THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF POSTGRADUATE BLACK STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATION THROUGH THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRANSFORMATION LENS

by

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for

the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN PSYCHOLOGY WITH SPECIALISATION IN RESEARCH CONSULTATION

At the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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MAY 2018

Abstract

Transformation of the higher education system has come under the spotlight recently. At the core of this debate are issues pertaining to access and throughput rates at universities. Although access has improved significantly, throughput rates remain relatively low especially amongst black students (Council on Higher Education, 2017). The current study aims to explore the learning experiences and academic performance of postgraduate black students at the university of South Africa. Through a qualitative approach that included interviews, a phenomenological research design and critical race theory to gain an insiders perspective. This approach is chosen for its ability to generate rich descriptive and interpretive accounts of events based on the participant's narratives. The findings revealed that the variation in learning experiences and academic performance was accounted for by background factors rather than student's own intellectual or academic competencies.

KEYWORDS:

Academic performance; Access; Financial Constraints; Language of Instruction; Learning experiences; Postgraduate Black Students; Quality of Education; Retention; Throughput Rates; Transformation

Declaration

Student number: 34568964

I declare that "**The Lived Experiences of Postgraduate Black Student: An Exploration Through the South African Transformation Lens**" 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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SIGNATURE   DATE

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List of abbreviations

CHE - Council on Higher Education

DHET – Department of Higher Education and Training

DOE – Department of Education

IPA – Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

MEDUNSA – Medical University of South Africa

ODL – Open Distance Learning

OFS – Orange Free State University

RAU – Rand Afrikaans University

TSA – Technikon South Africa

UNISA – University of South Africa

UP – University of Pretoria

VUDEC – Vista University Distance Education Campus

Chapter 1

The lived experiences of postgraduate black students: An exploration through the South African transformation lens

1.1 Introduction

South Africa encompasses a multicultural society that is made up of diverse racial and ethnic groups with a variety of languages. Increasingly this social, cultural and religious diversity is finding expression within institutions of higher education. This diversity has implications on several fronts amongst others, on the provision of higher education. From the year 1948 to 1994, our country was governed by an apartheid regime, which resulted in separate development for different racial groups including different education systems (Gerard, 2011).

The most influential system of education to ever emerge during apartheid rule was the introduction of Bantu Education Act 47 of 1953 (Reddy, 2004). Under this regulation, higher education assumed an elitist connotation, which resulted in language being used as an instrument of racial oppression (Badat, 2009). Through the marginalisation of black students, the apartheid system was able to strategically regulate their participation in higher education (Badsha & Harper, 2000).

Despite the new democratic order currently sweeping the country, the legacy of the apartheid system continues to have an impact on the provision of higher education (Mouton, Louw & Strydom, 2013). This is reflected by a number of prominent issues at universities across the country. Chief amongst these is the poor academic performance of black students in comparison to their white counterparts (Badat, 2005; Council on Higher Education, 2017; Jansen et al., 2005; Jones, Coetzee, Bailey & Wickham, 2008; Hendorn & Hirt, 2004); the need to urgently transform an increasingly western curriculum (Breidlid, 2009; Ensor, 2004; Waghid, 2002); the institutional culture prevalent at the majority of historically white universities in the country (Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Foster, 2005; Jansen, 2004 & Jones et al., 2008); and the composition of a progressively aging staff cohort, which is heavily skewed

along racial lines (Council on Higher Education, 2017). The need to transform the multicultural South African human capital is yet another prominent issue that requires consideration.

1.2 Access and success within higher education in South Africa

In the wake of democracy, the connected issues of access and throughput rates have continued to dominate public discourse at institutions of higher education (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Badat, 2010; Mouton, Louw & Strydom, 2013; Seabi, Seedat, Khoza-Shangase & Sullivan, 2014 & Van Wyk, 2005). According to statistical analysis in the year 2010, 892 943 students were enrolled across institutions of higher education and in 2015 the numbers increased to 985 212 (Council on Higher Education, 2017). Although access has improved significantly, throughput rates remain an area of great concern. In comparison to their peers, black students continue to perform poorly especially at postgraduate level.

Recent trends reveal that in the year 2015, 159 562 students were enrolled for postgraduate studies (Council on Higher Education, 2017). A breakdown by race provides a much clearer record of the continued increase in access rates, which do not necessarily translate into similar throughput rates. Statistics indicate that "enrolments by race increased steadily for black students between 2010 and 2015 from 78 808 to 98 259, trends within the same periods for white students showed a slight decrease in comparison to trends observed for black students from 39 384 to 36 928" (Council on Higher Education, 2017, p. 20).

The Council on Higher Education noted that "an analysis of headcounts of postgraduate qualification awarded by race revealed a steady increase in proportion of black postgraduates between 2010 and 2015 for all three qualification types (Honours: from 14 995 to 21 491; Masters: from 3550 to 5635; Doctoral 542 to 1233), however, there are significant differences in proportion of white graduates during the same period (Honours: 10 298 to 9853; Masters: 3740 to 4275; Doctoral: 682 to 909, respectively)" (Council on Higher Education, 2017, p. 21). When it comes to success rates these figures are highly problematic, considering that the enrolment rates of black students in 2015 was more than double that of their white counterparts during the same period. Although the access rates bode well for

transformation efforts in the country, caution still needs to be exercised as these are not always a true reflection of transformation gains in the higher education.

According to sentiments echoed by major policy documents, the question of transformation should not only be confined to interrogating issues of access, but should equally be concerned with throughput rates, as these still reflects widespread disparities (Council on Higher Education, 2010 & Department of Higher Education & Training, 2013). Against this background, there appears to be an urgent need to remedy the achievement gap, in order to assist more black students to performing academically on par with their peers. Efforts need to be strengthened to produce more postgraduate black students who can make valid contributions to the countries developmental needs.

1.3 Rationale for the study

There appears to be a scarcity of literature on the learning experiences and academic performance of postgraduate black students. The literature is often replete with narratives of undergraduate students (Keswell & Poswell, 2004; Mouton, Louw & Strydom, 2013; Murray, 2014; Ross, 2010; Sennett, Finchilescu, Gibson, & Strauss, 2003 & Strydom, Kuh & Mentz, 2010), or informed by international perspectives and consequently, fails to resonate with the South African student population (Adams, 2005; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Johnson-bailey, Valentine, & Cervero, 2006 ; Kynard, 2008; Toni & Olivier, 2004).

International studies tend to focus on the nature of curricula and black student's ability to relate to the learning material, the bulk of which is rooted in western belief, culture and ideology (Adams, 2005; Doll, 2008; Henfield, Moore & Wood, 2008 & Kynard, 2008). Other studies draw premature conclusions about black student experiences based on the campus environment prevalent at universities (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Johnson-bailey, Valentine & Cervero, 2009; Toni & Olivier, 2004). However, campus environment might not be a true reflection of student's experiences, given that for a majority of black students internationally, interaction with their white peers is not an alienating experience.

By way of contrast, due to culturally imposed standards of socialisation black students in South Africa had limited opportunities to interact with their white peers (Jansen, 2004; Jansen, 2006; Vally, Dolombisa, & Porteus, 1999). Consequently, campus environments have far-reaching consequences for black students considering our history of separate developments. According to Cornell & Kessi (2017), the prevalence of discrimination on campus contributes negatively towards black student's institutional commitment and social integration. Such alienation can hinder the process of successful racial integration thus, creating unnecessary barriers for effective teaching and learning at university (Miller & Sujitparapitaya, 2010).

International studies are further of the view that family involvement is an important source of academic support at university (Barnett, 2004; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003 & Jones, Coetzee, & Bailey, 2008). Amongst the South African student population, this form of support is often problematic given that the majority of black learners are often first generation university students (Makoe, 2005). This can result in unnecessary pressure and unrealistic expectations amongst family members, often with negative consequences to academic performance.

Therefore, taking into account the low proportion of black students who make the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies (Department of Higher Education & Training, 2013), and the constant pursuit of South African graduate's internationally (Crush, 2000), priority needs to be exercised in producing highly skilled individuals especially at postgraduate level. More studies such as this are needed to facilitate a holistic understanding of the current state of higher education, and how it contributes towards promoting issues of redress and national transformation. Given the South African history of separate developments, and its implications for the education system, it may be necessary to understand how postgraduate black students have been impacted.

1.4 Research aims and objectives

The aim of the study is to explore the learning experiences and academic performance of postgraduate black students at Unisa. The objective is to explore factors that come to bear upon students learning experiences and academic performance, and investigating the nature of such influences. This will be done to determine ways to support and improve students learning experiences and academic performance.

The research questions for the study can thus be formulated as follows:

- What are the factors that influence students' learning experiences and academic performance at university?
- How do these factors influence their learning experiences and academic performance?
- Which measures need to be put in place to support and improve their learning experiences and academic performance?

1.5 Chapter outline

The study consists of five chapters. The chapter that follows focuses on the literature review, which will consist of a discussion of the literature relevant for the study and will attempt to ground this research academically. The literature will explore factors that impact teaching and learning at universities, and it will be evaluated in light of international studies with a specific focus on the South African higher education landscape. The chapter will further elaborate on the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

Chapter three will outline the methodology including the research approach and research design for the study. The chapter will detail the sampling method employed including procedures for analysis of data. Ethical considerations that are applicable to the study will also form part of the discussion.

Chapter four will present the results of the study. The main themes that were extracted from the data will be discussed in detail. Chapter five will present the conclusion of the study, implications, strengths, limitations and recommendations for future research. The chapter will end with a reflection on the research process.

Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter consist of a discussion of the literature relevant for the study and will attempt to ground this research on sound theory. The literature will look at factors that impact on teaching and learning at universities, and will be evaluated in light of international developments, with a specific focus on institutions of higher education in South Africa. The literature will provide the context within which students at Unisa learn in relation to other institutions of higher education in the country.

Underpinning this discussion is the political climate that prevailed in South Africa during the apartheid era. Emphasis will be on how the notion of separate development, which was a key feature of the apartheid system, sought to regulate the provision of quality education. The literature will draw attention to how teaching and learning was impacted by focusing on the experiences of postgraduate black students. Bearing in mind that the theoretical framework underpinning the study is critical race theory. The literature is presented in a manner that is congruent with the basic assumptions underlying this theoretical framework.

2.2 Higher education in South Africa

There is a prevalence in critical South African discourses that no other sector within government sphere has undergone as major a set of reforms as higher education (Akojee & Nkomo, 2007; Badat, 2009; Brennan, King & Lebeau, 2004; Du Toit, 2009; Jansen, 2004 & Mouton, Louw & Strydom, 2013). Prior to 1994, higher education comprised more than 36 different institutions (White Paper on Higher Education, 1997). Under apartheid, higher education became increasingly divided along racial lines, and this manifested in a number of historically white and black institutions (Mabizela, 2005). These divisions were further characterised by distinctions between historically white English medium and Afrikaans medium institutions of higher education (Reddy, 2004).

According to Bunting (2002), historically white Afrikaans medium institutions comprised the University of Pretoria (UP), University of Orange Free State (OFS), Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), Potchefstroom University and the University of Stellenbosch. These institutions gained their reputation through strong coalitions with the then apartheid government (Bunting, 2002). This compliance did not only guarantee preferential treatment, but also ensured favourable institutional progress and a consistent flow of state subsidy (Moodie, 1994).

The composition of historically white institutions further comprised of English medium institutions, namely the University of Cape Town, University of Natal, Rhodes University, and the University of the Witwatersrand (Bunting, 2002, p. 70). A distinguishing feature of previously white English medium universities was their antagonistic stance towards the apartheid regime, which was motivated by a quest to preserve their institutional autonomy and to retain their academic freedom (Mabizela, 2005). Historically black institutions were also subjected to various divisions, and this yielded a number of institutions which were operating under the auspices of the department of education and training (Mabizela, 2005). According to Bunting (2002):

> "these comprised of the Medical university of South Africa (Medunsa); University of the North; Vista University; University of Zululand; Durban Westville University and the University of the Western Cape, the makeup of these institutions further entailed institutions which were classified under separate states by the apartheid system namely, University of Transkei; North west University; University of Venda and Fort Hare University all of which constituted breeding grounds for black students who were specifically trained for serving a white middle class" (pp. 74-77).

Even prior to an overview of Technikons, what immediately comes to the fore is an uncoordinated higher education system (Mabizela, 2005). These developments, coupled with some institutions that made provision for distance education, ultimately culminated in a fragmented higher education system that only catered for the intellectual development of certain minority groups (Moodie, 1994).

Historically black institutions remained for the most part within the confines of serving a side-lined student population. This was evident through poor funding structures, poor teaching and learning practices, and an equally poor quality of education which constituted the norm (Mabizela, 2005). As an additional barrier towards effective teaching and learning a majority of historically black institutions were located in remote areas of the country, and this impacted severely on their ability to create extended networks of social support (Bunting, 2002). These developments resulted in an intellectual vacuum that manifested through obsolete teaching practices and isolation from international best practice (Keswell & Powell, 2004). By virtue of their academic merit and poor affiliation with the apartheid system, historically black institutions were constantly engaged in a struggle to preserve their academic integrity, and this resulted in unstable campus environments at many institutions, and increasingly gave rise to a culture of defiance (Bentley, Habib & Morrow, 2006).

In contrast, historically white institutions enjoyed an increasingly substantial budget in government subsidies, which ensured continued excellence for students affiliated with such institutions (Reddy, 2004). Due to the financial muscle at their disposal, historically white institutions were able to attract amongst others highly competent staff who are specialists in their respective fields of study (Mabizela, 2005). An interesting aspect worth noting with regard to historically black and white institutions is the quality of students that each institution was able to attract. Previously white institutions historically as much as to date, have always attracted high performing students with exemplary school leaving results (Bunting & Cloete, 2010). Their state of the art research facilities and highly specialised coursework has always meant that placement at such institutions is highly sought after by students.

Against this background, universities were focused on theoretical training aimed at strengthening student's conceptual understanding of the learning material (Bunting, 2002). This entailed a highly structured curriculum, that in most instances, worked to guide students learning experience along a desired study path within a specified period of time (Ensor, 2004). This highly structured approach was equally accompanied by assessment strategies designed to reward students for reproducing factual information aimed at fulfilling the specific course requirements (Badat, 2007). Technikons on the contrary, were more concerned with hands on training that focused on bridging the gap between theory and

practice (Mabizela, 2005). They were specifically tasked with addressing the skills shortage in the labour force (Bunting, 2002). Meaning that, students who came from such institutions were exposed to training that is focused more on applying practical information in the working environment (Cooper, 1995).

However, post-apartheid the higher education landscape in the country has since undergone major reform (Ismail, 2011). This comes in wake of government effort to create an integrated and uniform higher education system (Ntshoe, 2003), and even more so, an education system that espouses values of inclusivity and diversity as outlined in the constitution. These efforts have since resulted in a number of institutional mergers aimed at achieving redress in the higher education landscape (Jansen, 2002). The current higher education landscape in the country comprises 23 institutions of higher education (DoE, 2008). These are characterised by contact and distance learning institutions.

2.3 Contact versus distance learning institutions in South Africa

Contact institutions are renowned for face-to-face learning that occurs on campus. They make provision for regular tuition classes and attendance of students on a daily basis is compulsory (Storper & Venables, 2004). The demographics of the student population comprise mainly individuals who have recently completed their high schooling (Deka & McMurry, 2006). As a mechanism to enhance students learning experiences, a majority of contact institutions boast state of the art research facilities and a wealth of institutional resources that enhances students learning experiences through practical application of knowledge (Meyer, 2003). Contact institutions are notorious for their ability to attract highly competent staff members due to the financial resources at their disposal (Bunting, 2002).

However, this does not imply that contact institutions are without any potential challenges for students. Criticism has been labelled against the exorbitant amount of fees that often accompanies studying at many contact institutions (Skuy et al., 2002). If one takes into account the high levels of poverty in the country, and the costs associated with studying at these kinds of institutions, potential exists for historically marginalised students to be denied the opportunity to compete on equal grounds with their peers. Consequently, the question

often arises as to whether academically gifted students might be in danger of being excluded by an education system that is influenced by a capitalist paradigm (Herman, 1995). This is problematic, considering that the schooling system in our country is shaped by a myriad of factors, most of which are political in nature and beyond the scope of academia. Thus, contact institutions do not provide for equitable educational opportunities.

In contrast, distance learning institutions mediate for a variety of student needs, especially those that might arise due to physical location or time constraints (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Students who are enrolled at distance education institutions are able to structure their learning experiences according to their personal circumstances. This implies that as opposed to rigid course requirements students studying at a distance are afforded more liberty to study at their own pace. Distance learning is renowned for its ability to accommodate a large number of students (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). In South Africa, distance learning remains one of the most feasible avenues of acquiring a higher education for the majority of historically marginalised students (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012). Meaning that because distance learning institutions are capable of enrolling an increasingly diverse body of students at a lower cost, it can thus, assume a leading role in addressing issues of access and redress in many developing countries (Badat, 2005).

Equally important to consider is the convergence between distance and contact learning institutions. According to Makoe (2008), it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the scope of practice for some distance learning institutions in relation to contact institutions. The lines between the two are becoming increasingly difficult to establish, as a result of amongst others, technological developments and the diversity of needs embodied by the current student cohort (Badat, 2010). Furthermore, it is becoming common practice amongst some contact institutions to facilitate certain courses through correspondence mode. Therefore, in comparison to contact institutions, distance learning is much more responsive and can assume a leading role in achieving redress and transformation (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). This does not imply that distance learning is the best approach towards teaching and learning. Common criticisms held up against this approach often include the poor quality of programmes (Badat, 2005), lack of timeous quality feedback for students (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013), and inadequate support offered to students in comparison to contact institutions (Cain,

Marrara, Pitre & Armour, 2003). The need to prioritise support for students has further been cited for the increased feelings of frustration and isolation (Tait, 2000).

2.4 University of South Africa as a distance learning institution

According to Boucher (1973) "the University of South Africa has a long standing and rich history that can be traced as far back as 1873, when it was still known as the University of the Cape of Good Hope" (p.25). Soobrayan (2002) added that, "it was only in 1916 that it became the University of South Africa and a distance education institution in 1946" (p.18). The transition of Unisa from an examining body to a fully-fledged correspondence university was spearheaded by the then Vice Chancellor of the University Professor A.J.H. Van Der Walt, who launched the division of external studies in 1946, and in 1959, Unisa became the world's first correspondence university, using study guides, audio tape, and limited face-to-face tuition (University of South Africa, n.d)

Given the divisions characterising the state of higher education, Unisa remained one of the few institutions making provision for the educational needs of diverse students. Being a correspondence university ensured exemption from legislation that prohibited different racial groups from attending the same institution (Soobrayan, 2002). However, as it was symptomatic of developments during the apartheid era, the composition of staff at Unisa was nonetheless skewed towards the white minority (Ngengebule, 1998).

Following events post-1994, a clear intent in the form of various higher education committees and multiple policy interventions were put into effect to promote issues of redress and transformation. The groundwork towards a transformed and integrated distance learning institution was laid by the then minister of education, Professor Kader Asmal (University of South Africa, n.d). Under this regulation, Unisa, Technikon South Africa (TSA), and Vista University Distance Education Campus (Vudec), were to undergo an institutional merger (Mabizela, 2005). According to Soobrayan (2002), this transitional process did not materialise as smoothly as is often documented, given that it was perceived by TSA and Vudec as more of an incorporation than a merger. Given the reputation and institutional

capacity of Unisa, TSA and Vudec became increasingly threaten by the prospect of an uncertain future. According to Soobrayan (2002):

> "there was no central body tasked with ensuring a smooth transition amongst these institutions and various disputes ensued, the bulk of which centred on ownership of institutional property, staff deployment, issues relating to a proposed new curricula, organisational labour issues, student administration as well as other matters pertaining to organisational integration" (pp. 34-48).

Amidst the uncertainties, the proposed merger effectively took place in 2002, and has since seen Unisa slowly establish a reputation amongst higher education providers worldwide as one of the major role players in the provision of open distance learning (ODL) continentally and abroad (Soobrayan, 2002). The commonwealth of learning (2000) argues that there is no one definition of ODL, but rather, that there are many approaches to defining the term. According to the guiding principle and framework for an ODL Pedagogy, as proposed by the Unisa (2011), an ODL pedagogy can be described as:

> "the intentional teaching strategies and enactment (delivery) of these strategies to contribute to and bring out learning in bridging multiple distances, ranging from the epistemological (how knowledge is constructed) distance between disciplines and/or lectures and students; ontological (how we see the world and make meaning) distances; to difference between aspirations, aim, access to resources and a range of other distance between students and lectures and/or disciplines" (p.11).

The council on higher education (2004) emphasises that "distance education for most institutions implies that there is a distance between learners and institutional/teachers a distance that is often physical (spatial), but could also be temporal" (p. 24). However, for the purpose of the study, the following definition will apply, as adopted in the Unisa ODL policy (2008), which defines ODL as a "multidimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, and educational and communication distance between students and institution, students and academics, students and courseware and students and peers" (p. 2).

Based on the above definitions, we can thus infer that ODL entails teaching and learning practices that are facilitated through correspondence. As an approach to teaching and

learning, ODL is devoid of face-to-face tuition between lecturers and students, as both parties are usually constrained by either time or physical distance (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Pitsoe & Maila, 2012). The modern student is confronted with a number of challenges, which at times necessitates them to perform multiple roles. Given that ODL is a highly flexible mode of delivering higher education it is particularly responsive to the needs of non-traditional students.

Given the historical legacy of inequality prevalent in our country, many students do not comply with criteria for automatic entry at contact institutions. Therefore, due to measures that are usually put in place at ODL institutions, students are able to gain alternative entry through recognition of prior learning, and various bridging courses that are designed to build on their existing knowledge (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). In recent years, Unisa has increasingly started to attract a large cohort of student's that have been previously denied access to higher education. According to the Unisa annual report (2016) "Students enrolment for 2012 were recorded at 336 286, in 2013 this number increased to 335 240 and in the year 2015 the figures were recorded at 337 944. Further analysis indicates that:

> "Enrolment by race group show that in 2016 the proportion of African students had increased approximately to 72.4% of the total student base, with an average year-on-year growth since 2012, this is in complete contrast to the proportional representation of Indian and white students which is on a continuous decline year-on-year from 2012 to 2016, the proportion of Whites declined by 1.5%, followed by Indians (0.4%) although the numbers for Coloured students increased annually this was still relatively low at (0.4%)" (Unisa, Annual Report, 2016, p.10).

A number of reasons have been advanced for the recent influx of students at the Unisa. Prominent amongst these is the new democratic order currently sweeping the country (Badat, 2007; Makoe, 2006; Jansen, 2004), and the reasonable cost of tuition which has become synonymous with ODL institutions (Badat, 2005). The administration of Unisa constitutes various departments that are tasked with overlooking critical spheres essential towards sustaining the core business of the institution. These entails teaching and learning, research, community engagement and academic citizenship. In order to ensure efficient and effective functioning of these spheres, Unisa comprise of departments that are equally responsible for a number of logistical matters ranging from human resource, information and communication

technology, tuition and facilitation of learning, student support services in the form of regional centres, directorates, and colleges that cater for diverse range of educational programmes (University of South Africa, n.d).

In keeping with standards of international best practice in ODL, teaching and learning at Unisa is facilitated through multiple approaches. These include but are not limited to printed material in the form of tutorial letters, study guides, as well as prescribed textbooks. Provision is made for electronic media through online platforms such as *myunisa,* which aim to promote active participation of students and their lectures, promote experiential and work integrated learning, practical training, and general reflections and research activities amongst students (Unisa, Open Distance Learning Policy, 2008, p. 1).

As an additional measure to ensure positive academic progress, Unisa has invested in the establishment of regional centres that are strategically located across all nine provinces in the country. The primary functions of these regional centres are twofold, namely for administrative purposes, and for academic learner support services. Administrative matters addressed by these regional centres comprise all types of student's registration including undergraduate, postgraduate, diplomas and certificate programmes, information about bursaries and loans. It houses information desks that make provision for a diverse range of academic programmes offered by the university, study centres in the form of libraries, and venues to facilitate discussion classes, as well as information regarding examination preparation and submissions of assignments (University of South Africa, n.d).

Provision for learner support services is catered for through face-to-face tutorials, interactive video conferencing, and academic literacy programmes, peer support programmes, and various forms of career counselling (University of South Africa, n.d). Although provision is made in some modules for discussion classes, this however, does not constitute a compulsory part of teaching and learning, as tuition between lecturers and students is facilitated through pre-arranged individual or group consultations, telephonic communication and electronic mail. Recent developments in student support have led to the introduction of the Unisa Integrated Tutor Model (2012) which seeks to provide an additional platform for students to engage with tutors in order to ensure success and social integration.

In line with Unisa assessment policy (2005) "assessment of students is viewed as a process in which evidence of performance is gathered and evaluated against agreed criteria in order to make a judgement as to whether the learning required for achievement of a specific outcome is taking place or has taken place" (p. 1). Assessment of students at Unisa is facilitated through a formative and summative approach respectively. The former entails assessment that takes place during the teaching and learning process, whilst the latter refers to assessment that is used for making a judgement about the achievement outcome in order to certify that a student may progress with his/her studies or graduate (Unisa, Assessment Policy, 2005, p. 4). Formative assessment is carried out through compulsory assignments, which are designed to assist students in working through the entire course syllabus, depending on whether students are enrolled for semester or year modules.

After successful completion of each assignment, students are sent feedback in the form of a tutorial letters, which provides the correct answers to the questions, and detailed feedback on individual questions, in an effort to facilitate deeper learning. These assignment marks contribute to a student's overall year mark, which is added to the final exam mark to determine whether a student meets criteria for successfully completion. In reference to summative assessment, students are expected to write examinations at the end of every academic year, or at the end of the semester for students enrolled for semester courses.

Due to the high rates of poverty in the country, many students are often forced to prioritise employment opportunities at the expense of their studies (Klasen & Woolard, 2008). Therefore, ODL institutions are able to provide alternative avenues for students to continue with their studies, while concurrently earning a salary. Not only does it help students to progress academically, but it holds great potential for students who might be employed in their respective fields of study, as they stand to benefit from any work related opportunities. The role of Unisa is not confined to serving students in South Africa only, but it is equally dedicated to serving students on the continent, the diaspora and outside the boarders of Africa.

Given the barriers that ODL is able to transcend and the diversity of students that it is able to accommodate, it would become a grave injustice for developing countries to fail in harnessing the intellectual potential of ODL. In order to ascertain that gains made by the new

democratic order were not in vain, the role of institutions of higher education need to prioritise societal demands. Therefore, Unisa mission statement "towards the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity" bodes well for transformation efforts in the country, as it signals a commitment on the part of the university to align their core function with the developmental needs of the African continent as well as the country's vision of a transformed higher education system.

2.5 Factors influencing student's success at institutions of higher learning in South Africa

2.5.1 Motivation

According to the Council on Higher Education (2017) in comparison to their peers, black students continue to perform poorly at universities. In light of this poor academic performance, an aspect that warrants attention is the role of motivation on students' learning experiences and academic performance. Various hypotheses have been advanced in the literature in an effort to remedy black students' underperformance. Some research is of the view that the historical legacy of the apartheid system ought to bear most of the brunt for black students' poor academic performance (Badat, 2010; Bunting, 2004 & Jansen et al., 2005). Other studies add the lack of family support as a contributory factor to underperformance amongst black students (Codjoe, 2007; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Jones, Coetzee & Bailey, 2008; Sennet et al., 2003), whilst others contend that an increasingly western curriculum is largely to blame as it tends to alienate black students and consequently, impacts negatively on their academic performance (Goodman et al., 2011; Moore, 2003 & Waghid, 2002).

Although various hypotheses exist on the relationship between student motivation and academic performance, most are informed by the experiences of students from contact learning institutions. However, taking into account the recent demand for higher education amongst non-traditional students, and the ever-increasing image of ODL, a number of theories have been advanced. Prominent amongst these is the self-determination theory which argues that a student independent study behaviour and personal ambition are the major determinants of academic success at university (Simpson, 2008). This theory is particularly

suitable for understanding student motivation at distance learning institutions given that it emphasizes the role of behavioural traits as a mechanism to ensure academic success at university (Simpson, 2008). According to the self-determination theory personal expectations will determine the level of effort that a student is willing to devote to their studies in order to achieve their goals (Kusurkar et al., 2012). The usefulness of this theory in understanding students' experiences in higher education is embedded in the belief that motivation is innate, and as a consequence differs from one individual to another (Zimmerman et al., 1992). In view of this, a student who is self-motivated and is able to work independently is more likely to succeed at university. As underlined by the self-determination theory studying at a distance requires a lot of dedication and personal sacrifices (Simpson, 2008). Therefore, the responsibility lies with the student who has to consistently work through the course requirements in order to comply with criteria for successful completion of their studies.

Other theorists emphasise the importance of a student decision making abilities as an important determinant of academic success at university. The epistemological identity theory is the most effective in explaining motivation levels amongst distance learning students as it focuses on the decision-making abilities (Mansell et al., 2004). The assumptions underlying this theory is that in order for a student to benefit from their learning experience, they need to ensure that their chosen field of study is aligned to their personal interests, and to the career path they intend to follow (Simpson, 2008). This theory has contributed to our understanding of student motivation at a distance as it places emphasis on a student ability to make informed decisions regarding their studies. As highlighted by the theory there needs to be cohesion in terms of the chosen field of study and personal interest in order to succeed at university (Mansell et al., 2004). An important consideration is that the theory could offer possible explanation for increased attrition rates at university as a consequence of minimal career guidance at school (Dabula & Makura, 2013). Evidence further suggests that students who are academically well prepared are able to make informed decisions regarding their studies and consequently adjust successfully at university (Bitzer & De Bruin, 2004). In South Africa, lack of access to information continues to have a bearing on many underprepared black students at university (Van der Berg, 2008). This is reflected by uninformed decisions in relation to their field of studies and prospective career choices amongst students at university (Dabula & Makura, 2013). Furthermore, there is also constant pressure amongst non-traditional students to start working whilst they are busy with their studies. This often

necessitates student to choose courses that can be completed in a short turnaround in hope that they will be able to finance their postgraduate studies and support their families in the process (Badat, 2005). This results in many challenges chief amongst these is the inability to devote the necessary attention to their studies which could lead to poor academic performance at university (Metcalf, 2003).

The ability to make informed decisions at university is equally influenced by specific goals which a student intends to achieve. In light of this, the achievement goal theory as proposed by Skaalvik (2004) maintains that motivation is to a large degree, influenced by personal goal setting. The contributions of this theory in terms of student experiences is underlined by the notion that goals serve as a point of reference that enables students' to constantly reflect on their own academic progress at university (Skaalvik, 2004). In South Africa, a majority of students who transit from a high school to university environment do so because it has become customary for students to follow this route, or because of societal pressure or parental expectations (Beutel & Anderson, 2008). Consequently, students might lack clear goals, which could result in high attrition rates (Fraser & Killen, 2005; Mclean, 2001). As pointed out by this theory having a clear goal is paramount in achieving academic success at university. However, having a clear goal alone does not guarantee success at university.

An equally important attribute with regard to motivation at a distance is a student's level of confidence in the learning process. In essence this implies that students who are confident about the learning process are able to motivate themselves in order to achieve their desired goals (Simpson, 2008). The self-perceived competency theory highlights the role played by a students' perception towards their own academic progress. This theory purports that a student's perception of their academic competence, be it realistic or illusionary, can contribute towards their expected outcomes (Pajares, 2004). According to the self-perceived theory, students have the tendency to either attribute their academic success to the amount of effort they directly put into their work, to luck, or even to unknown causes (Simpson, 2008). Some scholars are of the view that students' motivation does not occur in isolation, but rather is influenced by a myriad of factors, which relate to an individual's self-efficacy and learning strategies (Wang, Peng, Huang, Hou & Wang, 2008). Therefore, the usefulness of the theory is underlined by an emphasis on student's perception of their ability to perform academically. Meaning that the theory highlights the importance of how an individual's state of mind and

confidence levels can contribute towards their academic development (Pajares, 2004). In this regard, a positive state of mind is influential in shaping behaviour towards expected outcome.

Challenges with motivating students are not unique to South Africa, and have continued to hamper the provision of higher education in both developed and developing countries (Baxter, 2012; Heaven, Stones & Rajab, 1984; Simpson, 2008; Singh, Singh & Singh, 2012; Zimmerman, 1992). If such shortcomings are not properly addressed by various educational constituencies, then students are less likely to be motivated to strive for improved academic performance. Given the historical barriers of separate development, it is important for universities to remain mindful of factors that impact on black student's motivational levels in an effort to address their underperformance.

2.5.2 The apartheid legacy

Literature on the state of higher education during the apartheid era can be seen to describe it as a state of oligarchy, an existential crisis and as separate development, capturing the inequalities that embodied the provision of quality education (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Badat, 2007; Du Toit, 2009 & Jansen, 2004). A major feature of the apartheid system was its stated goal of separate development (Davies, 1996). Under the system it implemented to achieve this, regulation of higher education assumed an elitist connotation (Badat, 2007). This resulted in widespread disparities in the provision of quality education for the majority of black students (Moodie, 1994). It further culminated in a number of oppressive government acts, most notably the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which sought to curtail the intellectual development of certain minority groups in society (Mahlalela & Heugh, 2002).

The Bantu Education Act of (1953) was preceded by the Group Areas Act (1950), which sought to impose limitations on an individual's freedom of movement (Horrell, 1963). Under this regulation, interaction amongst racially diverse groups was strictly prohibited, and this manifested in racially segregated residential areas (Davies, 1996). This had a serious impact on higher education in the country, and increasingly gave rise to segregated schooling experiences. The University Extension Act of (1959) also came into effect during this time.

This Act deemed it unlawful, and even unacceptable, for black students to attend a historically white institution without formal consent (Horrell, 1963).

These regulations resulted in a lack of institutional autonomy for many historically black universities (Moodie, 1994). It also culminated in a spiral of negative events, as it gave rise to a culture of oppression and segregation (Gerard, 2011). Measures to enforce such stringent regulations were premised on the assumption that different racial groups were not created equally, and consequently were not entitled to an equal standard of education (Cross, Mungadi & Rouhani, 2002; Gerard, 2011; Horrell, 1963). This ideology was widespread during the apartheid era, and served to perpetuate the discriminatory racist paradigm that black people were inferior (Davies, 1996).

Under the apartheid regime, higher education endured a period of great uncertainty (Gerard, 2011). Not only did such regulations ensure state sovereignty over important matters that relate to the development of higher education, but it guaranteed compliance with the rule of law (Davies, 1996). The inequalities that were inherent within the apartheid regime had a paramount impact on higher education. This is because a majority of black students came from under-resourced schooling systems that failed to sufficiently prepare them to deal with the demands of higher education (Moodie, 1994). Consequently, such students are often at a higher risk of underperforming especially in comparison to their peers.

The quality of education often associated with low income communities such as those seen in our country, has a huge implication for academic success. According to Anderson et al. (2001) under-resourced schooling environments fail to provide the necessary intellectual stimulation for students to become independent thinkers. Nkhoma (2002) is of the view that due to poor teaching environments at many schools in the country, a majority of black students are often discouraged to aspire towards greater intellectual pursuits. He asserts that, the poor teaching practices that usually constitute the norm at a number of public schools in the country ought first to be remedied if the burden of underperformance is to be effectively addressed (Nkhoma, 2002).

Therefore, if we consider South Africa's historical legacy of injustice it becomes important to understand black students learning experiences in an effort to improve their throughput rates.

Against this background, the socio-economic status of black students needs to be acknowledged, and mechanisms to address such shortcomings need to be put in place. This will ensure that equity is not only limited to enrolment rates, but equally, that it translates into tangible throughput rates.

2.5.3 Socio-economic status

There is a general perception that is found in the literature which increasingly suggests that socio-economic status has an influence on students learning experience and academic performance at university (Breier, 2010; Herman, 1995; Jones, Coetzee, Bailey & Wickham, 2008; Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013 & Makoe, 2006). In light of the South African student population, this could have far-reaching consequences given that socio-economic status is often associated with prior quality of education (Breier, 2010). Literature by Case & Yogo (1999) posit that, prior quality of education is often a strong predictor of academic performance, as it provides students with the necessary academic skills and competencies to negotiate the demands of university. A study by Makoe (2006) added that "black students' understanding of learning is by large influenced by the social and cultural environment in which they grew up, their level of education and construal of their self in relation to their community" (p.363). According to Van der Berg (2008), the quality of education that black students were exposed to prior to university was insufficient to promote a culture of effective teaching and learning. In addition to the burden of an inferior education system, many schools in rural areas were constantly confronted with challenges of poorly trained teachers, whom by virtue of their own limitations, failed to nurture students' intellectual pursuit (Van der Berg, 2008).

Considering our history of separate developments socio-economic status has huge implications for a majority of black students in South Africa. This is often perpetuated by instances where students have added responsibilities of taking care of their families whilst studying. Evidence from literature suggests that working whilst studying has adverse effects on students' academic performance due to less time that is spend on studies, missed lecturers, fatigued resulting from long hours at work and increased stress due to work commitments (Curtis & Shani, 2002). Similarly, Evans, Gbadamosi & Richardson (2014) argue that the

amount of time that can be devoted to wider academic reading and assessment preparation is usually compromised amongst students' who work part time at university which often results in underperformance. A study by Metcalf (2003) indicated that working part time has an undesirable impact on students' academic performance. The study discovered that "students' whose fathers did not have a degree and female students (especially from ethnic minorities) were more likely to work during term time and, hence, benefit less educationally from the university" (p 1). Research by Anderson et al. (2001) highlights the importance of a stable family background as one of the factors which might mitigate the relationship between socio-economic status and academic performance at university. He posits that family background, and particularly the involvement of parents in the academic development of students serves as positive reinforcement towards their academic performance (Anderson et al., 2001). An equally important factor in this regard, is parental level of education (Sennet et al., 2003).

The influence of parental level of education on the academic performance of students has subsequently gained recognition in the literature (Ntshoe, 2003 & Peterson et al., 2009). This comes in the wake of strategies aimed at promoting parental involvement. A South African study by Beutel & Anderson (2008) highlighted that the extent of parental involvement on academic performance is usually influenced by the personal expectations that characterise a family's dynamics. According to Beutel & Anderson (2008), there is a tendency amongst high achieving parents who hold stable job positions and are high salary earners to have high hopes and expectations for their children's education. They concluded that parents who earn lucrative salaries are better positioned to send their children to the best schools in the country, and are able to meet all the associated costs of attaining a quality education (Beutel & Anderson, 2008).

An issue that is of serious concern is that many black students in South Africa often come from poverty-stricken areas that are often characterised by a lack of parental supervision, child-headed households or even single-parent homes (Louw & Louw, 2014). Even in instances where both parents are available, unemployment usually presents additional problems. It is estimated that the unemployment rate in South Africa is, for each designated population group differentiated by apartheid categories of 'colour', respectively 31,4% for the black population, 22,9% for the coloured population, 12,9% for the Indian population, and 6,6% for the white population (Statistics South Africa, 2017).

In light of the low socio economic status, parents have to contend with working jobs that might necessitate them to be away from home for long periods. The abnormal workload often results in fatigue and minimum time to assist with the educational needs of their children. This lack of parental involvement can in turn breed an environment of neglect and poor academic performance (Sennet et al., 2003). According to Croizet & Claire (1998) stereotypes and negative societal attitudes, which often accompany individuals from a low socio-economic background can impact negatively on their academic performance. Due to the stigma of being labelled as underachieving students from a low socio-economic background often become discouraged to perform academically which in turn results in a self-fulfilling bias (Croizet & Claire, 1998). According to Van Laar & Sidanius (2001) having a high socio-economic status contributes positively to student's academic performance given that they are aided by a nurturing environment that provides them with many opportunities for intellectual growth. In this regard, having a stable family background is advantageous towards the educational pursuits of students at university. The positive influence of a supportive family environment on the academic development of students continues to shape discourse on factors that have a bearing on the learning experiences and academic performance of students at universities.

2.5.4 Family support

The presence of a supportive family environment is one of the most important aspects by means of which it is possible to succeed academically at university (Barnett, 2004). The foundations of such an environment for students are usually fostered during their upbringing and interactions with significant others, especially their next of kin. It is often during these interactions that certain values, morals and behaviour are exchanged. According to Desforges & Abouchaar (2003), this process of interaction has implications for an individual's identity and conceptualisation of the self in relation to others. A family that espouses values of care, compassion and commitment is more likely to be beneficial for a student's academic development, as opposed to one that is characterised by neglect, disengagement or a lack of interest (Jones, Coetzee, Whickham & Bailey, 2008; Codjoe, 2007; Hendorn & Hirt, 2004).

This notion of togetherness is further embodied within an African perspective where a great deal of emphasis is placed on communal living and the importance of maintaining good family ties. Literature suggests that students who come from a supportive family background are better equipped to negotiate challenges that are presented by an unfamiliar environment, like those at institutions of higher education (Gianzero, 1999; Goldschmidt, 2003; Jones, Coetzee, Whickham & Bailey, 2008). In South Africa, a majority of students often come from poverty-stricken areas and low-income families that are characterised by patterns of neglect and disengagement (Sennet et al., 2003). These family dynamics have serious implications for students, as they constitute an additional barrier towards their learning experiences and academic performance.

The perception created by disengaged family dynamics is that of education as a means to an end. It is not uncommon amongst low-income families to pin all hopes on a single individual, in expectation that upon completion they will be able to financially support the family. Such expectations usually create unnecessary pressure for black student and might compromise their chances of success at university. Contrary to a supportive family, such dynamics might constitute an additional burden. According to Barnett (2004) students who come from a stable and cohesive family background, reported positive coping abilities and better levels of adjustment, in contrast to those from families that showed a lack of interest. The former was found to be emotionally well adjusted due to their extended networks of social support (Barnett, 2004). Families in South Africa should be encouraged to assume a more proactive role in the educational endeavours of black students and to express willingness to nurture their intellectual development. A radical mind shift needs to be encouraged amongst many families in order to be actively engaged in the academic development of students. There needs to be clear communication in terms of support that is expected and available. Family members need to understand the value of supporting their student academically and emotionally in achieving their goals.

2.5.5 Language of instruction

Language of instruction is arguably one of the most important factors impacting the effectiveness of teaching and learning at universities (Wilson-Strydom, 2010). In South

Africa, language constitutes a highly sensitive topic especially considering the historical connotation that often accompanies the use of certain languages. During the apartheid era language served as an instrument of racial oppression (Asmal & James, 2001). This was particularly evident through the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction for teaching and learning.

The introduction of Afrikaans increasingly gave rise to single medium schools that only catered for the educational needs of certain minority groups (Lafon, 2009). By virtue of creating single medium schools, the apartheid system was able to deny black students the opportunity to compete on an equal footing with their white counterparts, due to the language barrier they lay behind. The use of the Afrikaans for teaching and learning culminated in a number of unfavourable events for the education systems in the country. It served as a political strategy to regulate the provision of quality education (Gerard, 2011). By limiting the participation of non-Afrikaans speaking people, the apartheid system was strategically able to eliminate oppositional views in the governance of higher education (Brayboy, Castagno & Maughan, 2007).

In essence, this points to the subjective nature of language, and highlights its centrality in asserting substantive dominance over important aspects in society (Painter, 2008). This subjectivity often enforces distinctions amongst people, and can consequently lead to the oppression of certain minority groups (Painter, 2008). Given that subjectivity is a social construct, it remains highly susceptible to human biases considering that human perceptions are influenced by a broad terrain of factors most of which are personal in nature (Painter, 2008). However, post-apartheid it is interesting to note that there has been a concerted effort through policy intervention to promote multilingualism across institutions of higher education in South Africa (Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education, 2001). The need to promote multilingualism and indigenous African languages for teaching and learning at institutions of higher education is directed at remedial measures, which seek to redress historical practices that were more inclined towards a bimodal approach.

This approach poses a concern considering that English and Afrikaans are not the primary languages for teaching and learning at schools in the rural communities. The schooling experiences of many black students in South Africa are often facilitated through an African

language. English and Afrikaans constitute either a second or a third language. In some instances, it might not even be compulsory for students to pass these languages in order to meet criteria for successful completion of a national senior certificate (Department of Basic Education, 2009).

According to the Department of Basic Education (2009) criteria for successful completion of a national senior certificate requires that "a learner must be enrolled for six subjects or more, for which two of the subject are languages, and the rest are compiled from a choice of designated subjects list" (pp. 7-9). Additionally, a learner can choose between one "African language with an additional option of either English or Afrikaans, and a 40% or more is a prerequisite for language requirement in order to meet university admission, in addition to a 50% or more pass mark required for designated subjects" (DoE, 2009, pp. 9-10). Therefore, in order for a learner to achieve success "an overall 40% in three subjects, of which one must be at home language level, and 30% for three additional subjects is required" (DoE, 2009, pp. 10-12).

Given that institutions of higher education are more inclined towards teaching in either English or Afrikaans, it becomes increasingly challenging for black students to suddenly perform academically on par with individuals for whom English constituted a first language (Webb, 2002). Taking into account that there is a great deal of emphasis on the need to pass a home language for successful completion of a national senior certificate, universities should be encouraged to tap into the intellectual potential of students who are taught in their mother tongue by promoting the use of African languages in curricula.

In an exploratory study that sought to investigate bilingual concept development, Paxton (2009) propose that "code-switching" which entails the translation of English concepts to a mother tongue in order to make meaningful sense of the learning process, could offer possibilities for the intellectual growth and improved academic performance. He argues that, because the learning process is central to the use of language, it is important for students for whom English is a second language to be afforded the opportunity to unpack their learning experiences through discussions using their mother tongue as a mechanism to broaden their understanding (Paxton, 2009).

Even prior to understanding what is being taught most students for whom English constitutes a second language are often burned by a lack of comprehension of various English concepts and terminologies (Webb, 2002). It is therefore essential to nurture an environment where students are encouraged to interact with peers using their mother tongue, in a quest to facilitating deep learning (Paxton, 2009). South Africa is a multilingual country, and in the quest towards transformation universities need to consider integrating African languages in their teaching and learning practices (Lafon, 2009). According to an analysis of University of South Africa exam-sitting results, home-language speakers of African languages performed worse than their counterparts with an average exam pass rate of 57,6% (Van Zyl & Barnes, 2012). The Afrikaans-speaking students scored above 70,2% on average, while English-speaking students scored 70,7% and non-South African languages 69,9%, respectively (Van Zyl & Barnes, 2012). Against this background, home language does appear to be a strong predictor of academic success at university.

Literature by Leibowitz (2005) argues that there is interplay of the English language proficiency of students who come from a low socio-economic background and their academic writing abilities. The research focused on the educational background of students who used English as a second language, and how their circumstances contributed to their English language proficiency. The findings seem to suggest that students who come from educational backgrounds that are characterised by English as a second language experience more difficulties when having to deal with academic writing tasks, including articulation of thought and presenting their arguments in an academically structured and logically coherent manner (Leibowitz, 2005). A number of research findings (McNamara, 2006; Pretorius, 2002; Rubin & Lim, 2006) also supports the notion that language proficiency has a negative impact on academic performance.

In a case study of the University of Pretoria, which predominately offers their study programmes in English or Afrikaans, Webb (2002) investigated the impact of language proficiency on the academic development of students for whom English constituted a second language. According to Webb (2002), most students who use English as a second language often struggle to cope with the academic demands of university, due to their poor command of the language. He argues that in order for effective learning to take place a student needs a

reasonable command of the medium of instruction, which most students who study through English as a second language consequently lack (Webb, 2002).

If the use of English as a second language impacts negatively on the academic experiences of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, then this could have far more unfavourable consequences for many aspiring black students. This is an important consideration especially in view of the increasing enrolment rates in higher education (Department of Education, 2013). However, this does not imply that all black students are under prepared because of the language barrier. Ntshoe (2003) cautions against assuming homogeneity for individuals from a low socio-economic background given that the emancipation of South Africa from the apartheid rule has resulted in more educational opportunities for black people, with many having access to better schooling opportunities through multiracial schooling experiences.

2.6 Transformation of higher education in South Africa

Higher education historically, and even presently, is tasked with performing many functions in society. Amongst these, and perhaps central to the mandate of the government of national unity, is the quest to advance the agenda on issues of equity, redress and national transformation (Akojee & Nkomo, 2007 & Badat, 2004; Seabi et al., 2014). Institutions of higher education are better positioned to assume their rightful role in the reconstruction and development of the country. Transformation of higher education in the context of the present study will be understood as envisaged by the Education White Paper 3 of 1997. The Higher Education White Paper (1997) aims to restructure higher education into a single national coordinated system. The text locates transformation of higher education in the broader "political, social and economic transition," which is constrained by globalisation:

"(Transition) includes political democratisation, economic restructuring and development, and redistributive social policies aimed at equity. This national agenda is being pursued within a distinctive set of pressures and demands characteristic of the late twentieth century, often typified as globalisation. The terms refer to multiple, interrelated changes in social, cultural and economic relations, linked to the widespread impact of information and communication revolution, the growth of trans-national scholarly and scientific networks, the accelerating integration of world economy and intense competition among nations for markets…These national agenda given the interlocking nature of global economic relations." (p. 4-5).

The above definition is broad and encompassing many aspects that are interrelated in a variety of ways. Therefore, for the scope of the current study, transformation will be understood in the context of access, retention and throughput rates of postgraduate black students. According to the Council on Higher Education (2009); Department of Education (2008); National Plan for Higher Education (2001) or any major policy document formulated in an effort to remedy past inequalities, challenges of access, retention and throughput rates of black students pose a serious concern for which solutions are urgently needed. Against this background, the role of institutions of higher education remains paramount in efforts aimed at attaining these goals. Given the legacy of inequality, transformation efforts in higher education should ideally focus on a number of critical spheres that impact on knowledge production at institutions of higher education.

Firstly, transformation efforts should be focused on teaching and learning especially the composition of curricula in order to promote curricula that is founded upon African values, principles and worldviews (Breidlid, 2009; Cross et al., 2002; Doll, 2008; Ensor, 2004 & Waghid, 2002). This does not imply that teaching and learning currently does not make provision for indigenous knowledge systems, but rather, that the curricula is still heavily informed by a Eurocentric approach, which often fails to resonate with black students learning experiences (Adam, 2005; Chisholm, 2005; Moore, 2003; Samuel, 2002; Warren, 2002).

Institutions of higher education need to remain cognisant of the multicultural nature of South African society, and accommodate its diverse worldviews to a far greater extent when designing curricula. In the context of widening participation, the composition of curricula should be viewed with renewed interest in South Africa. This will help to ensure that the learning experiences of black students are informed by their community needs, and do not occur in isolation to everyday problems that affect people at grassroots level.

In light of historical developments in the country, teaching and learning has come under renewed interest in recent years, considering that during apartheid, it was informed by an inferior education system (Moodie, 1994). Under the apartheid system, a majority of historically black institutions lacked academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Bentley,

Habib & Morrow, 2006; Kaya, 2006). Against this background, there is an overwhelming need to promote curricula that is rooted in an African epistemology and worldview (Badat, 2010).

An issue that is often subject to neglect concerning the composition of curricula is student's conceptualisation of their teaching and learning experiences (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). According to Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci (2006) knowledge consumption is a highly subjective process, and differs from one individual to another as it is influenced by personal experiences. Therefore, not all knowledge will be regarded as equally important to students. Meaning certain information will take precedence over the other, depending on student's preference and personal interest (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004). In this regard, it is important for those who are tasked with imparting knowledge to remain mindful of diverse conceptualisations embodied by student's experiences and the extent that such understanding influences their learning experiences and academic performance (Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004).

According to Entwistle and Peterson (2004), the learning experiences of black students can be improved through an emphasis on curricula that is entrenched on African principles and beliefs. By striving for a value-based curriculum that is deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, institutions of higher education might be able to enrich students learning experiences (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). Adams (2005) posit that a majority of black students often bear the brunt of being labelled as underperforming, whereas the true reason for this underperformance might be a lack of identification with a foreign content, rather than their own level of competence. As a measure to contextualise students learning experiences, teaching and learning at universities should strive for a balance between student's immediate socioeconomic realities and the composition of curricula.

As highlighted by Waghid (2002) the best means of achieving a truly African curriculum is for academics to adopt a reflexive approach in their teaching practices. He posits that, the nature of teaching and learning should be driven by societal needs, as opposed to fixed outcomes and preconceived ideas on what constitutes knowledge. This entails a radical shift from predetermined standards of teaching for lectures towards a more reflexive and dynamic approach, one that seeks to align teaching and learning with community needs (Waghid,

2002). According to Ensor (2004) in order to effectively address issues of access and success to underprepared students, institutions of higher education need a curriculum that is responsive. Meaning there is a need for curricula that is geared towards embracing the principles of learner centeredness through content that is increasingly contextual in nature, and teaching strategies that are responsive towards the developmental needs of the African continent (Akoojee, 2007; Badat, 2007; Ensor, 2004; Moore, 2003).

Secondly, given the historical legacy of separate development, there is a need to critically reflect upon institutional culture prevalent at a majority of historically white universities. In light of the monopoly on higher education that constituted the norm in our country, the provision of education assumed an elitist connotation (Badat, 2007). Against this background, the institutional culture prevalent at many historically white institutions has come under the spotlight recently. This has since resulted in various intervention strategies, most of which are evident through various mergers and policy interventions that aim to facilitate ease of access (Badat, 2007; Council for Higher Education, 2010; Jansen, 2002; Reddy, 2004). These remedial measures come in the wake of efforts directed at accommodating the recent influx of students, the majority of which come from historically marginalised backgrounds.

A hostile campus environment that perpetuates a culture of exclusion and discrimination is yet another potential barrier experienced by black students at historically white universities. Literature supports the notion that the institutional culture prevalent at these universities has a negative impact on black student's level of coping and adjustment (Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Jansen, 2005; Peterson, Louw & Dumont, 2009; Sennet et al., 2003; Walker, 2005). This view is not only echoed by local studies, but is corroborated by international research that draws attention to a subtle form of racism which usually manifest in a hostile campus environment and limited opportunities for black students to advance their intellectual pursuit (Foster, 2005; Heinfield, Moore & Wood, 2008; Hurtado, 2007). The cultural legacy prevalent at many historically white universities is inextricably tied to the many developments undertaken during the apartheid system (Gerard, 2011).

It is disturbing to note that despite more than two decades into the democratic order, there is reluctance amongst some historically white universities to divorce themselves from practices that continue to remain discriminatory. In light of the political change currently sweeping the

country, a majority of historically white institutions have come under renewed pressure to transcend historical barriers of knowledge elitism, which continue to hamper the provision of quality education for black students (Badat, 2007). According to Cornell & Kessi (2017), a hostile campus environment has a negative impact on black students learning experiences given that, students are often engaged in psychological battles to constantly justify their academic merit, which is often under threat from white minority with a false sense entitlement.

Research using the black ideology scale, which measures an individual's level of coping in a highly stressful environment, suggest that the experiences of black students on campus are not necessarily shaped by a hostile campus environment alone, but can largely be understood in terms of black student's conceptualisation of the self in relation to others (Adam, 2005). Meaning that a student who is better suited to deal with challenges arising from a hostile campus environment, or who is able to draw inspirations from their challenges instead of viewing them as a barrier will be able to cope with challenges encountered in their learning environment (Adam, 2005). Alternative findings also support the notion that students who display a strong sense of identity might not be significantly impacted by an unfavourable campus environment. According to Walker (2005) in order to overcome challenges of discrimination on campus, students often resort to a variety of support structures, particularly associations with peers from similar race, but most importantly, they relied on family support to help them deal with challenges of discrimination on campus.

If the goals of equal provision to higher education are to materialise, then the role of institutions of higher education cannot be confined to intellectual spaces that only cater for the interests of certain minority groups. Rather, efforts should be expanded towards transforming the broader educational landscape through the accommodation of an increasingly diverse student body. Meaning that, "quality in South African higher education should be understood within the context of redress, equity and access, which has its objective in the transformation of society" (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007, p. 394).

Thirdly, the composition of students and staff profiles at university is another potential barrier towards effective transformation of the higher education system (Council on Higher Education, 2017). In reference to the former, transformation efforts should ideally focus on

admission criteria that are employed at universities in the country. In an effort to attract highly competent students, universities often necessitate students to comply with strict admission criteria. This practice is problematic given that socio-economic status in South Africa is strongly correlated with prior quality of education (Beutel & Anderson, 2008; Mouton et al., 2013; Ntshoe, 2003; Peterson, Louw & Dumont, 2009). In addition, admission criteria are still based on school leaving results, and assessment measures that are predominantly from a western perspective, and consequently might tend to be biased (Laher & Cockcroft, 2014).

It is argued that in light of the unequal schooling experiences characterising the learning experiences of a majority of black students in the country, matric results might not be a reliable indicator of their academic potential (Herman, 1995). Therefore, such should not be used as the only valid measure of how a student is likely to perform at university. If one takes into account the historical legacy of apartheid, and its implication on the learning experiences of black students, it becomes important for institutions of higher education to reflect on existing criteria in an effort to accommodate an increasingly diverse student body.

Equally in this vein, some of the admission criteria employed at postgraduate level might constitute an additional barrier. For example, in order to gain entry to selection degrees that have a coursework component students are often subjected to extensive interviews which are conducted in English (Mayekiso, Strydom, Jithoo & Anne-Katz, 2004). This practice has become essential at universities that cater for programmes with a coursework component. As an additional measure to gain entry an average score is also calculated using students' academic results (Badat, 2008). Given that some students are underprepared when they enter university and the subjective nature of these inclusion criteria, it stands to reason that they cannot be regarded as a true reflection of a student's academic potential in a multicultural context (Laher & Cockcroft, 2014). An issue that is subject to vehement criticism in relation to admission criteria employed at institutions of higher learning focuses appropriately on the medium of instruction that is employed in assessment (Badat, 2008; Mayekiso, Strydom, Jithoo & Anne-Katz, 2004). South Africa hosts more than eleven official languages therefore, assessing students in English only is likely to have a profound impact on students for whom English is not their first language. It is reasonable to assume that students could be disempowered by an assessment that requires comprehension of dialect that is not their

mother tongue (Foxcroft, 2004). Therefore, one has to question the credibility of continued use of such assessment measures in post-apartheid South Africa (Laher & Cockcroft, 2014).

The composition of staff profile especially that of black academics is another potential barrier towards effective transformation of the higher education in South Africa. The current composition of staff still tends to be in favour of the white middle class. A headcount of staff in selected personnel categories by race revealed that in 2015 there were, 20 014 African, 3 177 Coloured, 4 504 Indians and 25 492 White academics at institutions of higher education (Council on Higher Education, 2017). This is problematic in post-apartheid South Africa, as it may perpetuate stereotypes of knowledge as the domain entitled only to certain minority groups. The current staff cohorts have been actively involved in higher education for many years and as a result, a vast majority are approaching retirement. Therefore, the intellectual vacuum that will result from the sudden departure of these individuals will have far more adverse consequences for institutions of higher education in the country.

These staff profiles further inhibit the production of black academics at universities (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). Of concern, is the reluctance of historically white universities to recruit and retain black staff, and the implication of this on the issue of access, retention and throughput rates of black students (Badat, 2007). The composition of staff profile can be regarded as important in shaping the learning experiences and academic performance of black students. Therefore, striving for a balance between students and staff profiles might improves black student's learning experiences through association with relevant role models, who are better informed about their backgrounds. This is an important issue and one that constantly evades transformation efforts at many historically white universities (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Brennan, 2004; Ismail, 2011; Jansen, 2004).

Although the above factors may constitute potential barriers towards broadening access and improving throughput rates for postgraduate black students, a presentation of such interrelated factors in isolation only aids in breeding preconceived ideas about experiences of black students at university. The experiences of black students in South Africa presents unique challenges, as they are influenced by a wide range of factors, most of which are beyond the scope of academia. Given the South African history of separate development and

its implications for the education system as outlined earlier, it is necessary to understand how postgraduate black students have been impacted by this system.

2.7 The study's theoretical framework

Literature on the learning experiences and academic performance of black students is often informed by assumptions rather than sound theory (Barnett, 2004; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Johnson-bailey, Cervero, Bowles & Tuere, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). Against this background, the conceptual framework that will guide the present study will be that of critical race theory. Critical theory as a subject of inquiry, emanates from a group of German philosophers and social theorists in the western European Marxist tradition popularly known as the Frankfurt school of thought (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). It is concerned with challenging dominant views, values, norms and ideologies that are deeply inherent in society, more so, those that seek to justify the oppression or of certain minority groups (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Peca, 2000; Smith-Maddox, & Solorzano, 2002; Solorzano, & Yosso, 2002). It focuses on the emancipation of marginalised individuals, and aims to challenge those authoritative power structures responsible for creating socially acceptable knowledge (Tate, 1997). Critical theory is concerned with what people regard as acceptable knowledge, and how the reconstruction of such knowledge influences human behaviour in society (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

It is premised on the assumption that issues of race remain paramount in understanding inequalities prevalent in many countries, especially those countries that are historically divided along racial lines (Bernal, 2002). Critical theory perspectives are concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by issues of race, class and gender (Morrow & Brown, 1994). The essence of critical theory centres on the perspective that marginalised individuals ought to be empowered to transcend barriers placed on them by society's preconceived ideas and stereotypes (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Critical theory approach seeks to examine society and culture as they relate to categorization of race, law and power. These categorisations occur as part of an interlinked network of processes in society. Thus, the system consists of parts that make it a whole (Bateson, 1976).

In this regard, society, culture and race are influenced by issues of power relations which operate in a covert manner to influence decisions that have a bearing on postgraduate black students at university. Critical theory perspective is an integration of different fields of study, namely social sciences and humanities, which fit together due to overlapping assumptions, and compatible epistemologies (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This approach is relevant to the present research, as it was developed in the context of reflective assessment and critique of society and culture and, furthermore, it represents a set of principles whereby human functioning can be analysed in relation to race, law and power which continue to shape discourse on higher education (Peca, 2000).

A system is a process that is used to describe regularities or redundant patterns we observe between people and phenomenon. Thus studying the experiences of postgraduate black students in society is viewed in relation to issues of power dynamics which usually influences policy on the inclusion and exclusion of black student at institutions of higher education. Therefore, in the present study, the lived experiences of postgraduate black students are being studied in relation to race, law and power dynamic in society. The issue of race and how it influences students' experiences of studying at university becomes the focus of research. Critical theory perspectives have shown us the importance of adopting a holistic view of society in understanding human behaviour and forces that shape our understanding of such behaviour (Solorzano, & Yosso, 2002).

According to Nelson & Prilleltensky (2005) "the methodological tools that are central to critical theory entail creating value-based, partnerships in solidarity with disadvantaged people such partnerships emphasize a high degree of participation of disadvantaged people in all phases of the research and using the research to create social change" (p. 278). Peca (2000) argues that critical theory perspective centres on discourse of power as it is fuelled by a need to expose influential power structures through a critical process of inquiry of existing knowledge.

Regardless of strides made by our infant democracy, racism remains a major barrier towards successful racial integration (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Badat, 2007; Bunting, 2002; Jansen, 2002). Racism remains rampant in public institutions, especially at institutions of higher education, where culturally diverse students interact on a daily basis (Jansen, 2005 & Reddy,

2004). In South Africa, the experiences of black students require understanding in the context of historical developments that have shaped the broader education landscape. It is important to consider that due to the historical legacy of oppression in our country a majority of black students were subjected to an inferior quality of education (Moodie, 1994).

However, the emancipation of South Africa from apartheid rule has since resulted in a wealth of opportunities for many people. Nowhere else has this opportunity being seized as it has in the higher education sector. Increasingly, universities have started to attract large numbers of student applicants annually (Council on Higher Education, 2017). A majority of these students often come from historically marginalised backgrounds that are characterised by under-resourced schooling systems (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). It is important in the context of broadening access for historically marginalised students, to anticipate the intellectual deficit that they present in view of putting appropriate measures in place to support their needs (Lafon, 2009).

This has firmly placed responsibility on universities in the country to ensure that the participation of historically marginalised students is not only limited to enrolment rates, but equally translates to throughput rates (Machingambi & Wadesango, 2012). It has also persuaded institutions of higher education in the country to re-evaluate their admission criteria in order to ensure that existing standards do not discriminate against historically marginalised students (Laher & Cockcroft, 2014). Furthermore, it has in turn challenged institutions of higher education across the country to reflect on their existing roles in light of the new democratic order (Asmal & James, 2001 & Jansen, 2004).

The suitability of adopting critical theory for the present study is underlined by key values embedded in its theoretical assumptions. According to Nelson & Prilleltensky (2005), critical theory is guided by values of self-determination and participation which are tied to the discourse of power in society. Self-determination entails emancipation of marginalised individuals from authoritative power structures in society, in an effort to create a platform for social change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). The discourse of power within a South African context is closely tied to the apartheid rule, which ensured widespread disparities through the structural resonances of the provision of a separate education system based on racial affiliation (Moodie, 1994). Nelson & Prilleltensky (2005) also allude to the discourse of

exclusion, social justice and accountability to the oppressed groups. Within the South African higher education landscape, the discourse of exclusion was symptomatic of strict measures that sought to regulate the intellectual development of certain minority groups. Despite widespread condemnation from international society, such measures served to ensure that the intellectual development of black students was curtailed. It restricted educational opportunities for many black students by isolating their learning experiences. The study seeks to remain cognisant of such values throughout the process of enquiry.

As a subject of inquiry, critical theory has enjoyed extensive coverage in the field of educational research albeit from a predominately-western perspective (Brayboy, Castagno & Maughan, 2007; Jansen, 2004; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Research predominantly focuses on the underlying causes of racism at institutions of higher education, more so the extent to which it impacts on issues of access and equal opportunities for students (Gillborn, 2005; Lynn, Yosso, Solorzano & Parker, 2002). Lloyd-Jones (2009) applied critical theory perspective to investigate the experience of a single African American woman in a senior administrative position at a predominately-white university. A qualitative approach using a single case study was adopted, and findings revealed that regardless of the level of qualification and proficiency in their job, black females were generally considered to be incompetent in their respective positions, and consequently did not enjoy the equal treatment and recognition as did their male colleagues (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). This inequality was attributed to the patriarchal nature of society, especially the manner in which this notion is implicitly reinforced at public institutions (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). According to Zeus (2004) critical theory perspective are essential in achieving true emancipation in higher education, as they provide a unique platform to engage critically with issues that affect students. He argues that, a critique of authoritative power structure that regulates students learning experiences should be encouraged to expose oppressive forces that operate in a covert manner at institutions of higher education (Zeus, 2004).

Research using critical theory has also focused on issues of policy formation, which govern the provision of higher education in developed countries particularly the Unites States, Australia and the United Kingdom. Ladson-Billings (2005) suggests that despite advances made by the United States higher education system, the majority of black students in America continue to face challenges because of discriminatory policies that are implemented without a

thorough understanding of their educational needs. Gillborn (2005) highlights that the majority of policies which govern higher education are often guided by a white imperialist agenda, that are only concerned with reinforcing dominance of political power, rather than being genuinely concerned with the intellectual development of black students.

Critical theory perspectives have gained recognition in recent years amongst scholars in the field of higher education (Brayboy, Castegno, Maugham, 2007; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Peca, 2000; Tate, 1997). Consequently, it has become a major approach to inquiry in the field of social science research (Bernal, 2002 & Gillborn, 2006). This success has largely been attributed to the objective stance towards contemporary knowledge, which usually forms the core of inquiry (Ladson-Billing, 2005; Lynn, Yosso, Solorzano & Parker, 2002; Peca, 2000; Zeus, 2004).

However, this does not imply that critical theory is without any limitations. A common criticism held against critical theory is that it originates from a predominately-western perspective, and consequently, cannot be readily applied within an African context (Gillborn, 2006). Critical theory is criticised due to its emphasis on subjectivity as a guiding tool in conducting social research (Tate, 1997). However, for the purpose of the study, critical theory will assist to facilitate an understanding of systematic conditions that contribute to marginalising and excluding students within ODL studies. It is particularly suited for the study as it is guided by principles of empowerment for marginalised individuals in society (Creswell, 2003). According to Nelson & Prilleltensky (2005), critical theory perspectives are constantly engaged in a process that seeks to challenge authoritative power structures that impact negatively on the lives of marginalised individuals.

Currently the South African higher education landscape is in a process of transformation, motivated by a quest to achieve a more inclusive higher education system. Critical theory is suitable as it is driven by values and ideals of a better society, free from any form of oppression or discrimination. In South Africa, historically and even presently, state intervention has always been influential in the provision of higher education. Therefore, by gaining an understanding of political power relations that regulate the provision of higher education, we can move a step closer towards facilitating an understanding of the issues that influence access, retention and throughput rates of postgraduate black students.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the literature review for the study. The literature was discussed in relation to international trends, and with a specific focus on research in South Africa. Based on the review of literature, it was evident that higher education in South Africa is facing a number of challenges, amongst which is creating expanded access, improved quality and increased diversity of provision (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). Factors influencing student's success at institutions of higher learning in South Africa also formed part of the discussion. The chapter focussed on issues of transformation in higher education by exploring the extent to which it has been able to address the historical legacy of injustice, which tends to impact negatively on students from historically marginalised backgrounds. In conclusion, the theoretical framework underpinning the study was discussed. The following chapter will focus on the methodology of the study, including the sample of the study and instruments for data collection.

Chapter 3

Research methodology

3.1 Introduction

The study aims to explore the learning experiences and academic performance of postgraduate black students. The objectives are to explore factors that have an influence on postgraduate black students learning experiences and academic performance, and to investigate the nature of such influences. In line with the objectives, the study will attempt to determine measures that can be put in place to improve students learning experiences and academic performance.

The following research questions formed the basis of inquiry. Namely, amongst postgraduate black students what factors are considered as having an influence on the learning experience and the academic performance? How do these factors interact to bring about such an influence? Given these factors, which measures can be put in place to support and improve their learning experiences and academic performance? The chapter will provide the reader with a detailed discussion on the research approach and design that will underpin the study. A discussion on the instrument of choice will be outlined, including the sampling criteria, procedures for data collection, analysis and ethical considerations for the study.

3.2 Research approach

The present study was guided by a qualitative interpretive approach. According to Patton (2002), the assumption of an interpretive approach is that social research is a subjective process that involves the construction of meaning through an interactive dialogue between the researcher and the participant. In other words, when conducting a qualitative study, it is important for the researcher to refrain from assuming a position of authority, and allow participants the opportunity to share their experiences as they perceive them (Creswell, 2013). Willig (2008) emphasised that qualitative studies are informed by a bottom-up approach, whereby meaning is created from participant's accounts of events and themes that

are generated is an attempt to capture the essence of their lived experiences.

As highlighted by Creswell (2013) a qualitative research approach is personal in nature and thus concerned with shared meaning. This means that in a qualitative study, subjectivity plays an important role and the researcher acts as a mediator that guides the entire research process through the creation of an enabling environment (Coyle, in Lyons and Coyle, 2007). This suggests that the reality to be studied, in this instance, "the experiences of postgraduate black students" consist of individuals personal accounts of a lived experience. Therefore, it is paramount in qualitative research as a point of departure to acknowledge and respect participant's experiences throughout the process of inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Babbie & Mouton (2001) explains that once rapport has been established, participants will be able to give an insider's perspective into their experiences of a phenomenon. According to Silverman (2011) the depth, richness and essence of qualitative research lie in its ability to attribute meaning through different accounts of people who have experienced the same phenomenon.

A qualitative research approach is contextual in nature and consequently, aims to study human behaviour naturally, as it occurs in everyday social interactions (Creswell, 2013). The study remained cognisant of the value of qualitative research given that participants were studied in their natural environment. Contextualising participant's experiences assists the researcher to develop a complex understanding of how a phenomenon is perceived by a specific group of individuals (Denzil & Lincon, 2005). By using the participant's narratives, the study sought to explore the meaning attached to the participant's personal experiences, and how various factors impact on their learning and academic performance. The study strived to provide an honest account of participant's experiences as perceived by them, and attempted to construct meaning through a process of shared understanding (Ezzy, 2002).

The motive for choosing a qualitative approach is influenced by Babbie & Mouton (2001) seven characteristics of qualitative research. According to Babbie & Mouton (2001), one of the hallmark features of qualitative research is an emphasis on **naturalism** in the research process. Denzil & Lincon (2011) mentioned that "qualitative researcher's study things in their natural setting attempting to make sense of, or interpreting, phenomenon in terms of meaning people ascribe to them" (p. 3). Consequently, this allows participants the degree of freedom to communicate their experiences without any intimidation or pressure to respond in

a socially desirable manner. For the purpose of this study, participants were interviewed on campus, as they frequented the institution on a daily basis to undertake their studies. This was a suitable and convenient setting for participants, as they were already familiar with the location. This approach allowed participants the opportunity to give an honest account of their experiences, which could often be compromised by a controlled setting (Creswell, 2013).

Babbie & Mouton (2001) stipulate that qualitative research is **process-oriented,** and attempts to capture social events as they occur. In addition to studying behaviour in a naturalistic setting, I attempted to be interactive by focusing on the process as it unfolds rather than the outcome thereof. In my engagements with participants, I tried to capture the essence of participant's experiences as expressed by their rendition of events. Furthermore, I tried to focus on the intricate processes that shaped their perceptions and interpretation of events based on their narratives.

Adopting an **insider's perspective** is yet another critical tool in qualitative research (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). This entails the ability of a researcher to locate themselves within the experiences of participants in the study. The researcher needs to be respectful and empathic at all times during the research process, considering that participants are sharing their most personal experiences. This in turn enables the researcher to see reality through the eyes of participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Throughout the process of inquiry, I remained cognisant of participant's experiences and refrained from letting my own preconceived ideas and stereotypes about the topic to influence the process of assigning meaning to participant's voices.

According to Babbie & Mouton (2001) **describing and understanding** is another important aspect of qualitative research. In qualitative research, one does not aim to account for events or offer possible explanation of a phenomenon, but rather to offers a detailed description of behaviour as perceived by participants in the study. Facilitating a holistic account of events in such a way as to reflect the perception of participants in the study is an integral component of qualitative research.

Another essential feature of qualitative research is an emphasis on a **contextual** approach to inquiry (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Qualitative researchers do not attempt to study behaviour out of its original context. Emphasis is placed on participant's natural setting as a tool in understanding the essence of their experiences. Locating behaviour to a particular context allows for detailed descriptions of events and complexities of the problem as it is perceived by the participants, and communicated by their accounts of events. The study was contextual in nature as it primarily focused on students from an ODL institution.

The issue of inter-subjectivity, which positions the researcher as an instrument in the data collection process is another point of consideration (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). However, this does not occur in isolation, as qualitative researcher needs to be skilled enough to enter the participants' world with extreme caution (Creswell, 2013). According to Smith (2004) "qualitative research is informed by an attempt to grasp people's meaning of their world" (p. 4). This necessitates that a genuine interest take precedent from the researcher's side, to create a nurturing environment to allow participants the opportunity to express themselves freely, and in so doing, be able to invite the researcher into their personal space. An eagerness to learn from participant's experiences needs to be prioritised. In this regard, qualitative approaches rely on people's subjective experiences as a tool to guide the process of inquiry, and to access their worldviews (Silverman, 2011).

However, due to a strong inclination by some scholars towards positivistic research, qualitative studies have been subjected to various criticism. Silverman (2011) and Creswell (2013) point out that amongst these, is the inability to generalise the research findings and the tendency of qualitative research to embrace human subjectivity. According to Patton (2002), the credibility of some qualitative studies have also been subject to scrutiny. Although the above issues warrant consideration, qualitative inquiry does compensate for these shortcomings.

The strength of qualitative research lies in participant's authentic rendition of events and perception of phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is not concerned with generalisability, but rather, with facilitating a thorough understanding of a particular experience to allow for an in-depth analysis (Coyle, in Lyons and Coyle, 2007). According to Yin (2011), generalisability can still be attained in qualitative research provided

that emerging findings can be applied to other participants, who share similar characteristics to individuals who were under investigation. This means that through participants voices qualitative research is able to address the question of how and why a particular phenomenon occurs (Creswell, 2013).

3.3 Research design

Given that the study was exploratory in nature, a phenomenological research design was thus suitable. As defined by De Vos et al. (2005) "a phenomenological study is a study that attempts to make sense of people's perceptions, perspectives and understanding of a particular situation" (p. 264). The current study sought to explore in detail the experiences of postgraduate black students, with an attempt to gain a holistic understanding of factors that impact on their learning and academic performance.

Two distinct but related schools of thought exist within a phenomenological research design namely, descriptive transcendental and interpretive hermeneutic approach (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Whilst descriptive phenomenology aims to merely give an account of people's behaviour, an interpretive approach focuses on the importance of language in reflecting a common understanding with an emphasis on a particular context (Finlay, 2009). For the purpose of the study, an interpretive phenomenological stance was adopted. The narratives used by participants to describe their experiences formed the basis of inquiry, with emphasis on participant's socioeconomic background as a point of departure.

Taking into account participants socioeconomic background was important for the study considering that a majority of black students often come from historically marginalised backgrounds. According to Smith (2004), a phenomenological inquiry is motivated by the quest to return to the source of meaning. Returning to the source of meaning in phenomenology is achieved through an emphasis on participant's personal account of events as perceived by them. These personal accounts of events constitute the essence of a lived experience and are studied through a systematic process of inquiry, in order to communicate the essence of a phenomenon under investigation (Lewis & Staehler, 2010). Finlay (2009) mentioned that "phenomenology researchers generally agree that our central concern is to

return to the embodied, experiential meanings" (p.6). A return to the embodied meaning requires the researcher to reflect on the participant's personal accounts of events ideally using verbatim quotes, where appropriate to support the emerging findings (Groenewald, 2004).

A phenomenological inquiry begins with an emphasis on human subjectivity as a building block in understanding the essence of a phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The starting point of a phenomenological approach is from a consciousness point of view. According to Giorgi (1994) "by acknowledging the consciousness as a point of departure phenomenology is able to capture the essence of human experience as it is lived" (p.192). This research method corresponds well with the intent of the study, which is to gain a deeper understanding of the attitude, perceptions and feelings of postgraduate black students. In phenomenological research, human beings are viewed and treated differently. Meaning that phenomenology makes provision for the participant's feelings and values in the process of conducting research. Participant's role in the research process is not confined to that of a mere sources of data, but rather they are viewed as fellow researchers, who are actively involved in the research process (Willig, 2008).

A phenomenological inquiry is particularly concerned with providing interpretations of events through documentations that support the researcher's ability to capture the essence of a lived experience (Lewis & Staehler, 2010). In a phenomenological inquiry, emphasis lies on the participants as a point of departure in the quest to facilitate meaning. The beauty of a phenomenology is that it views participants as experts in the research process, and subsequently affords them the freedom to articulate their experiences in a less structured manner (Smith, 2004). According to Aspers (2004) an emphasis on meaning is precisely what distinguishes phenomenology from other qualitative approaches to inquiry. Therefore, phenomenology lends itself well to this study's inquiry, given that, the study focused on facilitating a deeper understanding of the experiences of marginalised individuals. Given that the voices of these individuals are not always taken in consideration on major decisions that have a bearing on their experiences, a phenomenological research design afforded them an alternative platform, and a voice to articulate their experiences (Willig, 2008).

3.4 Sampling method

The study's population consisted of postgraduate black student who are studying at the university of South Africa. The study's sample was refined to students who have completed their honours degree and are currently enrolled for a master's degree. For the purpose of the study non- probability sampling was employed. In particular, the study employed purposive sampling as the researcher was interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences of designated population group. According to Strydom & Delport (2005) "in purposeful sampling the researcher must first think critically about the parameters of the population and then choose the sample case accordingly" (p.392). Finding participants for the study did not constitute a challenge given that the topic was not emotional in nature. The participants in the study were chosen based on their willingness to participate and to share their experiences. Participants were identified through the university's internal student system and contacted telephonically. Participants who agreed to participate were formally invited through an email containing full details of the study. The participants comprised of both gender groups in order to represent and reflect diverse views on the topic.

In total, I interviewed eight participants for the study. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 46 years because I was cognizant of the legal age of consent in order to be interviewed. This age range allowed for a variety of experiences to come to the fore which further aided the study to achieve the depth and richness associated with qualitative research. Sampling to redundancy was employed in that I felt that after interviewing eight particicipants no new themes, issues or information came to the fore from new interviews. According to Babbie & Mouton (2001), theoretical saturation in qualitative research occurs when one stops collecting new material because it does not add any value to the available information which has already been collected. Given that sampling to redundancy was employed the population size was not determined in advance.

The setting of the study was at the university of South Africa main campus. A convenient location was identified for the purpose of conducting the interviews in one of the university's buildings. The location was well furnished, silent and adequately illuminated. The location was suitable for those who agreed to participate in the study. The duration of the interviews lasted for approximately 50 minutes with each participant. The interviews were conducted

between 10 and 11 in the mornings. Conducting the interviews in the mornings was advantageous considering that the participants' energy and concentration levels were at their peak. Four interviews were conducted per week and it took two weeks to conclude the interview process.

3.5 Data collection method

An interview guide was developed for the purpose of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were used as this allowed participants to be fully engaged in the research process (Roulston, 2010). According to Yin (2011), semi-structured interviews are especially suitable where one is particularly interested in complexity or process, or where an issue is controversial or personal. The questions were open-ended, meaning that participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on the responses. The questions afforded participants the opportunity to provide a holistic account of the phenomenon under investigation. The value of open-ended questions is that they allow the researcher the opportunity to explore concurrently with the aims and objectives, alternative areas that participants deem important in facilitating an understanding of their experiences, which might have been otherwise overlooked by the researcher.

An interview guide was created for the purpose of the study. The interview guide contained open ended question that covered four broad themes that relate to postgraduate black students learning experiences and academic performance at university. The open ended questions were in line with the IPA chosen for the study. IPA as a technique explores the experiences and interrelated nature of human sense making (Smith, 2004). In line with the research aims and objectives the first theme explored aspects related to participant's background information. This theme explored in detail the participant's identities as subject of research and sought to facilitate a context that would later help to understand their frame of reference. In addition to creating a context, the information elicited by this theme enabled the researcher to ground participants lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation.

The second theme that was covered entailed participant's level of academic readiness. This theme was important in light of developing a thorough understanding of the participants

schooling background and how it has contributed towards their level of academic readiness. Given the schooling dynamics associated with previously marginalized students in the country it was important in the context of the study to understand how various schooling experiences have shaped the intellectual development of participants in the study. This theme elicited important information in light of unequal schooling opportunities that often characterize majority of black students in the country.

The third theme fell within the umbrella of academic support amongst the participants in the study. The purpose of this theme was to determine the extent of support structures that was available for participants in the quest to study at university. The theme explores in detail participant's experiences of entering university. Participants level of academic readiness was brought to the fore by this theme as well as their ability to adjust at university. What was particularly important was that it attempted to gain a deeper understand of the challenges that are often encountered by participant's in the learning process. exploration of this theme helped to elicit dialog on measures that needed to be put in place to assist the participants to cope with their studies.

The fourth theme related to the participant's levels of motivation to enroll for postgraduate studies at Unisa. The theme helped to gauge participants understanding of studying at a distance learning institution. In addition, it also helped participants to learn about their inherent ability to motivate themselves based on their academic goals. Data gathering in a phenomenological research is not confined to a linear approach, but makes provision for flexibility through an interactive process between the researcher and the participants (Finlay, 2009).

Interviews were conducted until data saturation point, whereby no new information emerged from participants. The skill of an interviewer was influential during this process. The interviewer must possess skills such as empathy to encourage a process of thorough exploration (Roulston, 2010). The interviews were conducted using the English language. This eliminated the need to translate the information and ensured ease of communication that is often compromised during the process of translating text. The value of a research instrument in phenomenology is highlighted by questions that allow participants to cover key areas of their experiences of a lived phenomenon (Smith, 2004).

The following is an extract of interview guidelines that was used for the study. (See Appendix B for a full interview guide).

- Ask participants to share information about their background (e.g. where were they born, where did they grow up, with whom they grew up)?
- Ask participants about their schooling experiences?
- Ask participants about the language of instruction for teaching & learning at school?
- Taking into account participants schooling environment, ask if it had sufficiently prepared them to study at university?
- Ask participants about any significant role players who have contributed towards their academic development and the nature of this contribution?
- Considering that Unisa is an ODL institutions ask about the motive for choosing to study at Unisa?
- Ask participants about how they motivate themselves to study further?
- Ask participants about the challenges that uniquely impact on them as postgraduate black student studying at Unisa?

3.6 Data analysis

Recorded in-depth interviews with the participants were transcribed verbatim and all responses were compiled, coded and analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). According to Smith (2004) IPA is a qualitative method that aims to gain a deeper understanding of people's subjective experiences by assigning meaning to the social process, which governs their behaviour. Smith (2004) asserts that IPA "explores in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency of an IPA study is the meaning particular experiences, events, hold for participants" (p. 53).

IPA is informed by a hermeneutic tradition and is concerned with the process of facilitating meaning of a lived phenomenon through participant's personal accounts of events (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Given that IPA is informed by a hermeneutic position, it is concerned with interpretations of events, rather than mere descriptions, and for this reason,

emphasis lies on participant's perception of a lived phenomenon (Smith, 2004). IPA strives to gain an in-depth understanding of participants by analysing their subjective experiences with a specific reference to context which behaviour emanates (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Data analysis in IPA requires a researcher to develop a relationship with the transcript (Smith, 2004). The researcher needs to develop a genuine interest and willingness to learn about the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, has to constantly engage with the text in the process of ascribing meaning to participant's voices.

The analysis of data in IPA commences as soon as the first data set has been collected (Smith, & Eatough, 2007). This process is followed by immersion in the text, which requires one to read the transcript on countless occasions in effort to gain a thorough understanding of the narratives. Ideally, this will assist the researcher to become acquainted with the data, and to provide an indication of the type of information that has been collected. Reading the transcripts and re-reading them is important during this process, and cannot be over emphasised (Smith, & Eatough, 2007).

During the reading of the transcripts, the researcher will be specifically looking to identify any interesting or significant statements about participant's experiences. At this stage, one will be looking to identify any relevant information, which might be highlighted by participants. Preliminary interpretation will be made at this stage and any links, connection, consistencies, inconsistencies and possible patterns will be identified (Smith, & Eatough, 2007). Participant's narratives will be compared, and their selection of language to describe events will be noted. Researcher comments and notes will capture all these. Fixed rules do not exist at this stage; however, one needs to ensure that if participants are quoted, it is done verbatim to avoid misrepresenting their voices (Smith, 2004).

The second phase typically involves the researcher extracting statements that represent the essence of the phenomenon thereafter grouping them into meaningful chunks, called themes or categories (Creswell, 2013). This involves creating emerging themes, based on the comments that were developed by the researcher as a result of engaging with the transcript. It is during this stage that the researcher comments are changed into relevant phrases that are able to capture the essence of what is communicated in the transcript. An important consideration is that emerging themes should be informed by interpretations, which are based

on participant's accounts of events (Smith, & Eatough, 2007).

This means that emerging themes need to be located in the information contained in the transcripts. The transformation of notes into themes is repeated throughout the entire transcript. During this stage, similar themes might also emerge as different transcripts are analysed. According to Biggerstaff & Thompson (2008) "a distinct feature of IPA is that contrary to discourse analysis or thematic content analysis, IPA does not infer meaning, but rather relies on personal accounts as shared by participants and evidence as reflected in text to make that which is implicit explicit" (p. 215). IPA can be viewed as a dual process of interpretation, whereby participants and the researcher are collectively involved in the process of creating meaning (Smith, & Eatough, 2007).

The third step involves connecting themes identified in the transcripts. During this stage, the research identifies various themes and groups these in order of relevance. Themes that represent similar experiences or behaviour will be grouped and allocated a more specific theme. During this process of creating clusters, the researcher always needs to ensure that emerging clusters relates to information contained in the original transcripts (Smith, & Eatough, 2007). Where possible, the clusters need to be supported by verbatim quotes to ensure that transcripts inform them.

The final section involves the writing up of themes in order to capture the voices of participants. Once this has been established, the researcher will offer a textural and structural description of the phenomena (Smith, & Eatough, 2007). According to (Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Creswell, 2013), "the former includes verbatim/direct quotes of participants lived experiences which offer an indication of what participants in the study experienced in relation to their phenomenon and the latter refers to how the experience manifested taking into account contextual factors that influence the participant's experiences of a phenomenon" (pp. 193-194). In contrast to other qualitative approaches, which typically collect all the data prior to the subsequent analysis, a phenomenological approach makes provision for flexibility in the analysis process (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

3.7 Measures to ensure trustworthiness

In qualitative research, it is important to outline how a researcher aims to maintain trustworthiness in the study. Lincoln and Guba model of trustworthiness (1985) highlights that central processes in qualitative research entails credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability and authenticity in the research process. The credibility of the study was attained through a peer review process, whereby my supervisor reviewed the study and once complete, the study will be submitted for thorough examination to external examiners for further evaluation. Transferability refers to the extent at which the findings of the study can be applied to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Shenton (2004) argues that in order achieve transferability there needs to be sufficient contextual information about the fieldwork, thick description of phenomenon to enable comparison, information about contextual factors impeding on inquiry and a clear articulation about boundaries of the study. The current study's focus was on factors that have an influence on postgraduate black students' learning experiences and academic performance at university. The study focussed on eighth black students from diverse socio cultural and educational backgrounds who are studying through distance education. Thus these experiences might not necessarily reflect the views of all students given a variety of context applicable.

The Dependability of the study was established through consistency of participant's responses and perception of their experiences. I strived for conformability by maintaining impartiality. During the process of inquiry, I remained cognisant of my own perceptions, attitudes and pre-conceived ideas about the phenomenon in view of limiting their influence on the study's findings. Caution was taken not to enter the field as an expert but more as a co-explorer. The authenticity of the study was achieved because the findings were a true reflection of the participant's voices and rendition of events as perceived by them.

Trustworthiness is the guiding principle of reliability in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). It is important to clearly outline how a researcher aims to maintain trustworthiness in qualitative research. According to Silverman (2011), one of the distinct features of qualitative research is that as a means to ensure trustworthiness participants are studied in their natural setting as opposed to a controlled environment. Creswell (2013) added that "a qualitative approach to inquiry is strongly guided by the philosophy that research participants are central

in the data collection process because together with the researcher they are intricately involved in the process of creating meaning" (p. 47). Consequently, the collection of data is modelled on the principle of a trustworthy relationship between the researcher and participants, and hence emphasis is placed on creating an enabling environment that facilitates growth (Silverman, 2011).

Triangulation of data was employed to ensure trustworthiness in the study. Triangulation of data sources assists the researcher to reach reliable conclusions (Bapir, 2012). It further assists in achieving rigour in the research process (Creswell, 2013). To achieve rigour in the present study, I ensured that participant's narratives are an accurate reflection of their lived experiences. The study remained consistent by employing a similar interview guide for all participants thus, ensured reliability of the research findings. Trustworthiness was established through the consistency of participant's responses, which later helped in developing categories of themes. Transcripts that detail the research findings were sent to participants to confirm whether the themes accurately reflected their responses. Member checking was applied to validate the credibility of participant's responses.

3.8 Ethical considerations

It is important to adhere to good ethical practices when conducting research. This helps to ensure that harm is avoided to research participants. Furthermore, it minimises the participant's chances of being exploited which could result in possible legal implications. Prior to conducting the study, permission was requested from the Unisa department of Psychology (see Appendix C). I also emphasised the importance of voluntary participation amongst the participants. Participants were then informed about their right and responsibilities should they decide to participate. This included their right to discontinue participating should they deem it necessary during any stage of the research process. According to Willig (2008), the rights of participants should be a priority in the research process. Therefore, informed consent plays an important role. I made participants aware of the aims and objectives of the study and possible implications of participating in the research.

Willig (2008) emphasises that deception should be avoided at any stage during the research

process. Considering this, I outlined the entire research process as it was likely to unfold without any use of deception, and participants decided whether they were keen to participate. Before the research commenced, I requested permission to interview participant in writing and to record the interviews all of which were granted by the participants. I reminded participants of their freedom to choose not to respond to any questions that might make them feel uncomfortable. Once the participants consented to the interviews, the conversations were recorded with an audio device for later transcription. I assured the participants that the conversations, recorded material and transcripts would be safely secured in a locked office and only available to me.

I discussed confidentiality issues with each participant individually, and highlighted that they will not be identified during any stage of the research. Anonymity was maintained throughout the research given that the data was personal in nature. I ensured participant's that their names will not be revealed at any stage. I emphasised that pseudonyms will be used to ensure that their personal information does not reveal their identities. I mentioned to the participants that the results of the study would be published as a master's dissertation and in academic journals. I assured them that when the research has concluded, the data will be kept for a minimum of two years, and thereafter it will be physically destroyed.

3.9 Bracketing

Bracketing of the researcher's perspective is a critical tool in ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research. Bracketing entails acknowledging all subjective experiences of a phenomenon and stating them upfront in an attempt to prevent them from invalidating the research findings (Creswell, 2013). Thus, it was important for the researcher, as an instrument of data collection to refrain from any form of judgment, stereotypes or preconceived ideas about the topic.

I was aware that studying at the same institutions and having experienced similar challenges as some participants might have a bearing on my interpretation of findings. However, I remained cognisant of this reality and acknowledge that I was not the subject of inquiry. This ensured that my personal experiences did not permeate the findings. Being a postgraduate

black student is an experience rarely acknowledged by the university system and one that requires many personal sacrifices.

However, there are common threads that appear to be problematic amongst students, irrespective of their race, ethnicity or culture. Amongst these is the issue of access, first because it is difficult to obtain a higher education qualification if one does not meet the criteria to enrol at university. Secondly, the issue of finances has constantly plagued the educational aspiration of a majority of historically marginalised students. Lastly, given the history of separate development, there is the issue of academic performance, which usually separates individuals who meet the criteria for successful completion of a specific qualification from those who do not.

The above-mentioned factors have been instrumental in shaping my experiences of studying at the university, albeit at varying degrees. In my attempt to make sense of participant's experiences, I remained mindful of my own experiences and constantly reflected on them to avoid them clouding my judgement. All types of research inquiry are motivated by a need to address a particular problem or to signal a call for change. Therefore, most research undertaken often resonates with a researcher's reality. Topics studied through qualitative modes of inquiry are usually highly personal in nature. It is for this reason that as a researcher, you have to separate your personal experiences from participant's experiences in order to ensure that what is communicated is the phenomenon, and not your own personal interpretation of events.

Given this, it is unlikely to expect the researcher not to have an overarching interest in the topic of investigation. Absolute objectivity in this regard might not always be possible to achieve. However, the researcher must always strive to uphold objectivity. The researcher upholds objectivity by remaining aware of their own subjective experiences, thereby keeping them to a minimum. I was fully aware of the participant's role as the subjects of inquiry, and afforded them the opportunity to share their experiences of the phenomenon without imposing my own subjective ideas. I understood that as I enter the research field, I needed to remain cognisant of my own perceptions on the topic. I took caution not to enter the field as a counsellor, but as a co-explorer, who has a genuine and equal interest in the phenomenon

under investigation.

3.10 Conclusion

The chapter discussed the research methodology that informed the study, which was based on a phenomenological research design. It included information on the processes that informed data collection and subsequent analysis, which comprised identifying relevant themes from the responses of the participants in the study. The chapter highlighted the significance of the research design employed, including the sampling criteria, measures to ensure trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the study. The following chapter will present the results of study.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Introduction

The current chapter reports the results of the study. It commences by providing an overview of the participants' profile including the dynamics of the family relationship, perception of their relationship with significant others, and how these impact on their experiences of studying at university. This is followed by a detail presentation of each main theme and associated sub-theme as evidenced from the transcripts. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research findings.

4.2 Profile of participants

I will commence the discussion by providing a synopsis of each participants' narrative. This will be done to provide a context within which the themes that form part of the discussion later should be understood. As a measure to protect the identity of all the participants, pseudonyms are used throughout the discussion.

Participant 1 (Thandi)

Thandi is a 27-year-old female, who was born and raised in Mpumalanga. She is the eldest of the three children at home and a single mother of a two-year-old girl. Thandi's parents are both employed and responsible for providing for all her needs. Given that she is the eldest at home, she has a good relationship with her younger sisters and both look up to her for guidance. She attended her schooling in Mpumalanga and was taught in isiZulu. Shortly after completing her matric, she moved to Gauteng to further her studies at Unisa.

At the time of the interview, she was enrolled for her master's degree. According to Thandi, her parents have played an important role to ensure that she is able to progress with her postgraduate degree, considering that they were willing to look after her daughter whilst she

completes her studies. Thandi is a first generation university student and for this reason, her parents wanted her to obtain a good quality education.

Participant 2 (Molebogeng)

Molebogeng is a 25-year-old female who was born in a township in the North West province. She grew up with her older brother and sister until she was three, and later, her family moved to Europe where she attended her primary school. The reason for her family moving to Europe was to be with their father, who was working as a priest during that time. However, the family stay in Europe was short-lived, as they had to move back to South Africa soon after her father passed away.

Upon the families return she enrolled in a multiracial school that was predominately Afrikaans. Despite being one of the few black children in an Afrikaans-dominated school, she performed well and received many accolades in the process. Molebogeng' s high schooling experience was a period of transition as she had to move from an Afrikaans dominated school to an English medium school this resulted in an additional language barrier.

Her father provided for the family financially but soon after his passing, her mother had to find a job. By the time she enrolled at university her siblings were already working and naturally, they assumed responsibility for her studies. At the time of the interview, she had already completed her honours degree with the financial assistance from the university's bursary scheme, and was busy with a community engagement programme to boost her chances of being selected for a master's degree.

Participant 3 (Daniel)

Daniel is a 25-year-old male who was born in the Limpopo province. He is the fifth child in a family that comprise of six children. He attended both his primary and secondary schooling in his village. Although he grew up speaking Tshi-Venda at home, both his primary and secondary school used English as a medium for teaching and learning. Upon completion of high school, he moved to Gauteng to stay with his older brothers and sisters who had moved from Limpopo to Gauteng due to work commitments.

In 2008, he enrolled for an undergraduate degree at the University of Pretoria (UP) with assistance from the university bursary scheme. He later came to the Unisa to study for his honours degree, which he completed with assistance from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). At the time of the interview, he was enrolled for a master's degree and was rather unfortunate not to receive a bursary. His parents are both unemployed and he is a first generation university student. His siblings were the ones supporting him financially during the course of his postgraduate studies.

Participant 4 (Dineo)

Dineo is a 25-year-old female who was born in Johannesburg. She was raised by her grandparents. Her mom was a nurse, and worked irregular hours consequently could not stay with her. She attended her primary school at a private school that was predominantly white, and was taught in English. She is the eldest child at home and has three siblings. It was only at high school that she started living with her parents and siblings. The private school that she attended became too costly for her parents to afford, and consequently had to move to a public school.

After completing matric she enrolled for her undergraduate degree at UP and was fortunate to receive a bursary. After completing her studies at UP she enrolled for her honours degree at Unisa, where she received a bursary. During the time of the interview, she was enrolled for her master's degree, but was not successful in securing funding. Although her parents did not raise her, she recalls growing up in a very supportive environment, which was enabled by her grandparents who ensure that despite her parent's absence she was still able to get the best quality of education. Dineo is a first generation university student.

Participant 5 (Mandla)

Mandla is a 26-year-old male who was born in a small town in KwaZulu-Natal. He is the fifth child in a family comprised of seven children. He attended his primary school in the nearby village, where he was taught in his home language of IsiZulu. After finishing Grade Seven, he went to an all-boys high school. While he was doing matric he was motivated to go and study further, but did not know how to go about achieving this considering his humble

background. His father was still alive then, and promised him that he would assist him financially to further his studies.

He applied to study at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and was preliminary accepted despite being unclear as to which course he wanted to study. However, due to the financial demands of his studies it became apparent that he would have to postpone his studies in order to raise finances. Unfortunately, his father also passed away that year. His dreams were shattered given that there was no one in his family who could help him. However, this did not deter him from pursuing his dream. In 2006, he enrolled for his undergraduate degree at the Unisa.

During this time, he was working, studying and taking care of his family back home. Soon after completing his undergraduate degree, he enrolled for an honour's degree and was able to secure a bursary. Despite the bursary, he continued working and studying, given that his family was financially dependent on him. During the time of the interview, he was enrolled for his master's degree and had to stop working due to his postgraduate studies. Mandla relied on himself for academic support, considering that he was a first generation university student.

Participant 6 (Mbali)

Mbali is a 26-year-old female who was born in a small village in the Northern Cape Province. She grew up with her mother, grandparents, aunt and cousins. She attended a multiracial primary and secondary school that used English for teaching and learning. Despite her humble upbringing, she was exposed to a good quality of education from an early age. Upon completion of her matric she moved to Gauteng and enrolled for her undergraduate degree at UP. Thereafter, she enrolled for her postgraduate degree at Unisa. According to Mbali, her mother was responsible for supporting her academically and financially even though she has never attended university.

Participant 7 (Themba)

Themba is a 46-year-old male who was born in Gauteng. He is the third child in his family comprising of three children. During the interview, Themba was married with two children,

and lived with his wife. He attended his primary and high school in one of the nearby townships where he learned through the medium of English. After completing his matric, he went to the University of Limpopo (UL) to further his studies. Unfortunately, he soon dropped out because of financial constraints.

However, his passion for education inspired him to enrol at Unisa. Soon after completing his degree, he enrolled for a postgraduate qualification. Throughout all the challenges, his mother and wife remained a constant source of support. During the course of his studies, he was employed as a contract worker. He worked for more than two years in different contract positions and soon enrolled full time for a Master's degree. His wife has been the one who encouraged him to enrol as a full time student to increase his chances of successful completion. He is the first one to attend university in his family and was responsible for funding his studies.

Participant 8 (Lethabo)

Lethabo is a 27-year-old male who was born in a small village in Limpopo. He grew up in an extended family that comprised of his grandparents, mom, aunts and cousins. He attended his primary and secondary school in his village, where he was taught in his home language which is Sepedi. After successfully completing his matric, he moved to Pretoria to look for employment and further his educational prospects. He worked at one of the government department, and soon he managed to enrol for his undergraduate degree at Unisa.

During this time, he relied on himself for financial support, as the money he received from home was not sufficient to cover all his expenses. Fortunately, he managed to secure funding for his degree. After successful completion of his undergraduate degree, he enrolled for honours but did not receive any financial assistance. During this time, he was employed and supporting his family in the process. He is the first person to attend university in his family, and is proud of having managed to enrol for a master's degree.

4.3 Presentation of results

The following discussion presents the themes and associated sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts. The discussion provides the reader with representative extracts to illustrate each theme and associated sub-themes. The participants' pseudonyms and verbatim quotes are provided as a mechanism to enable cross-referencing.

4.3.1 The role of the family in the participants' education

Judging by the profile of the participants, it appears that the presence of family support featured strongly in their experiences of studying at university. The participants indicated that a stable family background characterised by a sense of support helped them to cope at university. However, not all the participants in the study came from conventional family backgrounds. It emerged from the findings that most participants came from families that comprised of either single parent homes or households that are characterised by extended family members. Against this background, it was important to explore the extent of support provided by various family dynamics, and how these have shaped the learning experiences of participants in the study.

4.3.1.1 The family as a place that provides a sense of belonging

The participants indicated that they came from stable family backgrounds. The stability that participants highlighted was in reference to the level of cohesiveness in the family. According to the participants, the family as a cohesive unit represented a support structure that enabled them to experience a sense of belonging, and fostered a spirit of togetherness. The participant's viewed emotional support as the most prominent form of support offered by family members. The participants' family structures revealed a number of dynamics that are both unique but interrelated in a variety of ways. Amongst the eight participants that were interviewed for the study, only two came from families that comprised of both biological parents (**Thandi & Daniel**). The majority of participants came from single parent homes (**Molebogeng, Mandla, Mbali, and Themba & Lethabo**) with the exception of one participant, who was raised by her grandparents (**Dineo**). It was interesting to note that amongst participants who came from single parent homes, the presence of extended family

members featured strongly in their family structure and was considered advantageous in fostering a sense of cohesion.

Amongst the participants in the study, the presence of siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins ensured a sense of cohesion within the family. This enabled various support structures to be in place. Participants from single parent homes indicated that in addition to their parents providing for their financial wellbeing their older siblings were equally influential in assisting them financially to further their postgraduate studies. It was the participants' perception that according to their family's expectations, the older siblings were obliged to assist financially in areas where parents were unable to meet all the financial obligations. Indeed, this was found to be common practice amongst most participants in the study. It was important to explore this theme in order to determine the extent of family involvement in the educational aspiration of participants. Some of the participants considered themselves fortunate in as far as having older siblings who attended university, as this enabled them to receive the necessary academic support and guidance. According to the participants' views this assisted them in anticipating potential challenges that they were likely to encounter during the course of their studies.

These findings suggest that it is not necessarily the extent of support available to participants at home but rather, their dedication and commitment was equally important in determining their academic success. This was evident amongst participants' who came from homes that were characterised by neglect and disengagement amongst family members. The participants who came from households that comprised of extended family members highlighted that they had experienced some challenges in the form of interfamilial conflict often with negative consequence to their learning experiences. This was attributed to the fact that in these families' unemployment and illiteracy was found to be rife, and in some instances, the participants were the ones responsible for providing for the family. In reference to perception of their family context, the participants' indicated that:

"My family is a very quiet family in terms of we are a closed knit family." **Themba**

"It is a very loving and supportive family." **Mbali**

"I think that my parents and my siblings helped a lot." **Daniel**

"I grew up with my sister, two of them, and my parents, it was a very loving family, and I am the eldest of the children at home." **Thandi**

This question afforded participants' the opportunity to describe their family constellation. In turn, it provided the opportunity to understand the extend of family involvement in shaping their learning experiences. The participants who stayed with extended family members reported a more positive outlook, and experienced a great deal of comfort from their extended network of social support. The participants perceived their family relationship as stable. This stability was a result of having various people to interact with, or to seek advice from during uncertain times. Allowing participants' the opportunity to reflect on their family dynamic provided a context to understand their frame of reference and significant others who have contributed towards their personal development.

The participants considered their significant others (parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, cousins) as having played an influential role in their lives. They highlighted that according to the African perspective there has always been an emphasis on communal living. Hence the African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child". Against this background, the theme of communalism featured strongly amongst participants' in the study. The participants indicated that they were family-orientated, whereas according to their understanding family was not only limited to fellow siblings, but also included extended family members. The participants' narratives highlighted that it was common practice amongst black culture to find three generations coexisting under one roof. In reference to the communal way of life, the participants' highlighted that:

"I grew up with my mom, grandparents, aunts, and cousins. It was an all in one house. It was a big family but I had fun" **Mbali**

"I grew up in Gamarishane village with my grandparents, mom, aunts, uncles and cousins it was a big family." **Lethabo**

"I grew up with my grandparents, mom and aunts." **Dineo**

According to the participants' perceptions not only did communalism help to maintain the family as a cohesive unit, but it acted as a constant source of support, especially in instances where parents were unavailable.

4.3.1.2 The family as a place that provides support

Acquiring a postgraduate degree was perceived by the participants' as a period when various support structures need to be in place to help them cope effectively. According to the participants' views, the presence of a supportive family was seen as an important source of emotional support that provided them with a sense of belonging, and helped to create shared identities. This was emphasised by the following insert:

"I think my mother. I think from my mother and my whole family. Do you understand? But more her, because she is directly linked to me, I think they believed in me in such a sense that they just take money for things, because she knew that her child is going to need them. She was supportive, and she will call and say what is going on. 'Are you coping?' and even little things; when I am going to write a test I tell her. She will even call and ask that part of the book 'do you understand now? Because last week you said to me that you do not understand'." [sic] **Mbali**

It was the participant's perception that studying at a distance can be a fairly daunting task however, the presence of emotional support from various family members can often assist in alleviating this burden and consequently creating an enabling environment to succeed academically. Another participant underlined that:

"The family was more of an emotional support than academic support." **Dineo**

Despite the need for academic support, emotional support was equally valued by the participants in the study. Having emotional support from significant others afforded participants' a stable platform to adjust and cope with the demands of their studies. In reference to the level of emotional support participants' asserted that:

"That would have to be my parents, 'because they never pushed me to work, it was just study, and they want me to go further, and I don't have that stress of financial issues or family issues." [sic] **Thandi**

"I will say that my family has been supporting me financially to further my studies, but on the other hand, I have also relied on myself a lot, because I started working in 2006." **Mandla**

Often ODL student play an additional role as primary providers for their families which could result in negative consequences for their studies. In this regard, having a supportive family

background enabled the participants the opportunity to devote enough time to their studies which contributes positively towards their academic success. Some participants' emphasised that:

"First one would be my mother, because I have disappointed her so many times, I am driven to achieve so that I make her proud. The other one would be my spouse; she has played a very important role in terms of in terms of me being where I am." **Themba**

It was the participant's perception that the emotional support that they receive from their families was held in high esteem and consequently motivated them to succeed at university. The participants were inspired to perform to the best of their abilities in order to show their indebtedness for the emotional support that they receive from their significant others. Another participant highlight that:

"One was my dad, because of what he went through to support my studies." **Molebogeng**

The participant's view epitomises the gratitude that is often felt towards their families for the personal sacrifices that they had to endure in order to ensure a better future for them. Another participant remarked that:

"You understand that I am the only child. The only thing that my mother can say that she has raised one person is me. And even her she feels like she needs to support me, how was the exam, are you getting it? Did you get your books?" **Mbali**

The participant's sentiments highlight the value that they place on the acquiring a good education as a result of the support they receive from their families. What is particularly interesting to note is that the participants' never felt entitled to receive support hence they were able to appreciate the emotional support on offer and viewed it as a stepping stone towards their academic success. One participant concluded that:

"Support, you know, I had my family, my parents, and friends, of course, and my cousin, because we studied together, although we were not doing the same course. So, went through all these challenges together and we were busy motivating each other and moving forward."
Dineo

It was interesting to note that while some participants indicated that they were raised by a single parent most grew up in households that were characterised by the presence of siblings and extended family members, hence were never emotionally isolated.

4.3.2 The role of finances in participants' education

Financial constraint was one of the most prominent themes that featured strongly amongst participants in the study. The participants did not only have to contend with coming from historically marginalised backgrounds, but households that are characterised by high rates of unemployment. This often necessitated participants to seek employment opportunities whilst they were busy with their studies. In reference to financial constraints, the participants lamented that:

"Finances can be hard to come by if you are not working you are a family man and you are expected to provide and support the family." **Themba**

"I was also working and supporting my family that year. So, there was support from home and I was also supporting myself." **Mandla**

Amongst participants who came from low-income families, the issue of financial constraints was perpetuated by instances where financial support was required to undertake studies at postgraduate. Given that they had completed an undergraduate degree; it is often expected that they need to start working. In such instances, family expectations created additional pressure as evidence by sentiments of one participant, who mentioned that:

"And coming from the family were you needed to go back and help financially studying for a postgraduate degree is considered an additional burden." **Mbali**

Coming from a low-income family background often necessitated some participants to prioritise employment opportunities at the expense of studying towards a postgraduate qualification. This was complicated by the fact that some participants had family responsibilities in addition to their educational demands. One participant was quoted as follow:

"Because we having it rough, you know, given that we do not have money, even finances are an issue." **Thandi**

Given these prevailing circumstances, it was common to find participants' enrolled for postgraduate studies whilst having to financially support their families. Another participant emphasised that:

"I was also working and supporting my family that year." **Mandla**

Financial constraints did not only constitute a challenge for participants who had additional family responsibilities. It was also perceived as a possible downfall amongst participants who were financially dependent on their parents, siblings or extended family members. For example, participants who were financially dependent on their siblings indicated that their parent's income was only sufficient to provide for the basic needs and could not be extended to cover the full costs of a tertiary qualification. One participant who was keen on attending university after matric mentioned that, he had to postpone his studies because of his father's inability to pay his tuition fees. His frustration is summed up in the following insert:

"Yes, I applied to UKZN. I was preliminarily accepted, and I was clear about the course that I wanted to do. However, when we started to discuss the issue of finances with my father, it then became apparent that the amount of money that they wanted me to pay was big, and we had to postpone until the next year, which was 2004." **Mandla**

The participants indicated that despite having the desire to study further not having adequate financial support hampered their academic prospects. One participant summed up his concern as follow:

"While I was doing matric, I was motivated to go and study, but I did not know where to go, and there was also the issue of financial constraints." **Lethabo**

Finances were perceived as problematic given that they did not only limit participant's educational opportunities but their future career prospects as well. This was evident in instances where participants had to settle for courses that could be completed in a short turnaround time, as a mechanism to prioritise employment opportunities. One participant summed up his experiences as follows:

"I was just hard thinking what to do and my mother told me just to take a one year course because she will not know how to fund me" **Mandla**

Participants' who struggled financially relied heavily on some sort of financial aid from the university. They acknowledged that ODL provided an avenue for them to further their studies given the flexible approach to learning and reasonable study fees. The participants expressed the following sentiment regarding how ODL helped to alleviate some of the financial burden that accompanied studying at university.

"It helps students to study at their own time, and one thing that I like about an ODL institution is that when you compare the study fees with other universities, Unisa is considered to be a cheaper one." **Lethabo**

"It has been good, as I have been telling, and I would not really be able to cope unless there was maybe a financial support, but because I am here at Unisa, I have been able to work and study at the same time." **Mandla**

"I came here because I thought it is cheaper, and I can also do it with the flexibility. I was just tired of going to school every day. I think that here you can study at your own time and be flexible." **Molebogeng**

It was the participant's views that finances appeared to be the biggest concern but through perseverance, they managed to come up with various strategies to fund their studies. This often necessitated some participants to study and work simultaneously, or apply for financial assistance.

4.3.3 Expectations of participants' families' post-completion of studies

The participants' highlighted that due to their humble background, there seems to be a misconception that their academic success ought to be measured against the families' wellbeing. According to their family expectations, participants' are sent to university so that they can be in a position to uplift their families materially. Some participants mentioned that according to their family's expectation a university degree does not amount to anything if they are unable to financially provide for their family's needs. Against this background, any student who acquires a degree but is unable to secure employment is likely to be looked down upon by the family despite their academic achievement. It was the participant's views that these expectations created unnecessary pressure. Even more so in instances where they were enrolled for postgraduate studies, considering that it was expected from them that after

successful completion of their first degree they should start working and assuming responsibility for their families. These family expectations were perpetuated by instances where the participants were first generation university students. The participants saw this line of thinking as creating unnecessary pressure. This was emphasised by one participant who was quoted as follows:

"You see when you are back at home, people like to support you, and when you succeed, they want to come back and show you off to people, and the fact that you have succeeded. And your success is also measured by how you take care of your family, because we do not come from a wealthy background and a good upbringing." **Mbali**

The level of material benefit that was expected by some family's post-completion of studies was summed up by a quote from another participant, who referred to the following:

"So, it's an honour that you have to come back and build them a house or improving the existing one upon completion of studies." **Lethabo**

According to participants' views individuals who do not conform to such family expectations are often stigmatised, or made to believe that they had failed their respective families. This was reflected by a participant who mentioned that:

"Everybody knew that you are going to university, but you are coming back to eat the same food with them and all that instead of you bringing new food." **Molebogeng**

Participants' indicated that given the sacrifices that their families had to endure to ensure that they receive the best education, it was considered ungrateful for them not to repay the favour. One participant said:

So, it is like your mother did slave to put you wherever you are. It will be cruel to say to her that 'Mama have a nice time in Kuruman, and I am off to a big city'. **Mbali**

Another participant expressed a different motive to complete his studies. However, family expectations still featured in his quest to complete his studies.

"For example, my girlfriend is going to be done with schooling in two weeks' time. That means that she is going to start working now and somebody has to start paying the bills, and

you know, in my culture, you cannot get married to someone if you are the one who is not working." **Daniel**

Another participant emphasised that

"*Yes, for me it is culture specific thing.*" **Mandla**

However, he felt inclined not to elaborate further but instead summed up his experience as follows:

"*I am not quite sure that my experiences are shaped by the fact that I am black because I do not know what other students of different race are experiencing.*" **Mandla**

The participant seemed reluctant to generalise the experience given that he was not well informed about variations in cultural differences. The above participants appear unsure of whether to attribute his experience to his cultural background as he purports not to have information about this aspect from other cultural backgrounds. Thus, while most of the participants are of the view that their cultural background imposes certain expectations on them, there are others who are not able to state, with certainty whether this is necessarily a consequence of belonging to a particular culture. The theme provides an overarching context of how socio economic status places the demand on postgraduate black students to materially provide for their family's post completion of studies. According to most of the participants, being able to provide for the family post completion of studies is regarded as important in their culture and they were aware of the stigma and negative consequences of not adhering to these expectations.

4.3.4 Participants' learning experiences and academic performance

4.3.4.1 Participants' quality of basic education

According to sentiments expressed by the participants, prior quality of education had an influence on their learning experience and academic performance. For the purpose of the study, it was important to note that some of the participants attended public schools whilst others attended private schooling. Meaning that, it was equally important to investigate the

extent to which different schooling systems has influenced the participants' level of academic readiness. Amongst the eight participants, three indicated that they attended multiracial or private schools, as opposed to the five who had attended public schools. Considering that participants came from different schooling backgrounds, it was not surprising that they reported different experiences. In reference to the perceived quality of education and level of academic preparedness offered at multiracial schools, participants' mentioned that:

"I was very fortunate to have a very wise mother who wanted me to have good education. So, she took me to a multiracial primary school with a lot of white people, back then it was two of them, which the other one was strictly Afrikaans, so she took me to that other one, so that I can get good schooling." **Mbali**

"Primary schooling I went to an Afrikaans school. It was that time when there was still that progression of having blacks into Afrikaans schools. I was kind of the only 'black' child in a way. I was taught in Afrikaans." **Molebogeng**

"It was really okay but the transition from pre-school to primary school was different, because it was a small location. I went to primary school with so many white kids, and I felt very intimidated. So, you could see that I actually wanted to learn more, I found friends and all was fine. I remember my parents telling me that the fact that they have sent us to a private school at elementary level is was for a good foundation purpose." **Dineo**

Judging by the sentiments above, it is evident that having been exposed to a multiracial schooling background was considered advantageous. According to the participants' views, not only did this expose them to various cultures, but it provided them with the necessary intellectual stimulation to adjust and cope effectively at university. In reference to the quality of education at private schools, the participants emphasised that:

"It broadened my life. So, I also went to a Model C secondary schooling." **Mbali**

"So, I was really exposed to various cultures and that helped me a lot." **Molebogeng**

Exposure to different cultures and different learning dynamics seems to have played an influential role in shaping the perceptions of participants in the study. This could possibly have some implications for the South African higher education landscape considering our history of separate developments. Another important consideration is that these participants perceived their academic potential in a positive light. In essence, this implies that participants who had high expectations of their academic competencies were more likely to perform

better academically, and achieve good grades, as opposed to those who did not perceive their competence in the same way. This was reflected in the following inserts:

"Once I got into university, I did not struggle much, and I got proper grades. And I am generally a hard worker, and my parents kept pushing for me to do my best." **Dineo**

"I was quite actually a star student and I got a number of awards at primary. I was very engaged with school activities such as drama and singing." **Molebogeng**

In contrast, participants' who attended public schools reported that they had experienced some challenges adjusting and coping effectively at university. It was the participants' views that the poor culture of teaching and learning prevalent at many public schools failed to adequately prepare students to perform academically on par with their peers from more affluent schooling backgrounds. According to the participants, the poor culture of teaching and learning was often perpetuated by instances where teachers themselves were perceived to be uninspiring. In reference to the quality of education at public schools, participants lamented that:

"It has an impact, because when I remember myself, even the teachers themselves were not competent." **Lethabo**

"I remember my teacher was teaching the same thing throughout the year. You know she was teaching past tense, and present tense throughout the year. You know those simple things, instead of encouraging us to read." **Molebogeng**

The participants mentioned that, the quality of education prevalent at many public schools need to be strengthened if institutions of higher education aim to remedy the achievement gap that has since become symptomatic of throughput rates in the country. According to the participant's views, the quality of teaching and learning at many public schools leaned more towards a monotonous approach. The quality of teaching and learning that characterised the educational background of participants from public schools was criticised for its inability to encourage students to aspire towards greater intellectual pursuits. One of the participant alluded that academic performance at university is strongly correlated to prior quality of education. This is a cause for concern considering that at postgraduate level lectures expect students to be able to write academically, with good grammar and sound comprehension. According to her sentiments, such expectations are detrimental for the majority of

underprepared students who were exposed to an inferior quality of education. She laments that:

"You always get lectures when marking your paper telling you that by honours level you should be able to do this and that, whilst forgetting that we do not all of us come from the same schooling environment... remember not everybody has access to internet, so we don't know." **Thandi**

The participants indicated that such expectations could result in poor academic performance considering the pressure associated with academic achievement at university. Another participant lamented the lack of inspiration associated with a majority of teachers from public schools, which consequently has the potential to manifest in poor academic performance for black students. He mentioned that:

"During my primary schooling, teachers were not inspiring us to study further." **Mandla**

However, these findings need to be interpreted with caution given that they are contextual. Although the quality of education at public schools has been noted as a barrier amongst participants in the study, it is important to highlight that in the wake of a new democratic order not all public schools in the country provide an inferior quality of education. This is evident in the case of the one participant who attended a public school in Limpopo called Mbilwi. This school is one of the high-performing schools in Limpopo. This suggests that not all public schools in the country are synonymous with a poor quality of education.

4.3.4.2 High school grades

According to the participants views high school grades are important in determining a learner's competence and academic readiness at university. Participants mentioned that the recent measures by the department to lower the matric pass requirement has since resulted in an inferior quality of education at many public schools. It was the participants' perception that the current standard of education is inadequate in providing students with the necessary academic competencies to enable them to succeed at university. This has been highlighted as an area of great concern by most participants given that, when they are admitted at university they are suddenly faced with an overwhelming task of having to adjust to a more intense and

rigorous workload. In terms of their high school grades and how these influences their level of academic readiness participants' highlighted that:

"I think it does contribute, if we are going to have a system that passes people at 33% to me, it's below par." **Lethabo**

"So, I mean you get to pass at 33% at secondary, and you get to university, the level is a bit higher which makes it difficult to succeed." **Mbali**

"Although I might not say the same about the education that is provided right now, looking at how many times the education system has been changed from OBE to something else, and rumours of the pass mark of 33% - at matric level with us it was 40-50%." **Themba**

The participants expressed concern about the number of times the education system has been changed in the country. One participant lamented that the current education system *"does more harm than good"* (**Themba**) to the educational aspirations of many black students, who would like to further their studies. There was an existing perception amongst participants that in comparison to the 50% pass mark, which used to constitute the norm at many public schools, the current pass criteria contribute to the educational mediocrity that is currently facing the country. Participants' mentioned that by lowering the benchmark for a matric pass requirement students are being deprived of their right to quality education, which embraces ideals of a high work ethic and academic excellence. Participants did not only express their dissatisfaction regarding the low matric pass requirement at high school, but indicated their concerns regarding the implications of lowering the benchmark for a matric pass rate. Considering that unemployment is rife in the country, higher education remains the only avenue for students to improve their chances of securing better employment opportunities. This was emphasised by one participant who lamented that:

"Now it is hard to get a job with a matric. So, studies need to be furthered." **Mandla**

It was the participant's views that the current matric pass requirement contributes to the burden of youth unemployment in the country. According to the participants views the current matric requirements enabled students to merely pass however, it did not guarantee admission to university given the limited number of places available and the stringent admission criteria which are often put in place to attract high performing students.

4.3.4.3 The role of career guidance on participants' education

The participants accounts shed some light on the extent to which career guidance or lack thereof has influenced their experiences of studying at university and prospective career choices. Participants were of the view that not enough is being done at school and at universities to assist underprepared students in making informed decisions regarding their future career prospects. They mentioned that career guidance needs to be strengthened as a mechanism to improve the learning experience and academic performance of black students. Participants felt that had they received proper career guidance at high school their chances of success at university would have been significantly improved. When asked about the extent of the career guidance the participants expressed the following concerns:

"Ideally more career guidance could have helped, I think, unfortunately that was lacking in our school environment, so you had to learn everything for yourself." **Thandi**

"I think career guidance at late secondary such as matric could have helped me." **Lethabo**

"If I am a teacher now, I will start with an idea of furthering education at Grade 1. You know asking children what really they want to become and what are the careers that they wanted to do." **Mandla**

"So, I feel like such preparations could have been implemented, especially at Grade 11 and 12, where we start preparing for university." **Molebogeng**

The participants' sentiments suggest that more effort could have been put towards providing them with the necessary information to make informed career choices. It was the participants' perception that the poor quality of school failed to provide them with the necessary information to succeed at university.

4.3.4.4 Participants transition from high school to university

Being overwhelmed was one of the negative emotions expressed by participants when asked about their level of academic readiness when entering university. The participants

complained about the high workload and the effort associated with academic success at university. The participants highlighted that:

"I was quite overwhelmed about the amount of work that one had to do. So, you look at the amount of work and you like, say 'no!' It is very demanding because you are there by yourself and you need to figure it by yourself. It is very different." **Lethabo**

"At University you get this lots amount of work in a short space of time and without much help. I mean at secondary, [I] *was not really expected to write references, but when I arrived here,* [I] *was informed that, 'dude you cannot just write people's stuff without acknowledging them.' You see such as things."* **Mbali**

Participants lamented the lack of sufficient support that often accompanies studying at university. It was the participant's perceptions that at high school they received enough academic support given that their teachers were prepared to help them individually. However, considering that at university you are expected to work independently, participants perceived this as a challenge towards their level of academic readiness and indicated that it often impeded their academic performance. This resulted in some frustration from the participants as evidenced by the following inserts:

"I do not know how much they could have done, but you look at how it is done at university, like a whole doing things yourself more, and at high school, we did not get left to do so much stuff ourselves." **Dineo**

Another participant summed it up as follows:

"In high school, there was more support, but here, you get to a lecture, the person speaks for an hour, reading from the book, and you are expected to do a lot." **Mbali**

The participants seemed to agree about the intense workload and the academic demands that often accompany studying at university. The university environment was perceived to be more of a challenge given that it often required of them to increase their efforts in order to meet the rigorous workload. Participants' sentiments regarding their level of academic readiness was summed up by the following quote:

"Yes, because I mean, when you get to university, there is a huge gap between what you learn from school and at university" **Dineo**

Another interesting dynamic that came to the fore is that participants who attended private or multiracial schools seemed to have had some exposure to contact institutions prior to enrolling at Unisa. This seemed pertinent in the context of the study considering the lack of academic support associated with students from a distance institution. When asked about their motive for choosing to study at Unisa one participant commented that:

"It was by default actually. As I told you I went through many colleges to hear about many programmes, and when I found Unisa, I just joined the queue." **Mandla**

It was the participants' perception that contact institutions offered more academic support because of measures that are put in place to assist underprepared students. Participants who studied at a contact institution for their undergraduate degree prior to enrolling at Unisa indicated that:

"My first year was at the University of Pretoria, and it was a contact learning institution. So, I enjoyed a lot in terms of going to lecturers, because I felt that it helped me a lot." **Dineo**

"For my degree, I went to the University of Pretoria. There is a lot of help there. There is efficiency of some sort. So, you know, you are having tutors and lecturers. There is really a difference between an email and somebody who shows that he is struggling in front of you. So, that is much better than having to send somebody an e-mail saying 'I do not understand page two' and waiting for two days. And some e-mails come back saying that 'I am on a well-deserved rest or holiday, please e-mail 'whoever'.' And 'whoever' does not even come [back] *to you"* **Mbali**

"Undergraduate was much fine, because you used to go to your classes every day, and there is much more contact with the lecturers. So, there are a whole lot of people that you are studying with, but coming in here was bit hectic, and it was difficult to be in contact with lecturers and so forth. You going to send e-mails and hardly ever get replies. I will say that you get used to it, because I did it for two years." **Daniel**

The presence of mentors at contact institutions was perceived by one participant as a mechanism that helped to improve her learning experience and academic performance. In reference to the academic support offered at contact institutions, she indicated that:

"Yes, there was academic support and we had mentors. So, what you did is that if you felt like you needed help, you will sign up for a mentorship programme – then they told us about that in the first year. So, they just said that 'you write down your name and we will find somebody who did the same course as yours and then we will choose, like, three or four

students and you guys had a little group. And you have your mentor.' I have mentor in the first year, and I felt like in the second, I felt like I could do it on my own, given that they were teaching us about things such as time management, and yes, so also more on your curriculum, but it was also more on your lifestyle, and how can you balance everything with life. We received all of that and I think that I could help. And also you had tutors as well, although some people felt like they did not want to attend tutorials and all that, but I felt that was very helpful." [sic] **Dineo**

According to the participants' views, contact institutions were perceived as being more advantageous. This suggest that having frequent contact with lectures and peers was instrumental in facilitating a learning environment that nurtured a student's full academic potential. Participants emphasised that a student's ability to perform academically was aided by an environment that enables easy access to information and encourages peer learning. In contrast to views expressed by participants who had prior exposure to contact learning, participants who have studied through distance learning from undergraduate lamented the lack of academic learner support. According to the participants, not having regular contact with lecturers affected their ability to make better sense of the learning process and consequently, this had a negative impact on their academic performance. They emphasised that:

"There is hardly anything going on between us and the lectures there was no discussion classes – there was nothing. It was back to normal, where you have to email somebody, and if they don't get back to you, it's hard. You don't realise how hard it is until you get to exam time" **Thandi**

Another participant indicated that:

"Yes, I think that it is still a challenge of not having contact with lecturers. Like still, you do not know how to contact the lecturers yourself, and there is still a distance between you and the lecturers." **Daniel**

The participants' sentiments on this theme draw attention to the intense work load and minimum support that is often associated with studying at university. The transition process from high school to university seems to pose various challenges that need to be successfully negotiated in order to adjust effectively at university.

4.3.5 Participants ability to adjust at university

According to the participants' view adjusting to university came with its own associated challenges for each one of them. The participants highlighted the inability to make the necessary adjustment as having a negative impact on their learning experience and academic performance. Conflicting emotions were reported regarding their perceived inability to make the required adjustment. Four broad themes of emotions were advanced regarding their inherent inability to adjust effectively. Amongst these were personal, social, emotional, and more academically inclined reasons. The participants perceived the university environment to be vast, and as a result, often struggled to understand how things ought to be happening in a rapidly demanding environment. Personal reasons that were advanced accounted for participant's perception of the university environment. There was a general feeling amongst participants especially those who received minimum career guidance that adjusting to university presented an additional burden considering the nature of their schooling experiences. Given that the university environment was perceived to be vast, it often gave rise to feelings of being overwhelmed amongst participants, as evidenced by the following inserts:

"I do not think that it was efficient, but I think somehow preparation for me to come here, because they prepare you academically with things like reading and whatever, but then it is not enough, because when you are coming to university, it feels like it is vast" **Dineo**

"I was quite overwhelmed about the amount of work that one had to do. So, you look at the amount of work and you like, say, no! It is very demanding because you are there by yourself, and you need to figure it by yourself. It is very different from a contact institution." **Mbali**

In terms of social reasons, one participant highlighted that his level of sociability proved to be his biggest downfall in terms of adjusting. This does not imply that he did not possess the

necessary social skills but rather that they did that much to the detriment of his academic progress. He narrates it thus:

"I can't say that I was not able to adjust in terms of learning, I am a very social person, and I get along with other people, but then I did that to the detriment of my books." **Themba**

Social reasons for the inability to make the necessary adjustment stemmed from not investing enough time and effort towards successful completion of studies. One participant referred to the following regarding their inability to adjust at university.

"It's just that I did not make a good transition from matric to first-year level, not that the standard of education at time was overwhelming to me, I just went out of my way, and did that which had nothing to do with education or my being there." **Mandla**

Other reasons that were highlighted had more to do with what participants considered existing perceptions at universities. Amongst these, is the notion that as a postgraduate student one is expected to have some prior knowledge about certain aspects of academia. The participants indicated that some of the expectation at postgraduate level entails the ability to write academically and critically. However, some participants argued that due to their schooling background, not all of them were exposed to a similar quality of education. One participant said:

"I think in postgraduate, they understand that people have to have a certain level of understanding and if you look at reality, it is not how it has always been. I think that there is a need to move away from that and the fact that everybody understands all these things. And then if there is a feeling that people do not understand everything, there should be help that is offered." **Thandi**

In terms of academic reasons that were highlighted, participants noted the challenges associated with teaching and learning in an ODL environment as one of the possible downfalls for their inability to adjust. However, this seemed to be more problematic amongst participants who had prior exposure to contact institutions. For example, one participant indicated that:

"For my degree, I went to University of Pretoria. There is a lot of help there. There is efficiency of some sort. So, you know you are having tutors and lecturers. There is really a difference between an e-mail and somebody who shows that he is struggling in front of you.

So, that is much better than having to send somebody an e-mail saying, 'I do not understand page two,' and waiting for two days. And some e-mails come back saying that 'I am on a well-deserved rest or holiday, please e-mail 'whoever'.' And 'whoever' does not even come to you" **Mbali**

The participants' experiences of this theme reflected the various challenges associated with adjusting at university. It was the participants' perceptions that adjusting at university was fraught with difficulties especially taking into consideration the vast amount of work that is associated with learning at university. The participants lamented the volume of work which often left them with a feeling of being overwhelmed. However, some of the participants' indicated that their inability to successfully adjust was a result of their own poor decision making abilities as opposed to being overwhelmed by the university environment. It was the participants' views that distance learning institutions offered little academic support in comparison to contact institutions and this often made it challenging to adjust successfully at university. The theme is reminiscent of the position held by a majority of participants in relation to lack of adequate support structures associated with helping student to adjust. The theme encapsulates the perceived challenges faced by participants when adjusting at university.

4.3.6 The politics of language

Language of instruction constitutes a sensitive topic in our country due to the historical connotation as an instrument to perpetuate the racial divide. Despite more than two decades into the new democratic order, the politics of language continue to dominate public discourse. This has become more prevalent at institutions of higher education where there is racial diversity. Given that some participants were taught in their home language at school, it became important to investigate the impact of learning in English on their learning experiences and academic performance at university.

4.3.6.1 Language as a barrier towards learning

According to sentiments expressed by the participants' language constituted a barrier towards their learning experience and academic performance. Participants who were taught in their home language highlighted that, learning in English often presented a burden considering that

at university it constitutes the language of tuition. According to the participants' views, language was perceived as problematic given that they needed to first develop a thorough understanding of various English language concepts and terminologies even prior to facilitating an understanding of what is being taught.

The participants lamented that when learning in English there is often little time for lecturers to engage students in order to ensure that there is a common understanding of the learning process. They emphasised that it is often assumed that all students share a common understanding of the learning process despite the language barriers that often exists. It was the participant's views that the effects of learning in the English language as opposed to their home language presented various disadvantages. Notably, was difficulties associated with communicating effectively which results in a lack of understanding and poor academic performance. Participants mentioned the following in reference to problems that accompany studying in English as opposed to their home language:

"Well I don't have any specific challenge, but I do have an opinion on that, because I think that is quite challenging as a black student to learn certain concept, because our education system is rendered in such a way that we use English, and for me that is a bit problematic, because even before you understand the concept or content, you first have to understand the language before concept or content; whereas for whites, it's half the job, because they were raised in that language, they do know, they understand, they can speak well; so for us, you have to struggling, which I do think it's a challenge" [sic] **Themba**

"I think a lot, because you first need to confront this English, and then understand it. If you do not understand English, how are you going to understand your work? Because you are still wondering, 'what is this big word here?" **Thandi**

"And another thing is about language given that here in South Africa, English is the third language. And you get this textbook, where you understand, but you actually really need to understand what is being said. Because, I mean, we come from different paths here, and not all of us are here because we come from 'posh high school' or whatever. Some of us still struggle here and there." **Molebogeng**

Participants emphasised that understanding various English language concepts and terminologies is essential to understanding course content, which is used in assessing their overall academic performance. It was the participants' perceptions that understanding content helps to facilitate a broader understanding of the entire learning process. According to sentiments by the participants, facilitating an understanding of what is taught is paramount to

learning new information and building on existing knowledge that contributes towards improved academic performance. The participants emphasised that their academic performance cannot be improved if they lack basic understanding of various concepts and terminologies that form part of the learning process. Based on participants' narratives, prior quality of education had a significant bearing on academic performance. It was the participants' perception that a lack of understanding of various English language concepts and terminology has a negative impact on their ability to accommodate new learning experiences. One participant indicated that:

"I think that even in postgraduate is the level where one is expected to specialise; there should be English that will teach you the Psychology jargon. That if they say 'this', 'this' is actually what they mean. So, it will give you a clear guideline on how to go about it. It should be an easy to read manual, because it is not like we are at the same level intellectually. We come from different institutions." **Lethabo**

This implies that deep learning cannot effectively take place if an individual lacks sufficient understanding of various English language concepts and terminologies. Participants attributed this problem to the burden of having to study in their home language, which often characterise the learning experiences of students from historically marginalised backgrounds. Furthermore, participants lamented a lack of competence amongst teachers who are tasked with developing basic understanding of English language concepts. One participant argued that:

"I think that's a yes for me, but I think that this has to do with prior education that you had. Your English teacher was not there in class, but somebody just rocked up there in the class. Do you understand, and it is not even your fault, it is the kind of education that you have. You do not even know some words what they mean. And because of little motivation that you have from somewhere that you have to come here and study but language is still a barrier" **Mbali**

The issue of language of instruction gave rise to multiple views amongst the participants in the study. The perception of language as a barrier to learning featured strongly in the broader narrative. A majority of participants were of the view that had they been taught in English as opposed to their home language from an early age that would have helped to ease the transition into university.

4.3.6.2 Proficiency and English language command

English language proficiency played a significant role towards participants learning experiences and academic performance. The participants expressed some concerns over the negative emotional reaction associated with learning in a language that is not their mother tongue. Amongst these, they emphasised feelings of stress and anxiety that are perpetuated by instances where they have to articulate themselves, often with negative consequences for learning. According to the participants views these negative emotions not only affected their self-esteem, but their confidence levels and ability to fully participate in the learning process. Based on the sentiments of participants having a reasonable command of the English language was considered advantageous in the learning process. It was the participants' views that being able to articulate themselves clearly, logically and coherently could have contributed positively to the learning process. With regard to English language competencies, participants remarked that:

"I think that the only thing that is a challenge is a language. I think that being able to speak language fluently like English you need to be competent." **Lethabo**

"So, reading I am fine with it, and now when I have to speak in English, it becomes a problem. It does not come that easily. But, maybe if I was groomed to speak English at a young age, I will be quite okay." **Daniel**

According to the participants, lacking a reasonable command of English was disadvantageous considering that at university they are expected to compete academically on par with individuals whom English constitutes a first language. Another participant highlighted that she did not experience any challenges reading in the English language, however, when it comes to having to express herself suddenly it became problematic.

"So, reading, I am fine with it, and now when I have to speak in English it becomes a problem. It does not come that easily. But maybe, if I was groomed to speak English at a young age, I would be quite okay." **Dineo**

Another participant was of the opinion that a lack of English language proficiency is problematic given that it is implicitly used as a measure of a person's academic potential or their level of intelligence. He remarked that:

"When you are a black person, and you write something, and in that you make errors. It is always going to be measured against you and your qualifications and your intelligence." **Daniel**

For participants who were taught in their home language proficiency and command of the English language proved to be a challenge, as evidenced in the following insert:

"I was taught in isiZulu; I would not say that it prepared me for university. We were learning things in Zulu, and when you came to university, everything was in English." **Mandla**

Participants agreed that indeed, proficiency and command of the English language did present additional barriers, and this was evident in instances where they had to resort to code switching as a mechanism to make better sense of the learning process. one of the participant indicated that:

"And language is still a challenge for me, and sometimes I use my own Zulu language to translate into English. So, what I say in Zulu, I will have to say it may be in a different way when I say it in English." **Mandla**

Having a reasonable command of the English language was perceived to be advantageous by participants who were exposed to teaching and learning in English from an early age. They remarked that:

"I think it has contributed a lot, because at university you get to read a lot in English, and if I learnt largely in an African language, I could have struggled. So, I think that it has contributed a lot in helping me" **Molebogeng**

"Well, it did wonders, because here I am I can converse with you in English. Had it not been in English, I would have probably used another language learned. But I think it had a positive impact, because it is the most widely spoken language in South Africa and abroad" **Themba**

Participants emphasised the value of being exposed to teaching and learning in English prior to university and highlighted that having such a background equipped them with the

necessary confidence and self-belief to communicate effectively. One participant remarked that:

"I think mostly with regard to high school, it did help. I think the most difficult thing about coming to university is learning to use the language every day and all that. So, I think I was prepared" **Molebogeng**

The participants acknowledged the importance of having prior exposure to the English language, and agreed that having such exposure was important in their quest to aspire towards better academic performance. Having a reasonable command of the language for teaching and learning at university was considered advantageous in the learning process.

4.3.7 Participants' motivation to study

Given the challenges associated with studying at a distance, participants were asked to comment on their motive for choosing to enrol for postgraduate studies at Unisa. It was the participants' views that studying at an ODL institution can be highly demanding, and the journey can often prove to be isolating. According to the participants' accounts, it is during these periods of isolation that they need to keep themselves motivated. Being motivated helped to ease the burden of their learning experiences by helping them to adjust and cope with their studies. According to the participants' views in order for an individual to succeed at university they need to have some sort of ambition, and to invest the right amount of effort to ensure that they attain these desired goals. The participants level of motivation was influenced by them having a passion for their studies, and this helped them to remain actively involved in the learning process. In reference to their motivation levels, participants indicated that:

"I think that I am self-motivated. What are other kinds of motivation really?" **Themba**

"My goals are time oriented and in five years, I need to see myself at a certain point." **Mbali**

"I am goal-orientated and I always want to achieve what I study. I know that for me to get where I want to be, I must complete, I must do something! At the moment, completing [my] *Master's is a gateway towards completing what I want to do."* **Dineo**

"You can have support systems but you need to be self-motivated. You need to have that drive and have self-discipline." **Thandi**

"For me it is a vision, you need to know where you are going. So, I think that has motivated me and just go and finish it, and get where I want to get" **Lethabo**

Having motivation is integral in achieving any goal. The participants' ability to succeed in their studies was motivated by a desire to achieve their respective goals. The participants' views on motivation are indicative of various theories on academic success at distance learning institution. Having a clear goal is paramount in achieving academic success at university. It is important for any students to have clear goals about what they want to achieve at university. However, having a clear goal alone does not guarantee success. In order to achieve these goals a student has to be willing to make personal sacrifices that are aligned to these goals.

4.4 Conclusion

The constellation of support from family members, friends, partners and significant others had an influence on the learning experiences of participants in the study. The participants perceived their family as a source of valuable support that provided them with a sense of belonging. In light of the challenges that accompanied studying at university, participants highlighted that the presence of a supportive family played an important role in helping them to cope at university. Support from family was generally perceived to be instrumental in assisting participants to cope emotionally rather than academically.

However, some participants indicated that their parents especially their mothers were supportive academically by showing a continued interest in their academic endeavours. This interest manifested through engagements with the participants' academic activities, for example, by constantly encouraging them to perform to the best of their ability. In addition to mothers being supportive emotionally, another participant indicated that support from her

spouse was also influential considering that, he had to relinquish his job in order to increase his chances of completing his studies.

Factors that influenced the participant's learning experiences and academic performance included prior quality of education. This was cited by the participants as one of the biggest challenges contributing to their poor academic performance at university. It was the participants' perceptions that the nature of schooling experiences in South Africa is characterised by inequalities, as a result, not all students are subjected to the same quality of education. Another factor that that came to the fore was the issue of language of instruction which was perceived by the participants as a barrier towards effective teaching and learning at university. It was the participants' views that having to learn in their home language at school presented an additional barrier on their learning experiences and academic performance. The participants cited increased concerns over their inability to communicate effectively and to fully comprehend the learning process that is facilitated through the medium of English. It was the participants' views that articulation, comprehension and command often proved problematic for them much to the decline of their academic performance. In conclusion, the issue of financial constraints was also perceived as an additional barrier towards the learning experiences and academic performance of participants in the study.

Chapter 5

Discussions and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The study aimed to explore the experiences of postgraduate black students at Unisa. The objective was to explore factors that have an influence on students learning experiences and academic performance and to investigate the nature of such influences. The current chapter focuses on clarifying the results that emerged from the process of inquiry. The implications of the study's results will form part of the discussion together with the strengths, limitations and recommendations for future research.

5.2 Conclusions of the study's findings

In line with the aim and objectives, the following conclusions can be drawn from the study:

- The role of prior quality of education, language of instruction and financial constraints has a negative impact on the learning experiences and academic performance of postgraduate black students.
- The nature of these factors are perceived as disempowering given that they determine access to higher education and influence the participation, retention and throughput rates of postgraduate black students.
- Unisa must improve the visibility of academic learner support and financial aid in order to assist underprepared black students to cope effectively with their postgraduate studies.

5.3 Implications of the study's findings

The conclusion that prior quality of education, language of instruction and financial constraints have a negative impact has several implications for the study. Chief amongst these

is universities are often designed to accommodate students who have graduated with good marks at high schools and are academically well prepared for tertiary education. However, South Africa encompasses a broad spectrum of students who often come from diverse backgrounds. Makoe (2005) argues that the majority of black learners who enrol at Unisa are often first-generation university students who come from under-resourced schooling backgrounds. This view is echoed by Ngengebule (1998) who mentioned that "the majority of learner who enter distance education in South Africa, who came largely from black communities, have thus not only been historically and politically disadvantaged, but also economically and educationally deprived" (p.4). Mouton, Louw & Strydom (2013) added that "these students are in a situation where academic performance becomes problematic as they fall into the category of being labelled underprepared" (p.288). This implies that Unisa must remain cognisant of the intellectual vacuum that is presented by academically underprepared postgraduate black students in view of putting appropriate measures in place to support their studies.

The contention that language of instruction constitutes a barrier suggests that issues of language might have a bearing on the underperformance of postgraduate black students. In view of aspiring towards a transformed, decolonised and Africanised higher education system, the inclusion of African languages in curriculum can help promote indigenous knowledge systems and align curricula content to the broader African context. South Africa encompasses a multicultural society that prides itself in the wealth of its linguistic diversity. A similar view is held by Webb (2002) that "the role of language and verbal instruction is probably even more significant in the context of multilingualism and cultural heterogeneity" (p.52). Therefore, limiting the provision of higher education to English and Afrikaans constitutes a gross injustice since it discounts the vast wealth of linguistic diversity of the country at large.

Higher education institutions must give concerted attention to the protection and preservation of African languages in an effort to promote multilingualism (Badat, 2010). The promotion of multilingualism in higher education can assist transformation efforts and encourage the active participation of black students in the learning process. Institutions of higher education need to remain cognisant of this diversity and ensure the active participation of students through mother tongue education in curricula. Leibowitz (2005) asserts that "in a multilingual and

socially stratified context, increasing the use of first language as a medium of instruction or improving the teaching of dominant language could enhance the prospect of academic achievement for many students" (p.676). Thus implying that Unisa must identify one of the local languages as a medium for teaching and learning and encourage students to speak these languages at the level of mother tongue. By incorporating African languages in curricula, universities can help to promote the intellectual currency inherent in mother tongue education and consequently, play an important role in preserving our cultural and linguistic diversity.

As a mechanism to transcend linguistic barriers these languages can be taught as a second language or used to improve the conceptual understanding of second language speaker's grasp of the English language. A similar view is expressed by Kamwangamalu (2001) who points out that "using indigenous languages in such higher domains as education is vital, not only for an efficient promotion of those languages, but also for the rapid and massive development and spread of literacy amongst populace to empower them to participate actively in the social, political and economic development of the state" (p.430). The Unisa language policy advocates for the use of African languages for teaching and learning with a particular emphasis on mother tongue education. The policy aims to use the potential of ODL to promote mother tongue based multilingual education, and maintain parity in the use of all languages (Unisa Language Policy, 2016). Although the policy encourages the promotion of mother tongue multilingualism, this ideal has yet to be translated into practical mechanism for delivery of results.

The assertion that financial constrains have a negative impact suggests that black students often come from historically marginalised backgrounds that are characterised by poverty and low-income households. A study by Laar & Sidanius (2001) have discovered that a lack of financial resources is often one of the biggest factors that continue to perpetuate the achievement gap amongst students from a low socio-economic status. This is consistent with Murray (2014) who concluded that "financial aid helps a student who will eventually graduate to do so quicker in terms of the number of credit points that they have to repeat, but also helps someone who will eventually be excluded on academic ground to linger longer in the system" (p.4). Despite the latest developments in the higher education ministry to accommodate students from low-income families, there is still an urgent need to increase funding opportunities especially at postgraduate level. This is a very important issue

considering that an increase in enrolment rates as evidence by current trends will require an even bigger increase in funding (Council on Higher Education, 2017).

Given the legacy of inequality prevalent in our country, it is increasingly clear that public funding of higher education remains inadequate (Badat, 2010). Recent developments in the form of student uprisings across institutions of higher education bears further evidence of the socio-economic divide that continues to perpetuate the cycle of exclusion. Thus implying in the quest to achieve redress and transformation, universities can make significant strides by providing more opportunities to students that are economically disadvantaged by so doing embrace the socio-economic diversity inherent in our country. Universities need to encourage partnerships with various stakeholders in government, business communities and private sectors to increase funding opportunities for economically disadvantaged students. This is echoed by Tinto (2002) who advocates for a new approach to financial aid policies "preferably one that encompasses various stakeholders for example state, schools, communities, families and organisation" (p.4).

The second conclusion that the study established is that the nature of these factors are perceived as disempowering by postgraduate black students. The perception of being disempowered by prior quality of education is premised on the notion that schools that black students attend or can afford often determines their quality of education. Research by Case & Yogo (1999) discovered that "many black Africans attended schools with inadequately trained teachers, insufficient textbooks, and pupil-teacher ratio above 80 children per class" (p.23). The problem of poorly resourced schools in our country is perpetuated by an over reliance on high school grades that implicitly influences access to higher education. Against this background, high performing universities are mainly interested in attracting students with excellent high school grades and that are academically well prepared for tertiary education.

This is a grave concern as such inclusion criteria might tend to discriminate against underprepared black student who do not meet criteria for automatic admission at university. A study by Bitzer & De Bruin (2004) emphasise that there is a need to support lower level school achievers more effectively for improved retention rates in higher. Research by Tinto (2002) recommends a closer working relationship between universities and schools in order to ensure that similar academic competencies are established amongst leaners in preparation

for university. He concludes that access does not occur in isolation but rather it is informed by other issues like academic preparation, therefore, access without academic preparation does not provide real opportunities as students are still at an increased risk of underperforming (Tinto, 2002). This implies that universities should refrain from isolating issues of access and success, but rather, focus on identifying applicants who have the potential to succeed at university. Currently transformation efforts in higher education are embodied by high enrolment rates especially amongst black students however; these do not necessarily translate to similar throughput rates (Council on higher education, 2017). Therefore, focusing and relying on statistical trend to address issues of transformation in higher education could be misleading for universities, and as a result may overestimate transformation gains that have been achieved in the higher education sector.

The participant's perception of being disempowered by issues of language is premised on having experienced a number of challenges associated with learning in English as opposed to their home language. Prominent amongst these, they emphasised language proficiency and the inability to fully comprehend the learning process. This is echoed by Seabi et al. (2014) who asserts "the majority of learners in South Africa, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are from poor homes with low levels of literacy and the medium through which they learn (English) is a second or third language for them, hence they lack proficiency in communication" (p.67). A similar view is held by Pretorius (2002) who argues that reading comprehension is an important determinant of academic performance and students who do not come from a strong reading background often have limited access to information, and as a result tend to develop comprehension problems. Thus implying that Unisa must seriously consider incorporating and promoting the use of African languages in curriculum as this can help to remedy the achievement gap amongst postgraduate students.

The perception of being disempowered by financial constraints is such that finances are often viewed as an indicator of the type of economic opportunities that black students are able to access. This view is supported by Breier (2010) who points out that "finances are felt most strongly by the lower socio-economic group; that they influence choice of institution; that sudden unexpected demands can lead to premature departure" (p.669). Given that, some of the participants were also employed whilst studying this was perceived as an additional barrier on their learning experiences. Furthermore, a majority of universities are still located

in big cities, which makes them inaccessible to students who reside in rural areas. The participants emphasised that they enrolled at Unisa due to the affordability of fees in comparison to contact institutions. This implies that had it not been for financial constraints participants would have opted to study at a contact institution, as these are perceived as offering more academic learner support.

The third conclusion is that Unisa must improve the visibility academic learner support and financial aid in order to assist more underprepared postgraduate black students. Despite literature having less to say about this conclusion, a number of initiatives have been implemented at Unisa to improve support for underprepared students. Most notably is the conceptual framework for student support. The assumptions underpinning this model is that, academic success is viewed in terms of the sociological perspective of "situated agents" whereby emphasis lies on the relationship between the student and the institution in creating a conducive environment to facilitate success (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Equally important are constructs of "student-walk" and "capital" which focus on nurturing a conducive environment in order to facilitate effective teaching and learning. Subotzky & Prinsloo (2011) point out that the former "begins with pre-registration and proceeds through every phase of mutual engagement: application; registration; teaching, learning, and assessment; student support; graduation; and subsequent participation in the community and labour markets" whilst the latter encompasses "cultural, intellectual, organisational and attitudinal forms of capital" (pp.185-186). Mutual engagement and success is shaped by the construct of "habitus" which is seen as "a combination of perceptions, experience and values, practices, discourses and assumptions that underlies the construction of our worldviews" (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011, p.186).

On paper, the conceptual framework seems to adopt a comprehensive approach in terms of addressing a plethora of student needs in the quest to facilitate support. However, since its inception not much has been documented in terms of the success that it has been able to achieve to date. The results of the study suggest that there is still a vacuum regarding academic learner support and financial aid especially at postgraduate level. Against this background, the conceptual framework seems to be more inclined towards undergraduate students (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Additionally, it has been subject to criticism for its perceived ability to accurately predict academic success based on large volumes of student

data, and the linear approach to success that is often devoid of constantly evolving institutional practices (Fynn, 2016). The profile of student entering Unisa are increasingly evolving. Therefore, it is important to improve measures that can help towards accommodation an increasingly diverse student body.

As a mechanism to improve academic learner support at postgraduate level, the conceptual framework needs to specifically address concerns that are brought about by the language barrier in the learning process. Thus implying that there is a need to ensure the promotion of multilingualism on campus through student and staff demographics in order to effectively improve teaching and learning. The framework must also strive to enhance the visibility of financial aid on campus for postgraduate black student as this has a bearing on their access, retention and throughput rates. Provision for measures aimed at strengthening black student's learning motivational support needs to be prioritised. This will help encourage and sustain student's motivation to learn and perform academically but most importantly, it will help eliminate feelings of isolation that often results from studying at a distance. As highlighted by Seabi et al. (2014) "achieving the support necessary must be multifaceted in nature and must also enhance the development of students in a holistic manner" (p.79).

The current study revealed that the variation in learning experiences and academic performance is accounted for by background factors rather than intellectual or academic competencies. The study achieved its objectives by highlighting various factors that are prominent amongst postgraduate black students that have an influence on their access, retention and throughput rates at university.

5.4 The study's strength

The strength of the study is that it was able to contribute to the paucity of literature into the topic. The study managed to explore in detail the experiences of postgraduate black students using their own narratives. This allowed for a rich description that facilitated a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, by taking into account postgraduate black students understanding of learning experiences, social setting and cultural context in which they developed the study was able to demonstrate how students constructed

their own meaning about learning in their own context. The use of critical race theory for the study allowed participants the opportunity to embrace their subjective experiences by so doing affording them the opportunity to assign meaning to their lived experiences, as they perceived them.

5.5 Limitation of the study

One of the limitations of the study is that it remains challenging to separate aspects of transformation as these are interrelated in a variety of ways. Initially the study sought out to investigate transformation of higher education landscape in terms of access and throughput rates but during the process of inquiry, other equally important debates ensued. Prominent amongst these were the decolonisation and Feesmustfall debate. Given that the study was already at an advance stage when these debates gained ground, it became increasingly challenging to factor their implications on the current discourse. These are important debates that warrant interrogation given that they might assist universities to further achieve their transformation agenda.

Caution should also be exercised so as not to over generalise the results of the study. The study focused on postgraduate black students at a distance learning institution. Therefore, the results are unique to Unisa students and might not be necessarily applicable to postgraduate black students at contact institutions. The themes and meaning that were generated are not the only possible reality and are thus, subject to various interpretations by different readers, this is a major limitation in conducting qualitative studies.

Due to the lack of context in terms of the field of study, it is difficult to assume that the learning experiences of participants in the study would be transferable to other ODL students. The UNISA student population is diverse and the participants reflected here may not represent the experiences of a wider range of students at the university. Another important limitation is that pre-testing was not done. This is an important limitation and one that needs to be acknowledged in the context of the current study.

5.6 Recommendations

Based on the results it is recommended that as a mechanism to improve academic learner support, Unisa could introduce compulsory classes at postgraduate level that are specifically designed to improve second language speakers grasp of the English language. The introduction of such classes will afford underprepared postgraduate black students the opportunity to improve their language proficiency, which will help to aid their cognition and conceptual understanding of the learning process. These classes will further provide student with the opportunity to improve their communication and presentation skills that will prepare them for the work environment.

An equally important initiative is the facilitation of more workshops on academic preparedness. Currently, Unisa offers a number of workshops aimed at offering academic learner support for postgraduate student (e.g. proposal writing, methodology, and statistical analysis workshops). However, these workshops are often premised on the assumption that at postgraduate level student are academically well prepared to studying at university. Additionally, these workshops are facilitated over a short period of time (e.g. two days) which is not sufficient to address a plethora of student's needs.

This is perpetuated by the fact that Unisa students have minimum contact with lectures. Therefore, problems that affect underprepared students at undergraduate are often left unresolved and might even persist at postgraduate level. Against this background, workshops on academic preparedness should specifically focus on providing underprepared student with academic writing skills that can help them to improve their learning experiences and academic performance. Another means of facilitating academic learner support could be the introduction of an operational writing centre to assist academically underprepared postgraduate students. The availability of a writing centre can play an important role in improving students learning experiences and make the transition to tertiary education easier and more successful. This could assist in improving student's verbal communication, critical thinking and academic writing skills given the timeous nature of feedback in the learning process. In addition, Unisa should source funds and provide more financial aid in order to assist and support postgraduate black students to cope effectively with their studies.

5.7 Conclusion

Conducting the study presented a number of challenges for the researcher. The first challenge concerned the fact that the researcher is a student studying in the same institution under investigation. During the process of inquiry, the researcher was challenged to remain as objective as possible in order to ensure that the results of the study were not in any way influenced by the researcher's subjective experiences. Although qualitative research is subjective by nature it is however, still important to allow participants to share their experiences in a way that they will be able to assign meaning to their experiences without any external influence from the researcher.

Another challenge was dealing with the multiple views that were presented by the participants. The participants in the study came from different family and educational backgrounds. This necessitated the researcher to firstly, have an understanding of different family backgrounds and how they impact on the participant's learning experiences at university. It was essential for the researcher to have an understanding of how different family backgrounds contributed to participant's educational aspirations and motivation to undertake and continue with studies at postgraduate level.

The strength of the study is that it was able to contribute to the scarcity of the research on this topic. This was highly advantageous considering that a majority of research on this topic is largely devoted to undergraduate students. The study was able to shed some light on the adjustment level of postgraduate black students at university. It was important to understand the experiences of postgraduate black students and various factors that have a bearing on their learning experiences and academic performance at university.

The study was able to highlight the process of adjusting at university as it impacted on participant's learning experiences and revealed various strategies that enabled students to cope effectively at university. The study highlighted that the process of adjusting to university is often challenging and multifaceted for underprepared postgraduate black students. The result indicated that the level of adjustment is experienced differently amongst students based on their academic readiness. The study revealed that adjusting to university was particularly problematic amongst participants who were first generation university

students. Another factor that influenced the participant's level of adjustment was language of instruction. The study revealed that participants who predominantly studied in their home language at school experienced difficulties performing academically.

The researcher concludes the study with a sense of enlightenment that comes because of the insight that was gained from participant's lived experiences. The participants in the study shared their experiences without any reservation, which allowed the researcher to learn from their experiences and contribute to the body of knowledge on this topic. The process of inquiry presented a variety of challenges, which provided the researcher with an opportunity to learn and grow. This process of growth allowed for a deeper introspection of the phenomenon.

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Appendix A: Inform consent form

The lived experiences of Postgraduate black students: An exploration through the South African transformation lens

Researcher: Palakatsela Romeo

Degree: MA Research Psychology (Research consultation)

Supervisor: Professor. Matshepo Matoane

Department: Tuition and facilitation of learning, University of South Africa

Dear participant,

The study **aims** to explore the lived experiences of postgraduate black students at the University of South Africa. The **objective** of the study is to explore factors that has an

influence on postgraduate black students' learning experience and academic performance, as well as to investigate the nature of such influences. This will be done in order to determine appropriate ways to support postgraduate black students, and to assist them in improving their learning experience and academic performance.

The interviews to be conducted will be limited to an hour and there might also be a need for follow up interviews. As a willing participant, you are free to withdraw from the study at any point. All information provided by you will be treated with confidentiality and will only be used for research purposes. The data that will be reported in my dissertation will not include any personal information which could identify you as a participant in the study. The final report of the study will be made available to you upon request.

Your co-operation will be greatly appreciated.

Signature of participant: --- I certify to have read the consent form and volunteer to participate in the research study.

Signature of researcher: ---

Thank you for your participation in the research study.

Appendix B: Interview guidelines

Background information

Ask participants about their family background?

Ask participants Where were they born? Where did you grow up?

Ask participants with whom did you grow up?

Academic readiness

Ask participants about their schooling backgrounds?

Ask participants whether they felt that their schooling background had sufficiently prepared them to study at university?

Language of instruction

Ask participants about the language of instruction which formed the core of their teaching & learning experience at school?

Ask participants about how using this language contribute towards preparing them for studying at University?

Ask participants about the extent at which language of instruction impacted on learning experience and academic performance at university?

Academic support

Ask participants to share their experiences of entering university?

Ask about the nature of university attended for example; was there a difference between where they studied for their basic degree as opposed to your postgraduate degree?

Ask participants to share their experiences of adjusting at university?

Ask participants about the nature of academic support they received whilst studying at university?

Ask if this was this sufficient?

Ask participants about measures that could have been put in place to help them transit smoothly from school to university environment?

Ask participants about academic support outside the university environment? Ask about any significant role players who have contributed towards their learning experiences and academic performance? Who are these people? What has been the extent of their contribution in their learning experience and academic performance at university?

Motivation to study at University

Ask participants about their understanding of Open Distance Learning and experiences of studying through Open Distance Learning?

Ask participants about their motive for choosing to study at postgraduate level through Unisa?

Ask about challenges that participants encountered whilst studying through Open Distance Learning? How did they cope with these challenges? How did they motivate themselves to deal with these challenges?

Ask participants about measures that need to be put in place to motivate students who are studying through Open Distance Learning?

Ask participants about challenges that they feel uniquely impact on them as postgraduate black student as opposed to other race groups? How do they cope with these challenges?

Appendix C: Ethical clearance letter Unisa Department of Psychology

UNISA
university of south africa
Department of Psychology

Ethical Clearance for M/D students: Research on human participants

The Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at Unisa has evaluated this research proposal for a Higher Degree in Psychology in light of appropriate ethical requirements, with special reference to the requirements of the Code of Conduct for Psychologists of the HPCSA and the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics.

Student Name: R Palakatsela   **Student no.** 34568964

Supervisor: Prof M Matoane   **Affiliation:** Dept. of Tuition and Facilitation of Learning

Title of project:

The lived experiences of Postgraduate black students: An exploration through the South African transformation lens.

The application was found to comply with appropriate ethical standards as required by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology of Unisa.

The application was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology on the understanding that all necessary permission regarding the protection of privacy of the participants and confidentiality of the information as stipulated in the ethics form is to be met to the satisfaction of the supervisor and all permissions that may be required will be obtained.

Signed:

Prof. M Papaikonomou   *Date: 2015/03/05*
[For the Ethics Committee   ]
[Department of Psychology, Unisa]