2001).

Many first generation students who previously lacked equal opportunities to access higher education now indeed have access. However, with the influx of students, space at South African universities have decreased (Griesel, 2003). Increased opportunities were supposed to produce both students with higher skills and a growth in South Africa's knowledge economy. However, the school education system produced more and more students who were unable to cope with higher education. As a result, higher education has now been linked to students' early withdrawal from studying and to lower levels of completion.

#### **4.4 Student Success in higher education**

Although the number of African students who matriculated has increased from 40% to 60%, graduation rates in higher education are dropping, with only 21% graduating in the minimum time that a qualification allows. As observed in chapter 1, the overall graduation rate of 15% in South Africa is among the lowest in the world (Beck 2011).

It is clear that higher educational institutions are facing many challenges, such as the poor performance of undergraduates and the retention and throughput rate. Available data by the Department of higher education and Training shows that by the end of 2004 only 30% of all students who entered for the first time graduated successfully. In turn, the Human Research Council found that an average of 15% of students completed their degrees in the allocated time.

## **5. Protective Factors Related to Student Success and Student Retention**

The following protective factors play a role in students' success. Likewise, these factors promote resilience in students. However, if these protective factors are absent in a student's life, such a student may be placed at-risk for academic success.

### **5.1 Language of Instruction**

Prior to 1994, English and Afrikaans were the official languages formally acknowledged in South Africa. The status of these languages, thus advantaged English and Afrikaans speaking students above the majority of South Africans who had an African language as their mother tongue. Many students struggle to understand complex concepts in English. In 1998 a task team investigated the impact of language on students' performance and found that language played a significant role in students' success. The task team implemented a strategy to compensate students. In instances where students whose mother tongue was not English had to answer question papers in English, five percent was added to the final marks (Umalusi, 2004).

In a research project about students' perceptions of the challenges they face in higher education, Agar (1990) reported that students found that they lacked in proficient language skills and found it hard to cope with the complexity of text and academic terminology. They particularly had to read text over and over again before they could comprehend the meaning. Students commented as follows:

"I sometimes find it difficult in presenting an argument simply and lucidly. I also have difficulty in getting to the point of an argument – not because I don't know what the point is, but because I have difficulty in expressing it simply and directly. I also have difficulty in finding the exact words in which to express an idea." (Agar, 1990).

It is not only students who lack confidence and competence in English. In many cases English is also the second or third language of teachers or lecturers. This has promoted rote-learning; which, in turn, affects student participation in the classroom (Agar, 1990). Although tertiary institutions in South Africa are doing much to promote multilingualism and diversity; second language English users are still being placed at a

disadvantage Tshotsho (2013).

## 5.2 Motivational Factors

The role of motivation should be aligned to students' achievement of academic success. Students have to consider three important questions when engaging in any learning situation: "Can I do this activity?", "Do I want to do the activity? (Why?)" ; "What do I need to do to succeed?" (Wigfield and Eccles 2001, cited in Peklaj, Cirila and Levpušček, Melita, Puklek 2006).

Motivation can either be extrinsic (coming from outside the student, focussing on making good grades) (Beaty. et al. 2005) or intrinsic (coming from within the student who is interested in the activity of learning and the acquiring of new knowledge) (Hoskins and Newstead, 2009). Students may have the ability to perform a task and be aware of this ability, but then remain disinterested in seeing the value of performing the task (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002, cited in Saeed and Zyngier, 2012). Williams (cited in Burton 2012) defines motivation as:

"A predisposition to behave in a purposeful manner to achieve specific, unmet needs and the will to achieve, and the inner force that drives individuals to accomplish personal organizational goals"

Mechanistic theories offered an early approach to human motivation. These theories claim that individuals are motivated according to what they expect. The focus of these theories are on constructs like instinct, drive, need and energy. It is assumed that individuals' needs provide them with energy to direct their behaviour and that the way they behave is beyond their control. The drive reduction theory of Clark Hull is directed to the individual's needs and how these stimulate behaviour. Hull's theory is inspired by the theories of Thorndike, Pavlov and Tolman. Hull synthesised their theories to inform his own, which suggests that behaviour follows as a response to a drive such as the need for food, shelter or sexual needs. In other words, when such a need is met, the drive is reduced (Cooper, 2002).

Therefore, a student should want to learn. Similarly, stimuli should be present and the student has to respond actively. Learning will take place if the need for learning is satisfied. Kenneth Spence and his colleagues hypothesised that the drive theory plays

a significant role in understanding the interplay between anxiety and learning. When it comes to learning, the drive reduction theory highlights that a drive (for example, anxiety) can serve as a motivator for learning to take place faster, provided that the task or learning activity is achievable for the learner. However, if a task is too challenging and the level of anxiety (the drive) increases, the result would be poorer performance (Graham and Weiner, 1996).

Between the 1940's and 1960's, researchers' attention to motivation shifted from mechanistic theories to a cognitive approach. As a result, cognitive theories became more prominent. Kurt Lewin leaned on Gestalt psychology to explain how behaviour is motivated. According to the Gestalt theorists, individuals are seen as open systems, who actively interact with their environment. Thus the individual and the environment are responsible for the behaviour that will occur. Lewin's field theory is based on three constructs namely, tension, the goal to be achieved and the "psychological distance" between the individual experiences and the goal (Graham and Weiner, 1996).

Achieving a goal involves the resolution of conflict. For example, a student will receive an academic prize if he or she attains a certain grade. The prize can be in the form of money that can be awarded as cash or as a down payment for the next study year. The student is then placed in a "win-win" position, which is also called the "approach-approach conflict". The conflict that arises within the student will be unstable and drive the student to make the best choice. The opposite scenario is known as the "avoidance-avoidance conflict". While this situation asks the student to make a choice; the outcome remains negative for the student. For example, if a student has failed, he or she only has the choice to repeat the year or to drop out of the programme.

During the 1960's to 1980's the role of achievement was emphasised in studies of motivation. "The attribution theory rooted in the work of Kurt Lewin, Julian Rotter, John Atkinson, Fritz Heider, and Harold Kelley..." (Gedeon and Rubin 1999). In the early 1970's Bernard Weiner and colleagues applied the theory to explain how achievement is linked up to the activities of an individual. The attribution theory considers how individuals make sense of events in their lives and how this impacts the way in which they will respond in future (Gedeon and Rubin 1999).

The attribution theory contributes to the study of motivation by assuming that individuals strive to understand why they have succeeded or failed in a particular area

(Graham and Weiner, 1996). In line with this theory, students will look for reasons to explain success or failure. For example: do students find the task difficult or easy? Are they lucky or unlucky? Do they have support or is there a lack of support? Are they able to complete the activity with success or not?

These precursors are categorised into three classes:

- Locus of causality (the origin of the cause of the failure or success)
- Stability (how stable is the cause and can it be changed?)
- Controllability (can the cause be controlled?)

The locus of causality can be intrinsic or extrinsic and it will depend on individuals (how much energy they put out to achieve their goal). If an individual puts in energy and is not influenced by external influences then the cause of success or failure would be intrinsic. Extrinsic causes would be the degree of luck or the difficulty level of the task that they have to achieve. An example of this would be a student blaming the lecturer for failing a test. He or she then uses extrinsic causes for their failure. However, if the student admits that he or she was not interested in studying, this would be an intrinsic cause for failure (Graham and Weiner, 1996).

If students can change the amount of effort they put into studying for a test, then they would be able to change the outcome, but if they do not have the means (for example access to the study material) to change the outcome, then the cause would be stable and one would not be able to change it. The third category is that of controllability, where some things cannot be controlled (for example intellectual ability). The attribution theory suggests that motivated behaviour can be biologically inherited and that it can be an emotional reaction to the outcomes that the individual had experienced in the past (Graham and Weiner, 1996).

The achievement goal theory identifies two sets of goals that influences student achievements, namely “mastery achievement goals” and “performance achievement goals”. Earlier research that focussed on comparing mastery goals to performance goals reported that if students failed in the mastery goals category, they were more inclined to be successful. Yet, later research reported that the two constructs “mastery” and “performance” were interdependent (Harackiewicz and Linnenbrink; Senko and Harackiewicz, 2005, cited in Peklaj and Levpušček Puklek, 2006).

Mastery goals are believed to acquaint students with building new skills, improve their abilities and build their confidence in the new knowledge acquired. It is thus positively linked to study skills and to engaging with the learning material. On the other hand, performance goals help students to realise their self-worth and to focus on their own capabilities. It is directly linked to academic achievement (Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002).

The last theory referred to in this discussion on motivation is the self-determination theory. This theory suggests that the individuals need to be competent in a task, which allows him or her to partake in activities that excite or challenge him or her (Deci and Ryan, 1995). When these individuals, then experience a sense of capability and independence, their intrinsic motivation is maintained, as well as their ability to learn even when external reinforcement is absent. The value of intrinsic motivation in an academic setting is that the student will enjoy the learning experience and continue to engage in new challenging learning activities. With intrinsic motivation the impetus is from within the student. Beffa-Negrini *et al.*, 2002 cited in Stipek (1993) stated that intrinsically motivated students are emotionally more involved in their learning and therefore enjoy learning more. Marton and Saljo (2005), Fransson (1977) found that pupils who were acquainted with the activities they were interested in, engaged in deep learning compared to students who were not interested in the learning activities. Students who were not interested in the learning activities showed signs of anxiousness when they were asked to report on their learning. According to Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998), assessments that are linked to real world examples will increase students' intrinsic motivation.

### **5.3 Self-Concept, Academic Self-Efficacy and Academic Self-Concept**

The constructs “self-concept” and “self-efficacy” are closely linked to motivation. Rosenberg (1979) defined self-concept as: “The totality of the individual’s feelings having reference to himself as an object”. The individual’s self-concept plays an important role in predicting behaviour. The self-concept is shaped by past experiences. Key factors include others’ evaluation of the individual, underlying traits, frames of reference and tasks mastered by the individual (Bong and Skaalvik, 2003). Bandura (1986:391) defines self-efficacy as: “People’s judgement of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of

performance.”

Bandura’s theory (1994) states that self-efficacy theory is what individuals believe about their own performance abilities in meeting particular task outcomes. In other words, self-efficacy is students’ beliefs about their academic abilities that contribute to their learning. Key factors in shaping self-efficacy are role models with whom students can identify; verbal persuasion from credible people; biological reactions; and past successes (Bong and Skaalvik, 2003).

Academic self-concept is the perception a student has about him- or herself in an academic environment, for example “I always make good grades in English” (Wigfield, and Karpathian, 1991, cited in Ferla, Valcke, and Cai, 2009). Academic self-efficacy refers to what individuals believe (their confidence) about their abilities to successfully complete a given learning activity at any chosen level. As such, self-efficacy is how one perceives oneself to perform in the future. For example, “I’m confident that I will make good grades in English” (Schunk, 1991, cited in Ferla, Valcke, and Cai, 2009).

Various studies established a correlation between academic self-concept and academic achievement, although researchers have different opinions about the causal ordering of the correlation. Some believe there is a direct correlation between academic self- concept and academic achievement, while others believe that previous academic achievement plays a role in forming the academic self-concept (Nagy, et al., 2006, cited in Wilson, 2009). A compromise between these two believes is the reciprocal effects model.

This reciprocal effects model suggests that academic self-concept and academic achievement are equally related. This can be explained as follows: If a student has a positive academic self-concept, but does not achieve academically, then his or her self-concept will become less positive. On the other hand, if a student improves academically but no attention is given to building his or her academic self-concept, the outcome will also lean towards a negative (Marsh, Hau and Kong, 2002, cited in Green, Nelson, Martin, and Marsh, 2006; Falchikov and Boud, 1989, cited in Chevalier *et al.*, 2007).

Students’ Academic Self-Perception (Chevalier et al., 2007) explains that students generally over-estimate their own ability. They have a habit of being over-optimistic

when predicting the outcome of an assessment. This is because they form their own expectations about the outcome from an egocentric stance and do not take into account the level of difficulty of activities or tasks.

Research also shows that less competent students have poorer judgement. The reason for this is that students require the same set of skills to achieve academically and to judge their own performance. One study revealed that 90% of first year students rated themselves as average to above average (Thorpe, Snell, Hoskins and Bryant, 2007).

#### **5.4 Socio- Economic Status**

Despite the transformation in education since 1994 to redress inequalities of the past, many South Africans have not experienced transformation in their personal economic status. This means that they are still affected by their poor living conditions and lack of resources. Although education has become more accessible, many individuals are still being marginalised by their socio-economic status (SES).

SES and academic achievement have been the focus of many studies and can be considered as one of the strongest predictors of a student's academic performance. Watts (1968), provides the simplest definition of poverty:

“...poverty lines represent the level of income that divides the families of a particular size, place, and time into the poor and the non-poor.” It can also be described as a lack of basic income to meet the needs of individuals (Potgieter, 1998).

Individuals from low income families must overcome many obstacles before they can enter into higher education. Many of these individuals come from informal residential areas, a legacy left by apartheid South Africa. These residential areas are generally associated with poverty and criminal activities. Due to a high unemployment rate, schools in these areas are poor and resources are limited or non-existent (Mampane and Bower, 2011). Obtaining a higher educational qualification is important for these individuals as it increases their opportunity for economic success. Research conducted at the Institute for Access Studies in the United Kingdom identified the following reasons why students withdraw prematurely from their studies:

- Lack of funding and financial difficulties
- Debt or fear thereof
- Comparing themselves with peers who are not studying, but already earning an income
- Part time employment distracting them (taking up time and energy away from their studies).

(Thomas *et al.*, 2002:5, cited in Jones, Coetzee, Bailey, and Wickham, 2008).

Though these factors cannot be viewed as an absolute, they may lead to anxiety and time management problems causing students to prematurely withdraw from their studies (Bourn, 2002:16, cited in Jones *et al.*, 2008). Data collected for a study commissioned by the Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) in 2008 confirms higher education a contributing factor to student drop out (Van Koller, 2010, cited in Mentz, 2012).

Though socio-economic status is not the only contributing factor to student success, it is well documented that family income indeed correlates with student achievement and academic performance.

## **5.5 Family**

Family plays a key role in students' academic success as it serves as a protective factor. As part of the psychosocial environment, family is considered the primary source of support for students. Essentially, values and beliefs are transferred within the family (Sigelman and Rider, 2006). Research in South Africa also suggests a strong link between educational success and growing up in a stable family where both parents are present.

“Secondary school pupils living with their fathers on average scored higher on a scholastic achievement test in all subjects than pupils with absent fathers. American research has also found that the absence of fathers when children grow up is one of a variety of factors which are associated with poor educational outcomes, anti-social behaviour and delinquency, and disrupted employment in later life.” (Holborn and Eddy, 2011).

Parents who monitor their children's progress and activities serves to protect them from

falling into negative behaviour like conduct problems or delinquency. When faced with adversity, these children feel a sense of belonging and protection, which allows them to adjust as they know their parents are there for them.

A vast majority of South African students who enter into higher education are first generation students with a background where parents did not have the opportunities to attempt higher education themselves. In many instances the parents' level of education is lower than the child's. For example, a student might have completed grade 12, but his or her parent might have only completed primary school or possibly grade 10. Where the parent's level of education is at a lower level than that of the student, the parent will lack the ability to guide his or her child academically, since he or she did not experience tertiary learning.

First generation students are likely to be less engaged in their academic activities as they might not understand what to expect and have no role models to imitate (Pike and Kuh, 2005a). Research conducted in Spain by Diaz (1998) confirms that parents' educational levels influence the amount of support they can give their children academically. These parents cannot assist their children with assignments and other academic challenges they might encounter. According to Diaz (1998), a mother's educational level indirectly affects the academic performance of her child. In cases where parents have high expectations of their child and no willingness to accommodate alternative choices, these children may become rebellious and anxious and the result would be low academic performance (Rammala, 2009).

One student made the following comment:

"You get a guy who comes from the rural areas and he is probably the first person in his family to go to university and their hopes are all on him... His family doesn't want him to study a BA, they want him to be an engineer or a doctor. But sometimes he isn't interested in those things, so he loses commitment." (Ntobeko, 2013, cited in John, 2013)

In many black cultures, parents do not discuss family problems with their children as it is not considered a norm. Students from such families would sense that there is a family problem and in many cases, they would then internalise the anxiety, stress and uncertainty they experience about the situation (Rammala, 2009).

The way in which a family perceives education can influence a child's perception of education either negatively or positively. Students who are being affirmed by their parents perform better when they study and are more likely to persevere in their studies. The way families adapt to different circumstances and the efficacy of communication between family members can serve as a protective factor to build resilience in members.

Unfavourable family circumstances include low income, family conflict, unstable relationships and the absence of one or both parents. The latter could also mean that the student has to take on more responsibilities in the family. In such cases, students may become disengaged from their own goal of obtaining a tertiary qualification, as most of their energy is spent on surviving their environment. As such, these students are then put at-risk (Peterson and Bush, 2012, cited in, Haverkos, 2012).

## **5.6 Peer Influence**

According to Astin (1993), peers are influential factors in a student's life. Exactly how influential peers are is debatable, as it is difficult to measure this variable: Students choose with whom they want to associate at a particular institution. Charles Manski (1993) refers to the "reflection problem" and explains that if a student's peers have certain abilities that are similar to the student's own abilities, it would be very difficult to statistically measure who affects whom. Manski (1993) further states that students usually tend to choose somebody within their class or circle, for example a roommate.

In research conducted in the US and Australia, undergraduate levels of academic success were higher and they were found to have a more satisfying experience of higher education. They were also inclined to be more committed to their studies and displayed an academic self-confidence (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

Students also gain from peer interaction away from the classroom when it comes to learning. Recent research found that social networking positively impacts on student success as it allows students to connect without seeing face to face (Morris, Reese, Beck and Mattis, 2009). However, peers can also pressure each other, causing stress and anxiety. For example, students who struggle academically and find themselves in a group who accelerates academically, may tend to deceitful behaviour in order to keep up with the rest. Or, they may join an at-risk group, or a group who has already dropped

out. On the other hand, peer pressure may be positive when accelerating students render support to academically at-risk students (Worley and Lynn, 2007).

## **5.7 The Role Played by the Institution**

Some of the factors identified by Beal and Noel (1980) that affect student retention include faculty involvement with students, high quality of teaching and learning, and the quality of support that a student receives from the institution. Such support includes adequately advising, financial assistance and motivation on getting involved in campus life. (Scholtz, 2013, cited in John, 2013) affirms that none of the university dropouts whom he had worked with had accessed any resources like emotional counselling. For this reason, universities have to prioritise access to support.

Students may not be aware of the different services they have access to. "Whether or not this is given to them during orientation week, it's definitely not given to them in a way they can understand it..."

Currently there is attention to student retention rates globally. Various studies have found that students are increasingly underprepared for higher education studies (Foxcroft and Stumpf, 2005). When a student enters higher education it is not without adjustment and for each individual it is a unique experience. For many it is a natural step after school, but for some it is a first generation experience. These students enter higher education institutions with very high expectations.

Institutions have a responsibility to meet these students' expectations and student support is the more common approach. Research has found that several institutions indeed have well developed systems for student support. However, students (and in particular first generation students) are unaware of the support available on campuses (Engle and O'Brien 2007).

Tinto's (1975) model of college student departure (based on Durkheim's theory of suicide) holistically approaches students who enrol into higher education institutions. According to his model, each student on enrolment presents his or her own individual set of characteristics and each has the goal of graduating. Tinto hypothesises that these characteristics and the goal to graduate play a role in student success and that such success is measured by the ability student's display to meet the demands of the

institution. The model further states that if a student's commitment to the institution and his or her personal goal increases, it positively influences their perseverance at the institution.

It is suggested that higher education institutions become proactive in creating an environment to promote student engagement and success. Drake (2011) explains in "The role of academic advising in student retention and persistence" "...We have long since left in the dust the notion that simply opening our doors to students, that once here they can negotiate their own way through our often byzantine, labyrinthine curriculum processes and hallowed halls." She further defines solid academic advising as a "vital link in the retention equation."

Kuh *et al.* (2005) elaborates on the importance of higher education institutions having well thought through support strategies in place, as these would anchor students to the institution and increase their learning experience. Tinto (1975) postulates that all role players in a higher education institution should integrate to provide students with a successful higher education experience. Good support strategies will at the same time serve as early warning systems for students who are either at-risk, or find themselves lost in the world of academics. These systems can include weekly monitoring of student profiles, including result reports and class attendance registers.

Faculty interaction outside the classroom can also influence students' academic outcomes. For students it is about the holistic experience of higher education, how they are socially integrated and how approachable the faculty is on campus. Also, how contradictions in their own cultural and value systems and that of the institution are being dealt with and embraced.

Astin's theory of involvement (1984) highlights the importance of students becoming involved on campus and with their own learning. Astin describes an involved student as a student who is actively participating in campus life, study groups, and who is often in contact with other students and the faculty.

## **5.8 The Role of Teaching and Learning in the Classroom**

As part of the digital era, teaching and learning in the classrooms are under pressure to transform due to higher education classrooms which are filled with 21st century

students who have access to information with a click of a button or a tap of the finger. Therefore, lecturers cannot afford to stick to outdated traditional lecturing styles as the student profile for the 21st century has changed. Transformation in the classroom is slow and many lecturers are still resistant to change their lecturing style (Weimer, 2008). According to Paulsen and Faust (2008), lecturers need to become originators of students' learning experiences and students need to engage on a different level with their learning material.

Lecturers often experience the following about student:

- Students are underprepared for higher education and find it difficult to engage with academic content
- They want to learn new information, but do not know how to engage with their learning material.

These students are the so-called "at-risk students." The focal point of teaching and scholarship has transferred from "research led teaching" to that of "student involvement". For this, effective lectures need to be enticing and encourage students to want to engage with the learning material as this can aid their academic success (Kuh *et al.*, 2003).

Available literature focusses on referencing students' voices to illustrate arguments made by the authors about student engagement and how this can contribute to academic success. However, very limited literature is available where the concept of student engagement activities is explored from the students' perspective (whether they feel that such activities aid them in being academically successful). For example, it can be asked: "How do these 21st century students see their role? What are their expectations from their lecturers?" (Trowler, 2010).

Rak and Patterson (1996) confirm that lecturers can support students by working from their individual strengths by demonstrating unconditionally positive regard; by teaching resiliency and conflict-resolution skills; by being role models for students; and by building these students' self-concepts.

## **6. Risk and At-Risk**

Risk is generally defined as a psychosocial adversity. As such, it would be considered a stressor for most people, hindering their normal functioning (Arrington, Melvin and Wilson, 2000). Risk can also be defined as negative circumstances that serve as a threat to normal development (Keogh and Weisner, 1993). Historically, risk was linked to a model of medicine and to psychopathological investigations in an attempt to explain patterns and outcomes of disease and disorders (Sanders, 2000).

Risk linked to education is a recent phenomenon. When a student is being identified as “at-risk” in an educational context, it implies that the circumstances that the student finds him- or herself in do not promote academic acceleration, but is linked to academic failure (Sanders, 2000).

### **6.1 The Profile of the At-Risk Student**

*At-risk* students refer to those students who are not achieving or functioning on the same level as students who are not at risk of failing. The “at-risk” labelling of students can be evaluated in different ways. According to Hixson and Tinzmann (1990, cited in Arrington, Melvin and Wilson, 2000), youth labelled “at-risk” often come from minority groups and have deficits in their lives. How at risk a student is will be determined by assessing different life events and the impact thereof on the student’s life.

According to McMillian, Reed and Daisy (1993), at-risk students can be described as students who are labelled as underachievers and who display behavioural problems. They are socially maladjusted and have a high dropout rate when it comes to higher education.

Gresham, Lane, Mac Millan and Bocian (1999) identify two categories of behaviour that at-risk student’s exhibit. They either externalise their behaviour by acting out aggression (not accepting responsibility for themselves) or they are impulsive and argumentative. They could also internalise the problem by withdrawing, being absent or developing anxiety and depression. It is important not to generalise when labelling students who fail at being “at-risk” because adverse life events may be perceived, interpreted and experienced differently by individuals. Rutter (1999) specifically points out that the peculiar concept of stress is too global to be useful, as each individual

reacts differently to the adversities in his or her lifetime. He explains that, because of the uniqueness of individuals, each interacts differently with their environment. How they perceive adversities will determine if they feel vulnerable or will they demonstrate resilience. A single negative experience can cause an individual to give up, while another individual can have the capacity to absorb more than one adverse event.

Friedlander (1980) describes at-risk students as students who are academically poorly prepared, who display low motivation and who experience a language difficulty. At-risk students can be divided into three categories:

- Academically at-risk
- Culturally at-risk
- Emotionally at-risk (Pobywajo 1996, cited in Hewitt, 2002).

Pobywajlo (1996) (cited in Hewitt, 2002) describe academically at-risk students as those students who chose unchallenging subjects at school, those who had achieved low to average high school marks and those who present a learning disability. The emotionally “at-risk” student lacks in confidence, has a low self-esteem and comes from a dysfunctional family. Culture at-risk students come from traditional backgrounds that do not correlate with the culture of the institution they are attending.

An example of this would be growing up in a culture different from that of an academic culture. These students’ family members may not always see the challenges and demands of higher education. Given the history of South Africa, many students fit the profile of all three categories when they enter higher education.

Beckenstein (1992) also explains: “... many at-risk students hope that simply being in a new environment would enable them to be successful academically.” When many students embarking on higher education go through the chaotic phase of self-regulation as they experience feelings of being overwhelmed. To these students the environment is new, and although they hold their own expectations of higher education, they are uncertain of what the institution expects of them. This doubt can cause students to disengage from the academic and societal support systems available to them. This could result in them eventually withdrawing and dropping out of higher education.

## 6.2 Factors for Being Placed At-Risk

Factors that play a role in student success can also put them at-risk. Researchers who studied dropout rates in the United States have identified common factors in the lives of students who tend to drop out or fail. These factors included:

- Socio-economic status (SES)
- Living conditions such as poor housing, overcrowding and lack of material resources
- Being from a single parent family
- Language barriers
- Being from a minority group
- Students who take on adult responsibilities
- Students who have struggled academically at school
- Poor class attendance
- Problems in building relationships with others (Hupfeld, 2010).

McMillian (2005) points out that the transition from high school to higher education may contribute to students being at-risk. Students find higher education learning challenging. As put by a first year student:

“The lecturers... forget that we have just come out of school and we are not in the least bit used to these ways of studying.” “Here (there) is a lot of work and you have to make notes for yourself... and you have to do everything for yourself...”

As students enter higher education, the demands put on them increase. They have to adapt to the freedom and more responsibilities. They also have to learn to cope with increased volumes of academic work and new social engagements. Some have to deal with risk factors that already pre- disposed them to being labelled “at-risk” and “an academic failure”.

Research findings suggest that factors such as poor conditions and poor teaching and learning strategies at school level and inefficient learning styles, all contribute to the difficulties that South African students experience when entering higher education (Van Heerden, 1992).

## 7. Resilience

The concept of resilience has been around since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and has emerged from various disciplines. Resilience stems from an old Latin word "re-silere", which means to "to bounce back or to recoil" (Deveson 2003:24). Resilience is active and serves as a supportive factor that assists the individual in developing their well-being. Fundamentally, resilience involves a relationship between what individuals perceive as a threat or a challenge and how they adapt and overcome this. Researchers continue to struggle to pinpoint what the exact relationship is between these two conditions. It is important to acknowledge that resilience is more than just having the strength to overcome the challenges that one is facing.

Resilience has been described as both a process and an outcome where an individual positively adapts to adversities and overcome them, making a success of their lives. While Dass-Brailsford (2005) and most other sources agree that resilience can be described as the ability to maintain competence in the face of challenging and difficult life circumstances, various other definitions have to be considered. Garmezy was one of the first people to use the term "resilience" to describe the ability of someone to recover from some or other trauma or failure that he or she experienced and then rising above it and be successful (Wang and Gordon, 1994). Bartlett 1994 (cited in Arrington *et al.*, 2000) states that resilience is relational, while Winfield (1994) views resilience as a process.

According to Arrington *et al.* (2000), resilience is not connected to ability as ability is not always found to characterise the resilient student (Waxman, Gray, Jon and Padron, 2003 (cited in Bernard, 1993; Gordon and Song, Masten, Best and Garmezy, (1994). Waxman *et al.* (2003) highlight factors that relate to resiliency. These factors include autonomy, time management, goal setting and a sense of purpose. These authors point out that individuals who positively overcome adversity by being resilient to the negative encounters, use the strength of their coping resources, while other individuals will surrender to adverse circumstances. Resilience can then also refer to the reserve capacity a person has to prepare him or her for adversities they might encounter in their future (Werner and Smith, 1992). To Cowan (1996) and Winfield (1994, cited in Condly, 2006) resilience does not mean that an individual is invulnerable. It rather means that resilience is a process that comes into motion because of an individual's reaction to risk factors.

Therefore, resilience is all about the interaction between a person's individual characteristics and the environment that determines whether the person demonstrates resiliency or vulnerability. What makes a person resilient is indeed a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic protective factors. For individuals to effectively deal with the adversities they might encounter in their lives and to adapt and overcome these adversities, it is important to acknowledge the presence of resilience.

A considerable body of literature indicates that individuals do have the capacity to counteract the adversities they might face. Yet, not all individuals will develop the ability to overcome these adversities. Resilience could then be viewed as a complex interaction between the individual and protective factors, for example family and community. According to Ungar (2008b), "Resilience arises when the individual is able to make use of internal (e.g., coping skills, attitude, planning competence) and external resources (e.g., physical necessities, family and social support, expert interventions etc.). These external resources, of course, must be accessible, culturally meaningful and relevant".

Cohler, Scott and Musick (1995) highlight the role of culture and ethnicity. As such, social context should be taken into account and not just the family environment, but also the cultural background and the community that a person comes from.

## **7.1 Perspectives on Resilience**

Resilience is increasingly being used to understand social and ecological systems and their underlying dynamic as an approach. For resilience to be a constructive concept, it must be grounded in theoretical perspectives. This section sets out social-ecological, developmental, strength and constructionist perspectives.

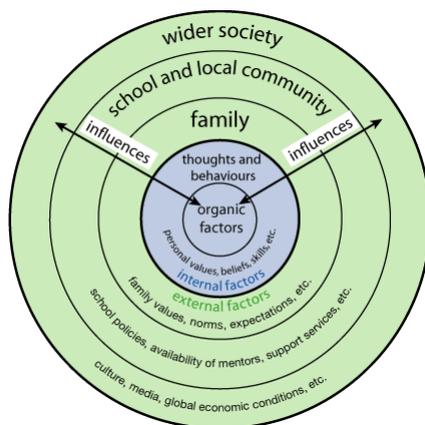
### **7.1.1 Social-Ecological Perspective on Resilience**

The social-ecology perspective emphasises the physical and social components of the environment. The focus is on the way an individual will interact with and adapt to the environment in the face of adversity.

When it comes to research on resilience, the ecological perspective is the dominant perspective in research on resilience. The term "ecology" refers to the study of how

individuals or organisms co-exist and interact with their environment, not excluding the different levels of interaction between the systems (Stokols, Lejano, and Hipp, 2013). The tendency to focus more on personal factors and not on the impact of the environment when explaining people’s behaviour is referred to as the “fundamental attribution error”. This perspective is informed by the systems theory and highlights the fact that relationships between risk and protective factors are predictable. It also acknowledges circular causality and transactional processes (Unger, 2004a).

**Figure 1: The Resilience Model**



(Resilience Resource Centre, 2005)

The above diagram illustrates how resiliency functions within a network of bi-directional influences. These influences are the individual's personal attributes and the environments in which they live, for instance, family, school and the immediate neighbourhood and ultimately the more spacious universe. The diagram demonstrates how individuals do not exist in isolation, but depend on their environment and its multiple-interacting levels of influence.

The environment is divided into macro systems (for example cultural beliefs); meso-systems (for example, social structures affecting the individual) and the micro system (for example the family, school and community). The social-ecology perspective underlines the environment’s physical and social components and focusses on individuals’ interactions and adaptation in the face of adversity.

Resilience, is the individuals’ capacity to direct themselves to their available resources to support them in the face of adversity (Ungar 2012). The optimal outcome is achieved “when all systems are supportive of the individual, but is not a prerequisite of

resilience.” (Bronfenbrenner 1992).

### **7.1.2 Developmental Perspective on Resilience**

The developmental perspective suggests that resilience is a hierarchical integrative process and considers both development and resilience as ongoing processes. Development and resilience develop over a lifetime as the individual develops new skills and knowledge in the face of emerging challenges. Wyman, for example, described resilience as follows: “Resilience reflects a diverse set of processes that alter children’s transactions with adverse life conditions to reduce the negative effects and promote mastery of normative developmental tasks.” (Wyman, 2003, cited in O’Dougherty et al., 2012).

Resilience is not the reason why individuals succeed in the face of adversity, but a reflection of the developmental process whereby individuals use resources to adapt, despite the adversity they might have previously experienced. Resilience evolves over time and is influenced by different areas of an individual’s life-context.

Factors include individual characteristics, such as cognitive ability, self-esteem and self-regulation, as well as characteristics of their environment, for example parents, community and educational environment (Masten *et al.*, 1990, cited in Luthar, 2000).

Individuals who experienced a nurturing environment during early childhood would develop a better understanding of reasons for challenges they might encounter and they would then also draw on their own belief that their needs will be met by their environment. Developmental theorists’ state that an individual's prior experience is not lost, but integrated into new patterns of resilience and adaptation to deal with the challenges they might face in their lives. Successful adaptation in the sight of adversities will pave the way or lay the foundation for the next. On the other hand, the opposite is also true: If an individual maladapts in a previous stage, it will interfere with how he or she develops his or her ability to deal with circumstances in the next stage (Weakley, 2006). Rutter (1987) uses the term “protective processes” to argue that the nature of resilience actually lies within the protective processes in developing systems.

### **7.1.3 The Constructionist Perspective on Resilience**

The constructionist perspective is in contrast with the ecological approach. The constructionist perspective reflects a postmodern interpretation of the construct “resilience”. This perspective describes resilience as negotiations taking place between individuals and their environment for resources. Unger (2004a) explains: “To define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse.” The constructionist perspective describes a non-systematic, non-hierarchical relationship between risk and protective factors and allows for relationships between factors to be chaotic, complex and relative contextual.

### **7.1.4 The Strength Perspective on Resilience**

Theorists who support the strengths-based approach, focus on the result of supportive and protective factors present in individuals' lives, in that they have the inherent ability to transform their own lives. While this is not a set of rules to be followed, it offers resources and support from which these individuals can draw strength and learn new skills to address the challenges.

The strength-based perspective accepts that all individuals should be considered in the context of their own competencies, capabilities and acquired knowledge and survival skills. Masten (2009) outlines three steps to promote resilience. The last two steps link directly to the strength-based approach. The three steps are:

- Reduce exposure to risk factors
- Increase available resources
- Activate protective systems

## **7.2 Resilience linked to Academic Success**

When an individual has to deal with long lasting adversities and exhibit the capacity and ability to overcome the challenges, they are being referred to as "resilient individuals". In the academic context, "resilience" refers to an individual's capacity to deal with long lasting academic challenges that prevent them from advancing academically. Similarly, "academic buoyancy" refers to an individual's ability to cope with everyday academic challenges (Martin and Marsh, 2009).

Academic resilience is thus the ability to achieve in an educational surrounding despite exposure to risk factors (Morales, 2008). The concept of academic resilience has over the years not received much attention because academia has different thoughts about linking resilience to academic success. According to Wang *et al.* (1994), academic or educational resilience refers to the probability that a student will succeed academically and pass despite the adversities he or she might encounter in his or her personal environment. Catterall (1998) describes academic resilience as “a student’s ability to recover from failure and alienation.”

According to social psychologist Halvorson (2012), ability has nothing to do with success. She explains that the actions taken or not taken by the individual determine if the set goals will be reached successfully. Many academic research studies focus on ethnic groups who are faced with extreme adversities (for example). These studies focus on how individuals are successful despite risk factors linked to their poor academic performance. These studies are justified because there is a need to learn more about using resilience to address underachievement (Morales, 2008). These studies confirm that academically successful students have access to resources that support them in their studies. (Casanova, Garcia-Linares, de la Torre and de la Villa Carpio, 2005 (cited in Castro, *et al.*, 2011).

Where a student has a mentor, this will also have an impact on academic resiliency Hassinger and Plourde 2005 (cited in Castro, *et al.*, 2011). Providing a stable academic environment where students feel they are getting the attention and care, could therefore lead to the development of academic resilience.

### **7.3 Characteristics of Academic Resilience**

Positive interpersonal and individual factors play a role in developing academic resiliency. Martin and Marsh (2006) highlight five factors related to academic resilience, namely: self-efficacy, low anxiety, planning, control and persistence. Bernard (1991) and Finn and Rock (1997) found that students who display academic resilience: participate in school, display strong interpersonal skills and possess high self-esteem, high self-efficacy, high expectations and autonomy.

Colbert and Thomas (2005) note that a collective risk factor in students who do not achieve is the lack of protective factors. It was found that successful students have

access to a combination of protective factors, which include personal, environmental and social factors. A significant number of studies focus on comparing the characteristics of resilient students to that of non-resilient students in an attempt to explain the phenomena of academic resilience (Waxman *et al.*, 2003). Some of these studies examine resiliency in education by investigating the educational success variable. They do so by measuring students' intellectual ability, cognitive functioning and behaviour outcomes (Wang *et al.*, 1994). Other studies focus on the theory of resilience in an attempt to explain why some students are academically successful despite having personal adversities.

While research offers much about resilience and how it can be fostered in students, limited studies have concentrated on academic resilience. As noted above, most research in this field attempts to explain the phenomena by simply comparing resilient students to non-resilient students. If at-risk students are resilient, we can conclude that their outcome in education will be positive and that they will beat the odds because of their resilience. In practice, this is however not the case. Many at-risk students overcome challenges in their personal environment through their innate resilience, but they still fail or drop out.

### **7.3.1 Characteristics of Resilient Students**

Resilient students have the ability to control their behaviour and emotions in an academic environment. They also have the ability to bounce back from negative experiences by making use of their positive emotions. These characteristics are synonymous with self-regulation. Their soundness allows them to recognise, support and use these resources to their own strength (Tugade, and Frederickson, 2004).

Protective and supportive structures can assist them in maintaining their well-being (De Berry, 2003, cited in Moleli 2005). Studies have shown that academically resilient students are more involved with their studies and approach their learning differently. They are more prepared for classes, have better time management and a higher self-esteem and self-efficacy. Although some of them come from disadvantaged families, they usually have one parent's involvement (Finn and Rock, 1997; Lee *et al.* 1991; Borman and Overman, 2004; Catterall, 1998; Shumow *et al.*, 1999; Connell *et al.*, 1994 (cited in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011).

Academic resilient students also have higher levels of intrinsic motivation and an internal locus of control. Furthermore, they possess the ability to lay out well-defined goals for themselves (Brehm, Kassin, and Fein 2005, cited in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011).

Other characteristics that reflect resilience is understanding and ego. Frydenberg (1997) explains that students who show insight into how adversities initiate and who understand the challenge, are more likely to be resilient. Likewise, students who are ego-resilient are often described as “well- adjusted and interpersonally effective”. They can be assertive and have the ability to maintain relationships with their peers. In addition, their problem solving skills are well developed (Smuts, 1992, cited in Moleli, 2005).

Resilient students can plan, have a positive self-esteem and can accept responsibility for themselves and their own behaviour. They also have a strong connection with at least one adult figure (Oswald *et al.*, 2004; Ryff and Singer, 2003, cited in Moleli, 2005). Claxton (2002), one of the theorists who promoted the concept of the resilient student, points out that a quality that these students possess is their ability to engage with unpredictable situations (Claxton, 2002, cited in Stallman, 2011).

## **8. Conclusion**

A large number of enrolled students in higher education in South Africa are at-risk of dropping out or not completing their qualification within the designated time that is prescribed for the qualification (for example three years for a bachelor’s degree). The literature reviewed in this chapter provided an historical overview of education in South Africa, followed by an overview of protective factors that can play a role in either helping students to build resilience or placing them at-risk. The literature included a review of the characteristics of at-risk students as it is important to understand who the at-risk students are. Finally different perspectives on resilience and how resilience is tied to academic resilience were discussed.

# Chapter 3

## Research Method and Design

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the research approach, to describe the design of the study and to explain how data were gathered for the study. The study was informed by a postmodernist stance, in particular, a social constructivist approach. The main tenets of postmodernism are provided below, followed by a brief description of the social constructivist approach and how it is distinguished from constructivism and social constructionism. The study is then unpacked in terms of qualitative methodology with special reference to validity and reliability. The final section relates how data were collected for the study. The data gathering involved three phases. Each phase provided a sample from which participants for the next phase could be selected. Although the study was mainly qualitative in nature, the first and second phases involved quantitative information.

### 2. Postmodernism

Postmodernism is best understood in relation to modernism. According to Neuman (1997), modernism relies on logical reasoning. It is a concept of “seeing is believing” and science is regarded as the origin of all reliable knowledge. Modernism is also referred to as enlightenment humanism, as it concerns itself with the role of reasoning or rationality in understanding a phenomenon. Modernism wants the researcher to remain objective during the research process, in other words, not to influence his or her subjects (Rosnow and Rosenthal, 1996). Another criterion for modernistic research is that it should be precise and supported by scientifically proven methodology (Gergen, 1992).

Gergen (2001) identifies the following three perceptions of modernism:

- How the individual understands knowledge
- Belief in an objective world
- Language’s ability to deliver the truth

Modernism underpins scientific theories and focuses on beliefs like objectivity and totality. Its stance is that the world can be understood, controlled and predicted (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Modernism relies on logical reasoning and aims to discover generalised laws to explain human behaviour.

Postmodernism focuses on subjectivity, a variety and individualism. Postmodernists are concerned with the search for meaning and the understanding of people's experiences. Postmodernism acknowledges more than one explanation for a phenomenon. While modernists regard self as an individual living independently of his or her environment, postmodernists consider the self not as an autonomous being who survives in isolation, only as somebody who is moulded by the world he or she is in. One can therefore argue that students are shaped by their lived experiences, not just in education, but also in their personal lives. Included herein would be variables such as gender, age, culture, family and community.

Gergen (in Becvar and Becvar, 2006:291) is cited as follows "the individual is viewed as a participant in multiple relationships, with 'the problem' only a problem because of the way it is constructed in certain of these relations." Durheim (1997) argues that modernism wants to predict and control. While postmodernists highlight the fact that they believe there are multiple realities present in each individual's life and that these inform the manner in which individuals perceive and make sense of the world they live in. This world is also influenced by the individual's gender, age and culture. What is perceived as a reality in one individual's life, might vary dramatically in another individual's context (Lyddon and Weill, 1997:77).

Postmodernists are primarily concerned with the stories individuals tell of their lived experiences. They believe that reality is created rather than discovered and that language is at the core of how individuals express these lived realities (Becvar and Becvar, 2000). In essence, postmodernism investigates the possibility of more than one reality (Anderson, cited in Becvar and Becvar, 2000). As the researcher sought to uncover students' subjective interpretation and lived experiences of higher education and how they construct and make sense of it, postmodernism was a suitable paradigm for this study.

Most studies on resilience and students use data obtained from teachers and institutions, or reports and questionnaires distributed to students, which are

subsequently interpreted through statistical methods (Ungar, 2004a). The problem with this is that the student's voice as a source is not considered. Context is also often discarded, as the protective and risk factors are not being studied from the student's point of view. According to Ungar *et al*, (2008), the majority of research conducted on resilience was in North American communities of minority groups and most of them focused on how students were successful against all odds. However, what has not been researched, is the phenomenon of students who have personal resilience but lack academic resilience. From the literature, it is clear that several factors play a role in both fostering resilience and placing a student at-risk. How a student experiences these multiple realities is important for uncovering why personal resilience does not reflect on their academic performance.

### **3.Social Constructivism**

The study is grounded in social constructivism, which refers to the way individuals actively create their own realities. This pertains to this study, where the aim is to explore how at-risk students, resilient in their personal lives, overcome personal adversities but fail to demonstrate academic resilience in higher education.

Social constructivism is often confused with constructivism and social constructionism. Although these concepts are similar, they are also slightly different. Constructivism refers to the knowledge that individuals create through what they experience, while social constructivism refers to the knowledge that individuals create and is influenced by. Examples of such influences are history, culture and interaction with significant others in the community. Social constructionism is linked to the knowledge individuals create through conversations with others (Talja, *et al.*, 2005).

Sheila McNamee (cited in Raskin and Bridges, 2004) explains how social constructivism relates to social constructionism: Both approaches imply that individuals construct realities from their lived experiences. The difference is that social constructionism focuses on the discourse of the realities being created and the notion that all interpretations are equally valid. However, social constructivists focus on the internal cognitive processes that take place in an individual because of his or her lived experiences and interactions with his or her environment.

When embarking on higher education, each student has expectations and has already constructed realities as to what he or she will experience and how he or she

will experience and manage the journey into higher education. These expectations are influenced by students' own social constructions of the environment they exist in. Many of them draw on previous lived experiences of education. Their frames of reference also play a role here, for example their family, community and culture. As humans, we do not exist in isolation, but within a particular context or system, from which we cannot be separated (Vygotsky, 1962).

Social constructivism as a postmodern approach also considers that the researcher constructs what he or she observes before assigning meaning to it (Fourie, 1998). The researcher and participants are linked in the research process and knowledge is created through the interaction that takes place between the two (Dean and Rhodes, 1998). In this study, knowledge is co-constructed by both the researcher and participants through conversation. The researcher seeks to look beyond the students' presented realities to explore and discover the underlying beliefs of these realities. The ultimate aim of this is to clarify why at-risk students do not utilise their personal resilience in academia.

According to Hayes and Oppenheim (1997), social constructivism highlights (a) the relationship that forms between the participant and the researcher and (b) the co-construction of meaning as lived by the participant and interpreted by the researcher. This allowed the researcher to examine the data to discover fresh theory. Likewise, the researcher is allowed the freedom to collect data with no preconceived ideas. The researcher needs to connect with participants and listen open-mindedly to what they have to say about their experiences and the realities they construct (Coale, 1992). Previous experiences that students went through in an educational setting will influence how they construct meaning and reality to higher education. This is because the meanings they construct are co-dependant on the context of their lived experiences. For example, if a student is used to a teacher giving second and third opportunities to pass a test, their expectation in higher education will be the same. They will expect multiple opportunities to pass an assignment or test and will act accordingly.

Social constructivism queries any claimed truth that serves as an only explanation to a phenomenon. Therefore, the influence of culture, family and language needs to be acknowledged when students create their own realities. As social processes evolve and change, meaning will also change and develop (Hoffman, 1994).

In the 21st century, students are bombarded with impressions of a world “out there”. Technology has removed the boundaries that historically existed within societies and cultures. Identity is also now formed against the backdrop of how individuals create and recreate their world as they perceive it. Included here are those impressions they get from connecting with other cultures and the global world through technology. Self-reflection as well as impressions that influence these reflections allow individuals to make changes to the meanings they create of their world (Cox and Lyddon, 1997). One can argue that all students have a cell phone and that they are connected to the global world via internet. Yet, as they live in South Africa, a developing country, many students still do not have access to the internet at home.

The premises and characteristics that social constructivism is based on, is that concepts of meaning and knowledge are socially constructed. Social constructivists analyse existing relationships and distinguish between levels of observation and action. They do so by focusing on reflexivity and how knowledge affects the construction of the reality that the individual has constructed of his or her own life (Guzzini, 2002).

Constructivists rely on language to construct and express their lived experiences (Gergen, 1995). Language is the medium through which individuals give meaning to the social constructs they create. They also use language to reflect the views and beliefs of individuals within the society and the community they exist (Efran, Lukens and Lukens, 1988).

Language is therefore context dependent. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis confirms that individuals make sense of their world in terms of their own language. The same words within one language can have a very different meaning in another language and so result in different interpretations and lived experiences. Guzzini (2002) explains:

“Language can neither be reduced to something subjective nor objective. It’s not subjective, since it exists independently of us to the extent that language is always more than its individual usages and prior to them (language exists and changes through our use). It is inter-subjective”.

The researcher used semi-structured interviews and relied on communication and language to allow participants to express their lived experiences and for themes to emerge (Jankowski, Clark, and Ivey, 2000).

## 4. Qualitative Research Methodology

The researcher approached this study from a social constructivist orientation, drawing on the principles of phenomenology. A qualitative research design was considered to be the best choice of methodology as it is primarily exploratory in nature and aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon.

Qualitative research can be described as a systematic approach where reality is regarded as subjective. Qualitative research aims to understand phenomena and the meaning individuals attach to it (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The aim is to see how people experience their world and the meanings they construct. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not include the use of statistical procedures or quantification methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The task of the qualitative researcher is to develop an understanding of the phenomena under investigation. If the researcher strives to understand how individuals interact with the world they live in and how they attach meaning to it, qualitative research is more suitable to uncover the meanings, perceptions and assumptions people have regarding their worlds (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This suggests that the researcher is involved in an intensive experience with his or her participants (Creswell 2007). John Creswell (2007) characterises qualitative research as follows:

- The data are gathered from the source in a natural setting, with the researcher as the key instrument in the gathering and collecting of data
- The data are collected from multiple-sources (for example from documentation, interviews, and by observing the participants) to provide a holistic account of the problem under study, which can then be reviewed
- Qualitative research is not stagnant, but develops dynamically as the researcher uncovers new information and meanings

Qualitative research is more flexible and open to interpretation and uses an inductive form of reasoning. This means that when a phenomenon is observed and data are collected, themes can be identified and conclusions be made. The data gathered are primarily in the form of spoken or written language, and analysis of the data ensues “by identifying and categorizing themes” (Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 2000:42).

The purpose of this study was to obtain rich descriptions of the students' lived experiences of higher education. Qualitative research allowed the researcher to explore the voices of the students. Through language, realities can be expressed. Language is used to not only construct shared views, but also highlight differences. Therefore, realities become each individual's subjective interpretation.

According to Barton (cited in Ungar, 2005), research conducted on resilience in the past, mostly relied on quantitative methodologies and positivist paradigms and was marked by an absence of qualitative inquiry. While quantitative methods increase our understanding of the relationship that exists between constructs, they do not enhance our understanding of resilience as a psychological process. Quantitative methods are also not suitable to address in-depth understanding of the complexity of human behaviour. Barton (cited in Ungar, 2005) reflects: "The sheer multiplicity of potential risk and protective processes and the possible relationships among them (reciprocal, conditional, etc.) places strains on the most complex multivariate, quantitative models. When one enters time as a variable...another layer of complexity emerges."

The researcher considered other relevant information, for example, academic records, background information questionnaires and at-risk information. This was required in order to apply a multi-perspective analysis.

## **5. Reliability and Validity**

For a study to be trustworthy, it needs to be reliable and valid. Reliability and validity are approached differently by qualitative and quantitative research. Credibility in quantitative research depends on the instrument construction while reliability and validity are considered two separate phrases. Reliability in quantitative research refers to the degree in which a measurement is stable and the same if repeated (Kirk and Miller, 1986).

In a qualitative study the researcher becomes the "measuring instrument". What makes a qualitative study trustworthy is the quality of the study and how understanding is generated. Stenbacka (2001:552) explains that the concept of reliability can even be misleading in qualitative research:

"If a qualitative study is discussed with reliability as a criterion, the consequence is rather that the study is no good."

Patton (1990) states that readers will regard a qualitative study as credible if they are confident that the researcher treated the data with sensitivity. This would include that the methods for data analysis accurately represent the subjective experiences of the participants. In qualitative research, the researcher has his or her own subjective point of view. Should the study be repeated, the subjectivity of each researcher would therefore present the “truth” differently each time. Merrick (1999) explains that even if the same researcher repeats the study, the findings would differ. Validity in quantitative research stems from positive tradition and establishes if an instrument construction measures what it intends to measure and if the results are accurate Joppe (2000).

It is not possible to prove the scientific accuracy in qualitative research. The researcher provides arguments by presenting continuous inter-reliant interpretations of phenomena with the aim of creating a subjective, reliable truth (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). The qualitative researcher refers to the following criteria to ensure a credible and trustworthy study:

- Credibility
- Transferability
- Dependability
- Conformability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

## **5.1 Credibility**

The measure of trust and understanding between the researcher and participants was enhanced by the fact that the researcher lectured at the higher education institution where the research was undertaken. The researcher was familiar with both the organisational culture and the participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) confirm that early familiarity between participants and the researcher enhances an understanding and trusting relationship.

The researcher further addressed credibility in this study by creating phases in which data were generated. Data were generated through using different sources. As a result, a richer dataset was provided. Triangulation was used to balance individual limitations (Brewer and Hunter, 1989 and Guba, 1981). The researcher used a variety of sources and the data included student academic records, attendance records, consultation with lecturers, and head of programmes reports. Finally, a semi-

structured interview was conducted with each participant to add a more credible subjective observation (Dervin, 1997).

## **5.2 Transferability**

In quantitative research the underlying positivist concern is to demonstrate that the findings or results can be applied to other situations or populations (Merriam, 2002). For a qualitative study to be trustworthy, the reader of the research (who is interested in the same phenomenon), must be able to connect to the researcher's findings and transfer these to his or her own situation or circumstances (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher needs to communicate a rich description of the phenomenon to the receivers of the information for them to form an accurate understanding of the phenomenon. In this manner they can distinguish and compare these experiences to their own situations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). If the researcher misinterprets the information, the reader will also misunderstand the information and have difficulty to relate it to his or her own situation (Hyson, 2007).

Lincoln and Guba (1985:298) explain that the onus lies with the researcher to provide sufficient descriptive data to make transferability possible. To address transferability in this study, the researcher highlighted the limitations of the study and provided a detailed description of the data collection methods. Documentation is kept on file and available upon request.

## **5.3 Dependability and Conformability**

Qualitative researchers rely on their own interpretation of the phenomenon they research. When reporting their research findings, it is important that researchers ensure that their findings are balanced, un-judgmental, neutral and empathetic (Patton, 1990).

To address this, the researcher described the research plan and how it would be executed. This information serves as an audit trail and consists of the data analysis documents and original transcripts. These are available for the reader to track the research steps and methods used. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this as "conformability audits". While there essentially is no guarantee to judge the validity of

a study, the criteria of transparency, accessibility and accuracy assist in increasing the study's credibility.

## **6. Research Method**

The researcher wanted to understand why students who are resilient in their personal life, did not display resilience when it comes to their academia. The researcher further wanted to explore students' "lived experiences" and gain insight into the obstacles and challenges that students experienced and had to overcome as they embarked into higher education. In particular the researcher wanted to find answers to the following research questions:

- Why do some resilient at-risk students lack academic resilience?
- Can the resilience that at-risk students possess in their personal environments be tapped into to promote academic success? In an attempt to answer these questions the researcher embarked on an exploratory multiple case study.

### **6.1 Exploratory Multiple Case Study**

Yin (2003) affirms that when a study plans to answer "how" and "why" questions, the case study approach is most suitable. In order to study the subjective world of the student in higher education, an exploratory multiple case study approach was therefore applied to identify questions and specific constructs to be used in the analysis of the themes.

Case studies can provide the researcher with an in-depth account of experiences, processes, relationships and events. The choice of a multiple case study approach allowed the researcher to study more than one case. This gave the researcher the freedom to analyse the data for each particular case as well as the data across cases to find and understand parallels and variances between cases (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

"The real value of a case study is that it offers the opportunity to explain why certain outcomes happen – more than just find out what those outcomes are" (Denscombe, 2003).

## **6.2 Sampling**

The researcher chose the purposive sampling method to select participants and approach the study in phases. For the first phase, the convenience sampling method as a subset of purposive sampling was used. This was followed by the criterion sampling method and another subset of the purposive sampling method for phase two.

### **Purposive Sampling**

The researcher chose the purposive sampling method as it is a useful approach for in-depth studies and for seeking information rich cases. As highlighted by Patton (1990), this strategy allowed the researcher to derive central themes. Patton (1990) describes 16 different types of purposive sampling methods.

### **Convenience Sampling**

The ideal for every study would be if the entire population could be included in the study. This however is not possible in most cases, especially if the population is too large. For this study it would suggest all enrolled students in all higher education institutions in South Africa. The researcher made use of this common sampling technique for the first phase of the study because likely participants were readily available. This technique was also inexpensive and time-effective. Altogether these elements are known advantages of the convenience sampling method (Castillo, 2009).

The researcher applied the convenience sampling method to identify participants for the first phase of the study. This was done because the researcher wanted to include as many respondents as possible. (Freedman, 2013).

### **Criterion Sampling**

The subset of the purposive sampling method involves selecting participants deliberately because of the qualities they possess (Given, 2008). The aim of phase two of the study was to select information, rich cases of at-risk students who fail academically, but are resilient in their personal environment. Students who were included in phase two of the study had to fit the following criteria:

- Scoring 70% or higher for the resilience questionnaire
- Having failed three or more assessments across modules for the first semester

or having failed a year and repeating modules

- Not being permitted to sit for two or more exam modules

### **Selection of Cases**

After obtaining ethical clearance from the University of South Africa and Rosebank College (see appendix A), the researcher commenced with participant selection and data gathering. The research focused on first year students and historical second year students who were repeating their first year modules. The researcher had access to 980 potential participants who were attending classes full time at the higher education institution where she was employed. The student database provided a list of first year students who were registered for the year 2013 and a list of historical second year students, who were repeating their first year modules.

### **Phase One:**

During the first phase of the research study, first year students across programmes were visited by the researcher while conducting class visits. They were invited to partake in a resilience questionnaire to identify resilience. This increased the possibility of a larger sample size.

The questionnaire consisted of 30 items that the researcher chose randomly and adapted from Dr W.E. Samuels Academic Resilience Inventory (ARI) that he developed to measure academic resilience (see appendix D). Dr Samuels developed the questionnaire as part of his PhD and pointed out that the instrument were created and selected based on the extent to which it appeared to measure characteristic traits of resilience” (Samuels, 2004).

Domains that are often linked to academic success include relationships with significant others for example family and friends, personality traits and motivation. The 30 items that were selected can be directly linked to these domains. They were presented in no particular order and were straight forward and transparent.

Dr Samuels stated that the number of items included in the questionnaire, was made intentionally large to provide a pool from which the best items could be taken out.

Higher scores are an indication of resilient characteristics. Permission to use and adapt the ARI questionnaire was obtained from Dr Samuels (see appendix C).

### **Scoring of the questions:**

In total, 285 students completed the questionnaire. The researcher scored the resilience questionnaire as follows: *Strongly agree* was given a score of 5 and *strongly disagree* a score of 1. All items bolded were reversed scored, for example strongly agreed was scored a 1 and *strongly disagree* a score of 5. The scores for all items were added to obtain an overall score, a higher score indicated a higher degree of resilience. For the purpose of this study, the researcher included all scores 70% and higher for the second phase in the study to create a sample of resilient students.

Sixty five (65) students did not answer all the items or indicated two options for a question. These questionnaires were discarded and did not form part of the study.

To determine the reliability of the questionnaire, the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was used to measure internal consistency and reliability. An acceptable coefficient value of ( $\alpha = 0,68$ ) were obtained. The results of these questionnaires were used in the second phase of the study to obtain a smaller sample to assist the researcher in identifying rich cases.

### **Phase Two:**

The researcher, viewed the end of the first semester results of all the students who scored 70% and higher on the resilience questionnaire. To be included in phase two of the study, the students had to comply with the following criteria:

- Having failed three or more summative or formative assessments across modules for the first semester and
- Not permitted to sit for two or more modules for semester-end exams as a result of not meeting the minimum qualifying mark of 40 %.

211 of the 285 students who completed the resilience questionnaire obtained a resilience score of 70% or higher. Of these students 30 were selected randomly from different qualification programmes to be included in the next phase of data collection. They were approached to complete a pre-interview questionnaire (see appendix E),

which would assist in the identification of rich data. The 30 students were provided again with information about the study and it was stressed that participation was voluntary.

The questionnaire consisted of 38 items that elicited more information about the participant's family life, understanding of how to use a computer, access to technology and students' academic experience and study habits. The items were grouped according to the areas mentioned.

### **Rich data:**

In total, 30 participants completed the pre-interview questionnaire. Participant responses on each item were compared to identify rich-data cases. Ten participants were selected for further participation based on being identified as most at-risk by means of the pre-interview questionnaire. As each participant's reality of their lived experience is unique validity and reliability was hard to establish and the researcher had to rely on the answers that each participant provided.

### **Phase Three:**

The researcher scheduled face to face Individual appointments for semi-structured interviews with each of the ten participants who were identified as rich data cases for semi-structured interviews. The face to face interviews created an opportunity for the researcher to naturally engage with the participants and gain more meaningful insight into their lived experiences (See examples of guiding questions in appendix F).

The interviews were audio-recorded and notes were taken during the interviews. Six participants kept their appointments. The researcher had to reschedule the interviews with the remaining four participants who did not keep to the scheduled interview times. One participant then indicated that he did not want to be part of the study anymore, while the other three continued to miss their interview appointments.

### **Other Data:**

Other data available from the participants included notes made by various staff members about each student. These were captured on the database system and included academic records as well as personal records. The researcher also consulted

all notes made by lecturers following their consultations with the students. Hoepfl (1997) recommends that considering other available data enriches the quality and the amount of data gathered through interviews.

### **6.3 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the authorities of the institution, prior to the commencement of the study. In addition to the ethical clearance obtained from the institution, the purpose of the study was explained to all prospective participants at the beginning of each phase. Participation in the study was voluntary and all responses were treated with confidentiality. Informed consent was also obtained from participants before questionnaires were administered and before interviews took place. Complete anonymity was not possible as student numbers were required to match survey responses with institutional data, however it was explained to students that no data would be reported in a manner that would disclose their identity.

A counselling psychologist was available on site to support students in case problem themes had to occur. Participants were informed that they would be referred to her for intervention and/or counselling.

### **6.4 Data Analysis of Interview Transcripts**

The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim. The researcher chose to do the transliterating herself so that she would be familiar with the interviews when she started the analysis of each transcribed interview. Information that could lead to the identification of individual participants (e.g. names) were altered to ensure anonymity. Filler sounds (for example “umm”), pauses, and body language was noted in each transcript. By playing back the audio-recording and comparing it to the typed transcripts, the researcher made sure that each transcript was a true reflection of the interview.

The interview transcripts were analysed using the guidelines for grounded theory and qualitative design (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The researcher analysed each interview transcript by reading it line by line and by coding it by means of open coding. The researcher then used a table format to group all the participants' responses per

question. This process assisted the researcher to create a visual presentation of the layers of ideas. An example of a table of grouped responses is provided in the next table:

**Table 2: Example of a Group Response Table**

Respondents ID		Respondents Name	Date of Interview
1		xxxxx	x
2		xxxxx	x
3		xxxxx	x
ID	Question Numbers	Response	Code
1	1	xxxxx	1. Tertiary Education = Good Life 2. Improve my life standard
2	1	xxxxxxx	1. Tertiary Education = Good Life 2. Improve my life standard
3	1	xxxxxx	1. Tertiary Education = Good Life 2. Improve my life standard

The open codes that developed through manual analysis were then transferred to the qualitative data computer programme NVivo (Version 10 for windows), as NVivo has the ability to classify, sort and arrange qualitative data.

### **Emerging Themes Using Constructivist Grounded Theory**

While there are philosophical differences within the social constructivist phenomenology and the constructivist grounded theory approaches, it is possible to reconcile phenomenology and grounded theory. Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory is closer to phenomenology especially where the researcher and participant co-construct meanings. According to Frost (2013) cited in the ISSB Bulletin: Supplement to International Journal of Human Behavioural a pluralistic approach is acceptable when wanting to interpret human experience in qualitative research as it allows for flexibility in search of meaning.

Using the constructivist grounded theory as a triangulation of method and approach helps to enrich the material. Glaser and Strauss (1967) define grounded theory as “the discovery of theory from data”. Grounded theory is often employed in qualitative research to generate theory from the data collected or to add to an existing theory (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008). The purpose is to increase understanding of analysed concepts. Charmaz, a student of Glaser and Strauss, is regarded a leading advocate for the constructivist grounded theory. Charmaz (1995b) explains that the key of the constructivist grounded theory is to keep the researcher close to the participants under study. The researcher “coproduced” rich data and became immersed in the data. This was significant for the final research outcome.

## **7. Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the steps that were required to conform to the objectives of this study and included the overall survey plan. First an overview was given of postmodernism and social constructivism in which the study was embedded. It was pointed out that the study followed a qualitative methodology approach. The chapter went on to describe the data collection process. An exploratory multiple case study approach was applied collect the data employing the purposive sampling method. Data collection comprises of three phases. In the first phase resilient students were identified, in the second phase at-risk students who are resilient in their personal life were identified and in the third phase semi-structured interviews with six participants who were identified as rich data cases were conducted. In the following chapter the six participants are introduced and a summary of their lived experiences is presented followed by the research findings.

# Chapter 4

## “Voices” of the Participants

### 1. Introduction

The following chapter is based on the transcribed interviews, student survey questionnaires and student records to give an overview of each of the six participants' experiences of higher education and to place this in context of their background. Each participant is introduced followed by a description of the participants' at-risk and resilience factors.

Findings for each participant are classified into the various themes that emerged from the transcribed interviews, student survey questionnaires and student records. The highlighted themes may not be the only true reflection represented about the experiences of each participant. The researcher acknowledges that another researcher may highlight different themes, depending on the specific lens through which he or she views the participants.

The first theme involves motivational factors as reasons why participants embarked onto higher education. This theme also represents the perceived value that a further qualification would hold for the participants. This is followed by the participants' perceptions of their own academic preparedness for higher education and their perceived academic and self-concepts. The next themes pertain to student-lecturer interaction; support from the institution; family support; and the influence of social life and peers on students' academic journey. All these themes are in line with the theory discussed in the literature review.

Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter to protect the identities of the participants.

### 2. The Participants

## 2.1 Masego

*“... If I lose this chance that means I have lost some of the moments of a good life of mine.”*

### 2.1.1 Background

Masego, 23 years old, was enrolled in a three year diploma in Accounting and Financial Computing. She resided with both her parents, her sister and two children, and a brother with his children. Her father’s highest qualification was grade 7 and her mother’s was grade 12. Masego was the second family member who had the opportunity of obtaining a higher education qualification.

She wanted to obtain her qualification because she wanted to be educated and live a good life. She wanted to continue studying towards a degree once she obtained her diploma. She failed three modules in 2013. To stay motivated, she organised her study time, according to a timetable. She never gave up when she struggled.

*“I motivate myself to study by organising myself a study timetable and manage my time to studying and balance my time of studying and other time.”*

Masego admitted to having challenges within her family. She felt that the family was not supportive of her studies and was disinterested in her and her studies. Her body language and the look in her eyes revealed that she felt rejected.

*“I never talk about it because nobody is interested.” [Shoulder shrugging; hands gesturing “I don’t understand”; far off look; avoiding eye contact]*

Masego did not have a good relationship with her father. She explained that he was not a good provider; neither financially nor emotionally. She would have preferred things to be different. Her mother was ill and needed constant care.

*“It will be different, because I will stop asking myself questions like why he is doing this and why he is not supporting me or anyone of the family...”*

Masego’s brother supported her in a limited way and as he was able to. He did show

some interest in her studies and well-being. He provided her with money for her studies and transportation when he could. When she ran away from home, her brother was the one who contacted the institution. He wanted to find out if they knew where she was as she had not returned home and he was concerned about her.

In a discussion with her brother, he indicated that while it was not the first time that Masego had run away, she had never been gone for such a long period. He further explained that their father had a problem with Masego and the way she dressed (“as a man”). Masego liked to wear men’s clothes and spoke with a deep voice. He also mentioned that their father expected everybody in the family to act the way he dictated. Masego’s brother stated that the father dictated what members in the family should feel, whether they could feel happy or sad. Masego’s father had not spoken to Masego’s mother or sister in three years. Neither Masego nor her brother knew the reason for this. Masego overheard her mother telling her aunt that she (Masego’s mother) wished that she had killed Masego when she was a baby. This shocked Masego and left her feeling very angry. She maintained that this was the reason why she ran away the last time and did not want to return home. [Masego stayed with a friend at the time of consultation with the campus academic development coordinator and the social- worker].

Around the house, Masego explained, she had many responsibilities to assist the family with day-to-day-chores, for example doing some cleaning and cooking for the family and taking care of her siblings’ children and her mother. When asked when she found the time to study, she said that she started to study at nine in the evening and that she tried to finish by two in the morning.

*“I’ve did my study timetable to start studying at nine o’ clock late until two o’ clock or after two. Yes... but some of the days during the days I get time to study.”*

She did have free time on weekends and usually spent this time with friends playing soccer or visiting a tavern to drink. She preferred having boys as friends and had one acquaintance who is a young woman. While this girlfriend was very supportive, they only saw each other once or twice a month. Because her friend resided in another town; they did not communicate regularly.

## **Masego as an at-risk student**

Masego came from a dysfunctional family where she felt rejected and undervalued both as an individual and as a child. Because of her situation at home and her feeling of being unrecognised as an individual, she ran away from home on more than one occasion. Her brother's explanation that her father openly rejected her, emphasised that she was personally challenged. Her brother also explained that she regularly abused alcohol and marijuana. Her mother was ill and dependent on others and this situation placed greater responsibility on Masego

Masego traveled more than 15km to the institution, and relied on public transport (including a bus and taxi). If there was a strike or taxi violence, she was stranded. Her brother only provided her with her transport money. She indicated to the social worker that there were days that she had neither food nor money to buy food.

There was no one in her family to advise her on the academic challenges she faced as a first generation student. She had access to a computer at home, but not to the internet. Masego failed two of eight modules in 2012 (her first year) and four to seven modules in 2013 (her second year).

## **Masego's resilience**

Masego enrolled for a diploma in 2012 and was motivated to complete this qualification and to then further her studies. She explained that she set high goals for herself. She managed to adapt herself to challenges in her personal and family life by remaining positive and making use of resources that were available to her. Even running away from home was a way in which she demonstrated her ability to plan and activate external sources as a support system.

She did not perceive the challenges in her life as insurmountable. Masego portrayed herself as having a valued self-esteem. For example, she continued to dress and behave in the way that she was comfortable with. She indicated that she was "happy" with whom she was, despite her father's disapproval about the way she dressed "like a man" and despite overhearing her mother telling her aunt that she wished she had "killed Masego as a baby". Masego considered herself a survivor. In 2012, she seemed to cope better with her academic curriculum than in 2013. She attended classes more regularly in 2012 than in 2013. This observation was made by her accountant lecturer.

Her results for accountancy confirmed that she passed the module well in 2012. However, in 2013, she failed accountancy in the first semester. Although she took the necessary actions like goal setting, planning, self-regulation and engaging with situations where the outcome could not be predicted, her characteristics varied between resilience and relinquishing.

### **2.1.2 Emerging Themes**

The following themes emerged from Masego's interview, the student survey questionnaire, and the student records:

#### **2.1.2.1 Motivational factors for wanting to obtain a tertiary qualification**

Masego believed that obtaining a tertiary qualification would provide her with a good life. She experienced her family environment as challenging and it caused internal conflict. She wanted to obtain a higher qualification to escape from her environment. She also had plans to further her studies once she received her diploma.

She chose the particular programme because she found accountancy easy to understand in high school. She indicated that she felt confident that she could master the learning material, because she successfully did so before.

*“Because at school I understood accounting and a commerce subject than other subject ... then I choose this because I knew I was going to do the same subject that I was doing at the high school.”*

#### **2.1.2.2 Perceived academic preparedness and self-concept**

Masego rated her academic skills as good and said that she believed that she would make a success of her studies. She further believed that her past experience with accountancy and commerce subjects at high school laid a foundation for her to build on. Masego was therefore surprised when she received lower marks and blamed her personal circumstances for failing and not obtaining higher marks. She acknowledged that the institution assisted her by providing opportunities to develop her computer skills. The institution also assisted her with an academic support program to develop her study methods.

#### **2.1.2.3 Student-lecturer interaction**

Masego thought that the lecturers at the institution were qualified, but that not all of them were well-prepared for their lectures. She stated that some lecturers read from their textbooks or study manual and said that their classes did not lend itself to enough interactive learning activities. This emphasised the fact that 21st century students' seek to engage with their lecturers and learning material. She specifically referred to the lecturer who lectured economics. Masego was not interested in the module and felt demotivated attending this class. One of the reasons she gave, was the lecturer's lecturing style.

*"...but economics ... sometimes I feel like why we need to have this class?"  
The lecturer is adding to the demotivation as his lecturing style is boring and not student-centred." "Yes it is the lecturer. He does not give us some examples ... sometimes he reads straight from the manual for the whole session and does not give some examples."*

Students' wish for meaningful interaction with lecturers. Masego had already perceived the economics module in a negative light and it was clear that the lecturer did not change her perception of the module. The lecturer did not provide a positive learning environment to change her perception about economics. Masego failed the module and had to repeat it.

#### **2.1.2.4 Perceived support from the institution**

Masego felt that she did not always have the full support of the institution. She found that access to resources on campus to support her in her studies was limited and not always available. Since Masego did not have internet access at home, she relied on the internet services that the institution provided to research information for her assignments. She reported that there were not enough computers available to students and that the environment in the library was too noisy and not conducive for working on assignments or studying. For her to finish an assignment on time she had to queue to gain access to a computer to do research and complete her assignment. She felt that this had an impact on submitting the assignment on time.

*"mmmmm... what I don't like? Sometimes the service is poor. In the library the noise and sometimes a shortage of computers ... And when you need something, sometimes you stand in long queues yes..."*

### **2.1.2.5 Support from the family**

Masego felt that her family offered very little support to her. This demotivated her as she felt that they almost never asked about her results. She also never talked to them about her studies, due to the lack of interest they displayed. She would have liked it if they showed some interest in her studies. This would make her feel that they did care for her and that they supported her.

*“...if they cared they were supposed to ask me about my results ... Sometimes they don't even ask when I am writing, when are you getting your results, how are your results from the beginning of the year? No one is asking.”*

Masego viewed her mother and brother as the only two family members who did take care of her emotionally and financially in their own way. The paradox here is that although she overheard her mother telling her aunt, that she wished she had killed Masego at birth, Masego still felt that her mother in some way cared about her.

She felt that her father did not care about her or the rest of the family. Masego might have come to this conclusion because she mentioned that her father has not spoken to her mother or her sister for three years (this was confirmed by her brother). The reason for his silence was not known to them. It is the researcher's impression that they did not question this matter, but simply accepted the situation. Their behaviour might be linked to culture specific practices, where in some cultures parents refrain from discussing their problems with the children.

From the resentment and bitterness in her voice it was clear that Masego and her father did not have a relationship. The look in her eyes conveyed that she would have liked things to be different. Masego thought that if her father had shown some interest in her and the family, things would have been different for the family. Masego felt that her brother was the only one who really supported her.

### **2.1.2.6 Social life and peer influence**

During the week, Masego had several duties to fulfil as a member of her family, like cooking and cleaning. She also had to take care of her mother, who was sick and dependant, and her siblings' children. On weekends she went out with friends. She

preferred boys as friends and said they usually played soccer and went to a tavern to drink and smoke. It is possible that Masego felt that she could then be the person she wanted to be. Although the researcher did not question this, it was very clear that Masego struggled with gender identity

Masego felt that going out with her friends over weekends did not influence her studies, as this did not occur every weekend. Her brother held a different opinion and felt that Masego drank too much and that this influenced her conduct and commitment to her studies. When she had an exam or test, Masego said that she stayed home to study. Masego had one special girlfriend who meant a lot to her. She did not see this friend very often as she stayed in another town.

## **2.2 Katlego**

*“I want to work in an office”*

### **2.2.1 Background**

Katlego, 20 years old, lived with her mother and father. Her father’s highest qualification was grade 12 and her mother’s was a certificate. She enrolled for a one year higher certificate in office administration and was the first member of her family to attend a tertiary institution. She enrolled for the qualification because she believed that a tertiary qualification would better her life and make her financially independent. Katlego wanted to be successful in life and her goal was to work in an office.

*“...because I want to work at this office...”*

Although Katlego stated that her parents could afford to pay for her studies, it is important to mention that the institution offered the course that she enrolled for at a special price and that the family was economically not well off.

Katlego had never worked with a computer before, nor did she know how to use the internet. She admitted that technology was a challenge for her and that she had no access to a computer or internet at home.

Katlego also indicated that she struggled to understand her lecturers because English was not her mother tongue. This was evident during the interview when she found it

difficult to follow the interview questions. She particularly found it hard to express herself.

*[Long pause] [Looking down at the floor] “How do you if you want to study, how do you get yourself to say yes now I’m going to study? [Pause] [Nervous sound] I want to study... I’m studying.”*

Katlego failed five of her six modules for the first semester 2013. In spite of this she still believed that she would complete the course successfully and that she was doing well. She mentioned that she strongly relied on books and lectures to provide her with information in order to help her to overcome her challenge with the language barrier and to complete the higher certificate successfully. For this reason, she regularly attended classes.

Katlego enjoyed her student experience and found the modules interesting. However, she mentioned that business calculation was not on her list of favourites. Katlego’s non-verbal body language communicated that although she was happy and enjoyed her life as a student, she was very aware of the fact that she struggled with English. She said that this was a challenge she wanted to overcome.

### **Katlego as an at-risk student**

Katlego fits the profile of an academically at-risk student as she failed five of her six modules. She found it hard to understand English, the instructional language of the institution. She was hopeful that if she read many books and attended her classes, she would overcome this barrier and be academically successful.

The fact that her technology resources at home were limited, also placed her at a disadvantage. She relied on public transport and the distance she had to travel to get to the institution was more than 15 kilometres. Katlego also fit the profile of a first generation student.

### **Katlego’s resilience**

Katlego demonstrated resilience as she remained positive. She believed in herself and that she would be successful in obtaining the qualification, despite her challenges. Katlego struggled with the instructional language -- to the point where she could barely

follow a conversation. Yet she attended her classes regularly and took action by applying herself to overcome this challenge.

She had the support of her parents and a cousin. Support from an academic point of view was limited in her immediate family environment. The only advice they could give her and to support her, was by referring her to books to access information. The problem with this was that most of the books was also written in English.

The programme she chose was something that she wanted to do and during the interview it was clear that she would do what it takes to overcome all the challenges she faced.

### **2.2.2 Emerging Themes**

The following themes emerged from Katlego's interview, the student survey questionnaire, and the student records:

It is important to note that during the interview Katlego found it very hard to follow the interview questions and did not manage to express herself. Considering that English is not her mother tongue, she found the language barrier quite problematic. She was very self-conscious throughout the interview. She frequently rubbed her hands, avoided eye contact, and looked nervous.

#### **2.2.2.1 Motivational factors for wanting to obtain a tertiary qualification**

Katlego said that she wanted to be successful in life. She felt that obtaining a higher certificate in office administration would be a step in the right direction. She wanted a better life for herself and she wanted to be financially self-sustainable. The goals and expectancies that she set for herself, extrinsically motivated her to reach her goal. Katlego said that wished to find employment in an office. There was a strong sense that Katlego associated working in an office with a form of status

*“...because I want to... [Pause] work at this office...”*

Katlego struggled with the institution's language of instruction and deliberately took action by engaging in behaviour that would help her to achieve her goals. She believed that if she spent time on her studies (specifically concentrating on reading) she would be successful in obtaining her certificate. The fact that Katlego found the environment

challenging from a language point of view was the very reason why she engaged in activities that she reckoned would assist her to overcome this challenge.

*“I’m reading many books to get information and I’m taking notes.”*

Another strategy she applied was to motivate herself by talking to herself. For example, when asked how she motivated herself to study she answered as follows:

*“I’m saying the word... I’m going to study.”*

#### **2.2.2.2 Perceived academic preparedness and self-concept**

Katlego found her tertiary experience very positive. One of the reasons for this was that she was engaging with subjects that she had never been exposed to before. Another reason was the fact that she was learning “new” things. It was evident that Katlego enjoyed the new environment where her world (as she perceived it) was enriched with new experiences. Katlego indicated in the student questionnaire that she thought her high school prepared her for higher education. She however felt that the institution was much bigger than what she had experienced before. It is possible that Katlego’s exposure to new experiences in her community environment was limited.

Katlego stated that she did not find her course difficult and that she was coping with it. Despite the fact that she failed five of her six modules for the first semester in 2013, she was confident that she would obtain the qualification in the one year that was allocated to complete the course. It was clear that Katlego over-estimated her own ability as she was repeating half of her modules in 2014. She did however pass the module in speedwriting with a distinction. She also passed six other modules. These achievements most likely balanced her self-concept and supported her to believe that she was capable of finishing the qualification with success, regardless of the language barrier. These were the thoughts that fuelled her resilience.

Katlego found the instructional language, English, a challenge. To overcome this, she indicated that she took notes in classes and consulted different books to help her.

*“I’m reading many books to get information.”*

She believed that engaging with different books would help her overcome her challenge with the instructional language. Although the interview was very challenging,

Katlego displayed determination to make the researcher understand that she believed that she would eventually succeed. This determination is an attribute of the resilient factor.

### **2.2.2.3 Student-lecturer interaction**

This theme describes Katlego's experience of the lecturing environment at the institution. Katlego described the lecturers as "good" because they provided her with adequate information and she felt that when she was not attending classes she was missing out. From the interview, one got the impression that Katlego was very focussed on overcoming her challenge with the instructional language. She felt that the only way she could accomplish this was by attending her classes and "by getting information".

Core to her assessment of the teaching and learning environment was the fact that lecturers helped her to overcome her language barrier. They provided her with some understanding of the content.

*"...because when I'm not in class, lecture are teaching other people... I'm not understand what ... lecture teaching other people ... because I'm not there in class."*

It appears that Katlego believed that if she was not in class she would never be able to make sense of the learning material by herself.

### **2.2.2.4 Perceived support from the institution**

Katlego thought she was getting enough support from the institution, although she could not specify to what extent they were supporting her.

*"...because they supporting me about... I'm honest."*

The fact that she could not explain her point, again stresses her challenge with the language. In response to the student survey questionnaire she indicated that she did not know whom to approach on campus for support; for example, if she had a problem with learning material, she was not sure whom to consult. As a first generation student, she was not aware of the different services and support structures that were available

on campus.

#### **2.2.2.5 Support from the family**

Katlego's mother and father were her primary caretakers. In response to the question how they supported her with her studies, she indicated that they advised her to read more. It seemed that Katlego's family's advice of seeking information and help from books, was the only way they knew to support her academically

Katlego mentioned that one of her cousins assisted her with business calculations, but that nobody in the family could assist her with computer skills. She had never worked on a computer before and being exposed to a computer was new to her. It is important to note that due to the nature of Katlego's course, most of her subjects were computer based. Since she was enrolled for a higher certificate in office administration, computer knowledge was a core component in her course.

#### **2.2.2.6 Social life and peer influence**

Katlego did not have any commitments and explained that when she was not studying, she was playing soccer or netball. She also spent her free time by going to town with her friends. She did not think her free time interfered with her studies or influenced her academic performance. Because of Katlego's challenge with English, it was very difficult to determine if her friends were influencing her and to what extent.

### **2.3 Cosmas**

*"Most people in South Africa they are not doing the career that they want to. So they are not happy. So I want to be happy."*

#### **2.3.1 Background**

Cosmas, an energetic 24 year old male with a passion for sport, was enrolled in a two year diploma in sports management. Cosmas lived with his mother and one of his two sisters and her children. His father has a diploma and his mother a degree. Cosmas chose the course because it was an area of interest for him. He believed that if you do something that you are passionate about, the course would be easier and you would

be happy.

*“Because I’m very passionate about sports and I think... eh ... for a person to be doing something that they love, will be much easier. Like maybe doing something like accounting, which I’m not passionate about ... so it’s much easier and when I qualify and do work, it’s also going to show in my work. Because most people in South Africa they are not doing the career that they want to. So they are not happy. So I want to be happy.”*

Cosmas believed that a tertiary qualification would make him more knowledgeable about life in general. An additional motivational factor was his baby daughter. He was not supporting her financially at the time of the research because of the fact that he was a student and earned no income. The baby resided with her mother, but Cosmas did spend time with her every weekend (except during exam times when he had to study).

He wished to provide his daughter with a good future. Cosmas enrolled for the first time in 2011. In 2012, he repeated all his first year modules. In 2013 he was repeating both second year modules and modules from his first year. He acknowledged that he experienced his first year as very challenging and that he was not at all prepared for tertiary education. He thought the class hours were too long. He said that he did not fully comprehend that modules or subjects were presented per semester and that there was no second or third term to catch up if you had failed a module in the first semester.

*“I think for me there was no foundation. Like I was trying because I am used to this thing when you come from high school ... like there are four terms in high school, so you know if you don’t pass first term, you know I will pass second term. So I use to do like that so here I did not understand the concept of you have to pass your test to qualify for the exam. So I think that was a bit difficult...”*

Cosmas placed significant value on lecturers’ abilities and the quality of the lectures he received in the classroom. During his first year, in the first semester, he had one lecturer for all his modules. He believed that this has placed him at a disadvantage academically. He explained that his results improved in the second semester when he was lectured by more than one lecturer. He also maintained that the quality of teaching

and learning that he received in the classroom made a difference.

*“...like I had one lecturer for I think ... 11 [pause] 22 modules... Because we do 11 ehh... no...like six [counting on fingers] eight... 14 modules in one year. So I think that was a bit also demoti... [Pause] like it wasn't ... because sitting in one class for the whole day like ... it is not refreshing.”*

*“I think basically for me it is not about the institution, it is about the people that lecture you. Like now I have different lecturers and all of them giving information in a certain way I understand it. And all of them, their teaching skills. Because everybody teaches differently so I learn to different teachers like this and this and this one. So all the information is getting in now.”*

For Cosmas smaller classes were the answer to some of the challenges he had faced in understanding the content of the modules that he repeated.

*“It became much easier to study because like they were telling me you must do this do that ... So ya, because we were not a big class (we were just only three or four) so the lecturer can sit one on one and tell us no you must improve here, you must. And then that's what I did.”*

Cosmas experienced support from both his mother and sisters. He felt that the practical things they did for him helped considerably. He also acknowledged the fact that although his sister was studying towards her doctorate in biology and that this made him feel inferior at times, his sister encouraged him to be the best he could be in his own right. He explained that this helped him to overcome these feelings of inferiority. Cosmas also believed that forming strong relationships with fellow students could build a network in the sports industry/community and that this could be advantageous to all the students. Cosmas valued a community that shared information.

### **Cosmos as an at- risk student**

It took Cosmas three years to complete a two year diploma. In 2011, he failed seven of 13 modules and in 2012 he repeated these modules but failed four of seven modules. In 2013, he repeated all the outstanding modules and passed.

Cosmas came from a single parent household. At the age of 24 he was a full time

student with a child to think of while having no income. Extra responsibilities that he had to take on was taking care of his younger siblings and household chores, which took up a lot of his time. He had no internet access at home and had to do all his research for assignments on campus or in an internet café. Although he attended classes, he seldom took notes in class and did not plan his study times.

### **Cosmo's resilience**

Though Comas failed his first year, he did not give up but continued his studies. When he failed his second year, he continued with the third year of the two year diploma. Cosmas set high goals for himself. He desired to have a career in sport and to address challenges that impacted on sports management in South Africa. In spite of the academic challenges that he faced, he continued to repeat the modules that he failed in pursuit of his goal.

During the interview Cosmas acknowledged the fact that during his first year he was unprepared for the demands of higher education. He did not do enough to overcome these challenges. He also mentioned the supportive role that his sister played in his life and how she motivated him to believe in himself and that he does have the ability to complete his diploma successfully. Cosmas also discovered that collaborating with peers can help one to overcome some of the challenges that you encounter in higher education.

### **2.3.2 Emerging Themes**

The following themes emerged from Cosmas's interview, the student survey questionnaire, and the student records:

#### **2.3.2.1 Motivational factors for wanting to obtain a tertiary qualification**

Cosmas wanted to obtain a tertiary qualification because he believed that being educated was important to secure employment.

*"I want to be educated so that I can also work."*

Cosmas felt that knowledge and being qualified was the pathway to secure a career with a future where one could work oneself into higher positions. For him it was not just

about the money, but also about engaging in a career that one is passionate about. Cosmas did not only consider the extrinsic motivational factors, but also the intrinsic factors, which played a role in motivating him. He chose a qualification in sports management because sport was his passion and he believed that studying something that one is passionate about, would make it easier.

Job satisfaction was important to Cosmas. Apart from seeking job security, he also wanted to experience job satisfaction. He believed that many people in South Africa, although they have obtained a qualification, were not satisfied and happy with what they were doing. He wanted to be involved in what he was doing.

*“... When I qualify and do work, it’s also going to show in my work, because most people in South Africa they are not doing the career that they want to. So they are not happy. So I want to be happy.”*

Cosmas became a father in 2012 and this added to motivate him to study. He felt that being qualified would place him in a position to provide and take care of his child, which also meant securing a future for her.

### **2.3.2.2 Perceived academic preparedness and self-concept**

Embarking onto higher education was a “fun” experience for Cosmas. He enjoyed being exposed to new people. However, getting used to the academic demands during his first year (2011) was a challenge.

He explained that he experienced the academic cycle as very different to that of high school. He said that he was not prepared for the (different) way in which academic activities were planned in a higher education environment. He felt that he lacked the foundation that had to adequately prepare him for the demands of higher education. He specifically found it difficult to make the transition from high school to higher education. He was used to four terms in a year, which allowed more than one opportunity to pass a subject.

*“I am use to this thing when you come from high school ... like there are four terms in high school, so you know if you don’t pass first term, you know I will pass second term. So I use to do like that so here I did not understand the concept of you have to pass your test to qualify for the exam. So I think that*

*was a bit difficult...*

In response to the question whether he believed that he got what it takes to obtain the qualification, Cosmas answered with a definite “Yes!” He explained that the reasons for this were that he was motivated and passionate about sport and that he would like to change the way in which sport was managed in South Africa.

*“... things I want to change within the sporting circle within South Africa ... because I feel the people they are running the sports; they are not qualified. Yes they are knowledgeable, but there’s a difference between knowing sports and*

*being qualified. So I want to be one of those people who changes sports for South Africa so that everybody can enjoy it. Because in Europe they take sports as a business. So I also want sports in South Africa or in Africa as in general to be taken as a business.”*

It appears that in 2011 Cosmas got so caught up and over-optimistic in seeing himself as a “change agent” in South African sports that he did not consider the academic outcomes and complexity level of the activities he had to accomplish before he could reach his goal.

In 2012 Cosmas realised that his expectations did not match the effort he had put into his studies. He compared studying to a habit that one must get used to.

*“mmmm... firstly, in the first year, it was very demanding, but as I told you, as you get used to something, it just becomes a habit. Like if you do something every day, it becomes a habit. So you not... you don’t feel the demands anymore.”*

He admitted that he did not play his part in taking responsibility for his own learning.

*“Well I wouldn’t lie. I think it’s on my part, because I think I didn’t do enough to find out what is happening and all these things...”*

Cosmos was convinced that he would complete the two year qualification despite the academic setbacks that he experienced. It appeared as if the time it would take for him

to accomplish his qualification did not distract him, there seemed to be no urgency as he used words such as “eventually”.

### **2.3.2.3 Student-lecturer interaction**

In 2011, Cosmas had one lecturer for all the modules he was enrolled for in the first semester of his first year. He felt that this negatively impacted on his studies and contributed to the fact that he failed the modules. He became bored sitting in one classroom and wanted to be exposed to different lecturers and lecturing styles.

Cosmas justified this by stating that the classroom environment should be about how lecturers motivate and lecture their students. He felt that their guidance through different teaching and learning styles contributed to student success.

*“I think basically for me it is not about the institution, it is about the people that lecture you. Like now I have different lecturers and all of them giving information in a certain way I understand it. And all of them, their teaching skills. Because everybody teaches differently so I learn to different teachers like this and this and this one. So all the information is getting in now.”*

Cosmas explained another factor that played a role was the smaller classrooms. He motivated that lecturers who gave individual attention in the classroom helped him to improve his marks. It appeared that Cosmas wished to be spoon-fed and that he demanded individual attention. This could also be linked to the fact that he enrolled for a course that gave him pleasure, and that he consequently believed it would be easy. Cosmas felt that the fact that a lecturer could guide you personally and show you exactly where you needed to improve contributed to his success in the second year of his study.

*“It became much easier to study because like they were telling me you must do this do that ... So ja, because we were not a big class (we were just only three or four) so the lecturer can sit one on one and tell us no you must improve here, you must. And then that’s what I did.”*

### **2.3.2.4 Perceived support from the institution**

Cosmas indicated in the student survey, that he did not know whom to approach on the campus if he experienced a challenge of administrative, academic or personal nature. Even so, Cosmas did have a positive view of the institution. He enjoyed the stimulation of meeting new people and the multi-cultural environment. For Cosmas it is ...*“not about the institution...”* He emphasised that it was all about the lecturers and the quality of teaching and learning that happened in the classroom.

Cosmas also admitted that students should take responsibility for themselves, and that this was something he only took serious after failing his first year.

Cosmas reflected further that he was not familiar with some of the processes that students had to follow, for example how to use “Turnitin”, an online plagiarism detector used by the institution to assist students and lecturers in detecting plagiarism. He simply submitted his assignments and did not bother to find out how “Turnitin” worked.

Only when he failed modules and did not obtain entry to the exam, did he understand the importance of following procedures. It was only at that stage that he took the responsibility of finding out how the “Turnitin” system worked.

### **2.3.2.5 Support from the family**

Financially, both his mother and sister supported Cosmas. Cosmas did not mention his father. At the time of the research, Cosmas’s sister was enrolled for a PhD in biology. This made Cosmas feel inferior and he thought of himself as less intelligent than his sister. However, his mother and sister both motivated him to realise that every individual has a purpose in life.

For Cosmas it was the little things that his mother and sister did that supported him.

*“...when it is time for me to study, they will do little things like take the volume of the TV down. And then everybody is just quiet so that I can also concentrate, but it mustn’t be too quiet because then if something disrupts you, then you are going to freak out. So ja, they give me all the support I need.”*

From the manner in which Cosmas made the above statement, the researcher reflected on the probability that Cosmas, as the youngest child, might have grown up

as a spoilt child. This observation is supported by the way in which he described how his mother and sister motivated him and in his emphasis on things being easy

### **2.3.2.6 Social life and peer influence**

Cosmas believed the interaction he had with his peers formed part of his support structure at the institution. He stated that belonging to a group who shared his sentiment for sport added value and could mean future possibilities and networking opportunities for him in the sport community.

By interacting on a regular basis, members of the group could share ideas, information and knowledge and in this way support each other academically.

*“...we’ll talk on the phone and they will ask me and I don’t know the answer. Then I look it up in my book and then there is the answer. Then we share ideas. So it is easier when you share ideas with somebody. You share study tips ... how does he study and how do I study. Then we mix it up. So ja, it helps, because we share ideas.”*

## **2.4 Portia**

*“I don’t have a life”*

### **2.4.1 Background**

Portia, 27 years, was in her second year and studying towards a diploma in commerce marketing management. She resided with her father and two sisters, their children and her daughter who was three years old at the time of the research study. She still had contact with the biological father of her daughter, but they were no longer in a relationship.

Portia and her twin brother were the youngest in the family of five children. Her biological mother passed away when she and her twin brother were two years old. Her father remarried and moved away, so he did not reside with the children.

*“Then my dad ... after my mom passing away ... my dad... he was not living with us. At the moment he was working somewhere. We were left with my*

*aunt...*

Portia tried numerous times to complete a higher education qualification, but with no success.

*“I started in Vaal Tech after ... no I did... [Very emotional; cries. The researcher stops the interview to allow the participant time to recompose herself] Okay, after matric I upgraded two subjects’ maths and science. Then I did well in them. Then I went to Vaal Tech after completing that. At Vaal, I did intro to engineering. Then from there on I did for two years that I have completed. Then I came back home, studied through UNISA. UNISA I did only for eight months, because I had financial problems. So I decided just to leave everything... and stayed at home for about three months.”*

Her father remarried twice and Portia found it difficult to build a relationship with her two stepmothers. From the following statement, it is clear that she resented her second stepmother.

*“...then he [rubs hands; irritated] left that... He left the wife [laughing] I nearly said that woman. He left the wife, then he came back home...”*

Portia struggled to build a relationship with her father as he was absent for most of her childhood years. Though she relied on him for financial support, she felt that she could not trust him to pay for her study fees as he did not always pay on time.

*“... But sometimes he is relaxing, like no it’s only a month, he will make a plan. The next month, like okay. The next month come, he doesn’t make a plan. You sit with that thought of having to be kicked out of school maybe or saying that you cannot write your exam because you didn’t pay ... you didn’t pay your fees. It’s stressful, because you think: I studying, what am I studying...? Why am I studying? Because I know that I won’t be writing my exams because I didn’t pay my fees.”*

At home, Portia cooked, cleaned and looked after her child and the children of her sisters. She felt that her family mistreated her and that no one supported her in her studies. She felt that no one considered that she had needs too.

*“My sisters are there. They not helping [resentment in voice]. So, in that sense, it’s like I’m hating the situation at home... I’m hating the people I live with, cause they are not helping me to do... they are not dedicating the work with me. So it’s kind of I am their slave. That’s how I feel when I am at home [tears in her eyes]. Nobody will say ‘What you want to do on weekends, I’ll babysit, then you can go watch a movie or something.’ Nobody says that.”*

Portia failed six of the eight modules for her programme in the first semester that she was going to repeat in 2014. She explained that she found the numeric modules (for example accountancy) more challenging than the theory modules. She admitted that the course was more challenging in the sense that the volume of work to be covered was far more than what she expected. She added that she also found it challenging to manage her time. She did not attend classes regularly because of the responsibilities at home. Although she had access to a computer and internet at home, she found that she did not know how to use it properly.

Portia wanted to make a success of her studies and considered studying at the current institution, her last opportunity to obtain a qualification. It is her hope that obtaining this qualification will free her from her situation at home situation. She wanted a success story.

*“I think for me it makes me want to do more for me: To have good qualifications, then move out, get my own place, get my own life, but I hope it is not too late. My plan was 20 five. I have to have made something of my life. Maybe get a new house, get a stable place, a job, a car maybe... So that didn’t happen... I am 20 seven. I still have the next year and that other year. I know I will be looking for jobs so that will be challenging that I know. So ja [rubs hands; looks hopeless]”*

### **Portia as an at- risk student**

Portia’s family environment appears to be dysfunctional. Her mother passed away at the age of two and her father remarried almost immediately. Portia was taken from the family environment she knew and placed with an aunt. In a sense, she lost both parents simultaneously. Portia felt disconnected from her very traditional father and when she talked about him, the resentment in her voice was recognisable. From the way that she

described the family, it was clear that she felt that she was mistreated. She commented that the situation at home depressed her and that her daughter was the only reason why she had not given up on life.

*“So everything that I do, like every time that I do not want to wake up, [signs of emotion] she is the reason that ...” [rubbing hands and trying hard to control tears and emotions].*

On several occasions Portia migrated from one institution to another. She also repeated modules and at the end of the first semester she had failed three of the five modules she was enrolled for in 2013. During the second semester, Portia asked for a transfer to another campus in Johannesburg. Portia struggled financially and had to rely on her pensioner father to pay for her studies. However, she could not depend on him to pay the fees on time. Due to outstanding fees, there was always the probability that she would not be permitted to write exams, this caused immense stress for her. Portia did not attend her classes regularly because of all her responsibilities at home. She fits the profile of a student who is both academically and emotionally at-risk.

### **Portia’s resilience**

There were times that Portia felt like giving up on life. She stated that it was when looking at her daughter that she felt motivated to continue her studies. Despite her home circumstances, numerous attempts and setbacks to obtain a higher education qualification, she continued to pursue her dream in the hope of making a new beginning for herself and her daughter.

## **2.4.2 Emerging Themes**

The following themes emerged from Portia’s interview, the student survey questionnaire, and the student records:

### **2.4.2.1 Motivational factors for wanting to obtain a tertiary qualification**

Portia explained (in a very emotional way) that her situation at home was one of the biggest motivational factors why she wanted to obtain a higher education qualification. She experienced her home environment as stressful and hostile at times. She felt that her family members were abusing her emotionally and that her needs were not taken

into consideration.

Portia was resilient in taking steps to obtain a tertiary qualification. She made numerous attempts to obtain a qualification with different institutions and undertook different areas of studies.

*“I started in Vaal Tech after ... no I did... [Very emotional; cries. The researcher stops the interview to allow the participant time to recompose herself] Okay, after matric I upgraded two subjects’ maths and science. Then I did well in them. Then I went to Vaal Tech after completing that. At Vaal, I did intro to engineering. Then from there on I did for two years that I have completed. Then I came back home, studied through UNISA. UNISA I did only for eight months, because I had financial problems. So I decided just to leave everything... and stayed at home for about three months. Found a job... [Looking up at the roof sighing] find a job, then I was promoted to being permanent, and then I tried okay to pay for my studies. It did not work out. I went to Unisa. Again did not work out; I continued working for roughly two to three years... [Sigh] the situation at home it’s [hesitates; thinks; rubs hands] I can’t say it’s good because we’ve got like serious financial problems there.”*

Portia strived to have a better life for herself and her daughter. She believed that if she obtained a tertiary qualification, her life would change for the better. One gets the impression that Portia longed for stability for herself and her daughter.

*“I think for me it makes me want to do more for me: To have good qualifications, then move out, get my own place, get my own life, but I hope it is not too late. My plan was 20 five. I have to have made something of my life. Maybe get a new house, get a stable place ...”*

It seems as if Portia’s family environment was the biggest external motivator for her to obtain a qualification. This was what she believed she needed; this was what drove her to keep on trying to achieve. This was also what made her resilient. When a module became too challenging for her, she did not lose the hope that she would eventually pass it. In addition, she usually asked for help or consulted other resources.

The need to get away from her circumstances caused a conflict within her, which, in

turn, fuelled her self-determination, despite the adversities she was facing.

#### **2.4.2.2 Perceived academic preparedness and self-concept**

Portia was convinced that studying towards a diploma in marketing was something that she was naturally good at. She said that she loved people and liked to engage with them. She also described herself as a “*convincing*” and a “*talkative fun*” person who was able to persuade people.

Compared to her previous experience at other institutions, she found the current learning environment a “*spoon feeding*” environment. Before enrolling with the current institution, she attended a distance education university where she had to rely on herself to make a success of her studies. She particularly found this challenging as she missed having a lecturer or tutor to guide her. Due to financial challenges she had to drop out.

She acknowledged that she found her current course more demanding and particularly referred to the amount of reading that she had to do. Although she likes reading, she acknowledged that the load of academic reading was too much to cope with. Considering these two views, Portia illustrated that she had over-estimated her academic preparedness and own academic self-concept.

Portia described herself as a procrastinator and said she usually left her reading until the last minute.

*“... Reading like one book for six months and it is 18 chapters... It is a lot, so it's like okay... Okay time management here, and we don't use that. Definitely we love the last minutes...”*

#### **2.4.2.3 Student-lecturer interaction**

In her opinion, the lecturers would help you understand the learning material up to a point, where they “*make you understand.*” She obviously compared it to the distance education institution that she attended previously.

She further explained that the lecturers made use of white boards and that they would make sure that you understand exactly what learning material they were covering.

However, at the previous distance education institution the tutors only drew students' attention to the page numbers of the learning material they were covering.

#### **2.4.2.4 Perceived support from the institution**

Patricia relied on the library as a resource to assist her in her studies, but stated that the support was insufficient. The course she enrolled for was a new three year course, and she felt that the library did not provide sufficient resources to support her learning needs. The library did not provide past exam papers, and she felt that these could have assisted her in preparing for exams.

#### **2.4.2.5 Support from the family**

Portia explained that she felt abandoned when her biological mother passed away. She stated that the feeling of abandonment was more intense after her father remarried, moved away, and left them in the care of an aunt.

*"I don't know it kind of. How can I say? It left a hole in me. Because I didn't have a chance to get to know her actually. So that gap was just tremendous for me... growing up with your friends ... everyone saying 'my mom this, my mom that' and you couldn't have that. My dad was away most of the times..."*

Portia had an older twin brother and two older sisters. Throughout their childhood years, her father did not provide in their needs and sometimes there was no food in the house. Her father remarried for a second time, but Portia never had a relationship with her two stepmothers, and the gap between her and her father grew wider.

Portia was living with her two older sisters, and her father who had moved back to the house after 15 years when his third wife passed away. Her father is very traditional and since he has moved back to the house, he rules the house according to his standards. Portia felt that the family treated her as a slave and that no one considered her as a person with feelings.

*"I'm hating the people I live with cause they are not helping me to do... they are not dedicating the work with me so it's kind a I am their slave that's how I feel when I am at home."*

*I'm hating the people I live with, cause they are not helping me to do... they are not dedicating the work with me. So its kind am I am their slave. That's how I feel when I am at home [tears in her eyes]. "...Sometimes I feel like when I ask for something ... 'No I've got plans'... What like? So what about me people? Am I invisible in this house?"*

This caused her to withdraw from her family members.

*"So you have to live under that small cocoon..." "...So when I am at home, I lock myself in the room, watch TV, sleep, study. That's what I do..." I*

When Portia talked about her family, the resentment in her voice was clear. Academically, she felt that there was only criticism from her family and no support.

*"The other day I got 99% for my assignment and my dad is like 'where is that 1 %? And I'm like [laughing sarcastically] 'Put yourself in my shoes, sit where I sit every day. I sleep late, I do everything in the house, I feed you guys, I wash the dishes, go study and prepare for my study... So it's a lot. So you can't be asking me where is that 1% ... it is still an A! 99% is an A, so you be grateful that I am even producing that A.'"*

*"...I need him to be like when I struggle say 'no you can do it, you can do it, and look within you, there's something. That little voice that say push harder, push harder.' Because if you don't have somebody, you won't do better in school. I need that reminder from my family. Other members, they've got their own lives, so I won't say they'd even care if I go to school or not."*

When asked who supported her financially, she indicated that it was her father, but that she could not rely on him to pay for her studies on time. She explained that this demotivated her to study for exams. She then referred to the policy of the institution that if fees were not paid up to date, students were not allowed to write the exams. Portia found this extremely stressful.

*"It's stressful, because you think: I studying, what am I studying...? Why am I studying? Because I know that I won't be writing my exams because I didn't pay my fees." "So it's ... no he is not... He is not very supportive he not that..." "He will say you got a 90. Good then. It's like you didn't motivate me to do more then."*

Portia's father has also physically abused her at one occasion by hitting her with a spanner before chasing her out of the house. He never provided a reason for the beating, and she went to live with her aunt. Her brother intervened and asked her to return home after he had talked with her father.

Her two older sisters seemed to take advantage of the dysfunctional relationship between Portia and her father, by misusing her to take care of their children and not supporting her.

#### **2.4.2.6 Social life and peer influence**

Portia expressed that she felt excluded from any forms of social life. She blamed her family for this.

*"Nobody will say what you want to do on weekends I'll baby sit then you can go watch a movie or something, nobody says that. They dress up they go so I know that when it's Friday till Monday I'm with the kids they go pack their clothes in the cars then they go party, sit with friends and all that so I kind a hate it when I'm at home that I have to do all those."*

With resentment and a sadness in her voice, she explained she had lost contact with the friends she used to know and that she felt very lonely.

*"Nobody calls me... like the people that I use to hang out with them, but they don't call me to say 'don't you want to go watch a movie, don't you want to go clubbing, whatever?' ... Because they I will say I am babysitting ... I don't have somebody to look after the kids. So I sort of feel alone."*

Although Portia and her daughter's biological father were no longer a couple, they still had contact. She explained however that he did not support her emotionally or motivated her to finish her studies. Portia considered the institution and a social life in the same context. She said that while she was at the institution. She had people to talk to and that her peers noticed when she was sad. They would show an interest in her and console her. It seems as if Portia used those moments to try to share glimpses of her life. This made her feel worthy and valued.

*“...when I am at home ... So at school it is better that people that I chat with when I am sad they ask ‘how you are doing?’ Then I explain to them today is not a very good day for me, this is what happened.” “So I love been at school, definitely, I do.”*

## **2.5 Terrence**

*“I am a slow learner, but to best I just want to get the highest qualifications...”*

### **2.5.1 Background**

20 year old Terrence resided with his mother and younger brothers and was enrolled for a higher certificate in office administration. His father passed away. Terrence valued education because he viewed education as the one thing that no one could take away from him. He was the first of his family to attempt a higher education qualification and it was clear that he was very committed and wanted to make his family proud. Terrence admitted that he found it difficult to study, but that he wanted to further his education, even if it was for the time only a one up qualification from matric.

*“...I am a slow learner, but to best I just want to get the highest qualifications ... and get done. I just want to get this certificate that is my wish.”*

When asked who supported him in his studies at home, Terrence indicated that it was mostly his mother who has matric, and his aunt and brothers. However, he made a point to mention that he believed that his late father also supported him from wherever he might be. From Terrence’s non-verbal body language, it was clear that he missed his father, not just with regards to his studies, but also as the father figure of the family.

*“My mom and my aunt and my... [Looking to the roof]. In fact, my entire family. Just that I don’t have my father; my father has passed away. He also wanted me to have a better [stops in midsentence with longing look in the eyes] ... I can say wherever he is right now... ja, he does support me and my mom and my little brothers and stuff.”*

Terrence believed that knowing how to use a computer, was the one skill that an individual would need most when entering any position of employment. He had never

used a computer in his life before. This was also the main reason why he chose office administration as a qualification.

English was not Terrence's mother tongue and he found it hard to understand his lecturers. He was failing eight of his 13 modules. The three modules that he had passed were typing and dictatyping (which he passed with a distinction), speed writing and office administration. The reason for this, could be that Terrence did not anticipate having modules like business calculations and business management to form part of the course. Instead he was under the impression that the course would only be focused on the use of computers. He stated that the work was more than what he thought it would be.

*"I thought when they say office admin I thought maybe it is going to be one subject. But it is six subjects, which is maths business calculations, business management...I thought maybe they were going to be only computers and something else. But it's a bit more."*

### **Terrence as an at- risk student**

Terrence came from a single parent family and resided with his mother, sister and younger brothers whom he helped to take care of. At the end of 2013, Terrence was failing eight of his 13 modules.

Terrence perceived himself as underprepared for tertiary education and found it hard to understand his lecturers. He mentioned that he found the instructional language of the institution challenging as it is was not his mother tongue. Furthermore, he had never been exposed to using a computer and had no access to a computer at home.

He described himself as a "slow learner" and explained that he struggled academically. Terrence had to rely on public transport; the distance that he had to travel to get to the institution was more than 15 kilometres. Furthermore, he was a first generation student in higher education. While studying Terrence also managed a small taxi business from home to assist his mother.

### **Terrence's resilience**

In spite of the challenges he faces, Terrence was committed to obtain a further qualification because he valued education. He believed that if he worked hard, he

would be successful and then be in a position to further his studies.

*“... I am a slow learner. So... But I like learning recovered in my parents I am a slow learner, but to best I just want to get the highest qualifications and get done... I just want to get this certificate. That is my wish.”*

*“I have realised that I am trying hard actually just not to be that and press myself into that and like... I am trying to get after that problem, so I push.”*

Terrence used resources from his environment (such as his family and the memory of his father) to support him to achieve his goal. He also attended classes regularly.

## **2.5.2 Emerging Themes**

The following themes emerged from Terrence’s interview, the student survey questionnaire, and the student records:

### **2.5.2.1 Motivational factors for wanting to obtain a tertiary qualification**

Terrence’s primary motivation for wanting to get a tertiary qualification, was to secure employment. This drive was mainly an extrinsic factor. Terrence decided on a particular course because he felt that he lacked the necessary computer skills. For him to attempt any other qualification, would also require this skill set

Terrence perceived himself as a “slow learner” and though he understood his intellectual ability and short comings, he used the fact that he realised this as a motivator to move beyond this challenge. This can also be considered as being resilient.

*“I have realised that I am trying hard actually just not to be that and press myself into that and like... I am trying to get after that problem, so I push.”*

It is clear that Terrence believed that if he could master this qualification and prove himself, he could also attempt and explore further study opportunities. It was this identified need in himself that steered his self-determination. Another point that can be derived from this theme is the fact that Terrence wanted to make his family (and

particularly his late father) proud. He stated in the interview that this is what his father would have wanted for him, to live a better life.

*“He also wanted me to have a better ... [stops in midsentence with longing look in the eyes] “... I can say where-ever he is right now... ja, he does support me and my mom and my little brothers and stuff.”*

A less obvious motivation for wanting to obtain a qualification, is the fact that Terrence was the oldest male in the family. While this might have motivated him as a step to take responsibility for the family it obviously also included a financial responsibility.

*“... I am taking care of my small business operation at home, which is like a duty. But it is only part time. I am assisting my mom because I am the oldest at home.”*

#### **2.5.2.2 Perceived academic preparedness and self-concept**

Terrence believed that he could make a success of this qualification despite the fact that he realised that he had (self-acknowledged) learning difficulties. Terrence's academic self-concept correlated with his self-concept and view on his own efficacy.

The honesty with which he stated that he had never owned a computer and that he did not know how to use one, underlined the fact that he was aware that he was underprepared for the course. Terrence also believed that his high school did not prepare him adequately for tertiary education.

*“...my parents never bought me a computer so didn't know a computer at all. So the reason why I here, because I really wanted to know computer. Because now, if you have to... I ... if you like try to...have to apply for a job, they need skills... you have to have skills for the computer.”*

Terrence indicated that the course was harder than what he had anticipated. The academic work was more and he did not expect to study modules like business calculations and business management.

*“I thought when they say office admin I thought maybe it is going to be one subject. But it is six subjects, which is maths business calculations, business*

*management...I thought maybe they were going to be only computers and something else. But it's a bit more."*

He attended classes regularly, but said that he did not take notes in the class because he did not know how to take notes or organise new information. When studying, he also did not study according to a timetable. He prepares for exams a week before the exam starts.

### **2.5.2.3 Student-lecturer interaction**

As a first generation student, Terrence has always wondered about the difference between a teacher and a lecturer.

*" ... I wanted to see what the difference between a lecturer and a teacher is. I have seen it and I have experience a lot of things that high school and tertiary are not the same."*

Terrence indicated in the student survey questionnaire that the high school he attended, did not prepare him for higher education. He felt that he was not exposed to computers and he did not know how to use a computer.

This could have had an influence on his experiences in the classroom as he described this as "updated" and "nice". He explained that his lecturers had a positive attitude towards students who needed individual help. He also said that this made him feel supported by his lecturers. He found that they were approachable.

One gets the impression that Terrence experienced a vast difference between the teaching and learning in the classroom in high school, and the teaching and learning at the institution. He explained that he had come to the realisation that in tertiary education students have to take on more responsibility for their own learning as lecturers simply take on the role of facilitator.

*"I have experience in college, as a tertiary student, you are now a reliable, I mean everything is on your hands. It is up to you now, you are matured enough, and you have to see that like okay from here like what you have... There is no one that is going to speak for you. You have to... you are on*

*your own and you have to. That's where you see the light of life."*

#### **2.5.2.4 Perceived support from the institution**

When asked how the institution supported him academically and otherwise, he associated lecturer availability with support from the institution. This implies that he did not feel free to approach his high school teachers in the past or that the high school environment did not provide the necessary support.

#### **2.5.2.5 Support from the family**

Terrence's father passed away and his primary source of support was his mother, sister, younger brothers and aunt. Terrence did not perceive the family as 'supportive of his studies, because they did not always ask about his results. In turn, he also did not talk to them about his days at the institution. He believed that they would not be interested.

He did admit that his mother sometimes asked him about his day. From the movements he made with his hands and from the look on his face, the researcher got the impression that he would have liked them to show more interest and support.

*"mmm... because if they, they care, they were supposed to ask me about my results and tell me this time you have dripped down... this time you have...[hand movement]" "I never talk about it because nobody is interested."*

His aunt took care of his study fees and seem to fulfil a key role as part in the family support structure. He explained that she was the person who would give him advice about life. He continued to explain that his mother and his aunt would help each other and by doing this in some way both were helping him. As a first generation student, it is clear that the amount of academic support that Terrence's mother, who has grade 12, gave him, was insufficient. His brothers and sister were younger than him, which meant that they too could not support him academically. Terrence expressed the belief that his late father was also supporting him, from wherever he might be. Furthering his education was something that his father would have wanted for him.

### **2.5.2.6 Social life and peer influence**

In his free time, Terrence goes to church and participates in the church choir. In the remainder of his free time, he likes to watch films, listen to music and spend time with his friends. He stated that spending time with his friends motivated him to study.

When asked how his friends influenced him academically, he answered that they had a positive influence. He explained that his friends were also studying and that they understood the academic environment and the challenges. He felt that they motivate each other because if one of his friends did well, he would feel that he could also achieve better. Terrence admitted that he found encouragement from his friends to study and become “*more knowledgeable*”. He ended by saying that he had faith that eventually he would also do well.

*“Where it is giving me courage to push more. Like you know what about this friend of mine is like okay going to do this and I am also going to do my best, and it is encouraging me to have a good knowledge and have faith that I am going to do well eventually.”*

## **2.6 Grace**

*“If I can get my diploma, I can get a chance to improve where I come from. It is a bit of a rural area...”*

### **2.6.1 Background**

Grace is a 24 year old single parent of a four year old son. She resides with her mother and two younger sisters. She did not say much about her father, as he was no longer part of their lives. Her mother’s highest qualification is a certificate. In 2011, Grace enrolled for a two year diploma in sports management. She chose this qualification because of her love for sport.

During her first year in 2011, Grace failed ten of her 13 modules. In 2012, she attempted these modules again and failed five of the nine modules she enrolled for. Grace re-registered in 2013 for 12 modules as she attempted to complete her two year

diploma. She managed to pass eight modules and in 2014 was left with four modules still to complete.

Grace described her community as rural and expressed the wish to play a part in uplifting her community. She wanted to make a success of this qualification because she wanted to secure employment for herself in a professional environment. Grace believed that without a qualification one would not find employment and have a nice life.

*“...without uh... tertiary qualification, you can’t work in... in a professional [pause] environment... wherever you, they will ask for any qualification... where varsity qualification...? If you don’t have, you won’t get work and you won’t live like I can say nice... have a nice life and stuff [hand gesture]”*

During 2013, Grace consulted with the academic development coordinator on campus, seeking academic support. The academic development coordinator made a note on the system indicating that Grace might suffer from attention deficit disorder (ADD). Grace confirmed that she had never consulted with a medical practitioner or a psychologist for any tests and that no one at her high school ever mentioned that she might have a learning problem. All she knew was that she struggled to learn and that she did not always understand when the lecturers explained work in the classroom.

As a single parent, she had responsibilities at home. She took care of her son and two younger siblings and had to assist with household chores. She was no longer in a relationship with the father of her son, although she received child support. She also received a social grant for her son from the South African government.

### **Grace as an at-risk student**

Grace came from a single parent family environment. She was a single mother of a four year old son and she described her community as rural.

Grace a first generation student, had tried since 2011 to complete a two year diploma. She does not have access to a computer or the internet at home, which meant she has to rely on services provided by the institution or an internet café to complete her assignments.

Grace might suffer from a learning disorder, though this has never been confirmed by a medical doctor or psychologist. During classes, she finds it difficult to follow the lectures. She seldom took notes in class because she does not know how to do this. She also finds it difficult to read lengthy academic text. Grace relied on public transport to get to the institution.

### **Grace's resilience**

Coming from a single parent family, and being a single mother herself, Grace was adamant to finish her qualification. In spite of the challenges she was facing (as such her learning difficulty and the struggle to understand lecturers' discussions, she was motivated by the support from her mother and one lecturer who inspired and motivated her to continue. Despite the odds against her, Grace had only one module to complete in 2014 to obtain her diploma.

## **2.6.2 Emerging Themes**

The following themes emerged from Grace's interview, the student survey questionnaire, and the student records:

### **2.6.2.1 Motivational factors for wanting to obtain a tertiary qualification**

Grace believed that without a tertiary qualification one could not find sustainable employment. She placed significant value on the word "professionalism" and to her a tertiary qualification would place one on a professional career path. She also believed that without a tertiary qualification you would miss out on having a good and financial secure life.

*"... I think I want a tertiary qualification because in today life you can't go anywhere without a tertiary qualification, you can't work in professional environment... [pause] wherever you, they will ask for any qualification... where varsity qualification...? If you don't have, you won't get work and you won't live like I can say nice... have a nice life and stuff [hand gesture]"*

A further personal motivational factor was that Grace came from a rural community and felt that she wanted give back to the community once she had completed her qualification. She said the following:

*“I can improve where I come from, because it is a bit of a rural area. Then, if I can get my diploma, I can get a chance to improve where I come from. I think I can do the better job.”*

Grace had a son who was four years old at the time of the study. Her responsibility as a single parent motivated her to finish her qualification as she did not want her son to lack anything in life. She seemed to be motivated by her own circumstances to provide for him and especially give him an education.

*“I think he motivates me to study because I’m the only parent I can say that he has. Then if I don’t study, I don’t work, and he will suffer. Then I don’t want him to suffer. I want...I want him to have a good life, go to school, and go to tertiary... and when he go to tertiary, I must be able to provide for him so that he can go further.”*

#### **2.6.2.2 Perceived academic preparedness and self-concept**

Grace admitted that she was struggling academically and rated her own academic preparedness as average. She said that she did not think of her course as more challenging than what she expected. She mentioned a few reasons for why in her opinion, she had failed modules. The first reason she mentioned was that she did not know how to study. She did not follow a study method although she had experimented with a few. The challenge seemed to be that she could not find a method to apply successfully. This could have been related to the possibility that she had a learning difficulty. The academic development coordinator she consulted assisted her with the challenges she experienced and suspected that she may have suffered from attention deficit disorder (ADD).

Grace indicated that she found some modules more challenging than others. She particularly struggled to follow the content of the module.

*“...the reason is I can’t follow exactly what the subject is talking about. I’m trying hard to understand, but it seems like I’m not getting it [looking to the floor]”*

It seemed that Grace knew her own abilities. The way she perceived herself,

correlated with her academic performance.

### **2.6.2.3 Student-lecturer interaction**

Grace experienced her lecturers as helpful, but said that the classroom environment presented a challenge to her. She was aware of the fact that some modules posed a challenge to her and stated that she struggled to follow the content and the lecturer in the classroom. Looking at her academic transcript, it was clear that she mainly found theoretical modules challenging. She had failed and was therefore repeating.

Grace found that her peers also played a role in the challenges she was facing in the classroom. She noted that students who followed the content and the lecturer easily would make negative remarks when students asked a question during the lesson. Grace stated that students who wanted to ask questions would be reluctant to ask them, because they wanted to avoid the negative remarks of some students.

Some classes were very crowded and lecturers taught at a fast pace. Lecturers did not have the time to address problems during these classes. Other lecturers did not make themselves available for consultations with students after class. Grace mentioned that one lecturer inspired her. When asked what this lecturer did differently, she answered that she made time for her; she consulted with her outside class times. Even when the lecturer was very busy, she still tried to help her by explaining the work to her again. This made her feel important and gave her hope.

*“Like last year, I was repeating my modules. I didn’t have hope that I will pass, but she inspired me... she even make time for me to lecture me... even if it’s late and... then even if she had some appointments, she’ll drop them and make time to help me...lecture me...”*

Grace mentioned that if classes had fewer students, she would cope better because she would be more comfortable to ask questions and follow the lecturer.

*“I think if the class is about four or less than ten student, its okay for me, then I can understand and cause um... much more comfortable...”*

### **2.6.2.4 Perceived support from the institution**

Grace stated that the institution offered support in a limited way. Looking at her body language she seemed dismayed at the level of support that she received from the institution. When asked pertinently about this, she reverted back to the lecturer aspect and explained that lecturers played a meaningful role in supporting and motivating students to continue, even in the face of adversity. This meant that students were given hope not to drop out. The researcher detected that she deliberately avoided the question about the institution's support to her. She finally answered as follows:

[How does the academic institution support you?] *"Uh... I can say the only person who support me on this campus it's... Mrs X. The others, agghhh... [Shaking head]."*

#### **2.6.2.5 Support from the family**

Grace and her son resided with her mother and two younger sisters. Her mother, also a single parent, created for her the opportunity to attend the institution to be further educated.

Grace acknowledged that her mother supported her by providing in her primary needs. She provided clothes and a place to stay for herself and her son. Where possible, she also provided financially. It was not always possible for her mother and sometimes she had to wait *"till the end of the month."*

Grace's mother also helped to take care of her son when she had to study. Emotionally, her mother supported her by encouraging her to learn. She believed that her mother wanted her to make a success of her studies.

#### **2.6.2.6 Social life and peer influence**

Grace spends her free time with her friends. They usually practice soccer with younger men because most girls do not play soccer. When asked about her interest in soccer, Grace answered that she became interested in soccer from a young age. She did not like to play with dolls like other girls, but was intrigued by sport, especially soccer. She started to play with the boys in her community.

In 2005 and 2006, she belonged to an all-girl team and they played league soccer, but due to corruption, the team did not have enough finances to continue to play in the league. As a result, the team broke up.

Grace explained that she found a balance between her social time and her studies. During the week she stayed at home and was committed to her studies, but on weekends she played soccer and sometimes went out with her girlfriends to watch a film or just to visit.

### 3. Summary of Emerging Themes

The themes that emerged for all participants are summarised in the next table:

**Table 3: Summary of Emerging Themes**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Language barrier</b>	As second language users the participants had trouble to articulate and express themselves in English.
<b>Motivational factors for wanting to obtain a tertiary qualification</b>	<p>There was a high correlation with extrinsic motivation for all participants and the following reasons were provided for wanting to obtain a tertiary qualification:</p> <p>The need for secure and sustainable employment and financial security</p> <p>Family circumstances</p> <p>Single parenthood, wanting to provide own children with a better future</p> <p>The status attached to a tertiary qualification (This was especially</p>

	<p>true for first generation participants)</p>
<p><b>Perceived academic preparedness and self-concept</b></p>	<p>Participant's self-perception of their own academic preparedness.</p> <p><i>It is important to take note that all participants failed more than one module in their first semester of enrolment; some had failed their first year.</i></p> <p>Participants felt that the high schools they attended did prepare them adequately for Higher education</p> <p>Participants believed that they would finish and obtain their qualification in the designated time. It is important to note that none of them referred to time as a variable; it was as if time did not matter, as long as they eventually did reach their goal</p> <p>Some participant's felt that Higher education was more</p>

demanding than what they had expected

Participants described their Higher education experience as follows: “It is fun”, “It is good”, “It is nice”, “it is okay” and “it is challenging”

Participants over-estimated their own academic preparedness by rating themselves as “good”.

They submitted the following reasons:

*“I am working hard”*

*“I am motivated”*

*“ If the module does not have to do with numbers, I’ll Ace it”*

*“I’m trying”*

Some participants indicated on the student survey questionnaire that they failed less modules than what their transcript actually reflected

Not all participants had access to a computer at home

Not all participants knew how to use computers

Not all participants knew how to use the internet adequately for their studies

Participants indicated that they did not take their own notes in class as they did not know how to do so

Participants indicated they did

	<p>not make use of a timetable to manage their study times</p> <p>Participants indicated that they did some to no preparation before their next class</p>
<p><b>Challenges of self-study</b></p>	<p>All participants indicated that they do not study according to a study time table.</p> <p>Some participants indicated that they found it challenging to manage the workload and text.</p> <p>Some participants explicitly stated that they preferred a classroom environment where they can rely on their lecturers or tutors to construct knowledge for them, from the new information given to them.</p>
<p><b>Student-lecturer interaction</b></p>	<p>Participants indicated that the following influenced their teaching and learning experience in the classroom:</p> <p>Not all lecturers had come prepared to the classroom</p> <p>Some lecturers read from their textbooks</p> <p>The lack of interactive activities in some classrooms negatively affected their learning experience</p> <p>Having the same lecturer for more than one module during a semester demotivated students and made them lose interest</p> <p>Lecturers did not know how to create opportunities for positive student interaction</p>

<p><b>Class size and individual attention</b></p>	<p>Some participants felt reduced class sizes assisted them in their academic performance. The smaller the class, the more individual attention they could receive, which would assist them in being academically successful.</p>
<p><b>Support from the institution</b></p>	<p>Participants regarded the institutions' support and resources as poor. The following reasons were provided:</p> <p>The library was not equipped with enough computers to service the high number of students</p> <p>The library was noisy and not conducive for studying;</p> <p>For some qualifications no past papers were available</p> <p>Students did not know where to go or whom to consult for various support services</p>
<p><b>Support from the family</b></p>	<p>Almost all the participants came from single parent environments</p> <p>Some participants were single parents themselves</p> <p>Their family duties and responsibilities included taking care of sick parents, younger siblings and siblings children</p> <p>Some participants indicated that their fathers mistreated them</p> <p>Some participants indicated that their parents or sponsors</p>

	<p>could afford their study fees</p> <p>Some participants said they could not trust their fathers to pay their study fees on time</p> <p>Some participants relied on a social grant from the South African government and on maintenance from the fathers of their children</p> <p>One participant relied on her brother for transport money</p> <p>First generation students had limited to no support from their families academically</p> <p>The researcher wants to highlight that most students studied with a student loan. Alternatively, their parents had made an arrangement to pay off the study fees monthly.</p>
<p><b>Social life and peer influence</b></p>	<p>Participants partake in the following social activities:</p> <p>Soccer</p> <p>Church activities</p> <p>Visiting friends</p> <p>Spending time at the local tavern. All participants indicated that spending time with peers did not influence their academics negatively.</p> <p>They perceived their time spent with peers as positive because of opportunities for</p>

	collaboration and networking that supported motivated them. This made them feel valued and worthy
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#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to present the findings of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with six South African students. The focus was on the meaning the participants constructed from their experiences of higher education. The researcher introduced each participant and described the emerging themes as co-constructed by students during the interviews. Relevant information sources, like student questionnaires, student transcripts and student records were consulted. The aim was to co-construct the participants' unique experiences and not to generalise it. Finally, the themes were tabulated to provide a clear synopsis of the findings.

# Chapter 5

## Discussion

### 1. Introduction

The overall research objective of this study was to understand why at-risk students who display resilience in their personal lives are not resilient when it comes to academic success. The focus was on at-risk students who demonstrated the attributes of resilience. For the purpose of this study, at-risk students were defined as students who had failed three or more modules for an academic semester or who were repeating their first year.

This chapter discusses the findings of the study as reported in chapter four. These findings are discussed in relation to existing literature, leading to particular conclusions. The discussion is followed up with a further discussion about whether the resilience in at-risk students can be tapped into to promote academic success. Finally, the researcher addresses the research question, can the resilience that at-risk students have in their personal environments be tapped into, to promote academic success?

This chapter concludes with an outline of the strengths and limitations of the study and the recommendations for further research projects.

### 2. Discussion of the Research Findings

Students do not enter higher education with a clean slate. They have their own expectations of the institution and learning environment and they also have various reasons why they want to obtain a tertiary qualification. Furthermore the social environment that students come from, for example diverse family backgrounds and the high schools they attended, also contributes to how they adapt to higher education and the greater academic responsibility it puts on them. Globally, there are many ongoing discussions about how to prepare students for higher education and the academic competency skills they need in making the transition from high school to higher

education. (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994) and Giddan (1998).

## **2.1 Why at-risk students demonstrate a lack of academic resilience despite being personally resilient.**

From the interviews with the participants, the researcher identified five interconnected factors that add to placing resilient students academically at-risk.

### **2.1.1 Language**

*“Do you have difficulty with English as a language?”*

*“[Smiling] I’m trying”*

Despite numerous efforts to encourage bilingualism in South Africa’s educational system, language remains a problem in the academic arena (Umalusi, 2004). English is not the mother tongue of the participants who took part in this study, however, their resilience in trying to overcome this barrier was noticeable. Instruction and learning material (including formative and summative assessments) at the institution were offered in English only. The medium of instruction was thus recognised as a collective risk factor for all participants.

The ability to interpret and speak English is not always sufficient to comprehend complex text and academic terminology (Agar, 1990). Students have to understand what they are reading and be able to recognise academic arguments (Council of higher education, 2013). During the interviews, the participants found it difficult to express themselves and articulate answers to the interview questions. They frequently used resonances like [umm] and for some participants the researcher had to rephrase questions several times before they were able to understand the question. In a classroom environment this would impact on student learning. Oftentimes, students tends to refrain from partaking actively in class discussions or learning activities, because they find it too difficult to formulate questions or to carry their points across (Agar, 1990 and Naude et al., 2005).

A further related finding that link to the above, was that students’ comprehension of English and their ability to articulate in English was evidently on different competency

levels. High schools did not always develop and expose students in the same manner to second language education due to multiple reasons, for example: standards of teaching at the school, resources available and teachers who are not English subject specialists. Some students entering higher education understood and could speak English with more confidence than others. This led them to think they are more competent in English, simply, because they could speak, interpret and comprehend the language. This finding concurs with research about students who over-estimate their own abilities and display poorer judgement as they do not take into account the degree of difficulty of natural processes or tasks. (Thorpe, Snell, Hoskins and Bryant, 2007).

These students perceive themselves as adept in the language and superior to other students less articulated or proficient. One of the participants said that when she was in class, she felt as if she did not possess the freedom to ask a question, because when she did, the other students who perceived themselves as more proficient in English, would react negatively towards her question. It made her feel uncomfortable. This can be linked directly to academic self-concept: if a student feels negative about his or her ability to speak English, it will influence their behaviour as they would feel reluctant to speak in class (Hau and Kong, 2002, cited in Green, Nelson, Martin, and Marsh, 2006, and Falchikov and Boud, 1989, cited in Chevalier *et al.*, 2007).

The outcome of this scenario is that students who perceive themselves as more proficient and feel more confident in practicing the language, would be more inclined to actively partake in class discussions or ask questions. For them, this presents an opportunity to develop their competencies with the language. On the other hand, less proficient students would then fall further behind in acquiring their linguistic communication skills and as a result, began to feel less confident.

In a South African context, it is also true that English is in many instances, the second or third language of teachers or lecturers. According to Agar (1990), one student claimed that the learners could not complete their matric English syllabus because their teacher could not explain some of the learning material, simply because the teacher was not confident in speaking English. The result of such a situation is often the promotion of rote-learning, which in turn affects students' participation in the classroom.

Conversely, if the lecturer in class is an English first language person and does not take into account that not all of the students in the class is adept in English and that the students may find it hard to follow the lecture, this would impact on students' learning (Agar, 1990). Martha Qorro (2006) states the following:

*“Just as a pipe is an important medium in carrying water, and a copper wire an important medium for transmitting electricity, the language of instruction is an indispensable medium for carrying, or transmitting education from teachers to learners and among learners.”*

As the participants demonstrated, students can be resilient in their own personal lives, but if they do not follow or understand the lecturer, they are immediately exposed to an at-risk factor. Moreover, if a resilient student finds it challenging to apply the institution's instructional language in an academic setting, the probability that the student will succeed academically, is minimised.

An undeniable relationship exists between language proficiency and academic literacy. For students to show evidence of learning that took place in their own sphere, they have to use reading and writing to construct meaning (Council of higher education, 2013).

### **2.1.2 Student Motivation**

In an academic setting, both extrinsic and intrinsic, motivation is an important component to academic success. Extrinsic motivation is present when behaviour is driven by external encouragement to achieve certain conclusions, while intrinsic motivation derived from within an individual, is not linked to an external stimulus. The individual's interest and enjoyment play a key role (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

The participants in this study embarked on higher education with the aim of obtaining a qualification and an expectation that this will secure employment and financial stability. They were mostly motivated by this external need. Thus, it is clear that extrinsic motivation played the most important contributing factor in their decision to embark onto higher education.

Participants in this study indicated the following grounds for wanting to get a higher education:

- The need to secure sustainable employment and financial security
- Family circumstances
- Single parenthood - wanting to provide their own children with a better future
- The status attached to a tertiary qualification

The study further found that many participants had to overcome financial challenges, could not find placement in public institutions public institutions due to bringing late application or not meeting the required entrance admission benchmarks. The college provided an alternative for them to obtain a higher educational qualification.

Hull's drive reduction theory maintains that, central to motivation, is how a need can stimulate behaviour. The drive reduction theory further suggests that when a need is met, the drive is reduced (Sahakian, 1976). Participants in this study wanted to further their education and it is possible that they used their resilience to get into higher education. However, once they succeeded and found placement and funding, their primary need was met and their drive reduced. At the same time, they were academically at-risk for the following reasons:

- They were underprepared for higher education, as many could not get into public institutions which was their first choice because they did not meet the minimum entrance requirements or lacked in finances
- English is their second language
- Many are first generation students lacking academic role models
- They lack the necessary academic skills

Some participants reported that higher education was more demanding than they had anticipated. Katlego, Grace and Terrence stated that they found the instructional language, English, a challenge. During the interviews it was evident as the researcher had to rephrase most questions. Katlego further indicated that she did not want to miss a class for fear that she will fall behind. Grace said that it was hard for her to follow the lecturer during lectures and that she became anxious as she was afraid to ask questions when she did not understand the work because her fellow students might

laugh at her. Terrence described himself as a “slow learner”.

Spence and colleagues hypothesised that the drive theory plays a significant role in understanding the interplay between anxiety and learning. Consequently, if a student wants to learn, the stimuli must be present and the student must respond actively. Anxiety therefore can answer as a motivator for learning to take place, but if the activities are too challenging and the level of anxiety too high, the effect could be the opposite. This implies that the student’s drive will reduce and result in poorer performance (Graham and Weiner, 1996). One of the factors related to academic resilience is low anxiety (Martin and Marsh, 2006). The probability for academic resilience decreases if students, in spite of their personal resilience, experience high anxiety and low intrinsic motivational levels. All participants in this study failed academically and it is possible that the academic challenges they experienced caused their anxiety levels to rise too high, resulting in them being demotivated.

Lewin’s theory involves three constructs namely, tension, the goal to be achieved and the “psychological distance” that the individual experiences from the goal. This theory suggests a strong relationship between the individual’s goal and the conflict or tension that is raised and experienced by the individual from the “psychological distance”. Although the participants may have a clear goal in terms of what they want to achieve, the challenges and at-risk factors to overcome creates a “psychological distance” which then generates conflict, tension and anxiety that set individuals up for failure (Graham and Weiner, 1996).

The participants in this study embarked on higher education with the aim of obtaining a qualification. However, due to the absence of one or more protective factors, they were placed academically at-risk. According to Lewin’s theory, the conflict that stems from a students' personal goals (to obtain a qualification) and the tension created by the challenges students have to face once they enter higher education, may create a “psychological distance”. In turn, this could lead to anxiety. Anxiety and tension raises the chances that these students will fail academically (Graham and Weiner, 1996).

Motivation is one of the strongest influences on behaviour and is closely linked to the mastering of one’s goals. Mastering goals in an academic environment, can lead to successful academic experiences. It can be concluded that although participants in this study were resilient and had a clear goal to obtain a tertiary qualification, they lacked mastery of goals because they were underprepared for higher education. They

also lacked the academic competency skills to grow and be successful in higher education.

According to the achievement goal theory, two sets of goals that influence student achievements were identified: “mastery achievement goals” and “performance achievement goals”. The two sets of goals were subsequently described as interdependent (Harackiewicz and Linnenbrink; Senko and Harackiewicz, 2005 (cited in Peklaj, Cirila and Levpušček, Puklek, 2006). Agreeing to this theory, mastery goals refer to how students present themselves by building new academic competency skills. This theory is also positively linked to study skills. Engaging with the learning material while achieving performance goals, assist students to realise their self-worth and to focus on their own capabilities. All of this is directly linked to the academic achievement (Pintrich and Linnenbrink, 2002).

For students to succeed in higher education, they need to be competent in a task. Once they feel they can manage academically, they start to enjoy the learning experience and to engage with new and more challenging learning activities (Beffa-Negrini *et al.*, 2002, cited in Stipek 1993). Research released from the University of Rochester focused on groups from different socio-economic backgrounds and their motivation for wanting to further their studies in higher education (Thadani, 2013). This study found that if students choose to study in a discipline that intrinsically interest them, they will benefit more, thus the presence of intrinsic motivation would be more desirable to enhance academic success.

A characteristic of academically resilient students is that they have higher levels of intrinsic motivation and an internal locus of control (Brehm, Kassin, and Fein 2005, cited in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). Students should not only focus on extrinsic goals like financial security, they should also pay attention to their own areas of interest such as enjoy working with people or like solving a problem. If they ignore these areas of interest, they are more likely to put themselves up for failure (Thadani, 2013).

### **2.1.3 Incongruent Academic Self-Perception**

*“...many at-risk students hoped that simply being in a new environment would enable them to be successful academically.” (Beckenstein, 1992)*

Academic self-efficacy refers to how confident students feel when they are successful academically (Schunk, 1991 (cited in Ferla, Valcke and Cai, 2009). Academic self-concept is how students perceive themselves in an academic environment (Wigfield and Karpathian, 1991 (cited in Ferla, Valcke, and Cai, 2009).

As stated previously, students entering higher education have high expectancies of the institution and of what their experience would be like. They also tend to have inflated perceptions of their own academic abilities (Thorpe, Snell, Hoskins and Bryant, 2007).

Entry level criteria for higher education also creates a misperception with students who qualify for admission with the minimum prerequisites on their national senior certificate. This creates an expectation in students that they are academically prepared and ready to be successful in higher education (Jansen, 2011). In other words, they acquire a false sense of confidence. Their academic self-perception becomes inflated while in reality they are academically at-risk. The risk identified in this study is that the participants acted according to their own academic self-perceptions without seeking academic support. They adjusted their behaviour to their perceived academic self-perceptual experience, which was not aligned with their academic skills or competencies.

Some of the participants who formed part of this study were repeating modules that they failed in the first semester of their first year. Others were repeating their first year (first semester modules) while being in their second year of studying. When asked how they perceived their own academic skills, they affirmed what was found in previous surveys. They over-estimated their own academic preparedness by rating themselves high in spite of the fact that they were failing modules and had to repeat first year modules (Thorpe, Snell, Hoskins and Bryant, 2007). The reasons provided varied from “I am working hard”, “I am motivated”, “If the module does not have to do with numbers, I’ll Ace it” and “I’m trying”.

All participants believed that they would finish and obtain their qualification. It is significant to mention here that none of the students referred to time as a variable; it was as if time did not matter to them as long as they finally obtain their qualification. When individuals set goals for themselves those goals are not always necessarily connected to time. Resilient individuals have the ability to pursue their goals in their

own time. On the other hand, higher education institutions have set timelines that need to be met in order to pass and obtain a degree.

Participants rated their academic preparedness as average. The researcher observed that participants indicated less modules or assignments as failed on the student survey questionnaire than what their transcript reflected. It seems that students refuse to acknowledge the reality of their academic situation. By not acknowledging their academic challenges, they then fail to restructure or adapt their study methods

The findings of this study indicate that students' academic self-perceptions and academic outcomes are not always aligned. In fact, students rate themselves higher in academic skills and performance than what is discovered in reality. This could be justified as a mechanism for students to protect themselves from having to deal with the reality of failing. This especially pertains to those students who show personal resilience by overcoming significant hurdles to access higher education. These students' personal resilience helped them to follow up on their goals and to make admission to higher education. However, when they arrive at the higher education institutions, they discover that only more challenges await them. These challenges are academic in nature and therefore include timeframes as dictated by the institution, academic processes and academic preparation.

Although students exhibited resiliency in reregistering for the modules that they have failed (in some instances more than once), they did not always identify their own academic under preparedness as a contributing factor to them failing. They would rather look for external reasons to justify why they failed. One of the ways in which they dealt with their failures was to migrate to other courses or institutions.

Key factors in shaping students' academic self-perception, is a combination of role models with whom they can identify and well developed support systems (Bong, and Skaalvik, 2003).

#### **2.1.4 Lack of Academic Role Models**

*“Authentic professional human beings who are worthy of emulation, need models who exhibit professional behaviour, a sense of commitment and purposefulness, and a sense of autonomy and integrity in a world that*

*generates enormous stress” words of Carl Rogers cited in Gardner, J. N. (1981)*

The participants in this study in most instances lacked in one or more of the protective factors. A dominant theme was that they were first generation students who lacked in academic role models, had limited knowledge about higher education, lacked the necessary academic skills and in some instances lacked sufficient finances and resources like access to a computer and internet.

Before discussing the lack of academic role models in the lives of the participants, it is important to refer to perspectives on resilience found in the literature discussed in Chapter Two. Individuals do not exist in isolation, but co-exist and interact with their environment. The social-ecological perspective highlights this, while the constructionist perspective reflects a postmodern interpretation of resilience, depicting it as a negotiation between the individual and their environment (Unger, 2004).

Role models play a key part in these perspectives. The social-ecological perspective considers the individual's coexistence in his or her environment, which includes internal factors such as individual thoughts and behaviours. According to Mental Health Foundation: Embrace the future (2006), an Australian resiliency resource centre, individuals imitate the values, norms and expectations of external factors that influence them. These include family, available mentors and peers.

Social psychologists highlight the fact that children will imitate from a young age the behaviour of significant others. Albert Bandura, a leader in social learning theory, explains that behaviour can be learned through modelling. This implies that students can learn a lot by observing the behaviour of others, especially academic behaviour. For example, students whose parents read or write will observe this behaviour and model it Bandura (1976).

Imitating the academic behaviour of significant others can positively influence a student's academic self-perception. If students believe they are capable of performing the same behaviour that they observe from others, such a belief can positively influence their own academic self-perception (Bandura, 1976). The constructionist perspective emphasises that an individual who finds him- or herself in adverse circumstances are put in the position where they will negotiate with their environment

for resources to strengthen them in their course. Academic role models would be a strong resource for a first time student in an academic environment.

The strength-based perspective believes that individuals should be seen as a unique entity with their own competencies, capabilities, acquired knowledge and survival skills. Masten (2009) links two steps directly to the strength-based approach: (1) to increase one's available resources and (2) to activate protective systems. Students may have the support of their family or peers, but these support systems may not always be able to fill the gap created by the academic environment and its many challenges. Family, peers, and even the extended community may not be equipped to serve as academic role models.

In an academic context, resilience refers to an individual's capacity to deal with long lasting academic challenges that prevent them from progressing academically. Nevertheless, academic buoyancy refers to an individual's ability to cope with daily academic challenges (Martin and Marsh, 2009). Research focusing on ethnic groups who were facing extreme adversities, revealed that academically successful students have access to resources that support them in their studies. Casanova, García-Linares, de la Torre, de la Villa Carpio, 2005, cited in Castro, et al., 2011).

Protective factors like family, peers and lecturers play an important part as academic role models for students who are academically at-risk. Students can be resilient in their personal life, but to be successful they need a combination of personal factors, protective factors, environmental and social factors (Colbert & Thomas, 2005 cited in Worley, 2007).

#### **2.1.4.1 Family**

Though resilient, most participants in this study were first generation students and they felt alienated from their parents and experienced their parents as absent from their academic life. They said they felt that their parents did not understand the academic environment. Though some participants did turn to extended family members for support, the researcher got the impression that they longed for that kind of support from their immediate family members.

Social psychologists over time have stressed the importance of role models in the psychological development of individuals (Sigelman and Rider, 2006). In this regard, role models with whom students can identify are key factors in shaping self-efficacy (Bong, and Skaalvik, 2003). Exposing students to a certain academic attitude and outlook, representing academic value forms part of a family's role in a student's academic journey. Parental involvement increases academic resilience (Finn and Rock, 1997 and Lee *et al.*, 1991; Borman and Overman, 2004; Catterall, 1998; Shumow *et al.*, 1999; Connell *et al.*, 1994 (cited in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). These findings suggest that absent role models within the family can potentially decrease a student's protective factors and indirectly prevent the development of academic resilience. Due to the previously segregated educational system in South Africa before 1994, not all students had equal opportunities to access higher education. Within the South African context, many students who enter higher education are so-called "first generation students". This means they are from families where either one or both parents did not have the opportunity to go to a higher educational institution. In many (if not most) of these instances, the educational level of the parents are lower than the student's (Rammala, 2009). This was also a finding of this study.

A common finding of this study was that almost all participants came from single parent families where the head of the household had a lower educational qualification. Participants reported that their parents were not interested in their studies because they did not ask them about their academic progress. Parents with a lower educational level cannot be meaningful academic role models for their children. They do not understand the challenges that their children are facing in higher education because they lack the experience. These parents do not know how to set realistic expectations for their children. They also do not know what questions to ask or how to identify problems that might put their children academically at-risk. Although these parents might be willing to support their children financially, they fall short in the knowledge to assist their children to develop the academic skills they need for higher education.

Case and Deaton (1999) points out that there exists a connection between students who are part of a household where the head successfully completed secondary education and a higher qualification. In reverse, many students grow up in a household where the head of the family has only completed primary education. The way in which a family perceives education will influence a child's perception of education either

negatively or positively. Students who are being affirmed by their parents academically, perform better when they study and they are more likely to persevere in their studies (Haverkos, 2012).

#### **2.1.4.2 Lecturers**

The participants in this study noted the following about their lecturers and classroom experiences:

- Lecturers do not come to class prepared
- Lecturers read from the textbooks or power point presentations
- Lecturers fail to create opportunities for students to ask questions

Just as children, while they grow up have a need to identify themselves with role models, so too do students have the need to identify themselves with someone who they can emulate in academia.

It was clear that participants relied on their lecturers for academic support and to guide them through the academic challenges of higher education. Some stated that they were comfortable with the “spoon feeding” teaching and learning that happened in some classes. The researcher observed from their body language and statements that the participants thought these lecturers were good lecturers as they did everything for their students. This suggests that because of the lack of academic role models in the academic sphere of many students, they expect lecturers to, apart from their traditional roles of teaching, impart and explain new information to become surrogate academic role models to students (Weimer, 2008).

This is an important matter, especially if one considers that the students who formed part of this study did demonstrate personal resilience. Though they had personal resilience, they were academically at-risk at the same time because they were all failing either three or more modules, or their entire academic year. The study found that these students have the need to turn to another source that they can emulate. A source that can empower them and serve as a strengthening and protective factor of resilience on their academic journey. These role models can enhance the position of the student because, if a student perceives the lecturer as an academic role model or as an academic mentor that they can look up to, they gain self-confidence and believe that their academic goals are achievable.

Rake and Patterson (1996) confirm that lecturers can help students by working from their individual strengths; demonstrating unconditional positive regard; teaching resiliency and conflict-resolution skills; being models for students and by focusing on building students' self-concept.

A stable academic environment where students feel they are getting the attention and care, could lead to the development of academic resilience (Hassin-ger & Plourde, cited in Castro, et al, 2011).

### **2.1.4.3 Peers**

Participants in this study indicated that the time they spent with peers had no negative influence on their academic performance. They likewise did not mention how and if their peer's behaviour had a positive influence on their academic performance. Some of the participants reported that having peers outside of the classroom to collaborate with, motivated them. They confirmed that it was helpful to have somebody to talk to when they had to deal with academic challenges.

There is a measure of support within peer interaction and peer groups may provide opportunities for individuals to construct and reconstruct their identities, explain concepts to each other, or learn better in the company of other academically stronger students. One participant stressed the fact that being able to collaborate with his peers, helped him with some of the challenges he faced.

When considering peers as academic role models one needs to keep in mind that many students are in the same situation as their peers. For example: being underprepared for higher education and lack in the necessary academic skills. It is therefore unlikely that they could serve as academic role models to each other. While many researchers have investigated the way peers influence each other and the role of peers in academic performance, this is not easily measurable. Charles Manski (1993) refers to this as the "reflection problem": When students end up choosing a role model within their own class or circle it becomes difficult to establish who is influencing whom.

### **2.1.5 Lack of Support**

**Another finding of the study is the lack of support that participants experience. Participants reported that their families did not show an interest in their studies as they never asked them about their progress. Their family members could not direct them or help them with their academic studies. Participants further reported that some lecturers did not avail themselves to consult with them about their academic challenges. Participants also indicated that the institution did not have enough computers on which they could complete their assignments or do research. They also indicated that the library was noisy and not a conducive environment for studying. Internet access was also a problem on the campus. They also did not know to whom to turn to for support or advice on academic matters or administrative assistance.**

**Students who enter higher education often have unrealistic expectations. They could easily feel overwhelmed by the academic demands and responsibilities. In addition, they may lack the necessary personal and academic skills, which subsequently leads to emotional difficulties and places them academically at-risk (Thorpe Snell, Hoskins and Bryant, 2007 and Conley, 2008m). This study found that students did not know how to take notes in class, they struggled with time management and found the academic responsibilities overwhelming. One participant said that he did not read the academic policy or semester plan, and thus had no idea during his first semester that he had to obtain a qualifying score before he could write exams.**

**According to Hixson and Tinzmann (1990, cited in Arrington, Melvin and Wilson 2000), youth labelled “at-risk” often come from minority groups and display deficits in their lives. Friedlander (1980) describes at-risk students as academically poorly prepared students who display low motivation and experience a language difficulty. Beckenstein (1992) explains:**

**“... many at-risk students hoped that simply being in a new environment would enable them to be successful academically.”**

**Contrary to Hixson and Tinzmann (1990), the majority of students in South African higher education institutions is underprepared (Subotzky, 2011), which means that the**

majority of students could be at-risk for academic failure. Without the necessary support these students are in danger of failing. It is therefore important that students receive adequate support from various role players like family, faculty and the institution. Once a student feels that they are being supported it could be a strengthening factor and enhance their academic resilience.

#### **2.1.5.1 Family**

Since 1994 there have been an increase in the number of students who wanted to enrol in higher education in South Africa. Though first generation students were not a new phenomenon in higher education, the increased number of students that had the opportunity to enrol in higher education also meant that there were more first generation students than before apartheid ended. Parents who have not had the opportunity to pursue a tertiary qualification have since started seeking a better future for their children (John, 2013).

Some participants in this study voiced their disappointment with regards to family members who never asked them about their days spent at the college or their results. They stated that they could not ask their family members to assist them with their studies. They also could not discuss their studies or the challenges they faced with their family members. Their interpretation of this behaviour from their family members are that they were not interested in their studies or academic progress.

Participants who came from single parent family environments and are first generation students, indicated they received limited to no academic support from their families. The family environment can either be a protective factor that cultivates resilience or a factor that adds to a student being at-risk. The family is considered the primary source of support and encouragement for students (Sigelman and Rider, 2006).

Household members who did not receive the opportunity to go through higher education themselves, lack in the ability to understand and provide the necessary support that a student embarking onto higher education needs (Rammala, 2009). These parents often struggle to support students with taking the first steps. For example: they may not know how to advise their child about which institution would suit their study needs the best. They cannot do this because they themselves do not have an understanding of what to look for when choosing an institution to best serve

their child's study needs. This leads to students being left to make important decisions for themselves without any guidance or support from the family. In particular, one has to refer to the following important decisions:

- *Which course would be best for the student?* In some cases it is important that the parent speaks to a consultant to prevent a situation where the child is forced to study a course that the parent perceives as best.
- *Is the institution a registered higher education provider?* Many students who cannot find a placement at public universities turn to private institutions that offer higher education certificates and diplomas, but are not registered with the Council of higher education. They may also offer a course that is not accredited. This implies that the student will receive a certificate or diploma that is not recognised by the Council of higher education.
- *What is the extent of the study costs and what additional financial expenditures might be encountered?* For example, textbooks, accommodation cost, travelling costs and other hidden costs may arise

In this study, participants experience their families as not being supportive of the fact that they need adequate time to study and that they need some acknowledgement or someone to talk to about their experiences of a particular day. They indicated that they had obligations and responsibilities to their families that were time consuming. For example, they had to fulfil household duties and take care of their siblings' children. Some of the participants were single parents themselves. Part of the duties of one participant was to take care of her sick mother.

Many parents are willing to pay the tuition fees or try to make ends meet to come up with these fees, but lack the understanding of the demands that await their child in higher education. In many instances, students are also still bound to their family by obligations and other family responsibilities (Rammala, 2009 and Peterson and Bush, 2010), this resonates with the fact that parents are not always aware of the demands that higher education places on a student.

In this study, participants indicated that their parents could afford the institution's fees. It should be noted that some courses were offered on a discount fee to attract students to the institution and to certain courses. The researcher wants to highlight that the institution does provide for students who financially fall within the lower income bracket. This is a registered private higher education institution and they do provide a

limited number of bursaries for students from very low socio-economic backgrounds, who qualify. Most students at the institution study with a student loan. Some parents had an arrangement to pay off the fees on a monthly basis.

Since 1994, financial support for students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds has increased. Unfortunately, many parents and students are ill informed about their options and the procedures they can follow to assist them when it comes to their commitment to student fees.

Most parents who did not attend higher education, doesn't understand the academic cycle nor the impact that irregular payments could have on a student's academic performance (Bourn, 2002:16, cited in Jones, *et al* . 2008). An example of this is that certain fees need to be paid before academic transcripts are made available to the students.

Despite the fact that students are resilient and able to beat the odds, some factors within some family environments can leave them severely demotivated and alienated once they experience the full demand of higher education.

### **2.1.5.2 Institution**

This study found that participants were unhappy with the overall service that the institution provided. They stated that resources like computers and the internet were not sufficient to meet all students' needs. They further reported that the library were noisy and did not have past papers for all modules, which they could access to prepare for tests and exams. Some participants felt that the lecturers did not provide a good service in the classroom.

Institutions are not fully committed to assist students with the transition from high school to university and in the way they contribute to the student's experience. When applying at a higher education institution, students are bombarded with many options, new processes and information.

In most cases their first encounter with the institution is through the academic advisor who provides academic guidance with regards to the importance of selecting a suitable course that speaks to the student's interest. The aim of this consultation is to make students aware of the workload in higher education, while also explaining that this

would ultimately lead them to success. This consultation is especially important when advising first generation students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These students do not have a frame of reference that they can tap into for support.

The findings in this study indicates that participants were not always aware of the different support systems that were available on campus. Some participants said that lecturers did not really care as they came late and unprepared to class. Research has found that many institutions, despite having well developed systems for student support, do not make students adequately aware of the different support systems available to them on campus (Engle and O'Brien, 2007).

Undergraduate students who enter higher education for the first time, have high expectations of the institution, especially with regards to facilities, resources and student experience. If they find then that the institution cannot provide in the student experience, these students feel that they are being let down (Mc Elwee and Redman, 1993). The uncertainty of where to go, what to do and what is expected of them can cause students to disengage from academic and social support systems available to them. This could then result in their withdrawal and dropping out of higher education.

The fact that participants felt that the institution did not support (by providing adequate resources and opportunities) demotivated the students, despite their resilience. Resilient individuals can direct themselves to supportive resources in the face of adversity (Unger, 2012). For them to do this, these support resources must be available and they should be made aware of how to access them. Minimised resources decrease the chances that resilient students will seek protective factors. Consequently, this impacts on the likelihood that they will develop academic resilience. Institutions should be focussing on their support services and the manner in which they respond to the students' different needs (Kuh, *et al.*, 2005). Drake (2011) emphasises that higher educational institutions should become proactive in creating environments that will promote student engagement and success. By doing this, these institutions will assist the resilient student. What's needed is an environment where the resilient student can develop new academic skills to develop his or her academic resilience. Developmental theorists believe that when students feel they have overcome certain challenges, the platform is set for new patterns of resilience to develop (Weakley, 2006).

### **2.1.5.3 Lecturers**

A positive experience in the classroom and a positive student–lecturer relationship can add to a student’s academic success. Students need to engage on a different level with the learning material and with lecturers. Lecturers need to create a supportive learning environment where all students feel they can partake in discussions, ask questions and take risks. All in all, this can improve the student’s academic success (Paulsen and Faust, 2008).

Some participants in this study indicated that their experiences in the classroom were negative. One participant felt that lecturers did not support her enough and this could be why she had failed her year. When she repeated her year, she said that she did not have hope to pass modules as lecturers fail to inspire her or make time available to consult with her. Another participant indicated that he had one lecturer for all his modules in the first semester and he found it boring to sit in one class with the same lecturer.

An environment where students feel supported can assist resilient students to tap into their inherent resilience to transform their lives. To enable students to draw on this strength, they would need an environment where they can learn new skills and feel protected (Masten, 2009). Learning new skills and developing their own academic competencies, can help them to cope with the academic challenges and thus promote academic resilience (Martin and Marsh, 2009).

Students need to feel that lecturers understand the pressures they are facing. This is particularly true for first generation and/or underprepared students who cannot rely on academic support from their family. A lecturer who is willing to help students by working with their individual strengths and demonstrating unconditional positive regard in creating a supporting learning environment, will indeed enhance these students’ chances to be academically successful (Rak and Patterson, 1996).

## **2.2 Can the Resilience that At-Risk Students have in their Personal Environments be tapped into to Promote Academic Success?**

The following collective resilient attributes were identified in the participants who were part of this study:

- All the participants were pursuing their goal to obtain a tertiary qualification. Although they were all failing, they did not give up
- None of the participants were negative about failing, they made a decision to repeat their modules or the academic year and were optimistic that they will complete their qualification. They were determined to achieve this goal. Katlego turned to extra reading to try and overcome her challenge with English as the instructional language
- Participants expressed hope that they will achieve their goal of obtaining a higher educational qualification at the end
- All participants had raised above their circumstances and in some instances very difficult circumstances, for example Portia, who felt that she did not have a life and that she is being misused by her family. And Terrence who stated that he knows that he is a “slow learner”, but that he wants to obtain a higher educational qualification
- Participants displayed confidence despite their home circumstances and the fact that they were failing and had to repeat modules. Some participants had to repeat an academic year
- Participants showed an awareness of their personal problems

Many studies have explored the topic “from risk to resilience” and has highlighted how students can, despite the odds against them, overcome their challenges successfully. It is important in the context of this study to discern between personal resilience and academic resilience. From the literature in Chapter Two, it is clear that personal resilience means “to bounce back or to recoil”. This functions as a supportive factor that assists the individual to develop his or her wellbeing (Deveson, 2003:24). Resilient individuals are able to make use of their internal coping skills and attitudes and they know how to apply accessible external resources (for example support structures and necessities) to helping them. The precondition however, is that these resources are accessible (Ungar, 2008).

The student who displays academic resilience is identified as the one who participates in activities, displays strong interpersonal skills and has high self-esteem, self-efficacy, as well as high expectations and autonomy (Bernard, 1991 and Finn and Rock, 1997). The constructionist perspective, emphasises that individuals who find themselves in adverse circumstances can find themselves in the position where they need to

negotiate with their environment for resources to strengthen them in their course. The strength-based approach echoes in stating that one ought to increase one's available resources and activate one's protective systems (Masten, 2009).

Environments therefore play a key role in providing protective resources that individuals can access and tap into for support. These resources in turn support them to overcome their adverse circumstances. Resilient students will identify these resources and negotiate with their environment as to which of the resources could assist them to overcome the adversities they experience (Unger, 2008). However, if the environment lacks in protecting resources, the individual has no negotiation options. Even in the face of being resilient, the student will now be exposed to an increase of risk factors (Masten, 2009). To counterbalance this, the environment must provide enough resources to negotiate with. This would then activate the protective systems in the resilient student's life (Masten, 2009).

To facilitate the already existing resilience in resilient students, institutions need to maximise protective resources. The researcher wishes to highlight the following protective factors that can be tapped into to promote academic success and academic resilience:

- **Language:**

As a channel of educational instruction, language is one of the main challenges faced by second language students. Extensive research has reported on this and it is also true for South African students. Students can demonstrate academic resilience and be resilient in their personal lives, but if language is a barrier, they are at-risk because of their lack of language proficiency (Agar, 1990). If English is a student's second language and he or she has no capital knowledge of the language or does not know how to apply the language academically, the student will find themselves in a challenging position.

On the other hand, if a student feels confident that he or she can read, write and speak English, he or she might not perceive him or herself as being academically at-risk as a second language user. He or she would expect that the outcome of his or her academic activities, formative or summative assessments would be positive. They therefore perceive that they do understand the language and know how to apply it.

To increase academic resiliency, a student's capacity to deal with academic challenges must increase. One approach could be to make students aware of the fact that they can develop and up skill their ability to apply English as a second language in an academic setting. To assist students to achieve academically and to increase their academic resiliency, higher education institutions should look into implementing interventions and support strategies. Likewise, they should continuously focus on training programmes to keep up with the ever changing landscape of the academic environment.

Several higher education institutions do assess students' academic literacy skills and competence on pre-entering the institution. These institutions have language policies and support programmes in place, but they do not always enforce or expose students enough to these programmes. It is suggested that institutions should focus on two levels: macro level (what the institution can do) and micro level (what lecturers and students can do).

On a macro level, institutions should no longer turn a blind eye to the fact that the vast majority of their students are second language users. Institutions should look into formulating a well-developed language programme to assist students to overcome the language barrier. Such a language program can then be offered at different levels (for example, basic intermediate and advanced levels) as student level students would inevitably vary. For each level, the focus should be in different areas. To help students improve their basic knowledge of English, the basic level could address the following key areas:

- Speaking and communicating
- Listening
- Reading
- Writing and taking notes

The intermediate level should focus on academic reading and writing skills, as well as essential literature skills. In turn, the advanced level should focus on preparing a student for writing research papers and academic discourse. In this way, all second language users are given the opportunity to develop their language skills.

On a micro level, second language lecturer's need to be professionally developed. This can be accomplished by providing short accredited certificate courses to lecturers in an attempt to improve their academic literacy and linguistic skills. The successful outcome of such an intervention will directly influence lecturers' performance in the classroom and the quality of student learning.

Aside from investing in their own professional development, lecturers can assist students by providing them with multiple opportunities to practice the language. Activity based teaching scenarios can be incorporated in and outside of the classroom by means of group discussions or online blog discussions about set readings or class activities. One mistake many lecturers make, is to have too low expectations of second language students. Lecturers should raise their expectations of students and make this known to them. In doing so, they will assist resilient students to tap into their already existing resilience to set into motion and overcome this barrier and to also increase their academic resilience (Morales *et al.*, 2004).

Students who struggle with the instructional language, must also be encouraged to identify with stronger students and seek opportunities to engage with them to practice the language. Lastly, lecturers should provide ongoing support to students by availing themselves for consultation with those students who need more support. During these consultations lecturing academics need to raise the bar of expectation for the resilient student. They should be careful not to accommodate the students' lack in protective factors, but rather identify factors to strengthen and guide students to tap into their own resiliency.

For example, students who struggle with English must be made aware of, and understand that, it is their responsibility to take ownership of their own development by seizing all opportunities available to assist them to be academically successful. Lecturers and tutors can play a role in this and refer students to existing language or mentoring programmes. Students must be encouraged and motivated to tap into supporting and protective structures that are available at the institution. This will strengthen their academic resilience and promote their academic success. They should further be advised to form supportive relationships with those students who are well-acquainted with English.

- **Student motivation:**

The researcher found that participants were mostly motivated by extrinsic reasons as to why they want to obtain a tertiary qualification. Though they were resilient in wanting to obtain the qualification, they were academically underprepared and lacked the necessary academic skills. Even if the student wanted to learn, the inner force that should be driving them lacked, as they were mainly extrinsically motivated (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002).

Secondly, if the underprepared student continues to experience negative outcomes, for example failing a formative or summative assessment consecutively, the “psychological distance” becomes too wide, which in turn, demotivates them (Graham and Weiner, 1996). This could inhibit them to develop intrinsic motivation, a much needed attribute for student engagement and finding enjoyment in the learning experience (Negrini *et al.*, 2002, cited in Stipek 1993).

Not achieving their goals could further alienate students from engaging with their study material and from developing the necessary academic skills to experience academic success (Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002). Students who struggle to enter into higher education and who are motivated by extrinsic reasons, in most instances are disillusioned by the demands that higher education places on them. Resilience might, against all odds, drive students to gain access to higher education. However, if they cannot tap into their innate resilience and convert this to become academic resilient, they will find it difficult to deal with academic setbacks and academic demands.

As mentioned before, one way of redressing this, is to make resilient students aware of their innate resilience and to educate them about the value thereof. Institutions could at the beginning of each academic year, during orientation week, present work sessions on resilience. During this period, students should be exposed to the terminology and do an online test to establish how resilient they are in their personal lives. Once students gain an understanding of their own resilience, they can be guided further to identify and manage the protective factors in their own lives. Through this, they can enhance their resilience which could ultimately drive them to academic success.

This could be followed up by a compulsory academic skills programme for all first year students during the first academic semester. Students who score low on resilience would definitely benefit from such a programme. When students are made aware of the existence of the resilience attribute, they could start looking at ways of enhancing their own resilience.

Topics that should be addressed in such a skills programme include:

- SMART (Specific; Measureable; Achievable; Relevant and Time-bound) goal setting and the importance of setting SMART goals for each academic semester: Setting SMART goals will direct a student and strengthen his or her existing resilience
- Enhancing internal locus of control: This will help students to guide their behaviour and to not be guided only by their wants and needs (like the participants in this study). This is likely to propel them towards academic achievement and success (Siebert, 2005)
- Identifying protective factors and seeking support: Assisting students to identify protective factors and to actively seek support when they need it, may alter their at-risk status to that of academic success (Morales *et al.*, 2011)

Focussing on these topics will help students to make sensible choices when faced with adversities. Being motivated may further assist them in having realistic expectations, which in turn, may promote their capacity to adapt.

- **Incongruent academic self-perception:**

As discussed previously, students generally tend to over-estimate their own ability and the outcomes of their assessments. Previous research highlighted that academically underprepared students have poorer judgement. This can be linked to the fact that students use similar skills to pass a test as they would to judge their performance (Thorpe, Snell, Hoskins and Bryant, 2007). This was also the finding of this study. The participants over-estimated their own academic preparedness by rating themselves good in spite of the fact that they were failing more than one module. Some participants had to repeat their first academic year. It was noted that participants failed to identify or recognise major risk factors in their lives that had placed them at-risk.

A valuable strategy would be to guide students to apply the practice of active reflection. Regular reflection assists students to interpret their experiences and the implications of their choices and actions (Branch *et al.*, 2002). Students can also be motivated and assisted by lecturers or supervisors to set an academic plan for themselves, also known as an academic self-schema. By having an academic self-schema students can be encouraged to regularly reflect on their own performance (Clarence Chi-hung, 2014).

Resilient students are often so focussed on the adversities they have to overcome, that they find it hard to assess the level of their own academic performance. If their academic self-perception is inflated and does not truly reflect their academic capabilities and skills, their academic performance will be negatively affected.

For example, students lacking in academic writing skills or critical thinking skills would approach an academic essay in the same way they would approach an essay about a topic like “My last day in matric”. If they previously received good marks for such an essay, they will become confused because they had over-estimated their academic writing ability. Reflecting on their past successes, can raise student’s awareness of what they did to achieve or fail. Meaning, which part is attributable to their ability and which part is attributable to their effort or lacked thereof? (Twigg, 1989).

If students can get into the habit of reflecting on their academic performance in relation to their perceived academic preparedness, it will help them to develop an objective view of their academic ability. Reflection also promotes skill acquisition and competency. Furthermore, it can lead to an increase in confidence, academic success and a congruent academic self-perception.

- **Absence of academic role models:**

Regardless of how resilient a first generation student may be, if the environment they find themselves in does not present negotiating opportunities or a platform from where they could increase their resources, they are academically at-risk. Resilient at-risk students will need increased resources to activate protective systems against academic failure. Students need academic role models to mirror themselves in. These role models can guide them in their academic development.

Being resilient does not automatically lead to academic achievement. For this reason institutions should continually find effective practices to promote positive academic outcomes. It is no secret that students do not only learn from what they hear, but also from what they observe and experience. Therefore, role models can play an important part in guiding and helping students to mature academically. Institutions can promote academic resilience by fostering environments that encourage high academic standards. One way of achieving this is to encourage faculties to not only appoint appropriately qualified and experienced lecturers, but also to focus on the extent that

appointed academic staff serve as academic role models. Bandura (1986) explains: “Role modelling is one of the most powerful means of transmitting values, attitudes and patterns and thoughts and behaviour of students.”

Another strategy is to create opportunities for students to contact other resilient students who struggled initially, but later found their way and became a success story. Mentorship programmes can be implemented to facilitate such interactions. Alumina and other influential role models (with whom students can identify), can also be invited as guest speakers either by faculty, lecturers or mentors to share their stories, challenges and successes with students. These role models can further motivate students to make their own success stories and also become a role model to other students in the future.

- **Lack of support:**

The concept of academic resilience refers to the probability that a student will succeed academically even in the face of adversities. Wang *et al.* (1994) and other studies show that for students to be academically successful, they need access to resources that support them (Casanova Garcia-Linares, de la Torre, and de la Villa; Carpio 2005, cited in Castro *et al.*, 2011). Unless students have an academic conducive environment, they will struggle to overcome academic challenges (Masten, 2009).

When resilient students are being prevented from negotiating with their environment or from increasing their available resources to mitigate at-risk factors (or their perceived at-risk factors), no value is added to their academic success. To promote academic success in higher education, a student’s personal resilience can be a supporting factor. However, regardless of how resilient a student is, if the key areas as highlighted in the above section, constrains the resilience of the at-risk student, the student’s capacity to develop academically will be negatively influenced. The answer to the research question could be to look into strategies that can build students’ academic resilience.

Students spend a great part of their day on campus attending classes. This is where they get to interact with lecturers and peers. These environments can play a key factor in supporting them. Transforming these environments in which underprepared students exist, will provide students with a key to unlock their natural resilience and helping them to recognise the supporting protective factors in their lives. The aim is to

learn how to negotiate. Support however, does not mean that lecturers and the institution must do all the work and take all the responsibility. Instead, they should create environments where students can learn and be developed to take responsibility for their own learning and where lecturers can acknowledge resilient students. Institutions and lecturers need to move away from trying to “fix” at-risk students. Instead, they should focus on how they could assist these students to access their own innate resilience and apply it to their circumstances.

As mentioned before, creating a reflective atmosphere in the classroom is one valuable strategy that lecturers can use. Students can use self-reflection to recognise both their strengths and weaknesses. By making use of self-reflection, students can be guided to answer certain questions: How did I overcome certain adversities in my life? Who was there for me at that particular time? How did I solve that problem? Reflecting on such questions will help the student to recognise certain strengths and strategies that they have applied and that worked for them before (Morales, *et al.*2004). Self-reflection activities and questions that encourage students to think about their own circumstances and construct meaning to their experience are useful in this regard. Together with this, students can also be introduced to self-evaluation tools, as these can promote intrinsic motivation, assist and empower them to achieve their goals and guide their own learning.

If lecturers create environments in which at-risk students felt that they were being supported, the door would be unlocked for students to discover the strength that lies within them. Most higher education institutions have academic support programmes where at-risk students can turn to for help. These support programmes, mostly include a variety of services where students can find academic support, access to tutors and seek advice on how to develop study skills and other online developmental workshops. The problem is that although students are aware of these programmes, they do not necessarily understand the support and strengthening value of these programmes. By understanding what resilience is and tuning into their own resilience capacity, students could utilize these programmes with great success.

Support is one of the strongest protective factors to promote resilience and to help the at-risk student to find inner-strength. Support guides at-risk students in an environment where they can explore and reconstruct their own lives, while fostering their belief in self and their abilities to promote their own learning and academic success.

### **3. Conclusion**

This study focussed on the resilient at-risk student and investigated whether tapping into the student's existing personal resilience could promote academic success. The research investigated the protective factors that play a key role in promoting resilience. The absence of such factors were also investigated, showing that the absence of protective factors essentially places the student at-risk for academic failure.

Regardless of whether resilience is viewed as a characteristic, attribute or process, it is considered a positive construct. Getting educated therefore becomes a means to an end for students who wish to overcome adversities in their personal lives. The fact that the majority of students in a South African context is academically underprepared for higher education, essentially places them at-risk (Subotzky, 2011).

Being a first generation student from a particular socio-economic status who has to cope with language barriers without academic role models or support are additional challenges for the at-risk student. This study advocates that unless the identified key areas and the value of developing strategies to drive and create accessible resources are explored, the promotion of student success will remain a challenge in higher education.

Developing strategies would include that students be assisted (1) to become aware of risk factors in their own lives, and (2), to identify and apply multiple available resources. In doing so, they would promote their own academic success. Within a South African diverse context, this would also include exploring the role of multi-cultural perspectives and competencies in developing academic resiliency in students. If we want students to become academically resilient, higher education institutions will have to look deeper into the vital role that protective factors play in the at-risk student's life.

### **4. Research Strengths and Limitations**

This research is important because it investigated personal resilience in at-risk students and the probability that this could be articulated and promoted into student success. By exploring the stories and experiences of the participants, the research attempted to shed new light on understanding the constructed realities of the resilient

at-risk student. As such, this research can assist developing intervention and support mechanisms for at-risk students in higher education. This study must be considered an early exploration into what higher education institutions can do to support at-risk students who are resilient in their personal life.

It is important that future research and practice revisit the effectiveness of current support systems and programmes, retention strategies, curriculum designs and teaching methods, beyond the traditional values of higher education. This study, therefore paves the way for further exploration on how higher education institutions can support, foster and promote academic resilience. This research was not without limitations. The researcher identified the following areas of limitation:

- The sample size of this study is small with regards to the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions in South Africa
- The institution where the study was done is a private higher education institution that focusses on diplomas and certificates. Since public colleges and universities were not represented, the generalisation of the findings is limited
- The language barrier that the participants experience, might have impacted on how participants interpreted the questions
- The participants' duration of being at-risk might have had an impact on the outcome of the study. Some participants may have been at-risk for long periods or throughout their lives, while other participants may have become at-risk during their secondary school years or during their first year in tertiary education
- The research did not consider other academic role models whom participants might have looked up to (for example sport idols or public role models who value academics)
- Because the participants were from African ethnic backgrounds the data might not present other populations in South Africa
- The researcher is from a different culture than the participants and this might have influenced the way the participants perceived and answered the questions
- Semi-structured interviews were used and minor variations in the interviews with participants are evident
- The researcher's interview style and the use of a voice recorder might have influenced the way the participants responded to questions

## 5. Recommendations for Future Research

Although the findings of this study cannot be generalised, they provide insight into how institutions can adjust their services to serve underprepared students to become academically successful. The findings shed light on how other protective factors can be tapped into to assist the students in higher education. A number of areas that emerge from this study require further research:

- This study was conducted at a single institution. Studies of similar nature that compare institutions are recommended to detect comparable or different patterns.
- Further exploration into academic literacy and language programmes are needed to assist underprepared students to bridge the gap. Future research should focus on how to close the gap on second language users' capital and knowledge of the language, so that they can apply the language in an academic setting.
- An additional area for future research could study the impact of second language lecturers who lecture underprepared students from diverse languages.
- It is necessary that higher education institutions investigate ways to bridge the gap between first generation students and their parents.
- Underprepared students would benefit if they were made aware of (a) the strategies to aid them in identifying risk factors in their own life and (b) how to apply the multiple available resources available to them to promote academic success.
- Further research is needed to examine the correlation between protective factors and academic self-perception.
- Furthermore, more research is needed to understand the relationship between academic resilience, sense of purpose and high expectations.

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# Appendix A

## Unisa

0927 M1RST

VAN VUUREN N MEV

STUDENTENOMMER : 3314-594-6

1015 FREDERIK STREET

ELDORAIGNE EXT 27

POSTGRADUATE QUALIFICATIONS

0157

(012) 441-5702

NAVRAE NAAM :

NAVRAE TEL :

DATUM

: 2014-04-14

Geagte Student

Ek wil u graag meedeel dat u registrasie vir die akademiese jaar hieronder aangedui aanvaar is. Aktiveer u Unisa myLife e-pos adres (<https://myunisa.ac.za/portal>) vir toekomstige kommunikasiedoeleindes en toegang tot navorsingshulpbronne. Kontroleer die inligting hieronder en stel die Meesters-en-Doktorale afdeling per e-pos ([mandd@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mandd@unisa.ac.za)) in kennis u nie saamstem nie.

GRAAD : MA (SIELKUNDE) (98402)

TITEL : Promoting student success by tapping into the resilience of the At-risk Student: A South African higher education perspective

STUDIELEIER : Prof SH VAN DEVENTER

AKADEMIESE JAAR : 2014

TIPE: VERHANDELING

KURSUSSE GEREGISTREER: DFPSY95 MA - SIELKUNDE

'n Rekeningstaat sal eersdaags aan u gestuur word.

Indien u beoog om u verhandeling/proefskrif in te lewer vir eksaminering, voltooi vorm DSAR20 ('Notice of Intention to Submit') voor 30 September. Indien u hierdie afsnydatum haal nie, moet u herregistreer en u voorneme om in te handig voor 15 April inhandig en u verhandeling/proefskrif voor 15 Junie inhandig.

U toesighouer se skriftelike toestemming tot inhandiging moet u kennisgewing van voorneme om in te handig vergesel.

Die uwe,

Prof M Mosimege  
Registrateur

# Permission Letter Rosebank College



## Johannesburg

48 Julia Street  
Chr. J. van der Merwe  
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## Durban

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Barnesby West Street  
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Fax: 031 301 8571  
e-mail:  
info@rosebankcollege.co.za

13 September 2012

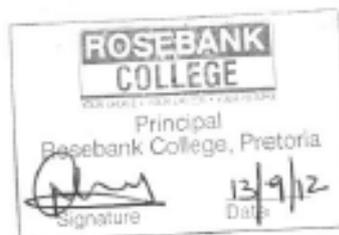
### RE: Approval to conduct research study

To whom it may concern

We hereby grant permission to Nicolene van Vuuren to conduct a research study on Promoting Student success by tapping into the Resilience of the At Risk Student: A South African Higher Education Perspective. She will be able to gather her survey results, in-depth interviews and statistics on the campus of Rosebank College Pretoria.

Yours faithfully

**Moloko Chepape**  
**Principal**  
**Rosebank College**  
**Pretoria Branch**  
**(012) 320-3270**



**Directors:** JDR Geach, FR Thompson **Company Secretary:** S Saunders  
Reg No. 196706475487



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# Appendix B

## Participant Consent Form

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **AN INVITATION:**

Dear Student

I wish to extend an invitation for you to participate in a study, involving completing questionnaires, which will take place.

### **Purpose of the Research Study:**

My dissertation topic involves social and academic resiliency factors that contribute to at-risk higher education students and the purpose of this study is to gain insight into why students demonstrate resiliency in their personal lives, but have difficulty to demonstrate it when it comes to their academia. It hopes to provide valuable information of resiliency and persistence to students in similar situations, so they too, can find an inner-strength to obtain an undergraduate qualification.

### **The Process:**

Your participation in the study will involve the answering of a questionnaire and the participation in an interview with an estimated length of one hour. I will audio-tape the interview session to insure accuracy and to allow me to take notes on your comments. These tapes will stay locked in my home and will be destroyed afterwards. Insights gathered by you and other participants will be used in writing a qualitative research report which will form a part if the Masters Dissertation.

### **Risks Involved:**

This study poses little to no risk to participants. I will however leave my contact number with you should you have any questions or concerns. You could also request to be referred to the Campus Psychologist with no costs to you should the need arise.

### **Right to Participate:**

If you decide to voluntarily participate in this study, your identity will remain anonymous. In the written dissertation, you will be referred to by a pseudonym to assure your anonymity at all times.

You may choose to leave the study at any time, and may also request that any data collected from you not be used in the study.

Please indicate by replying to this e-mail if you are willing (or not) to participate.

Thank you for your participation and assistance with this study. If you have any questions regarding this research study, you may contact me via e-mail [nvvuuren@rosebankcollege.co.za](mailto:nvvuuren@rosebankcollege.co.za) or at 012 3207270 during office hours.

If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Once again, your co-operation is greatly valued.

Yours sincerely

---

Nicolene van Vuuren  
(Researcher)

I \_\_\_\_\_ understand what is required of me and hereby give consent to conduct and publish this evaluation as stipulated in the above form.

---

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

Permission Letter Dr Samuels

**From:** ellery.samuels@gmail.com [mailto:ellery.samuels@gmail.com] **On**  
**Behalf Of** El Samuels, Ph.D.  
**Sent:** 04 October 2012 03:18 AM  
**To:** Nicolene Van Vuuren  
**Subject:** Re: Creation and Initial Validation of an Instrument to Measure Academic Resilience from Souh Africa

Dear Nicolene,

Thank you very much for writing, and of course you can use the ARI. I'm attaching a version of it, but feel free to reformat it however it works best for you.

A few things to say about it. First, even though some items are reverse-coded (the ones in bold-face in the file I'm sending), I still found that it correlated significantly with social desirability, so I recommend--if you can--administering both of them so that you can factor out social desirability from your analyses. Social desirability itself didn't relate significantly with academics, but adding it to the model helped factor out its effect letting the ARI (and other instruments) demonstrate their true associations. I'm attaching the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MCSD) I used as well as their original article from way back in which they introduced it.

Second, the relationship between the ARI and academics was better at predicting current grades (with a correlation in the mid to high .2s) than previous grades (correlations still in the .2s, but not always significant). This may mean that the ARI is better at measuring the current state of one's academic resilience and not an very strongly enduring resilience trait.

Third, please feel free to change the formats of the instruments I'm sending. If nothing else, remove the bold-face from the reverse-scored items in the ARI; I just did that to remember which ones they were.

And finally, do please feel free to ask me any additional questions you have or let me know of any ways you think I can help you further--maybe with theory, experimental design, or analyses.

I wish you the best with your research and everything else,

Nicolene. Sincerely,  
El

-----  
W.Ellery Samuels, Ph.D.

**College of Staten Island  
The City university of New York  
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# Appendix D

## Student Resilient Questionnaire

### Student Survey: Resilience

Student Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions: Please read each statement and indicate how much you agree or disagree with the given statement.**

**Thank you for taking time to complete and submit this survey.**

**1. I get excited when new opportunities arise.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**2. I have at least one very close friend.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**3. When I need help, there never seems to be anyone around.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

- **4. Most of the problems in my life are too big to be solved.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

- **5. I don't like trying new things.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**6. I usually look at the bright side of things.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**7. I usually learn from my mistakes.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**8. Other people tend to rely on me to get things done.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

- **9. I don't like taking on new responsibilities.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**10. If I really want to do something, I can do it.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**11. I like solving problems.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**12. I can easily find people to help me when I need it.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

- **13. There is no one in my life who takes good care of me.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**14. There is no situation I could not overcome.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**15. I can usually take care of myself.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree

- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

- **16. I often don't think that I deserve to succeed.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**17. Even though stuff can go wrong, things usually work out in the end.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**18. I have high expectations for myself.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**19. I look at problems as challenges to be overcome, not things to avoid.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

- **20. I don't like myself.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**21. I can adapt easily to new situations.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

- **22. I find it hard to make new friends.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree

e.) Strongly disagree

**23. Things are never as bad as they seem.**

a.) Strongly agree

b.) Agree

c.) Neither agree nor disagree

d.) Disagree

e.) Strongly disagree

**24. I gain comfort from my religious faith.**

a.) Strongly agree

b.) Agree

c.) Neither agree nor disagree

d.) Disagree

e.) Strongly disagree

**25. I can overcome any obstacle.**

a.) Strongly agree

b.) Agree

c.) Neither agree nor disagree

d.) Disagree

e.) Strongly disagree

**26. I have been successful in most areas of my life.**

a.) Strongly agree

- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**27. I have always been motivated to do well in school.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**28. I set high goals for myself that I plan to reach.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**29. I am a survivor.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

**30. Things usually work out for me in the end.**

- a.) Strongly agree
- b.) Agree
- c.) Neither agree nor disagree
- d.) Disagree
- e.) Strongly disagree

---

**The reason for the survey was explained to me and I do understand that I am taking part voluntarily.**

**Signed** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Student Survey

2013

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Programme: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Gender:

M	F
---	---

2. Age:

17- 20	21- 24	25- 28	older
-----------	-----------	-----------	-------

3. I live with

both parents	
only one parent	
relatives	
friends	
alone	
In a flat with 1-2 other students	
In a flat with more than 2 other students	
Other	

4. My father's highest academic qualification:

Grade 7 and lower	
Grade 8 to grade 11	
Grade 12	
Trade	
Certificate	
Diploma	
Degree	
Post Graduate	

5. My mother's highest academic qualification:

Grade 7 and lower	
Grade 8 to grade 11	
Grade 12	
Trade	
Certificate	
Diploma	
Degree	
Post Graduate	

6. My hometown is: (if elsewhere write down the name of the town/village)

Pretoria	
Johannesburg	
Elsewhere from Gauteng	
Elsewhere from Free State	
Elsewhere from Eastern Cape	
Elsewhere from Northern Cape	
Elsewhere from North West	
Elsewhere from Limpopo	
Elsewhere from Mpumalanga	
Elsewhere from Kwa-Zulu Natal	
A Small Rural Village	

7. My parent's financial contribution towards my studies is:

They can pay all my studies ,they can afford it	
I will need help for example a bursary, but my parents can afford extra day to day expenses like traveling, books and registration	
I will have to get a full bursary that covers all expenses	
I am studying with a loan	
I got the first semesters funds but do not know where the rest of the funding will come from	

8. I have a part-time job to help support my household

Yes	
No	

9. I have my \_\_\_\_ encouraging me to do well in college.

Father	
Mother	
Friends	
Family	
Lecturer	
Other	
Nobody	

10. Travelling distance to college is

1-5km	
6-10km	

11-15km	
Further	

11. I get to college by

Walking because I live close to the college	
Walking because I do not have money to use public transport	
Taxi	
Bus and taxi	
2 or more taxi's	
My own car	
Parents	
Other	

12. I am the \_\_\_ to attend Higher Education from my family

The First	
The Second	
The Third	

13. My family accept me as I am

Yes	
No	

14. My parents/caregivers can give me advice when I struggle with my studies

Mother	
Father	
Both	
None	

15. I do take care of my younger siblings when I am not at college

Yes all the time	
Yes most of the time	
No	

16. I have to do household chores when I am not at college

Yes all the time	
Yes most of the time	
I have set chores	
No	

17. I do have my own space to study

Yes	
No	

18. My High School prepared me sufficiently for higher education?

Yes	
No	

19. I do know how to use a computer?

Yes	
No	

20. I do know how to use the internet?

Yes	
No	

21. I have access to a computer at home.

Yes	
No	

22. I have Internet access at home.

Yes	
No	

23. I struggle to understand my lecturers because English is not my mother tongue.

Yes	
No	

24. I attend my classes regularly.

Yes	
No	

25. I take notes in the class

always	
Most of the time	
sometimes	
never	

26. I know how to take my own notes and organise information.

Yes	
No	

27. When having a problem on campus I know who to approach to help me.

Yes	
No	

28. I have failed my tests across modules:

1	
2	
3	
4 or more	

29. I have failed my assignments across modules:

1	
---	--

2	
3	
4 or more	

30. I am repeating modules

Yes	
No	

31. Some of my friends have dropped out of school.

Yes	
No	

32. I bunk my classes to be with my friends

Yes	
No	

33. I am still interested in the programme I choose to study

Yes	
No	

34. My parents chose my course for me

Yes	
No	

35. I study according to a study timetable

Yes	
No	

36. I prepare for class

Yes	
No	

37. I study\_\_ hours for a test

1-2	
2-4	
More	

38. I study the \_\_ before a test or exam

Night	
Day	
Week	
Longer	

## Appendix F

### Interview Questions

<b><u>Goal Valuation</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Why do you want a tertiary qualification?</li><li>2. Why did you choose the programme/qualification that you are enrolled for?</li></ol>
<b><u>Motivation/Self-Regulation</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How do you motivate yourself to study?</li><li>2. Do you withdraw from a module and loose interest if you feel it is to challenging? Why?</li><li>3. What strategies did you employ to help cope with the demands of the course? How do you implement them?</li></ol>
<b><u>Academic self-perceptions category</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Do you have what it takes to get your qualification? Why do you think so?</li><li>2. How do you feel during classes or while you are at college?</li><li>3. How would you assess your academic skills?</li></ol>
<b><u>Attitudes Towards College</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Describe your college experience. Is it what you expected?</li><li>2. Do you find your course more demanding than what you had expected? How?</li><li>3. How does the institution support you academically?</li></ol>
<b><u>Academic Support from Family</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Discuss the level of support you are experiencing during your studies from your family?</li><li>2. Who takes care of you?</li><li>3. Are there any other commitments you have besides studying?</li></ol>
<b><u>Peer Influence</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Tell me about your social life away from college (this may include your friends, where you like to spend your time).</li><li>2. How does this influence your commitment to your studies?</li></ol>