

MEd in Open and Distance Learning

***TITLE:***

***'Tell someone who cares': the value of intentionally establishing an online presence dedicated to student emotional wellbeing; particularly during times of crisis.***

**A MINI DISSERTATION SUBMITTED BY:**

**Liesl Helene Scheepers**

**Student No: 44530684**

**Master of Education in Open and Distance Learning**

**College of Education**

**University of South Africa**

**Supervisor: Prof G van den Berg**

**JANUARY 2022**

I declare that the above dissertation of limited scope 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.

I further declare that I have submitted this mini dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at UNISA for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

DATE : January 2022

SIGNATURE : 

## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to my late father, Nic Scheepers. You inspired me to discover the root of things, to challenge ideas and to delight in the written word. Many years have passed since our dictionary-games and listening to 'Test the Team' on Springbok radio, but the memory of those times together will always remain. Thank you, Dad – this one is for you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I must begin by acknowledging the unwavering support of my partner, friend and confident, Peter Lowe, who encouraged me to embark on this journey three years ago and to stay the course; even when it meant missing out on family gatherings or spending time with friends. In reference to my wonderfully blended family, thank you for all your support and for so graciously accepting that sometimes “I just couldn’t make it”.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Prof G. Van den Berg: thank you for the time taken to talk me through the challenges I experienced along this journey, and for providing me with such timeous feedback and insightful suggestions. Your support has made all the difference. I look forward to future ventures.

I wish to thank the organisation for granting me permission to engage with the distance students enrolled with their Online Centre and for allowing me to interrogate a role that is central to the organisation’s ODL model. Finally, I feel it is important to acknowledge the support of my colleagues, in particular my Line Manager, Mr David McConnell. Thank you for providing me with the space to work on this study and for all the gestures of encouragement along the way – I hope I do you all proud.

## ABSTRACT

### DISSERTATION OF LIMITED SCOPE

**TITLE: “TELL SOMEONE WHO CARES”: THE VALUE OF INTENTIONALLY ESTABLISHING AN ONLINE PRESENCE DEDICATED TO STUDENT EMOTION-WELLNESS; PARTICULARLY DURING TIMES OF CRISIS.**

Rather than being antithetical to thinking or reasoning, current research would suggest that *emotion* has a critical role to play in the teaching and learning process, especially in the online environment. While a literature review will soon reveal the importance of emotion, either as directly experienced by the *student* or as orchestrated by the online *facilitator* in the creation of a safe and respectful learning environment, it is far more challenging to find any documented research that refers to the importance of a third-party presence dedicated to the emotional wellbeing of students in an online context – particularly in times of crisis such as that experienced during Covid-19. Such a presence exists in the form of a Programme Success Tutor (PST), a role integral to the ODL model of a leading South African private higher tertiary (PHT) organisation.

Using a case study design and an interpretivist paradigm, 34 students – enrolled for distance studies with this PHT provider – shared their experiences of the PST role and the value they placed on having access to this affective support mechanism during the pandemic. Qualitative data was collected using a series of semi-structured and focus group interviews and then analysed using the thematic analysis model of Braun and Clark (2006; 2012).

The findings suggest that while students appreciate the PST presence and the support these individuals provide, they do not make a clear and immediate connection between the role, the support, and their emotional wellbeing. Rather than undermining the importance of the PST as affective support, the findings provide the opportunity to broaden the scope of the role to now also include the forms of generic support valued by the participants in this study.

**Key words:** social presence; emotional wellbeing; affective support; non-academic support; times of crisis; Programme Success Tutor (PST).

Liesl Scheepers: 44530684

**TITEL: “VERTEL VIR IEMAND WAT OMGEE”: DIE WAARDE DAARVAN OM DOELBEWUS 'N AANLYN TEENWOORDIGHEID TE SKEP, TOEGEWY AAN STUDENTE SE EMOSIONELE WELSTAND, VERAL TYDENS KRISISTYE.**

Eerder as om antities teenoor denke of redenering te staan, doen huidige navorsing aan die hand dat *emosie* 'n deurslaggewende rol speel in die onderrig- en leerproses, veral in die aanlynomgewing. Hoewel 'n literaturoorsig spoedig die belangrikheid van emosie sal onthul (óf soos direk deur die *student* ervaar, óf soos deur die aanlyn *fasiliteerder* bewimpel in die skep van 'n veilige en eerbiedige leeromgewing), is dit 'n baie groter uitdaging om enige gedokumenteerde navorsing te vind wat verwys na die belangrikheid van 'n derdepartyteenwoordigheid wat aan die emosionele welstand van studente in 'n aanlynkonteks toegewy is – veral in krisistye, soos ervaar is tydens Covid-19. So 'n teenwoordigheid bestaan in die vorm van 'n sogenaamde programsuksestutor (PST), 'n rol wat integraal tot die ODL-model van 'n toonaangewende Suid-Afrikaanse private hoër tersiêre (PHT)-organisasie is.

Met behulp van 'n gevallestudieontwerp en 'n interpretatiewe paradigma het 34 studente wat vir afstandstudie by hierdie PHT-verskaffer ingeskryf is, hul ervarings gedeel ten opsigte van die PST-rol en die waarde wat hulle tydens die pandemie geheg het aan toegang tot hierdie affektiewe ondersteuningsmeganisme. Kwalitatiewe data is ingesamel met behulp van 'n reeks halfgestruktureerde en fokusgroeponderhoude, waarna dit ontleed is op grond van die tematiese-ontleding-model van Braun en Clark (2006; 2012).

Die resultate suggereer dat hoewel studente die PST-teenwoordigheid en die ondersteuning wat hierdie individue bied op prys stel, hulle nie 'n duidelike en onmiddellike verband tussen die rol, die ondersteuning en hul emosionele welstand waarneem nie. Die bevindinge ondermyn nie die belangrikheid van die PST as affektiewe ondersteuning nie, maar bied eerder die geleentheid om die omvang van die rol uit te brei om nou ook die vorme van generiese ondersteuning in te sluit wat deur hierdie studie se deelnemers na waarde geskat word.

**Sleutelwoorde:** sosiale teenwoordigheid; emosionele welstand; affektiewe ondersteuning, nie-akademiese ondersteuning; krisistye; programsuksestutor (PST).

Liesl Scheepers: 44530684

**ISIHLOKO: “XOXELA UMUNTU OKHATHALELAYO”: UBUMQOKA BOKUQINISEKISA NGENHLOSO UBUKHONA BOKUTAKULA UMFUNDI NGEMPILO ENHLE NGOKWEMIZWA KUYI-INTANETHI, KAKHULUKAZI ESIKHATHINI SEZINKINGA.**

Esikhundleni sokuphikisa ukucabanga noma ukucabanga, ucwaningo lwamanje lungaphakamisa ukuthi *imizwa* inendima ebalulekile okufanele iyidlale enqubweni yokufundisa nokufunda, ikakhulukazi endaweni ye-inthanethi. Nakuba ukubuyekezwa kwezincwadi kuzokwembula maduze ukubaluleka kwemiza, njengoba *umfundi* ebhekana nayo ngokuqondile noma njengoba kuhlelwe *umsizi* we-inthanethi ekudaleni indawo yokufunda ephaphile nehloniphekile, kuyinselele enkulu kakhulu ukuthola noma yiluphi ucwaningo olubhaliwe oluqondiswe kulo, ukubaluleka kokuba khona komuntu wesithathu okunikezelwe enhlalakahleni engokomzwelo yabafundi esimweni esiku-inthanethi - ikakhulukazi ngezikhathi zobunzima obufana naleso esiye sabhekana nabo ngesikhathi se-Covid-19. Ubukhona obunjalo bukhona ngohlobo loMfundisi Wempumelelo Yohlelo (MWY), indima ebalulekile kumodeli ye-ODL yenhlangotho ehamba phambili yaseNingizimu Afrika ezimele yemfundo ephakeme (EYE).

Besebenzisa umklamo wesifundo sendaba kanye nepharadimu yokuhumusha, abafundi abangama-34 – ababhalisele izifundo zebanga nalo mhlinzeki we-EYE – babelane ngolwazi lwabo ngendima ye-MWY kanye nenani abalibeka ekufinyeleleni le ndlela yokweseka ngesikhathi sodlame. Idatha yesimo yaqoqwa kusetshenziswa uchungechunge lwezixoxo zeqembu ezihlelekile nezixilile zase zihlaziywa kusetshenziswa imodeli yokuhlaziya ingqikithi kaBraun noClark (2006; 2012).

Okutholakele kukhombise ukuthi nakuba abafundi bekwazisa ukuba khona kuyi-MWY nokusekelwa yilaba bantu, abawenzi uxhumano olucacile nolusheshayo phakathi kwendima, ukusekelwa kanye nokuphila kahle ngokomzwelo. Esikhundleni sokubukela phansi ukubaluleka kuyi-MWY njengokwesekwa okuthinta inhliziyo, okutholakele kunikeza ithuba lokwandisa ububanzi bendima ukuze manje ihlanganise izinhlobo zosekelo olujwayelekile olwaziswa ababambiqhaza kulolu cwaningo.

**Amagama abalulekile:** ubukhona emphakathini; inhlalakahle yemizwa; ukwesekwa okuthintekayo; ukwesekwa okungezona ezezemfundo; izikhathi ezinzima; loMfundisi Wempumelelo Yohlelo (MWY)

ULiesl Scheepers: 44530684

## LIST OF TABLES

Number	Table Description	Page
1.7.4	Phases of Thematic Analysis: Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012)	29
1.10	Definition of Key Concepts	31
3.4.3.3a	Data Extract with Codes Applied	73
3.4.3.3b	Overarching Themes and Subthemes	78
4.2	General Participant Information	86
4.3	Themes and Subthemes (revisited)	87
4.3.1	Theme 1: PSTs, what are they really there for?	90
4.3.2	Theme 2: Affective Support during times of calm	92
4.3.3	Theme 3: Affective Support during times of crisis	96

## LIST OF FIGURES

Number	Figure Description	Page
1.6.1	Four Research Paradigms	19
1.6.2	Essential Differences between Qualitative and Quantitative Research	20
1.6.3	Five Qualitative Research Strategies (Creswell, 2006).	23
2.2.2	Online Presence and Emotional Wellness	39
2.3	Taylor et al. (1997): Eight Aspects of Educational Policy	41
2.4	The Conceptual Framework of this study	47
2.4.2	Tait's (2000) Three Aspects of Student Support	50
3.3.1.1	Interpretive Paradigm, as it relates to this study	57
3.3.2.2	Four Guiding Questions	61
3.4	Research Methodology	63
3.4.1	Five Types of Non-Probability Sampling	64
3.4.2.1	Three Types of Qualitative Interviews	67
3.4.2.2	Factors to Consider with Focus Groups	68
3.4.3.3a	Early Thematic Map: Phase 3	74
3.4.3.3b	Thematic Map: Phase 4, Stage 1	76
3.4.3.3c	Thematic Map: Phase 4, Stage 2	77
3.6.4	Establishing Confirmability	83
4.4	Summary of Themes 1 to 3	99
5.6	Strengths of Case Study Research (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001)	112
5.7.1	Karp's (2011) Mechanisms of Student Support	115



## LIST OF APPENDICES

<b>Number</b>	<b>Appendix Description</b>	<b>Page</b>
A	Email to Participants	128
B	Letter of Consent	129
C	Reply Slip	133
D	Reminder/Confirmation of Session	134
E	Questions: Semi-Structured/Focus Group Interviews	135
F	Ethics Clearance Certificate (UNISA)	137
G	Permission to Conduct Research	139
H	Impartial Peer Feedback	141
I	Transcript: Semi-Structured Interview Example 1	142
J	Transcript: Semi-Structured Interview Example 2	149
K	Transcript: Focus Group Interview Example	156
L	Language Editing Certificate	171

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>13</b>
1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND .....	13
1.2 RATIONALE.....	14
1.3 THE PROBLEM STATEMENT.....	15
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	16
1.5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES .....	17
1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN .....	17
1.6.1 <i>Research Paradigm</i> .....	18
1.6.2 <i>Research Approach</i> .....	19
1.6.3 <i>Research Strategy</i> .....	22
1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	24
1.7.1 <i>Population</i> .....	24
1.7.2 <i>Sampling</i> .....	24
1.7.3 <i>Data Collection</i> .....	26
1.7.4 <i>Data analysis and interpretation</i> .....	28
1.8 ETHICAL MEASURES.....	29
1.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	30
1.10 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS.....	31
1.11 DIVISION OF CHAPTERS.....	32
1.11.1 <i>Chapter 1: Orientation and Overview of this Study</i> .....	32
1.11.2 <i>Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review</i> .....	33
1.11.3 <i>Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology</i> .....	33
1.11.4 <i>Chapter 4: Findings and Discussions</i> .....	33
1.11.5 <i>Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations</i> .....	34
1.12 CONCLUSION .....	34
<b>CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>35</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION .....	35
2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	35
2.2.1 <i>The Importance of a Theoretical Framework in Research</i> .....	35
2.2.2 <i>Establishing a Theoretical Framework Through a Review of the Literature</i> .....	37
2.3 EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE.....	40
2.3.1 <i>Policy and Student Support</i> .....	42
2.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	46
2.4.1 <i>The Role of Emotion in an Online Learning Environment</i> .....	47
2.4.2 <i>Providing Students with Emotional Support in an Online Learning Community</i> .....	49
2.4.3 <i>Non-Academic Student Support</i> .....	51
2.4.4 <i>Non-Academic Support in Times of Crisis</i> .....	52
2.5 CONCLUSION .....	52
<b>CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>54</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION .....	54

3.2 RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY .....	54
3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN .....	56
3.3.1 Research Paradigm .....	56
3.3.2 Research Approach .....	59
3.3.3 Research Strategy .....	61
3.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	62
3.4.1 Population and Sampling .....	63
3.4.2 Data Collection .....	66
3.4.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation .....	70
3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	79
3.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS .....	80
3.6.1 Credibility (truth) .....	81
3.6.2 Transferability (applicability) .....	82
3.6.3 Dependability (consistency) .....	82
3.6.4 Confirmability (neutrality) .....	82
3.7 CONCLUSION .....	83
<b>CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>85</b>
4.1 INTRODUCTION .....	85
4.2 GENERAL PARTICIPANT INFORMATION .....	85
4.3 REPORTING ON THE IDENTIFIED THEMES AND SUBTHEMES.....	86
4.3.1 Theme 1: PSTs, what are they really there for?.....	87
4.3.2 Theme 2: Affective support during times of calm .....	91
4.3.3 Theme 3: Affective support during times of crisis .....	94
4.4 SUMMARY OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS .....	98
4.5 CONCLUSION .....	102
<b>CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>103</b>
5.1 INTRODUCTION .....	103
5.2 A SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW .....	103
5.3 A SUMMARY OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY .....	104
5.4 SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	106
5.5 CONCLUSIONS.....	108
5.5.1 What commonalities (and differences) exist in terms of distance students’ understanding of the PST role? .....	108
5.5.2 What value, if any, do distance students place on having access to a PST, and the emotional support they provide, during the course of the academic year .....	109
5.5.3 What is the impact of a crisis – as that experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic – on the perceived value of having access to PST support?.....	109
5.5.4 What value is there in intentionally establishing a role that is dedicated to the emotional wellbeing of students in an ODL context, particularly during times of crisis? .....	110
5.6 LIMITATIONS .....	111
5.6.1 There is a Great Deal of Data to Analyse .....	112
5.6.2 The Complexity Examined is Difficult to Represent Simply .....	112

5.6.3 Case Studies are not Generalisable in the Conventional Sense .....	113
5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS.....	113
5.7.1 PST as a Generic Support Role.....	114
5.8 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH .....	118
5.9 CONCLUSION .....	119
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>121</b>

## CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Rather than being antithetical to thinking or reasoning, current research would suggest that *emotion* has a critical role to play in the teaching and learning process – especially in the online environment (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). While a literature review may soon reveal the potential impact of emotion, either as directly experienced by the *student* (O'Regan, 2003; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; Värlander, 2008), or as orchestrated by the online *facilitator* (Barbalet, 2002; Brookfield, 2006; Eloff, O'Neil & Kanengoni, 2021; Lehman, 2006) in creating a safe and respectful learning environment, it is far more challenging to find anything that speaks to an emotional presence that is intentionally established by a *third party*, someone external to the student-teacher or peer-to-peer relationship. What also remains elusive is any research that investigates the need for such a third-party presence during times of crisis, such as that brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The question then remains: What value (if any) does a role dedicated to the provision of *emotional* support bring to the promotion of students' sense of wellbeing in the Online Distance Learning (ODL) context?

In 2016, a leading South African private higher tertiary (PHT) institution launched its ODL model. Central to the development of this model was the role of the Programme Success Tutor (PST). The PST is a member of the organisation's academic team, specifically tasked with providing students with emotional support for the duration of their learning journey. Each PST was allocated approximately 100 students from the initial cohort<sup>1</sup>, thereby limiting the numbers to ensure that the PST had the necessary capacity and resources to provide the support required by the role. Rather than providing academic or subject-matter expertise, the role of the PST was created to intentionally establish an emotionally supportive presence with their allocated group for the full duration of the group's chosen programme of study. The PST role focuses on relationship building and includes a personalised introduction during the first two weeks of each semester and, thereafter, the facilitation of regular contact during the

---

<sup>1</sup> As the student numbers increased over the years, additional PSTs were contracted to provide the necessary support.

course of each semester (via email, WhatsApp, etc.). The role also mandates the monitoring of student engagement via the organisation's Learning Management System (LMS) and following up on potentially at-risk students. In 2020, as the PST role entered its fifth iteration, the world was introduced to the novel coronavirus, which causes Covid-19. In 2021, there was an opportunity to review the PST role and to interrogate the impact of same on the student learning journey during the pandemic. Through engaging with the organisation's online students, the aim was to determine what bearing, if any, the PST role had had on the students' academic journey and their ability to remain focused and engaged, both prior to and during the Covid-19 lockdown experienced in South Africa.

## **1.2 RATIONALE**

In March 2020, the South African government imposed a lockdown on the country in a bid to minimise the impact of the Covid-19 virus. The resulting government policies, as well as the alarming speed with which the virus continued to spread, inevitably impacted the emotional wellbeing of every student, including those who had elected to study in an online mode prior to the lockdown restrictions. While the majority of the organisation's distance students reside within South Africa, a small number live overseas in countries that include the United Arab Emirates, the United States of America, Canada, China and Australia. As lockdown was implemented, the PST team were tasked to immediately increase their level of contact and support by making personal calls to every student under their care within the first few weeks – including those who lived beyond the country's borders. This initial contact was then followed up with regular online and mobile (or telephonic) engagement to monitor each student's particular context as well as to offer, if required, any support the PST role was mandated to provide.

As Daniels and Stupnisky (2012:224) assert, research into emotion and the role it plays in online learning has made it “more important than ever to consider the *source* of the emotion in addition to the emotion itself” (italics added). Understanding the importance of the emotional support provided by the PST team, over the last five years, and during the extraordinary times experienced during the pandemic, is essential – not only because of the organisation's responsibility to provide for the

wellbeing of its students, but also to garner greater insight into the perceived value of the PST role as a third-party contributor of emotional support in an ODL context.

### 1.3 THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the last decade, there has been increased interest in *emotion* and the role it plays in the online learning environment (Brookfield, 2006; Eloff, O'Neil & Kanengoni, 2021; Lehman, 2006; Lipman, 2003). While some have focused on the *negative* emotions experienced by distance students, such as stress (O'Regan, 2013; Weiss, 2000), anxiety (Christie et al., 2007, cited in Bharuthram, 2018), shame and anger (Pekrun & Stephens, 2011; You & Kang, 2014) or even alienation (Wegerif, 1998; Zembylas, 2008), others have investigated the impact of *positive* emotions, such as experiencing a "sense of achievement" (Pekrun & Stephens, 2011), stability and motivation (O'Regan, 2013; Williams, 2017), and even joy (Zembylas, 2008). Emotion has also been explored as it pertains to *social presence*, either as facilitated by the online lecturer (Bharuthram, 2018; Lehman, 2006; Weiss, 2000) or by the sense of *community* that students speak of having experienced through peer-to-peer engagement in the online environment (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Majeski, Stovel & Valais, 2018). What has yet to be explored in any real detail, however, is the intentional nurturing of online students' sense of emotional wellbeing via a role whose primary focus is to understand the individual student context in order to provide students with an emotional support mechanism specifically aimed at helping them cope with the demands of ODL – not only during the day-to-day demands of a 'normal'<sup>2</sup> academic year, but also in times of crisis.

Emotion is central to the human condition and, therefore, impossible to separate from the learning experience (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; LeDoux, 1996; Plutchik, 2003; Stets & Turner, 2006; Wosnitza & Volet, 2005; Zembylas, 2008). Electing to study online brings with it a number of challenges for students, each eliciting some form of emotional response, whether due to the pressures of having to familiarise themselves with the workings of an LMS (Näykki et al., 2019) or mastering how to navigate the various platforms and technologies through which content will be

---

<sup>2</sup> In this context, the word 'normal' is used to designate a time prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

accessed, facilitated, and assessed (Stephan, Markus & Gläser-Zikuda, 2019; Zembylas, 2008). Students also have to gain an understanding of the 'rules of engagement' so particular to this mode of instruction: they need to adjust to online collaboration and feedback and acquire the skills necessary to effectively engage with instructors and peers they might never meet in person (Hughes, Ventura & Dando, 2007; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2010).

Makhanya, Mays and Ryan (2013) argue that simply having the opportunity to study online is meaningless unless there is at least a reasonable chance of *success*, and achieving that success cannot be left to chance. If one agrees with Plutchik (2003) and Zembylas (2008) that emotion and the learning experience cannot be separated, then it would stand to reason that emotion and the 'success', to which Makhanya et al. (2013) refer, are closely related. Research would suggest that understanding the emotional impact on students studying online, as well as the *source* of that emotion, warrants further investigation (Daniels & Stupnisky, 2012; Lehman, 2006; Pekrun & Stephens 2011; You & Kang, 2014). I believe that there is value in understanding the impact of providing emotional support to students in an ODL context, the aim of which is to encourage the continued online engagement and potential success of those students. Providing this emotional support and fostering a sense of wellbeing in the ODL context are particularly important, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The aim of this exploratory mini dissertation is to interrogate the PST role as it exists in the ODL model of the selected PHT institution. The PST role is one dedicated to students' sense of emotional wellbeing (rather than providing them with academic support or subject matter expertise) across an entire programme of study.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Guided by the research problem as set out above, the focus of this qualitative study was to answer the following main question:

***What value is there in intentionally establishing a role that is dedicated to the emotional wellbeing of students in an ODL context, particularly during times of crisis?***



From this question, the following three sub-questions arose:

1. What commonalities (and differences) exist in terms of distance students' understanding of the PST role?
2. What value, if any, do distance students place on having access to a PST, and the emotional support they provide, during the course of a normal<sup>3</sup> academic year?
3. What is the impact of a crisis – as that experienced during the Covid19 pandemic – on the perceived value of having access to PST support?

### **1.5 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

Based on the main question, the aim of this mini dissertation is to determine the value of intentionally establishing a role dedicated to the emotional support of students in an online context, particularly during times of crisis.

Following from the aim, the objectives are to

1. articulate students' understanding of the PST role;
2. share anecdotal evidence of students' engagement(s) with their respective PSTs in order to gauge what value they place (or have placed) on having access to a PST during the course of their studies;
3. understand the perceived value of PST support during times of crisis; and
4. determine whether there is a need to retain the PST role as it is currently offered or to amend the role to better meet the needs of ODL students.

Data gathered from the individual semi-structured interviews (SSIs) and focus group sessions were synthesised to identify any patterns or trends relating to the experiences that students shared, specifically as they pertain to the PST role and the students' sense of emotional wellbeing, or wellness, in the ODL context.

### **1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN**

Research design is a “framework for action” (Durrheim, 2006:34), which serves to connect the research questions to the execution, and subsequent implementation of,

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Normal' is a relative term and is used in this context merely to designate a time prior to the global pandemic.

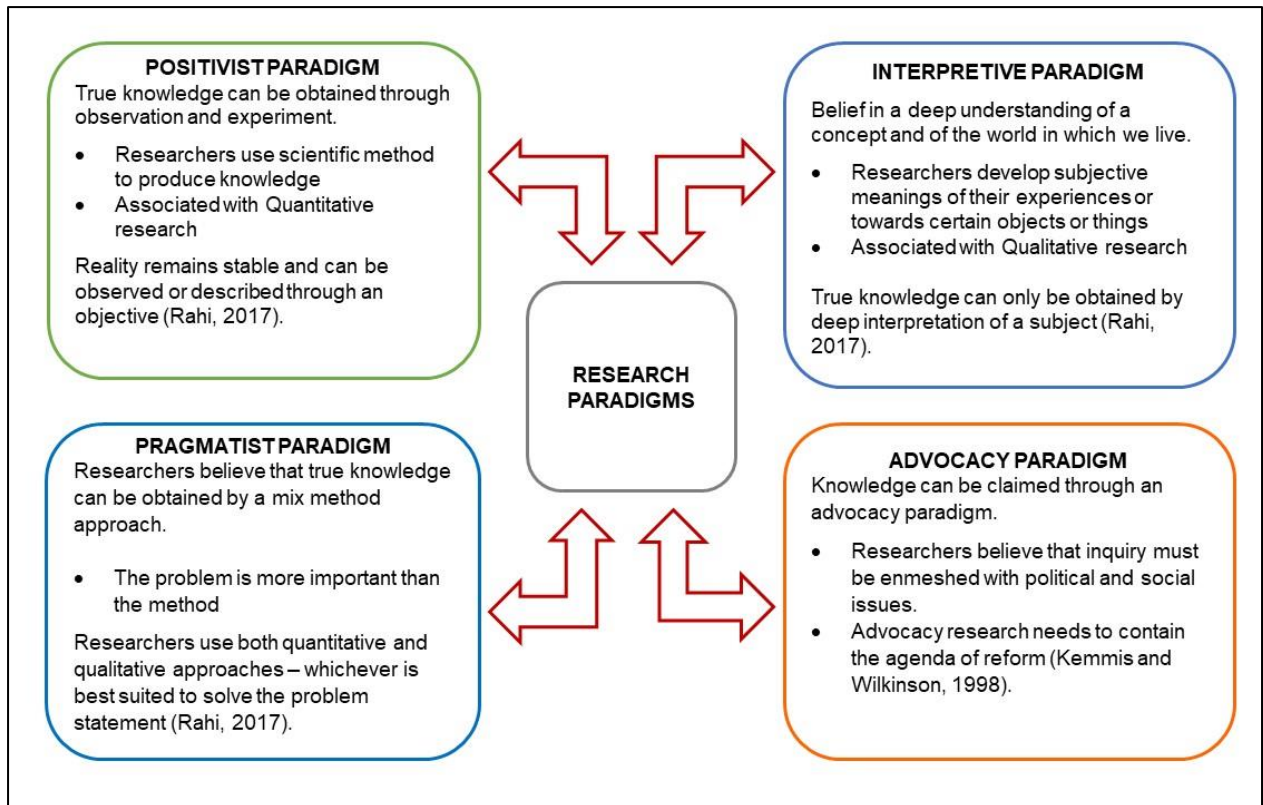
the research. According to Jahoda, Deutch and Cook (1965, cited in Durrheim, 2006:34), a “research design is the arrangement of conditions for the collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy and procedure”.

The framework for the research this mini dissertation reports on is addressed under the following headings:

- Research paradigm;
- Research approach; and
- Research strategy.

### **1.6.1 Research Paradigm**

According to Creswell (2003), the term ‘paradigm’ is used to identify a set of shared beliefs about how one should view the world and, therefore, how one should go about collecting information and conducting research. Rehman and Alharthi (2006:51) explain the concept of ‘paradigm’ as comprising “a basic belief system that underpins the way in which a researcher understands the reality of the world around them, and guides the way in which they study it”. There are four main research paradigms that are widely used: Positivism, Interpretivism Advocacy and Pragmatism (*ibid*). These are summarised in the figure below.



**Fig. 1.6.1 Four Research Paradigms.**

The PST role serves as the phenomenon that is explored in this study. A deeper understanding of this role and the impact of the emotional support the PST provides is achieved through the interpretation of the feedback provided by the students to whom such a support mechanism has been made available. This study, therefore, relies on “socially constructed multiple realities”, where “truth and reality are created” rather than known (Rehman & Alharthi, 2006:51). Because the goal of this research “is to understand the interpretations of individuals about the [PST] phenomena” (Grix, 2004:83), an *interpretivist* approach has been adopted. The justification for this choice is further explained in chapter 3 (section: 3.3.1).

### **1.6.2 Research Approach**

While quantitative and qualitative research approaches both hold important positions in the field of research, they are distinctly different in their approach (Arghode, 2012). The main differences between these two approaches are illustrated in the figure below.

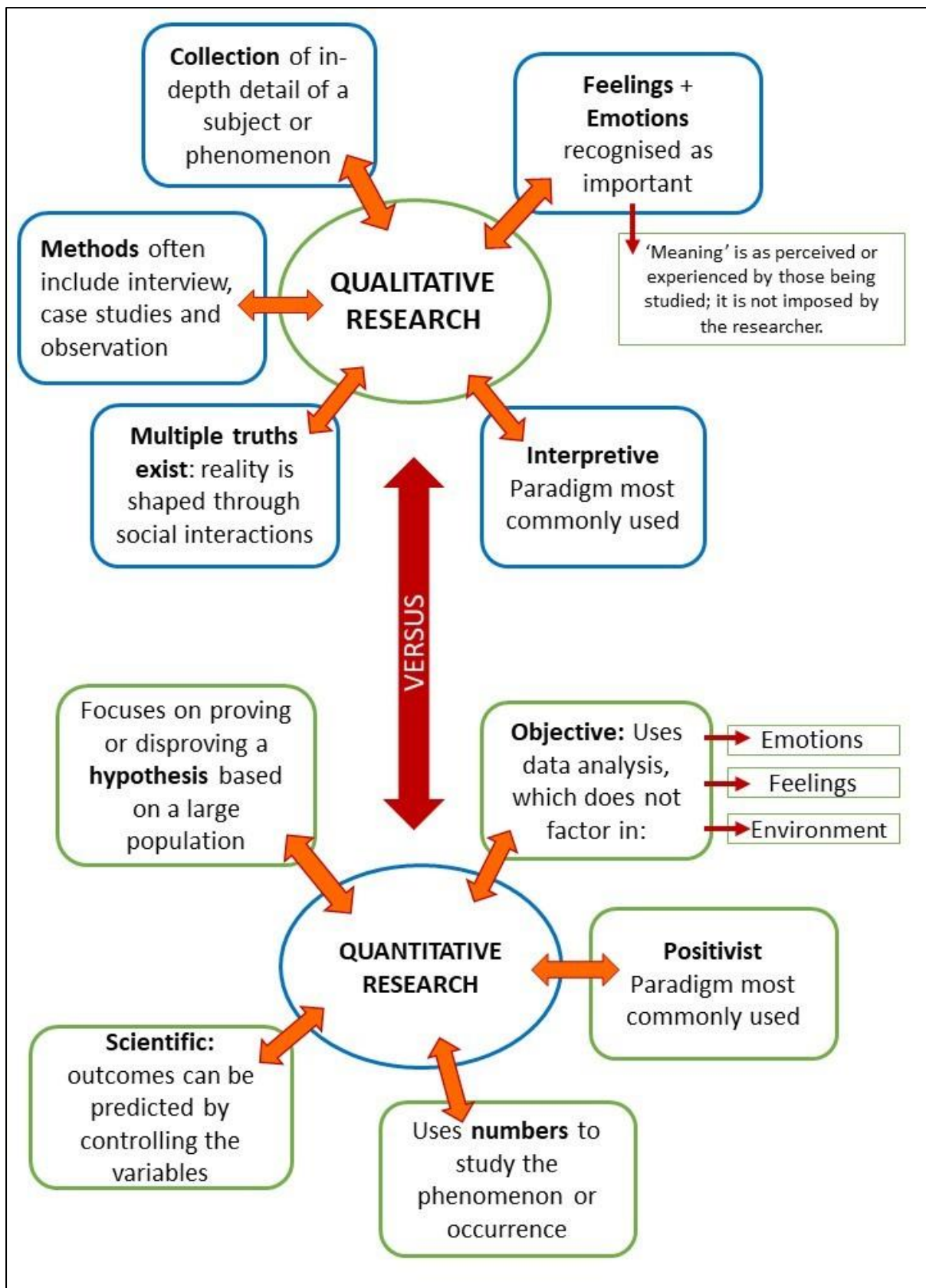


Fig. 1.6.2 Essential differences between qualitative and quantitative research (Arghode, 2012).

Quantitative research works on the premises that “reality can be deciphered through observation” (Arghode, 2012:161) and that research outcomes can be predicted by “controlling the research variables”. Quantitative research makes use of scientific methods and researchers remain external to, or detached from, the research outcomes (*ibid*). Qualitative research adopts a different approach. It has as underlying assumption that “reality cannot be comprehended as it is constantly shaped through social interactions” (Arghode, 2012:162), and, as a result, multiple truths exist. Qualitative researchers “seek to explain the construction of knowledge and not just whether the knowledge is constructed or not” (*ibid*). When conducting qualitative research, the researcher is more intimately involved, bringing with them their subjective experiences and interpretations. Researchers also have the option of adopting a mixed method approach.

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007:96), a mixed method approach sees a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Adopting this approach for the collection of empirical data involves the use of both “numerical and verbal data in order to gather rounded, reliable data”. Most often, a survey is used to gain an overall view, while individual interviews or focus groups may be used to obtain a more “fine-grained analysis” (*Ibid*:96).

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach was adopted. This approach was selected because it is best suited to explore a phenomenon in which feelings and emotions play a pivotal role. This study was prompted by an interest in the impact and efficacy of a non-academic support mechanism whose sole function it is to provide online students with emotional support. The PST role is one such mechanism that exists within a specific ODL model as offered by a leading PHT organisation based in South Africa. By engaging with students enrolled with this institution, I was able to gain insights into the perceived value of the PST and what impact, if any, there was in having access to this dedicated emotional support system, especially during the 2020 pandemic.

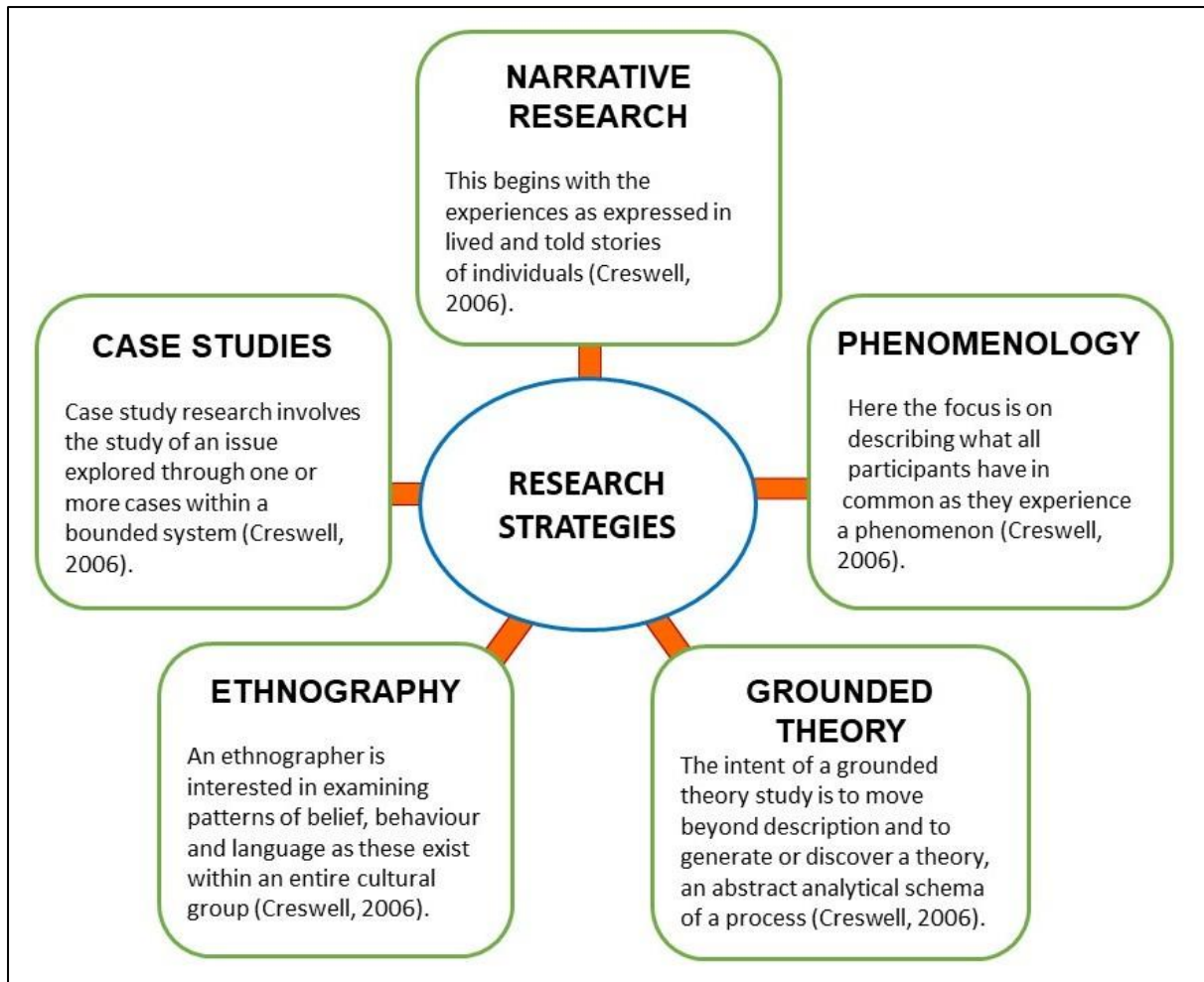
According to Patton (2001, cited in Golafshani, 2003:600), qualitative research “seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings... where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest”. Instead, the researcher

pursues findings from real-world settings as they naturally unfold (*ibid*). Reid-Searl and Happell (2012, cited in Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019:np) suggest that “qualitative exploratory design allows the researcher to explore a topic with limited coverage within the literature and allows the participants of the study to contribute to the development of new knowledge in that area”. A review of the literature has highlighted that, although there is growing recognition of the importance of student emotional wellbeing in an ODL context, very little is written on either the intentional inclusion of a role specifically dedicated to the emotional support of online students or the impact thereof should such a role exist (Karp, 2011; O’Regan, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Shea, 2006; Zembylas, Theodorou & Pavlakis, 2008). This study focuses on exactly such a role, that of the PST, and aims to “uncover the full nature of [this] little-understood phenomenon” (Polit & Beck, 2012, cited in Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019:np). This study is, therefore, also exploratory in nature.

Holloway and Wheeler (2010, cited in Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019:np) posit that the “description of... phenomena provides a detailed account of its significance and generates a picture of the world from the perspective of the participants”. A qualitative descriptive approach is one which requires the researcher not only to document and describe the phenomenon, but also to analyse and interpret the data (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019:np). This study, which relies on the experiences and perspectives of the participants, also included a descriptive element.

### **1.6.3 Research Strategy**

According to Creswell (2006), a research strategy is simply a plan of how you aim to achieve your research goal. There are five possible qualitative research strategies from which researchers can select: (i) narrative research, (ii) phenomenology, (iii) grounded theory, (iv) ethnography, and (v) case studies (*ibid*). Each of these is briefly explained in the figure below. The research strategy for this study is addressed in more detail in chapter 3 (section: 3.3.3).



**Fig. 1.6.3 Five Qualitative Research Strategies (Creswell, 2006).**

Investigating the importance of providing targeted emotional support for distance students – in particular as it is facilitated by the PST role within the ODL model of a South African PHT institution – lies at the core of this study. As the PST role, and the model within which it exists, is an “individual representative of a group” or a phenomenon bounded by space, time and a specific context (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017:15), a case study strategy was the most suitable. Because I was interested in the process, meaning and understanding that would be gained through engaging with distance students to whom a PST had been allocated, the approach I took is socially constructed and descriptive in nature (Creswell, 1994). I will now address the research methodology.

## **1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

According to Myers (2009, cited in Sönmez, 2013:301), while research design is the *plan* one puts in place to answer a research question, “the research method is a *strategy* of enquiry, which moves from the underlying assumptions to research design and data collection” (emphasis added). The research methodology for this mini dissertation is discussed under the following four headings:

- Population;
- Sampling;
- Data collection; and
- Data analysis and interpretation.

### **1.7.1 Population**

The population of a study is the group of people a researcher is most interested in (DeCarlo, 2018); the population tends to make up the ‘who’ that a researcher wants to be able to say something about at the end of their study (*ibid*). The population for this study comprised ODL students who were registered with the PHT institution between 2019 and 2021, and to whom a PST was allocated for the duration of their studies. The total population numbered 1200 students.

### **1.7.2 Sampling**

It is considered typical in qualitative research to make sampling choices that enable a “deep understanding” of whatever the phenomenon at the focal point of the study is (DeCarlo, 2018). Nonprobability sampling is most commonly used as it offers “in-depth, idiographic understanding rather than more general, nomothetic understanding” (*ibid*).

For the purpose of this study, two forms of non-probability sampling were used: (i) purposive and (ii) quota.

#### **1.7.2.1 Purposive Sampling**

A purposive sample involves the selection of participants who display or embody the specific characteristics that the researcher wishes to examine. Since its inception, the PST role has been a key component of the ODL model at the centre of this case study.



Every student who registers for an online programme with the organisation is allocated a PST for the full duration of their studies. In March 2020, the support provided by the PST team was intensified to recognise and address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' emotional wellbeing. Purposive sampling allowed me to focus this study on the impact of the PST role on the student journey during the pandemic. Students who had completed their qualification one year prior were, however, also included. The rationale for this inclusion was to gain insights from those students whose learning journey was not directly impacted by the crisis of the pandemic. These students comprised the quota sample.

### **1.7.2.2 Quota**

Quota sampling takes nonprobability sampling one step further and is used to identify subgroups: groups that are still central to the study, but who will potentially display some form of *variation* from the larger purposive sample (DeCarlo, 2018). As noted, the PST role was amended in the wake of Covid-19, the impact of which would not have been experienced by students who had completed their studies in 2019. These students would be able to provide feedback on their experience of the PST role under 'normal'<sup>4</sup> circumstances, therefore making up an important subgroup of the study.

A total of 34 students was selected to participate in the research that this mini dissertation reports on: 30 made up the purposive sample; and four made up the quota sample. The 30 participants in the purposive sample were selected using the following three criteria:

- Their willingness to participate in the study;
- Their availability to participate in the study; and
- Being a registered ODL student with the PHT institution during 2020/2021.

The four students in the quota sample were selected against the same criteria, with the exception that they had completed their qualification a year prior to the advent of the pandemic.

---

<sup>4</sup> Once again, 'normal' is simply used to designate a time that preceded the Covid-19 pandemic.

The selection of participants is discussed in more detail in chapter 3 (section: 3.4.1).

### **1.7.3 Data Collection**

According to Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick (2008), there are a variety of data collection methods available to qualitative researchers. These include observations, visual or textual analysis, and interviews – whether group or individual. The most common methods, however, are interviews (*ibid*).

There are three types of interviews that can be used: (i) structured, (ii) unstructured and (iii) semi-structured.

- Structured interviews are “essentially, verbally administered questionnaires, in which a list of predetermined questions are asked, with little or no variation and with no scope for follow-up questions to responses that warrant further elaboration” (Gill et al., 2008:291).
- Unstructured interviews “do not reflect any preconceived theories or ideas and are performed with little or no organisation” (*ibid*:291). Unstructured interviews can be very time consuming and are perhaps most effective when very little is known or understood about a subject and the researcher has no option but to begin with an open question and allow the conversation to unfold (*ibid*).
- Semi-structured interviews (SSI) consist of several predetermined questions that help to “define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail” (Gill et al., 2008:291).

The flexibility of the SSI allows for the discovery of, or elaboration on, information that is important to participants but that the interviewer may not have initially considered. It is for this reason that SSIs were selected for this study.

Focus groups, according to Gill et al. (2008:292), share a number of the same attributes as interviews; however, rather than simply collecting “similar data from many participants at once”, the engagement that takes place within a focus group can be “guided, monitored and recorded” by the researcher. Focus groups were also selected

as a data collection method because of their ability to generate information on “collective views, and the meanings that lie behind those views” (*ibid*:292).

As noted, a total of 34 students was involved in the research this mini dissertation reports on. Twenty-two (22) participated in five focus groups and 12 took part in semi-structured interviews. Each of these methods, and the reason for their selection, will now be addressed in more detail. To note, triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking will be addressed in chapter 3 (section: 3.5.1).

### **1.7.3.1 Individual Semi-Structured Interviews**

According to Adams (2015:493), SSIs are conducted “conversationally with one respondent at a time”. The interviewer “employs a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions” (*ibid*), and the dialogue is allowed to “meander around the topics on the agenda”. Adams (2015:493) qualifies SSIs as being “relaxed and engaging” and lasting a maximum of one hour, depending on the number of questions the researcher seeks to have answered and in order to “minimize fatigue for both interviewer and respondent” (*ibid*). Using SSIs allowed for specific questions regarding the PST role to be addressed, while also providing students with the opportunity to share their personal insights and perceived value of the PST role as they experienced it as an online student.

For this study, students were contacted via Microsoft Teams, and each interview was limited to a maximum of 40 minutes. Sessions were recorded with the permission of each interviewee. In total, twelve SSIs were conducted. The justification for the use of this data collection method is covered in more detail in chapter 3 (section: 3.4.2.1).

### **1.7.3.2 Focus Group Interviews**

According to Krueger and Casey (2001:5), focus groups are planned discussions designed to elicit group interaction and “obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment”. In keeping with the suggestion of Agar and MacDonald (1995), participants in each focus group did not necessarily know each other. As participants were online students, this was almost inevitable; however, two of the focus groups were intentionally comprised of students who were under the care of the same PST, while the remaining three groups comprised of

students where this was not necessarily the case. Grouping students by PST allowed me to establish what Morgan (1997:36) refers to as a “homogeneity [of] background” although not necessarily a “homogeneity [of] attitudes”. Understanding how different students experienced the same PST provided important insights into how different people respond to the same levels or forms of emotional support provided by the PST. The expectation was that having the same PST in common would serve as a unifying starting point for conversation, while still leaving room for participants to share insights that were unique to their own experiences and context.

While Morgan (1997) suggests that the ideal size of a focus group should be between six and ten, others place the number between three and twelve (Adler & Clark, 2008). Based on the number of participants available for this study (34), focus groups ranged from four to six, as supported by the ideas of DeCarlo (2018). Five focus groups were hosted on Microsoft Teams. These sessions were limited to one hour each and were recorded with the permission of the participants. The justification for the use of this method is covered in more detail in chapter 3 (section: 3.4.2.2).

#### **1.7.4 Data analysis and interpretation**

According to Walsh (2003:71), the “goal of qualitative data analysis is to move from summarizing the data to identifying related themes and patterns, to discovering relationships among the themes and patterns, and to developing explanations for these relationships”. As such, the analysis of qualitative data is often *inductive* in nature (*ibid*).

Data analysis and interpretation were conducted using the six-phase thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) as set out in the table below, the detail of which will be provided in chapter 3 (section: 3.4.3.3).

PHASE	DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS
Familiarising yourself with the data	Transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, and noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systemic way across the entire data set. Collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, and gathering all relevant data to each potential theme.
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2). Generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine each theme and the overall story the analysis tells.
Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of compelling extracts. Relating back to the research questions and literature review. Producing a scholarly report.

**Table 1.7.4 Phases of Thematic Analysis: Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012).**

## 1.8 ETHICAL MEASURES

Terrell (2016:89) emphasises the importance of ethical considerations when conducting research that involves human participants. He refers in particular to three overarching principles that were mandated by *The Belmont Report* of 1979:

1. Beneficence refers to the importance of ensuring the wellbeing of the participants in the study. This includes having their decisions respected and protecting them from possible harm (Terrell, 2016).
2. Respect for persons requires participants to be treated as individuals who are capable of making their own decisions with regards to their personal wellbeing. Any participants in the study who are not capable of such autonomy must be protected and potentially excluded (*ibid*).
3. Justice speaks to the need for all participants in a study to receive all and any benefits to which they may be entitled, “with no burdens imposed unduly” (*ibid*:89).

*The Belmont Report* of 1979 also places particular emphasis on the need for the following:

1. Informed consent: This requires that participants are made aware of the purpose of the study and their rights as participants. Once this is done, participants must

provide “written acknowledgement of and their agreement to participate” (Terrell, 2016:89).

2. Assessment of risks and benefits: The researcher is responsible for thoroughly investigating the “nature and scope of risks and benefits” inherent in the study (*ibid*:89). Participants can then make an informed decision regarding their participation in the study.
3. Selection of subjects: Participants must be selected using a fair set of procedures and criteria. Nobody should be intentionally included or excluded “for reasons of risk or reward” (*ibid*:89).

Each of the three principles, that is, (i) beneficence, (ii) respect for persons, and (iii) justice, is covered in more detail in chapter 3 (section: 3.5). It is important to note that ethics clearance for this study was obtained from the College of Education at UNISA, and that permission from the PHT institution at which this research was conducted was also obtained. Issues of informed consent, assessment of risks and benefits, and the selection of subjects are addressed in chapter 3.

## **1.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Quantitative research is guided by “clearly established concepts and procedures”, allowing the researcher to establish objectivity (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Rubin & Babbie, 2005, cited in Lietz, Langer & Furman, 2006:442). Quantitative research design, therefore, provides clear guidelines and strategies for conducting research and establishing concepts such as reliability and validity (*ibid*). Qualitative research, however, is not guided by these same principles and relies instead on the co-construction of meanings. Guillemin and Gillam (2004:274, cited in Lietz et al., 2006:442) explain the co-construction of meaning as “an active process that requires scrutiny, reflection, and interrogation of the data, the researcher, the participants, and the context that they inhabit”. This does not mean, however, that reactivity and bias should be left unchecked when conducting qualitative research. As Lietz et al. (2006) emphasise, the contrary is true, and every effort should be made to ensure that the meanings of the participants are always given precedence over those of the researcher.

Rigour, or *trustworthiness* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in qualitative research does not need to be achieved using an “inflexible set of standards and procedures” (Gambrill, 1995, cited in Lietz et al., 2006:443); instead, it can be achieved by adopting strategies that will increase the reader’s confidence that the findings that are presented “represent the meanings presented by the participants” in the study (*ibid*:443).

Gasson (2004:95, cited in Harrow, 2005:252) identifies four factors that, when met, will realise this requirement of *trustworthiness*:

1. Credibility refers to the idea of internal consistency, where the core issue is “how we ensure rigor in the research process and how we communicate to others that we have done so” (*ibid*).
2. Transferability refers to the extent to which the reader is able to generalise the findings of a study to their own context and addresses the core issue of “how far a researcher may make claims for a general application of their theory” (*ibid*).
3. Dependability deals with the core issue that “the way in which a study is conducted should be consistent across time, researchers, and analysis techniques” (*ibid*).
4. Confirmability relies on the researcher ensuring their “neutrality in the study” and explaining how the results are reflective “of the participants with no outside influence” (Terrell, 2016:174).

Each of these factors is addressed in more detail in chapter 3 (section: 3.6).

## 1.10 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

The definitions in the table below are provided to ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout this mini dissertation. I have developed all definitions not accompanied by a citation.

Key term	Definition
Achievement emotions	According to Pekrun and Stephens (2006), these are the emotions directly attached to a student’s achievement and can be either positive (as in the satisfaction or sense of excitement experienced when a student masters a concept or does well in an assessment) or negative (as in the anxiety or shame associated with having failed or underachieved in some way).

Affective support	This pertains to support that is of a non-academic nature and specifically focuses on a student's sense of emotional wellbeing (Karp, 2011).
Covid-19	According to the World Health Organisation (2020), "The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus. This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019".
Emotional wellness/wellbeing	This is "the awareness of feelings and their expression in a healthy manner with stability of mood, sense of self, positive attitude toward others, and the ability to cope with stress" (Rehman, Hussain, Khan & Katpar, 2015:16).
Non-academic support	This is "distinct from academic (support) in that it addresses different skills and knowledge and encourages student success via different processes" (Karp, 2011:2).
Normal (academic year)	The word 'normal' is simply used to designate a time prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.
Programme Success Tutor (PST)	An individual tasked with the provision of affective support and relationship building in an online context.
Social presence	This refers to the degree to which a learner feels personally connected with other students and the instructor in an online learning community (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012).

**Table 1.10 Definition of key concepts.**

## **1.11 DIVISION OF CHAPTERS**

This mini dissertation comprises five chapters, as follows:

1. Orientation and Overview of this Study
2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
3. Research Design and Methodology
4. Findings and Discussion
5. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **1.11.1 Chapter 1: Orientation and Overview of this Study**

In this initial chapter, the introduction, background, and rationale for the study are addressed. These provide the context of and motivating factors for undertaking this explorative study. In so doing, the problem statement that was identified and the resultant research questions that were addressed during the data collection and analysis phase of this study are presented. The aims and objectives of the study are founded on the research questions and serve to guide the research design and methodology, both of which are briefly outlined in this opening chapter and further



elaborated upon in chapter 3. The present chapter concludes with a clarification of key concepts and the division of chapters as they appear in this study.

### **1.11.2 Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

This chapter begins with one of the most important aspects of the research process: the theoretical framework, which provides structure and support for the rationale on which the study is based. A review of the literature reveals the growing recognition of the importance of emotion and the affective nature of social presence within online learning communities, as well as the role that emotion plays in ensuring a student's sense of connectedness and wellbeing in an ODL context. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000), and the inherent constructs of social presence and emotional wellbeing, serve as the foundation for this study. A review of the literature also identifies important gaps – specifically pertaining to the facilitation of emotional support for online students, not only during normal day-to-day engagement, but also during times of crisis. The chapter goes on to address the role of policy as a plan of action that drives and informs organisational practice by addressing four of the policies drafted by the PHT institution whose ODL model serves as the case study for this study. The chapter concludes with the conceptual framework and the mechanisms of non-academic support as these pertain to the role of a PST.

### **1.11.3 Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

In this chapter, the context and rationale for this study are again established before addressing in greater detail the research design, research paradigm, research approach, and research type. The research methodology, which includes identifying the population, sampling, and instruments for data collection, is then explained, followed by the thematic analysis method that was used for the analysis and interpretation of the data. The chapter concludes by addressing ethical measures that were implemented, as well the notion of *trustworthiness* as it pertains to this qualitative study.

### **1.11.4 Chapter 4: Findings and Discussions**

In this chapter, each of the three themes that were identified during the thematic analysis process are addressed. Theme 1: PSTs, what are they really there for? Reveals three distinctly different views of the PST role as experienced by the

participants. Theme 2: Affective care during times of calm, addresses the importance students place on affective care during a normal<sup>5</sup> academic year. Theme 3: Affective care during times of crisis, highlights the value students place on the affective interventions offered by the PST role during a time of crisis, such as that experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Interpretations of the dataset are supported using verbatim quotes taken from the SSIs and focus group sessions. Results are then summarised and discussed at the conclusion of the chapter.

### **1.11.5 Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations**

The final chapter of this mini dissertation begins with a summary of the literature review that was conducted in chapter 2. This is followed by an overview of the empirical qualitative study, and a synthesis of the findings derived from an analysis of the dataset. Each of the research questions is addressed in detail before outlining the limitations of this study. The chapter then concludes with proposed suggestions for further research.

## **1.12 CONCLUSION**

In this opening chapter, the background and rationale for this study were established, thereby providing the foundation upon which the problem statement and research questions were then based. The research design was then interrogated, and it was determined that an interpretivist paradigm was best suited for this qualitative study. The research strategy, involving the use of a case study, was explained. The research methodology was then defined, which includes the population, sampling, and data collection methods that were used. The thematic analysis model of Clarke and Braun (2006) was identified as the approach that was used for data analysis before addressing the ethical considerations pertaining to this study. The notion of trustworthiness was briefly addressed, followed by the key concepts and the division of chapters for this mini dissertation.

In the next chapter, the literature review is presented. This is followed by the theoretical and conceptual framework on which this study was based.

---

<sup>5</sup> As previously, 'normal' refers to a time prior to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this study was to investigate whether there is value in providing distance students with a dedicated non-academic support mechanism designed to ensure their sense of emotional wellbeing within the context of their online learning journey. The value of this support is interrogated as it was experienced by students during the course of a normal<sup>6</sup> academic year as well during times of crisis – as was the case during the Covid-19 pandemic. For the purpose of establishing a theoretical framework for this study, the notion of ‘social presence’ is explored through the work of Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012), O’Regan (2003), Shea (2006), and Zembylas, Theodorou and Pavlakis (2008). Social presence is then aligned to the Col model of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) and the nature of affective or emotional support as posited by Lipman (2003), Zembylas, Theodorou and Pavlakis (2008), amongst others. This theoretical framework is presented in this chapter. Next, the chapter’s focus shifts to the educational policies and practice that pertain to the nature and provision of student support provided by the institution whose ODL model serves as the case study for this explorative research. The conceptual framework, which is presented next, was developed with specific reference to non-academic support and emotional wellbeing, as explored through the work of Fynn and Janse van Vuuren (2017), Karp (2011), Tait (2000, 2003), and Waight and Giordano (2018).

### **2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **2.2.1 The Importance of a Theoretical Framework in Research**

Grant and Osanloo (2014:12) refer to the theoretical framework as “one of the most important aspects in the research process”, explaining that it “serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions”. Eisenhart (1991:205) concurs, defining a theoretical framework as “a structure that guides research by relying on a formal theory... constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain

---

<sup>6</sup> In this context, the word ‘normal’ is used to identify the period of time which preceded the Covid19 pandemic.

phenomena and relationships”. The theoretical framework should be derived from an existing theory (or theories) that has (or have) been tested and validated by others (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Citing Merriman (2001), Grant and Osanloo (2014:16) refer to the theoretical framework as the “researcher’s lens” through which they view the world and approach their research.

Lederman and Lederman (2015:594) argue that the simplest way to understand the purpose of a theoretical framework is to begin by asking two simple questions:

1. What is the problem or the question at the centre of the study?
2. Why is the approach that has been selected to address either of these the most feasible?

Lederman and Lederman (*ibid*) go on to suggest that the answers to these two questions will provide the “substance and culmination” of the first two chapters of a dissertation, and that only “a thorough review of the literature”, which includes existing theories as well as the apparent gaps, will provide the answers that the researcher seeks.

#### **2.2.1.1 Answering Question 1**

The question at the centre of this study, and, by extension, this mini dissertation, is whether or not there is merit in establishing an online presence that focuses exclusively on the affective or emotional support of ODL students, and whether or not this role has particular value during times of crisis.

#### **2.2.1.2 Answering Question 2**

The approach has been to, firstly, review existing literature to more fully understand the various online presences that exist and the role that each presence plays in a student’s online learning journey. Specific focus is given to the affective component of social presence within an online learning community and the impact this has on a student’s emotional wellbeing. This was followed by engaging with ODL students at a PHT institution to whom an individual has been assigned for the explicit purpose of nurturing student emotional wellness. Students who were registered with the institution during the Covid-19 pandemic were included in the study to share how they experienced this support during such a challenging time. Four students who had

completed their studies prior to the advent of Covid-19 were also included to serve as the quota sample.

The first step in the process identified what is known about the role of emotional support in an online context, who can or should facilitate this type of support, and the importance of such support as purported by the theorists. The second step determined how ODL students experienced this support and whether or not they valued having access to this type of emotional support during the pandemic.

The approach taken was feasible as it provided the ideal platform for the researcher to meaningfully compare and question whether the theory aligns with the practice.

### **2.2.2 Establishing a Theoretical Framework Through a Review of the Literature**

According to Zembylas et al. (2008:108), there is extensive research that “refers to the existence and importance of learners’ emotions during the online learning process”. The majority of these studies, however, focus more on aspects of *social presence* rather than specifically looking at the emotions that students experience as they pertain to their learning journey (*ibid*). Studies investigating social presence, such as those by Richardson and Swan (2003) and Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer, (1999), suggest a clear link between the perceived level of social presence in an online context and the learning outcomes, but these studies do not specifically identify any emotions or how these should be supported.

According to Zembylas et al. (2008:109), more recent research has begun to focus on the importance of “learners’ feelings in relation to the sense of community of learning” as well as on the impact that both positive and negative emotions can have on a student’s online learning experience (O’Regan, 2003). Spitzer (2001, cited in Zembylas et al., 2008) concurs and suggests that, until the affective aspects of web-based learning are properly acknowledged, the potential of this medium will never be fully realised.

Online learning environments have been described as ‘cold’, with students often citing a sense of isolation and disconnect (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Galusha (1997, cited in

McInnerney & Roberts, 2004:74) supports this idea and points out that what students want instead is the sense that they are “part of a larger learning community”. Shea (2006:35) expands on this notion, defining an online learning community as “groups of people, connected via technology-mediated communication, who actively engage one another in collaborative, learner-centered activities to intentionally foster the creation of knowledge, while sharing a number of values and practices”. In order to understand these online learning communities more fully within an educational context, it is important to address the “foundations and assumptions upon which online learning communities rest” (Shea, 2006:35). To this end, Shea (*ibid*) refers to the “philosophical shift from objectivism towards constructivism; a theoretical shift from behaviourism towards socio-cognitive views of education; and a *pedagogical* shift from direct instruction to the facilitation of collaborative learning” (emphasis added).

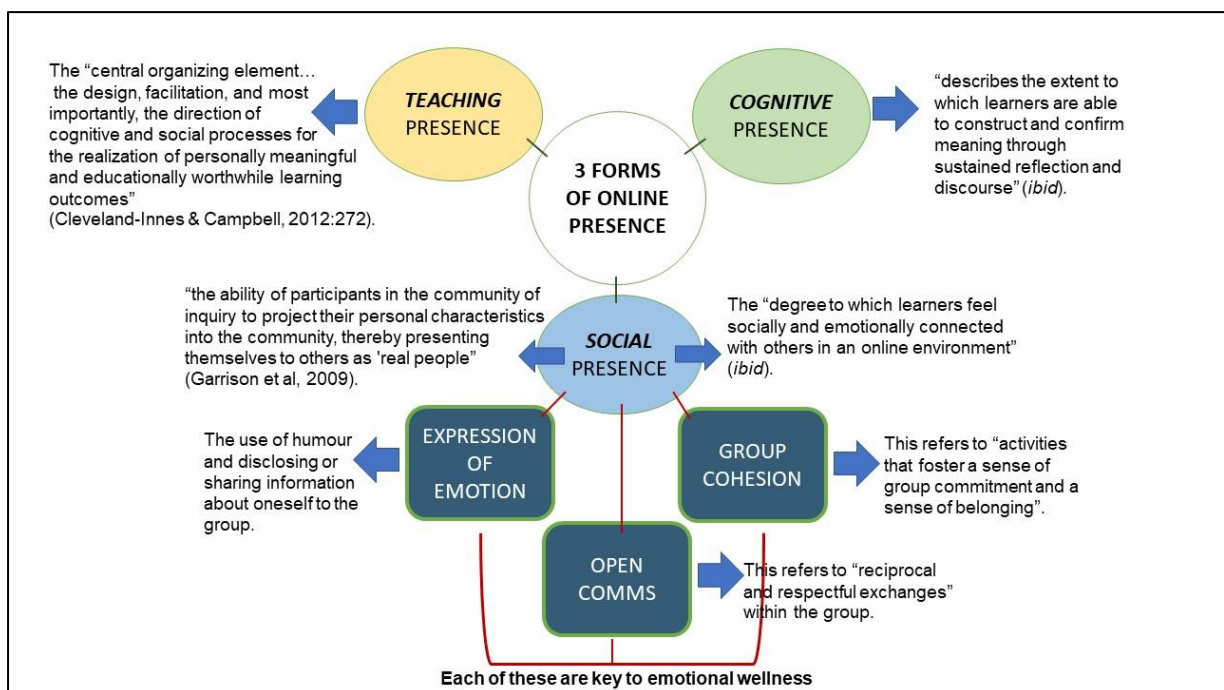
It is this pedagogical shift that leads to the work of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000), who developed their Col model for the purpose of studying the “dynamics of online learning communities” (Garrison, 2009:355). Key to understanding the complexities of these communities is the composition and interaction of three forms of presence: (i) teaching (or teacher) presence, (ii) cognitive presence, and (iii) social presence (*ibid*).

1. Teaching (or teacher) presence is seen as the “central organizing element... the design, facilitation, and, most importantly, the direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012:272).
2. Cognitive presence “describes the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse” (*ibid*).
3. Social presence is the “degree to which learners feel socially and emotionally connected with others in an online environment” (*ibid*).

According to Garrison (2009:352), of the three presences, it is *social* presence that has evolved most significantly since the initial inception of the model. Social presence has been explained as the degree to which a person is perceived as “real” in mediated communication (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997, cited in Cobb, 2009). In the Col model (Garrison et al, 2000:89), social presence is defined as “the ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community,

thereby presenting themselves to others as ‘real people’”. The Col model (Garrison, 2000) model further distinguishes three forms of social presence: (i) expression of emotion, (ii) open communication, and (iii) group cohesion (*ibid*). While emotional expression includes the use of humour and disclosing or sharing information about oneself to the group, open communication talks to “reciprocal and respectful exchanges”, and group cohesion refers to “activities that foster a sense of group commitment and a sense of belonging” (Cobb, 2009:243). Lipman (2003:18) concurs, referring to a Col as “thoroughly social and communal; a method of integrating emotive experience, mental acts, thinking skills, and informal fallacies into a concerted approach to the improvement of reasoning and judgement”.

The figure below serves to illustrate the three forms of online presence and the role of each within the Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) Col model.



**Fig. 2.2.2 Online Presence and Emotional Wellness.**

The constructs of social presence and emotional wellbeing, as defined within the Col framework of Garrison et al. (2000), and depicted above, served as the foundation for this study. Current research further suggests that, within the context of a Col model, social presence, or a sense of belonging, may be nurtured by the online facilitator who intentionally sets about establishing a safe and nurturing learning environment (Britt,

2015, cited in Williams, 2015; Hughes, Ventura & Dando, 2007; Lehman, 2006; Weiss, 2000). This is achieved by using “explicit statements of optimism, [and] clear statements of the contributions made by each learner” to foster a sense of “togetherness” (Conrad, 2005; Jones & Issroff, 2005; MacFadden, 2007, cited in Zembylas, 2008:83). Research also links emotional wellbeing to the concept of social presence as it pertains to online engagement amongst peers, thereby fostering a sense of community and connectedness in an online context (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Majeski, Stover & Valais, 2018; Zembylas et al., 2008). What seems to be missing, however, is any mention of a role within an online learning community that is intentionally crafted and dedicated to the nurturing of a student’s sense of emotional wellbeing: a non-academic role that is focused instead on relationship building and providing a level of emotional support aimed at fostering a student’s sense of connectedness and belonging in an online setting.

Such a role exists within the distance model of a leading South African PHT institution. The individuals tasked with providing this support are integral members of the institution’s online team and are allocated to a group of students for the full duration of the relevant programme of study. Their designation is ‘Programme Success Tutor’ or ‘PST’. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived value of the PST role as experienced by distance students enrolled with the institution, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this next section, I interrogate the educational policies and practices of this PHT organisation as they pertain to the nature and provision of student support, with particular reference to distance students.

### **2.3 EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE**

The online Cambridge English Dictionary defines policy as “a plan of action agreed or chosen by a political party, a business, etc.” It stands to reason, then, that educational policy serves to outline the plan of action that drives the principles and practices of a particular educational institution, but is it as straightforward as that?

According to Taylor, Rizzi, Lingard and Henry (1997:15-18), there are at least eight aspects to consider when investigating or analysing educational policy. These are



illustrated in the figure below. Although based on their observations as educators in Australia, I believe their comments are worth noting within a South Africa context. After the figure, these eight aspects explained in more detail.

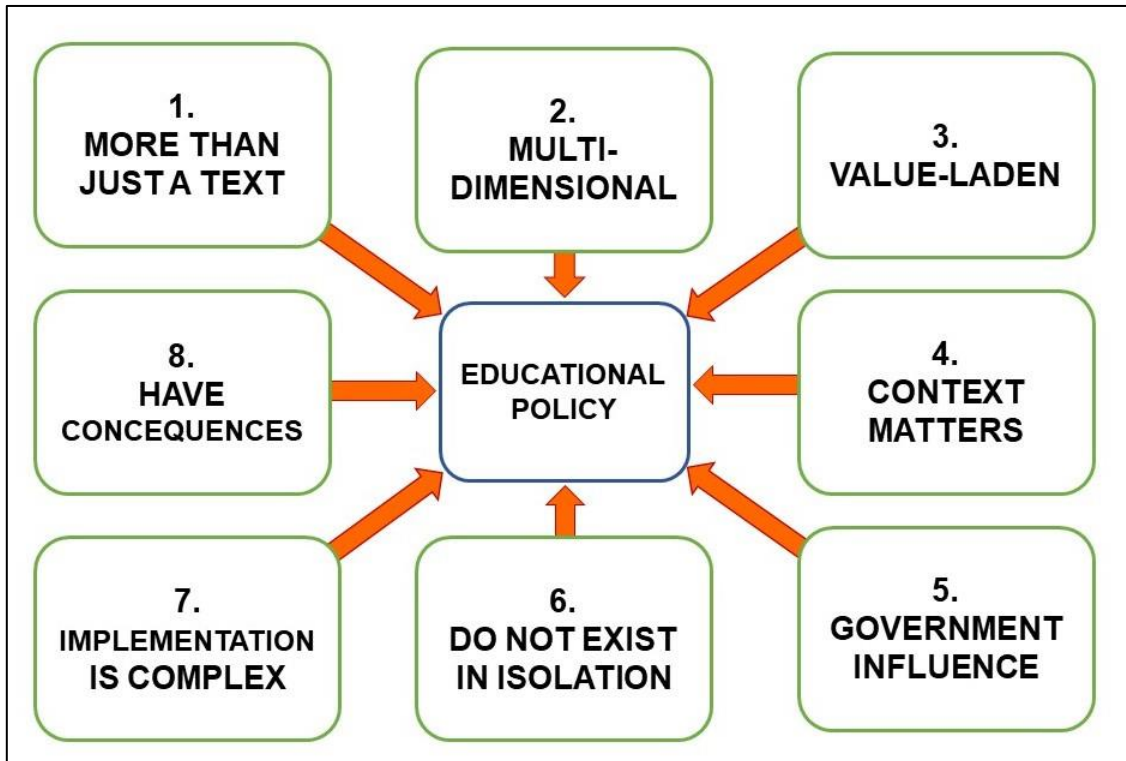


Fig. 2.3 Taylor et al. (1997): Eight Aspects of Educational Policy.

1. Policy is more than just the text: Policies are dynamic and interactive, “and not merely a set of instructions or intentions” (*ibid*).
2. Policy is multi-dimensional: How policy is understood and put into practice very often depends on the interpretation of policies by individuals. There may even be “conflict and contradiction between the perspectives or interests” of those involved in the implementation (*ibid*).
3. Policy is value-laden: The justification for the inclusion or exclusion of certain aspects of policy are inevitably influenced by those who develop or implement policy and by what they believe to be of importance or of value (*ibid*).
4. Context matters: Policies do not simply manifest; they are carefully crafted to reflect “a particular ideological and political climate, or a social and economic context”. Of importance, too, are the individuals who influence “the shape and timing of policies” and how these evolve over time (*ibid*).

5. Government influence: Even policy that is drafted by private organisations is influenced by government: their expectations, politics, policies, and reforms (*ibid*).
6. Policies do not exist in isolation: “even seemingly self-contained... policies can usually be seen to be connected in some way with broader policy development” (*ibid*). The link between the organisation’s distance education policies (022, 029) and the Department of Higher Education (DHET) that are driving increased access to education in South Africa offers one such example (see section: 2.3.1 below).
7. Implementation is complex: Implementation is often viewed as the “link between policy production and policy practice” (*ibid*). Leaders of educational organisations are increasingly being challenged to align policy with social interests, requiring them to “work strategically with particular policy prescriptions” (*ibid*).
8. Policies have consequences: While some consequences are intended, others may be unintended due to the “complex interrelationship of contextual factors, different and sometimes opposing interests, linguistic ambiguities and the variety of players involved in the policy process” (Taylor et al., 1997:15-17).

Having outlined the various facets of educational policy, I now turn my attention to the policies that specifically govern *student support* within the context of the PHT organisation whose ODL model serves as the basis for this study.

### **2.3.1 Policy and Student Support**

Within an ODL context, student support is generally defined as “a range of services both for individuals and students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources” (Tait, 2000:2). The nature and provision of these services is further detailed by reviewing four of the institution’s policies:

- Student Services, Academic Development and Lecturer Resource Allocation Policy (027)
- Teaching and Learning Strategy (022)
- Distance Education Policy (029)

- Assessment Strategy and Policy: Covid-19 (009)<sup>7</sup>

The policies have been ordered to begin with that which covers the broadest spectrum of services offered across both a contact and distance mode of delivery (Policy 027). This is then followed by the Teaching and Learning Strategy, a policy which also refers to both modes, but which focuses more specifically on the organisation's pedagogical approach (Policy 022). The third policy is of particular relevance to the distance mode (Policy 029), while the fourth addresses amendments to policy which were made in the wake of the pandemic (Policy 009). These four policies are discussed in order and in relation to this study next.

### **2.3.1.1 Student Services, Academic Development and Lecturer Resource Allocation Policy (027)**

The Student Services, Academic Development and Lecturer Resource Allocation Policy identifies the Student Support Team (SST) as members of staff that can be “approached for advice and direction and who carry out a particular function related to the support of students’ academic, personal and social wellbeing” (027:5). In this policy, provision is also made for students to “access their own lecturers for support and questions including on the digital platforms”. Making use of this is referred to as “student consultations” or “student subject consultations” (027:7). Within the context of distance students, this access would align with establishing and maintaining the *cognitive* and *teaching* presence considered so important to students in an online learning community (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Garrison, 2009).

Student wellness is addressed in this policy; however, rather than specifically addressing *social* presence or affective support within an online learning community, the focus is on the availability of registered counsellors, and the provision of “community engagement activities or other wellness activities” (027:9).

---

<sup>7</sup> This is an addendum to the Assessment Strategy and Policy (009) and is also called ‘Pandemic Version’.

### **2.3.1.2 Teaching and Learning Strategy (022)**

The Teaching and Learning Strategy emphasises the constructivist approach adopted by the institution, highlighting the importance of “constructivist thinking, the promotion of active learning strategies, the use of technology to support teaching-and-learning and the development of reflective practice on the part of lecturers” (022:6). Teaching is defined as a “complex and multi-faceted activity” (*ibid*). In line with social constructivist thinking, the lecturer is positioned as the “expert, or cultured adult in an educational culture” tasked with driving the learning experience. Within an online learning community, this designation aligns with the all-important teaching presence that Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) suggest is central to driving the social and cognitive processes required for a meaningful student learning experience. The policy clearly acknowledges this “power dynamic... in which lecturers take ownership of actively directing and facilitating the learning of students” (*ibid*). The multiple roles fulfilled by the lecturer or online tutor – that is, coach, mentor, scaffolder of knowledge, etc. – creates room for *cognitive* presence, where learners are “able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse” (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012:272). What is less clearly defined in the policy is an acknowledgement of *social* presence or what strategies the institution endorses to ensure that students feel both socially and emotionally connected with others in their learning environment – be that in a contact classroom or in an online environment.

The Teaching and Learning Strategy does, however, highlight the availability of student support mechanisms that are in place to meet the specific and generic needs of all students. According to the policy, student support at the institution is aimed at improving student “achievement, performance and success” (022:16) and is not only focused on supporting students who may be at risk. Referring specifically to distance students, the aforementioned support is further supplemented by “additional support for students via phone, email and various online forums and collaboration applications” (*ibid*), which may be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the need for non-academic support that is more *affective* in nature. The efficacy of these support mechanisms is monitored to track student online engagement, and to follow up with those who may have become disengaged.

It is noteworthy, however, that no specific mention is made to how any of these support mechanisms will be provided, or perhaps adapted, should a national or global disaster occur. I believe that this apparent gap in policy further supports the importance of this study in better understanding the nature and provision of support that students most value during times of crisis.

### **2.3.1.3 Distance Education Policy (029)**

This policy begins by stipulating that the general principles, practices, and values of the institution apply to all modes of offering and that the Distance Education policy; therefore, it “only details specific additional provisions for the distance mode and must be read in conjunction with all other policies [of the institution]” (029:1). Because of this approach, the policy offers only a basic overview of the purpose and principles provided and only as these pertain to other, existing organisational policies. It is the final section of this policy that is of particular interest: outlined in it is the importance of providing student support and the various mechanisms that are available to both contact and distance students, such as subject consultations, peer-to-peer support, information specialist support, etc. (029:11). In addition to the academic support provided, student emotional wellness is considered to be of critical importance in the ODL space. The PST role is cited as being in place to foster a student’s sense of emotional wellbeing and, in so doing, promote retention and student academic success (029:12). Again, although the importance of providing non-academic support for distance students is made clear, the policy does not specifically address how PST support will, or should be, leveraged during times of disruption or crisis.

### **2.3.1.4 Assessment Strategy and Policy Covid19 (amendment to 009)**

Although not necessarily created to explicitly address *student support*, this amendment, referred to as the ‘Pandemic Version’, was put in place to address the unforeseen circumstances brought about by the pandemic and to acknowledge that not all students were impacted by the crisis in the same way. The policy was amended “to accommodate the significantly different circumstances of students in a manner that [gave] an equitable chance at success for all” (009:9). While still maintaining the need for academic quality and integrity, the new draft allowed for greater flexibility and pacing, an adjustment to assessment and the provision of feedback. The institution’s stance on a culture of agency is also clear: “While every effort is made to assist

students by providing equitable, flexible alternatives it is up to the student to manage themselves in order to complete the requirements of a module” (009:4). Although driven by necessity, due to the lockdown regulations prompted by the pandemic, the institution’s willingness to rapidly adjust policy in order to ensure greater equity of provision demonstrates, I believe, a level of care for the emotional wellbeing of their students, hence the inclusion of same in this section.

In this chapter, the theoretical framework was established, and the relevant policies and institutional practices were interrogated as they pertain to student support and the nurturing of the various presences – that is, teaching, cognitive, and social – that are deemed essential for a successful online learning community (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison, 2009). The next section of this chapter addresses the conceptual framework of this explorative study and the concept of ‘non-academic support’ as it pertains to a student’s sense of emotional wellbeing.

## **2.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

While the theoretical framework serves to ground a study in known and proven theories, Grant and Osanloo (2014:17) posit that a conceptual framework identifies how the researcher intends to approach the research question, “the specific direction the research will have to take, and the relationship between the different variables in the study”. Camp (2001, cited in Grant & Osanloo, 2014:17) argues that the conceptual framework is a “structure of what has been learned to best explain the natural progression of a phenomenon that is being studied”. The conceptual framework for this study centres around non-academic or emotional support as it exists in an online learning environment and will be discussed using four sub-headings, as illustrated in the figure below.

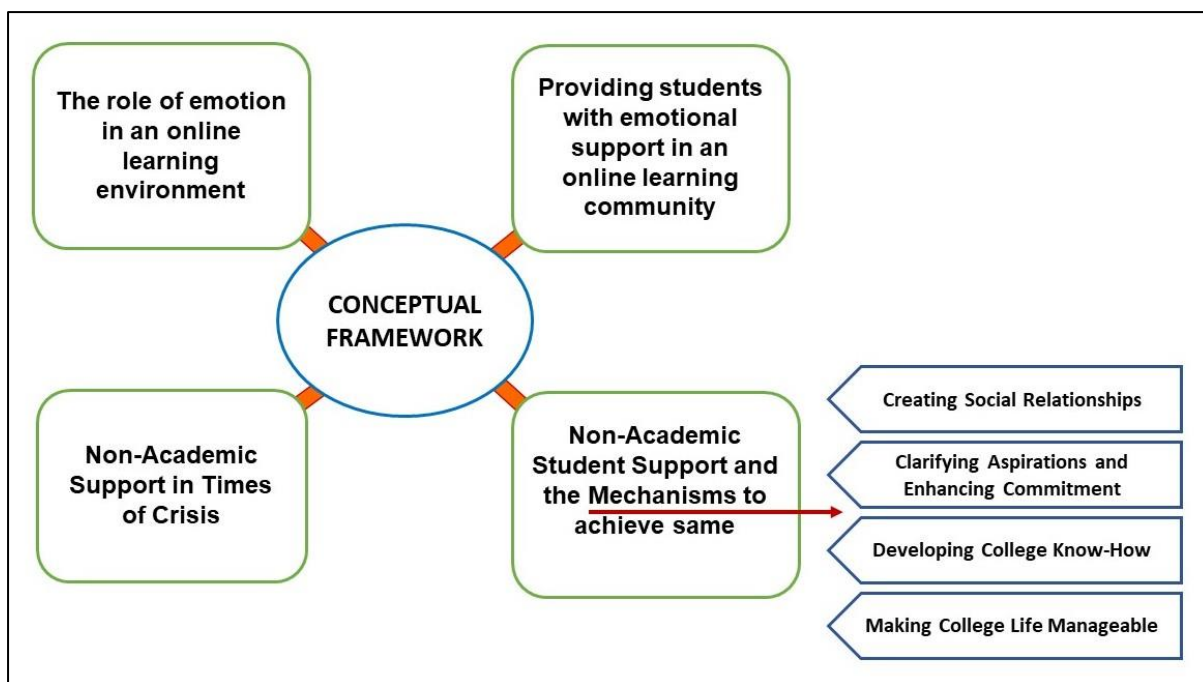


Fig. 2.4 The Conceptual Framework of this study.

### 2.4.1 The Role of Emotion in an Online Learning Environment

Conventional Western thinking would have one believe that *emotion* should be viewed as being diagonally opposed to *reason* (O'Regan, 2003; Zembylas, 2008); that feelings are, in fact, *inferior* to thinking and should not be trusted (Damasio, 1999). O'Regan (2003:78) supports this by adding that there has been “a consistent and entrenched belief that emotions are erratic and untrustworthy and that for sanity and civility to prevail, rationality and intellect must function unfettered by the vagaries of emotion”. Such traditional views even go so far as suggesting that “the truth [can] only be reached when humans [are] completely devoid of subjectivity and emotions” (Zembylas, 2008:4), and that emotions stand as “obstacles to reason and the development of knowledge” (Dirkx, 2008:11). According to Mortiboys (2012:7), this type of thinking has become entrenched in much of the culture of higher education institutions, where universities are viewed as “emotion-free zones”, along with a “tendency to downplay the affective domains of learning as emotions are considered private and should be controlled” (*ibid*).

This suggested disconnect, or the continuing need to keep separate reason (thinking) and emotion (feeling), may stem, in part, from the complexity of providing a clear definition of what constitutes ‘emotion’. As LeDoux (1999:14) explains, “everyone

knows what [emotion] is until they are asked to define it". There are those, however, who strongly support the idea that emotions are inherent to the human condition, and to ignore emotion in the human response is to ignore a central element of the human experience (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; LeDoux, 1999; Plutchik, 2003; Stets & Turner, 2006; Wosnitza & Volet, 2005). Solomon (2008, cited in Bharuthram, 2018:28) succinctly captures the importance of emotions when he states that "we live our lives through emotions, and it is emotions that give our lives meaning". One could argue, then, that emotion cannot (or should not) be considered separate from the teaching and learning environment (Brookfield, 2006; Lehman, 2006; Lipman, 1991), and that the impact of emotion on the student experience, and how this can be supported, warrants further investigation.

Turning specifically to the ODL context, Pekrun and Stephens (2011) note that the number of studies addressing students' emotions has begun to increase over the last decade. The majority of these, however, seem to focus on either the types of emotions experienced by online students, or on emotion as it is linked to establishing social presence in the online environment. Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2007:3) note that becoming a university student is an "intrinsically emotional process", and they refer to the "culture shock" that students experience when confronted with the unfamiliar rules of engagement and the resulting "anxiety [of] not knowing what is expected". Others in the field highlight the uncertainty and associated fear that students experience when faced with the online environment in which materials and assessments are presented in new and unusual ways, and the processes of which are either unclear or inadequately explained (O'Regan, 2003; Pekrun & Stephens, 2011; Weiss, 2000; Williams, 2017). These negative emotions are then further compounded into anger, or even shame, when students receive less than favourable feedback on the work they submit or when they fail their assessments (Pekrun & Stephens, 2011; You & Kang, 2014). These negative emotions, however, may well be tempered once students grow more accustomed to the requirements of online engagement and are able to experience a sense of success – what Pekrun and Stephens (2011) refer to as "achievement emotions". The positive emotions that students report having once they feel more settled run the gamut from experiencing a "sense of stability" (Williams, 2017) to feeling motivated (Pekrun & Stephens, 2011) and even joy (Zembylas et al., 2008).



Although emotion – if not as a central factor, then at least as a “ubiquitous, influential part of learning” (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012:285) – is being increasingly recognised, it remains a challenge to source any studies that interrogate the existence (or viability) of a role whose primary focus is the nurturing of students’ emotional wellbeing in the ODL environment. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the emotional turmoil that students around the world experienced, this gap in current research becomes all the more noteworthy.

I will now turn focus on the provision of online student support, specifically addressing non-academic or affective support as it pertains to a student’s sense of emotional wellbeing within an online learning community.

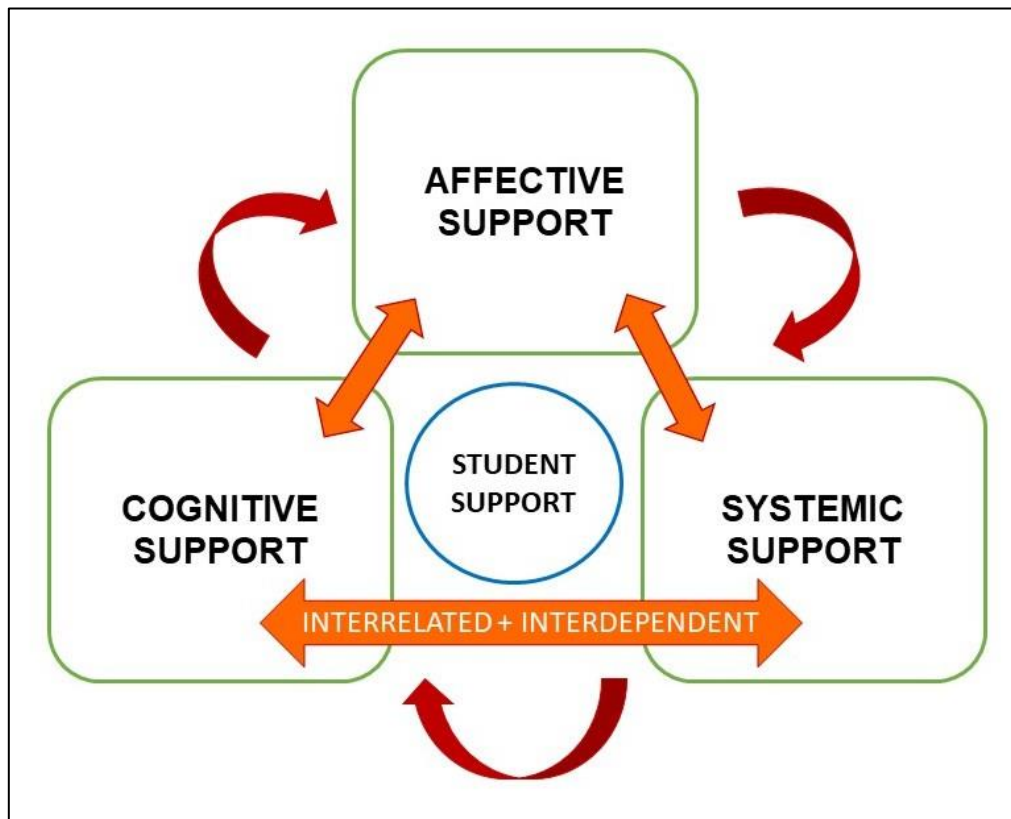
#### **2.4.2 Providing Students with Emotional Support in an Online Learning Community**

According to Rotar (2021, citing LaPadula, 2003; Ryan, 2004; Simpson, 2003; Tait, 2004), it is widely recognised that the provision of support for online students is essential. Rumble (2000) concurs, suggesting that student support is closely linked to both retention rates and academic success. However, rather than mechanistic support, such as is available via “advanced technological and pedagogical tools”, Rotar (2021:np) suggests the need for a more humanistic approach. Citing Sewart (1993) and Thorpe (2002), Rotar (2021:np) defines this humanistic support as being more personalised in nature, more “targeted and tailored” to the specific needs of the student.

Tait (2000, 2003, cited in Fynn & Janse van Vuuren, 2017:189) posits that while course content and learning resources are standardised and “uniform” for all students, student support has to be tailored for individuals and students in groups, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. Tait (2000:2) breaks student support down into what he considers to be three key aspects, each of which is “truly interrelated and interdependent”.

1. Cognitive support,
2. Systemic support, and
3. Affective support.

These are illustrated in the figure below.



**Fig. 2.4.2 Tait's (2000) Three Aspects of Student Support.**

- Cognitive support is associated with the “course material and formal learning support resources” (*ibid*).
- Systemic support relates to “effective administration and information management services that are transparent and student-friendly” (*ibid*).
- Affective support refers to the learning environment and its impact on student “commitment and self-esteem” as well as a student’s “emotional or social environment” (*ibid*).

It is this third aspect, that of *affective* support, which is also referred to as “non-academic support” (Karp, 2011; Fynn & Janse van Vuuren, 2017; Waight & Giordano, 2018), that most closely aligns to the nurturing of a student’s sense of wellbeing in an online learning environment.

### **2.4.3 Non-Academic Student Support**

Non-academic support activities are “presumed to encourage success but are not overtly academic” and can occur formally within a class setting or informally through a range of mediators (Karp, 2011:2). However such support activities transpire, non-academic support is “distinct from academic [support] in that it addresses different skills and knowledge and encourages student success via different processes” (*ibid*). Macfarlane (2011, cited in Waight & Giordano, 2018:6) suggests that, with “emotional wellbeing now recognised as contributory to academic success, strong student support services... are seen as an essential element of a successful modern institution and a student entitlement”. Pearson (2012, cited in Waight & Giordano, 2018:6) posits a strong connection between students’ emotional resilience and retention rates, suggesting that academic pressures can influence a student’s sense of wellbeing and pressure on the one can “heighten the burden of the other”. Schulze (2011, cited in Fynn & Janse van Vuuren, 2017:189) suggests that, within an ODL context, “assisting students with their confidence or self-esteem would, in turn, support their [academic] perseverance and success”. Fynn and Janse van Vuuren (2017:197), referring to the findings of a study conducted at a South African distance institution, explain that “emotional support emerged as one of the predominant needs among the respondents” and that, by “acknowledging emotional support as part of the critical support required to improve resilience”, the institution bears a responsibility to provide same.

These findings resonate with the work of Cobb (2009) and Garrison (2009) and the importance that they place on nurturing a strong social presence in online learning communities where students feel connected and emotionally supported. As Lipman (2003) noted, online learning communities are meant to be thoroughly social and communal, thereby allowing students to represent themselves as ‘real people’ (Garrison, 2009).

According to Karp (2011), a sense of belonging, or having the confidence to share who you are with your online peers, does not simply manifest the moment a student enrolls for an online programme of study. There has to be a deliberate and focused effort to establish and sustain such an emotionally supportive environment, and there are four mechanisms that can be used to facilitate same (Karp, 2011):

1. Creating social relationships,
2. Clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment,
3. Developing varsity life know-how, and
4. Making varsity life feasible.

Each of these mechanisms are explored in more detail in chapter 5 (section: 5.7).

#### **2.4.4 Non-Academic Support in Times of Crisis**

In March of 2020, the entire world was forced to react to a global pandemic. The South African government responded by putting in place a number of strategic measures for the protection of its citizens. These included, among many others, the closure of contact campuses and moving teaching and learning almost exclusively online. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), citing the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002, emphasised that special support programmes needed to be in place to “alleviate the impact of unforeseen catastrophes on normal teaching and learning” (DHET, 2020). The PHT institution, whose ODL model provides the focus of this study, also implemented a number of policy changes to address the lockdown requirements and the shift in academic delivery. What is interesting to note is that each of the aforementioned resources focus almost exclusively on the contingency measures that institutions put in place for the *academic* support of their students, rather than providing any real insight into how the non-academic or affective support mechanisms that might be available would be modified or leveraged during times of discord or crisis.

It is for this reason that understanding the impact of the PST role is so essential. By engaging with the students who had access to this non-academic support during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was possible to determine whether such support was, in fact, necessary and whether or not students placed value on being able to access this support during the crisis.

## **2.5 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study were laid out. A review of the literature revealed the importance of social presence in an ODL context, as well as recognising the value of establishing an ethos of belonging or

connectedness in an online community of learning. The literature review also revealed the need for non-academic support mechanisms to be made available to ODL students to engender increased resilience and academic success. What is worth noting, however, is that current research appears to limit the role players to either peers or online facilitators in terms of who can, or should, establish this sense of connection and emotional wellbeing for online students. The PST role, on which this study focuses, is one that was created to introduce a *third* option: someone whose primary purpose it is to facilitate non-academic or affective support for ODL students.

In the next chapter, the research design and research methodology for this study are detailed. The chapter also addresses the ethical measures taken in this study as well as the notion of trustworthiness.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study were laid out. A review of the literature highlighted the importance of emotional wellness for distance students, particularly as this pertains to their sense of connectedness and their ability to present themselves and experience others as ‘real’ people within their online learning communities. This same review exposed the need for further research to be conducted, specifically to address how the support and facilitation of student emotional wellbeing can be realised in an ODL context. The review also showed the importance of increasing this type of affective support during times of crisis. Chapter 3 begins by presenting the context for the study that this mini dissertation reports on and why this particular study is of importance. This is followed by an exploration of the research design through the identification and justification of the research paradigm, research approach, and research type that have been used. The research methodology is then interrogated as this pertains to the selection of participants, data collection, and research instruments, followed by data processing, analysis and interpretation. The chapter concludes by addressing the implementation of ethical measures such as permission, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, as well as the notion of trustworthiness so critical to qualitative research.

### 3.2 RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY

The literature explored in chapter 2 strongly supports the importance of social presence in an ODL context, as well as the importance of recognising the value of establishing an ethos of belonging or togetherness in an online community of learning (Brookfield, 2006; Jones & Issroff, 2005; MacFadden, 2007, cited in Zembylas et al., 2008). The literature further endorses the need for non-academic support mechanisms to be made available to ODL students to engender increased resilience and academic success (Karp, 2011; Fynn & Janse van Vuuren, 2017; Waight & Giordano, 2018). What is evident from the research, however, is that it limits the role players to either *peers* or online *facilitators* in terms of who can, or should, establish this sense of connection and emotional wellbeing for online students. But what of a *third* option? The PST role is one that has been created to introduce just such an option: someone whose sole purpose it is to facilitate the affective, or non-academic support, as defined

by Karp (2011). Interestingly, each of the four mechanisms, outlined by Karp (2011) in chapter 2 (section: 2.4.3) – and supported by theorists such as Bean and Metzner (1985), Bensimon (2007), Grub (2006) and Tinto (1993) – are integral to the PST role as it was developed for the ODL model of a PHT institution based in South Africa. As such, exploring the perceived value of such a role becomes all the more relevant with much to be learnt from the shared experiences of those students to whom a PST has been assigned – not only under ‘normal’ conditions, but also under those of increased stress and anxiety as experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Guided by the literature review reported on in chapter 2, and the existence of the PST role, the main question of this research became:

***What value is there in intentionally establishing a role that is dedicated to the emotional wellbeing of students in an ODL context, particularly during times of crisis?***

From this question, the following sub-questions were developed:

1. What commonalities (and differences) exist in terms of distance students’ understanding of the PST role?
2. What value, if any, do distance students place on having access to a PST during the course of the academic year?
3. What is the impact of a crisis – as that experienced during the Covid19 pandemic – on the perceived value of having access to PST support?

Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to explore and describe the perceived value that students place on the provision of emotional support in an ODL setting. This support was provided by an individual, other than an instructor or a peer, who was specifically tasked with facilitating an affective social presence to ensure distance students’ sense of emotional wellbeing and connectedness.

In order to answer these questions, a suitable research design first needed to be selected. This is discussed next.

### 3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Bhattacharyya (2006, cited in Asenahabi, 2019:78), “research is a careful and systematic way of solving problems and gaining new knowledge”. Research should “solve a problem” or “make an innovative contribution to the existing body of human knowledge” (*ibid*). For a study to be considered *research*, it has to, therefore, adopt a systematic approach and conform to a set of norms and standards (Asenahabi, 2019).

Creswell (2006) notes that it is important for researchers to reflect upon their research paradigm, understanding this as the lens through which they view the world. Equally important is to carefully consider the strategies researchers plan to adopt and how they intend to translate these strategies into methods. It is also essential that researchers take the time to clearly set out how they plan to collect and analyse their data, and to recognise any preconceptions or biases that they may bring with them into the process.

The research design for this study, along with the rationale for each choice that was made, is set out using three subheadings: (i) research paradigm, (ii) research approach, and (iii) research strategy. This is followed by a justification for the use of an interpretivist paradigm.

#### 3.3.1 Research Paradigm

As noted in chapter 1 (section: 1.6.1), a research paradigm consists of four distinct components: (i) ontology, (ii) epistemology, (iii) methodology, and (iv) methods (Scotland, 2012:9). These components are briefly unpacked below.

- Ontological assumptions, according to Scotland (2012:9), are concerned with “what constitutes reality, in other words what is”. Researchers are required to take a stance regarding “how things really are and how things really work” (*ibid*).
- Epistemological assumptions are concerned with “how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated, in other words what it means to know” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:108). Epistemology asks questions about the “relationship between the would-be knower and what can be known” (*ibid*).



- Methodology, explains Scotland (2012:9), is concerned with “why, what, from where, when and how data is collected and analyzed”. Guba and Lincoln (1994:108) argue that methodology asks the question: “How can the inquirer go about finding out whatever they believe can be known?”
- Methods are the techniques and procedures used to collect data, which will either be quantitative or qualitative in nature (Scotland, 2012).

There are four main research paradigms that are most widely used: (i) Positivism, (ii) Interpretive, (iii) Advocacy, and (iv) Pragmatism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For the purpose of this study, an *interpretivist* paradigm was selected. The rationale for this choice is explained below.

### 3.3.1.1 An Interpretivist Paradigm

The figure below outlines the interpretivist paradigm as it pertains to this particular study.

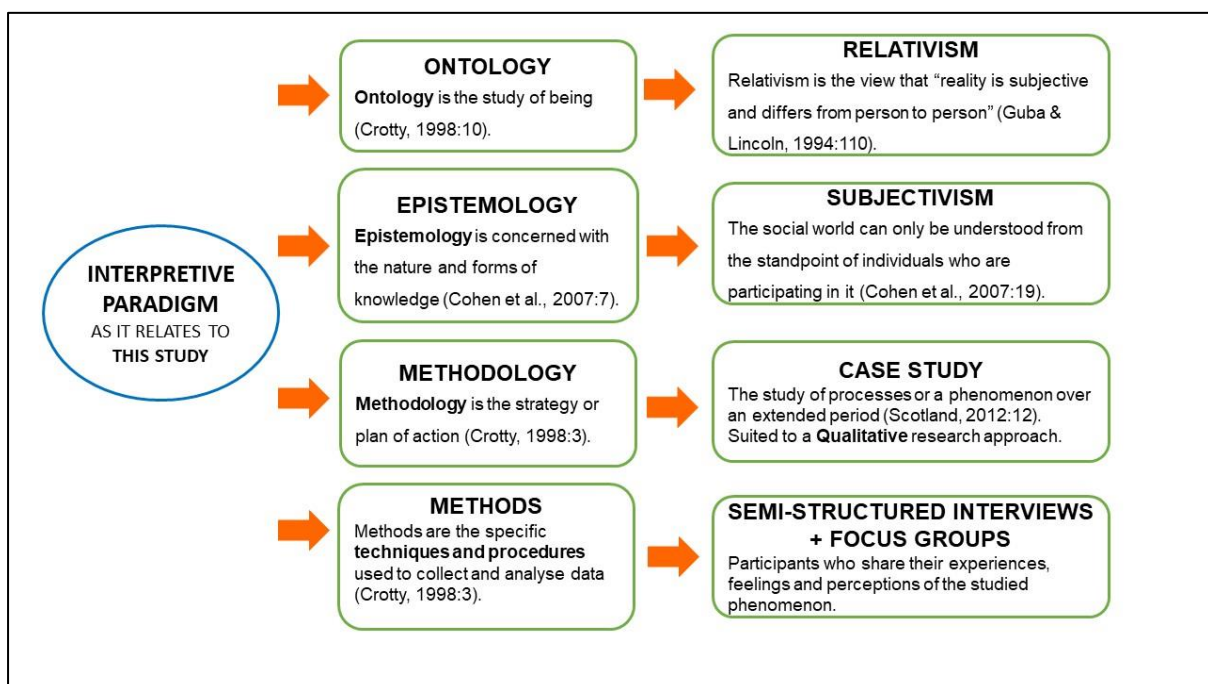


Fig. 3.3.1.1 Interpretive Paradigm as it relates to this study.

- The ontological position of the interpretive paradigm is relativism, which is the view that “reality is subjective and differs from person to person” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:110). Reality is, therefore, individually constructed and there are as many

realities as there are individuals (*ibid*). The students who participated in this study each brought with them their individual 'realities' by sharing their subjective views and the perceived value they placed on the emotional support that was experienced.

- The interpretive epistemology is one of subjectivism, which is based on real-world phenomena. Crotty (1998, cited in Scotland, 2012:12) explains that when people experience the world, they simultaneously participate in and mould the world around them. Even when experiencing the same phenomena, “different people may construct meaning in different ways” (*ibid*). The students who participated in this study had each been assigned a PST, and some had been assigned the same PST. Each of the participants had engaged with their PST on several occasions, either prior to or during the pandemic. Only students who had experienced the PST role for themselves would be in a position to provide feedback and, therefore, the data relevant to this study.
- According to Creswell (2009, cited in Scotland, 2012:12), “Interpretive methodology is directed at understanding phenomenon from an individual’s perspective, investigating interaction among individuals as well as the historical and cultural contexts which people inhabit”. Through the interactions between the participants and the researcher, “individual constructs are elicited and understood” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:111). Rather than reducing events to “simplistic interpretations, new layers of understanding are uncovered as phenomena are thickly described” (*ibid*). The PST role is, as far as I am aware, particular to the ODL model as offered by a leading PHT institution based in South Africa. As such, a case study approach was best suited to investigate the PST role and its impact on the emotional wellbeing of the students studying in that particular ODL model.
- Interpretivist theory is usually *inductive* – evolving from the data, rather than preceding it (Cohen et al., 2007, cited in Scotland, 2012:12). Interpretivists acknowledge, therefore, that research can never truly be “value free” as researchers inevitably “assert their beliefs when they choose what to research, how to research and how to interpret their data” (*ibid*). Interpretive methods, according to Creswell (2009), yield insights, and explain behaviour from the perspective of the participants. In order to elicit such data, the researcher must

use open-ended questions, interviews, focus groups, role-play, etc. Using these methods usually generates *qualitative data*. From the outset, the purpose of the study, the “agenda and the value-system”, needs to be made clear to participants to account for the fact that the analysis of the data provided will stem from the researcher’s own interpretations (*ibid*). In this study, participants were provided with the necessary detail and context to understand the purpose and aim of the research reported on in this mini dissertation. The questions that were to be asked were also shared well in advance. Both SSIs and focus groups sessions were used to provide students with the opportunity to freely share their experiences and provide comment on the varying ways in which they had personally experienced the PST role.

Having established the research paradigm for this study as *interpretive*, I now address the research approach that was adopted.

### **3.3.2 Research Approach**

As noted in chapter 1 (section: 1.6.2), qualitative and quantitative research are the two dominant branches of research design. According to Brannen (2016), the most important distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is the way in which each treats data. The quantitative researcher, Brannen (2016) explains, seeks to isolate and define variables, linking these to frame a hypothesis, often before any data are collected, and then testing the hypothesis upon the data. In contrast, explains Brannen (2016), the qualitative researcher will begin by defining general concepts which, as the study unfolds, may very well change or evolve. For the quantitative researcher, “variables are the vehicle”, while for the qualitative researcher, variables “constitute the product or the outcome” (Brannen, 2016:np). The qualitative researcher is, therefore, said to “look through a wide lens searching for patterns of inter-relationships between a set of previously unspecified concepts”, while the quantitative researcher looks through a far more narrow lens at “specified sets of data” (*ibid*).

Another distinction that Brannen (2016:np) makes is the way in which data are collected. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument, who is guided by their own “cultural assumptions as well as the data” while seeking to achieve personalised insights into the world of the participants. In quantitative research, the

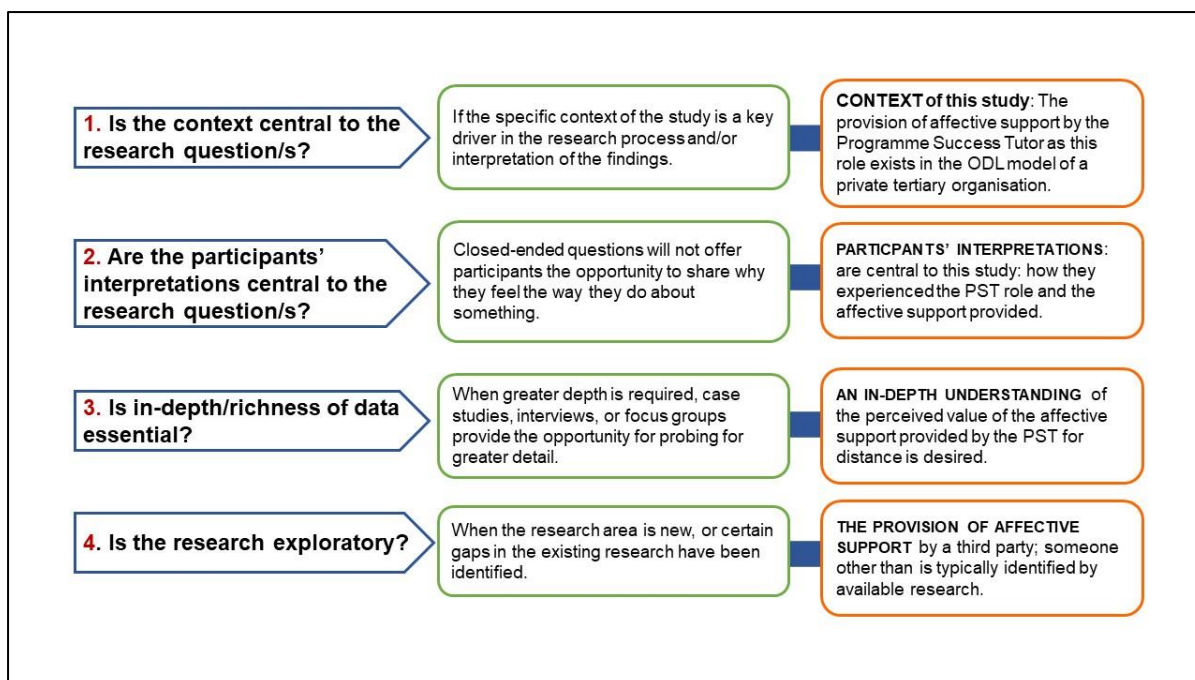
instrument is a predetermined and finely tuned scientific tool that allows for far less flexibility.

### **3.3.2.1 The Nature of Qualitative Research**

Perhaps the key to understanding qualitative research “lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002:3). Unlike a quantitative approach, the world of the qualitative researcher is not a fixed, “agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon” (*ibid*). Instead, Merriam (2002) argues, there are “multiple constructions and interpretations of reality” that are constantly shifting over time. Qualitative researchers seek to understand these interpretations as they exist at a specific point in time and within a particular context or setting (*ibid*). According to Mays and Pope (1995:109), qualitative research is often criticised for lacking scientific rigour, reproducibility, and generalisability. They suggest that, because of the personal nature of the researcher’s involvement, qualitative research is arguably “an assembly of anecdote and personal impressions, strongly subject to researcher bias”. Merriam (2002:5) counters this argument by suggesting that “rather than trying to eliminate these biases... it is important to identify and monitor them” as the research unfolds, and to take note of how and why they may be “shaping the collection and interpretation of the data” (*ibid*). Peshkin (1988:18, cited in Merriam, 2012:2) even goes so far as to suggest that the subjectivity of the researcher can be seen as “virtuous, for it is the basis for researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected”.

### **3.3.2.2 Justification for a Qualitative Research Approach**

Bachiochi and Weiner (2002) note that the justification for qualitative research methods is driven by the types of research questions being asked and suggest that there are four questions that can be used to guide the researcher in their selection of the most appropriate methods. These four questions are summarised in the figure below.



**Fig. 3.3.2.2 Four Guiding Questions.**

With the experiences, feelings and perceptions of the participants in this study being of key importance to understanding the perceived value of the emotional support provided by PST role, a qualitative approach was the logical choice. As determined in chapter 2, there exists apparent gaps in the research with regards to the provision of this form of non-academic support, not by the online facilitator or by peers, but rather by a third-party role whose focus is that of relationship building and student emotional wellness. This, too, supports the suitability of adopting a qualitative approach. Heppner, Kivlighan and Wampold (1999, cited in Jalma, 2008:53) posit that, where a study is exploratory in nature, the data should guide the study, and, for this to occur, a qualitative approach is best suited. Understanding that qualitative methodology relies on “context, individual experience and subjective interpretation” (*ibid*:53), generalising the findings would not be possible, nor would it be congruent with the purpose of this particular study.

### **3.3.3 Research Strategy**

In chapter one (section: 1.6.3), it was determined that, of the five possible research strategies most commonly used in qualitative research (that is, (i) narrative research, (ii) phenomenology, (iii) grounded theory, (iv) ethnography and (v) case studies), a case study was the most appropriate choice for the research this mini dissertation

reports on. Gerring (2004:342) suggests that finding a definition for 'case study' research that everyone agrees on is a long-standing challenge; nonetheless, he offers his own definition as a means of clarification. The case study, he argues, is "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units" (Gerring, 2004:342).

By investigating the affective care provided by the PST role, my aim was to understand the perceived value that ODL students place on, firstly, being emotionally supported during their studies, and, secondly, receiving that affective care from a dedicated role, which is filled by someone who is not their programme facilitator and/or who is outside the online peer group, and on their perceptions regarding whether such a role might be a viable inclusion for other ODL models. As noted by Woodside (2017:2), a defining feature of case study research "lies in the supreme importance placed by the researcher on acquiring data resulting in describing, understanding, predicting and/or controlling the individual case".

Having established the rationale for a case study approach, I now interrogate the methodology that was used for this study.

### **3.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Every paradigm is built upon its own foundation of ontological and epistemological assumptions. As noted by Scotland (2012:9), it stands to reason that different paradigms are based on differing ontological and epistemological views; therefore, according to the approach that researchers adopt, "they will have differing assumptions of reality and knowledge which underpin their particular research approach" (*ibid*:9). These differences will, in turn, be reflected in the methodology and methods that are deployed in a study.

How the research this mini dissertation reports on was realised is summarised in the figure below and further explained using the following three headings:

1. Population and sampling,
2. Data collection, and
3. Data analysis and interpretation.

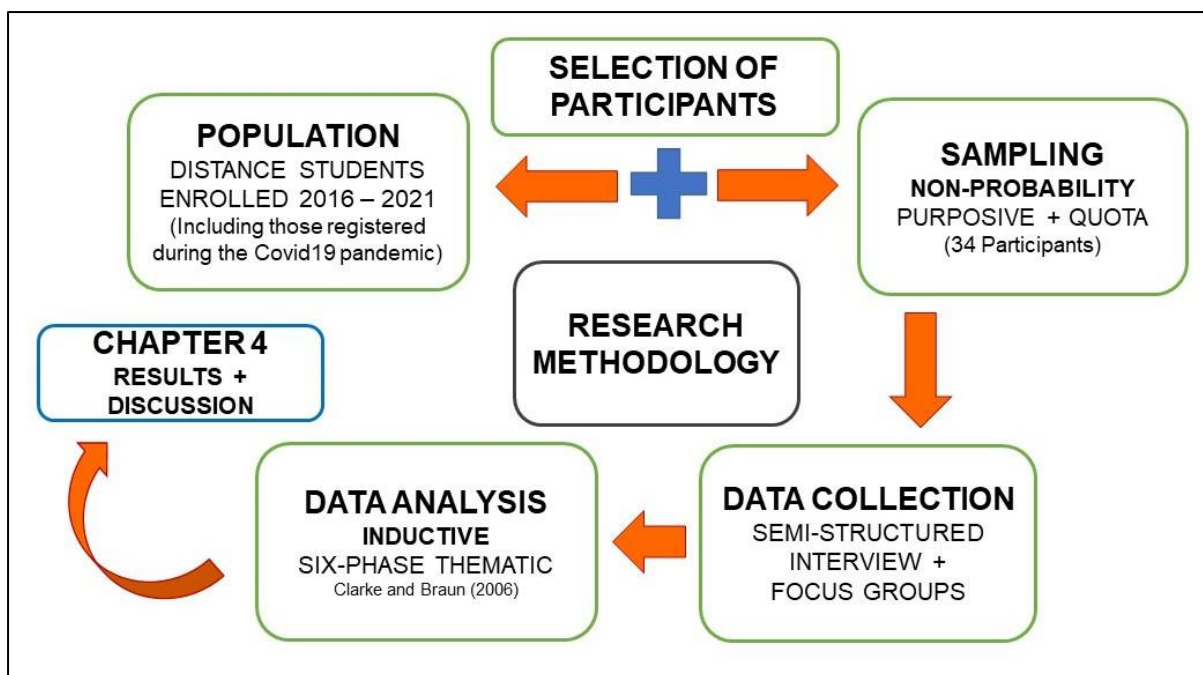


Fig. 3.4 Research Methodology.

### 3.4.1 Population and Sampling

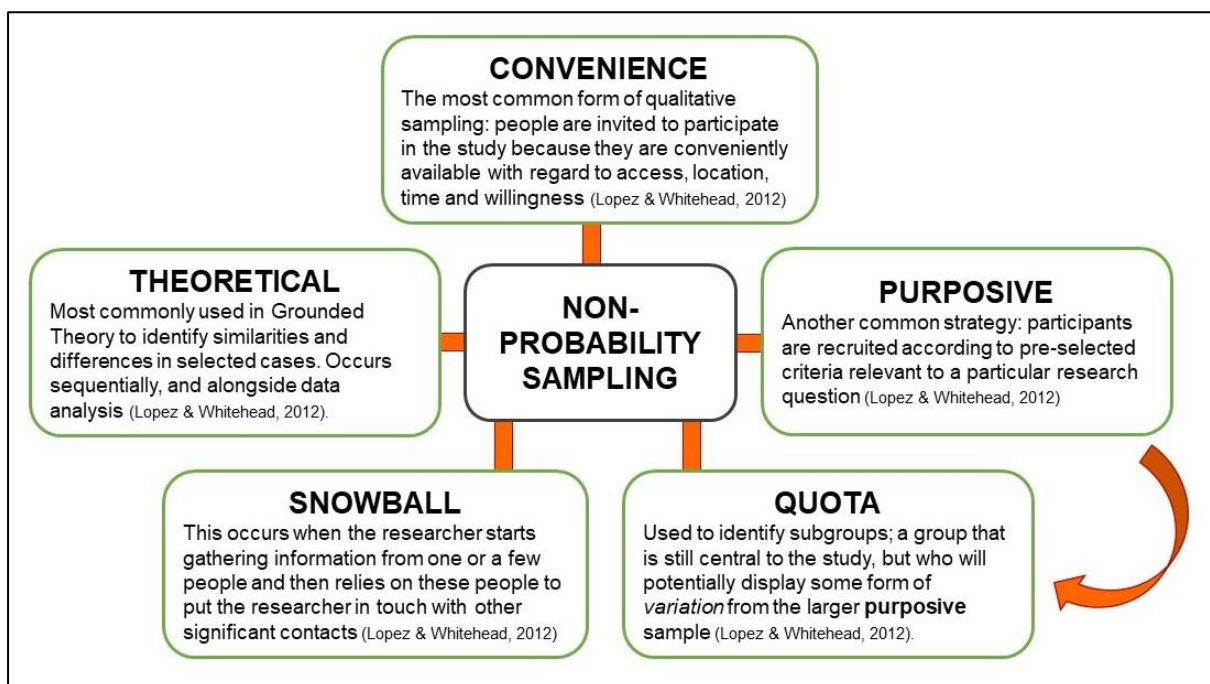
As noted in chapter 1 (section: 1.7.1), the *population* of a study is the group of people a researcher is most interested in (DeCarlo, 2018). The population comprises the ‘who’ that a researcher wants to be able to say something about at the end of his or her study (*ibid*). Determining or selecting an appropriate population is a key aspect of qualitative research.

The ODL model of the PHT institution, which acts as the setting for this case study, has as one of its central components the PST role. Rather than providing academic support, the PST role was devised for the explicit purpose of providing distance students with affective support in order to promote their sense of connectedness and wellbeing. Every student who enrolls with the institution for distance studies is allocated a PST for the full duration of their academic programme. For the purpose of this study, students who were registered between 2019 and 2021 comprised the population.

A population *sample* is a chosen subset that is representative of the wider population that was identified for the purpose of the study (Lopez & Whitehead, 2012). According to Salkind (2012:33), samples should be “selected from populations in such a way that you maximize the likelihood that the sample represents the population as much as

possible”. The value in this is that, once the research is complete, “the results based on the sample can be generalized to the population” (*ibid*:33).

As set out in chapter 1 (section: 1.7.2), non-probability sampling is typically used in qualitative research when the researcher is only able to recruit a specific population in order to investigate a “specified topic or when the total population is unknown or unavailable (Lopez & Whitehead, 2012:124). There are five types of non-probability sampling that are most typically used for qualitative research (*ibid*). These are summarised in the figure below.



**Fig. 3.4.1 Five Types of Non-Probability Sampling.**

Because this study focuses on a very specific topic, the participants with whom I needed to engage were those who had first-hand experience of the PST role and, as such, were able to comment on the nature and impact of the emotional support provided by these individuals. To ensure that the participants in this study met the necessary criteria, purposive sampling was required. By accessing the PST student allocation lists of 2019 to 2021, I was able to email students, both former and current, and invite them to participate in this study (Appendix A). The invitation to participate included the *Letter of Consent* (Appendix B), which outlined the purpose of the study in some detail. Participants also received an SMS requesting that they check their



institutional email to locate the invitation email and its attachment. In total, 1200 students were contacted. From the responses received, the first 34 students who met the criteria as set out below were selected.

Thirty (30) participants were selected based on

- their willingness to participate in the study;
- their availability to participate in the study; and
- them being a registered ODL student with the institution during 2020/2021.

Four (4) participants were selected based on

- their willingness to participate in the study;
- their availability to participate in the study; and
- them having completed their qualification in 2019 – prior to the pandemic.

These four participants, which then made up the total group of 34, served as the quota sample. Quota sampling was also used to gain some insight into whether the support provided by the PST role was perhaps experienced in a different way by those students who had concluded their studies prior to the 2020 pandemic. Quota sampling involves the researcher deciding on specific characteristics that the participants need to possess (Lopez & Whitehead, 2012). For the purpose of this study, four of the 34 participants who had completed their qualification a year before the pandemic were selected. The rationale behind this quota sample was to gain insight into the impact of the non-academic care provided by the PST during times of relative calm. Two of these four participated in an SSI, while the other two formed part of one of the focus group sessions. While all four were able to share their views on the questions being posed, their experience of the PST role did not fall within the context of Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown regulations.

Having identified the population and successfully recruited a suitable sample to best represent that population, the process of data collection could begin. This is reported on next.

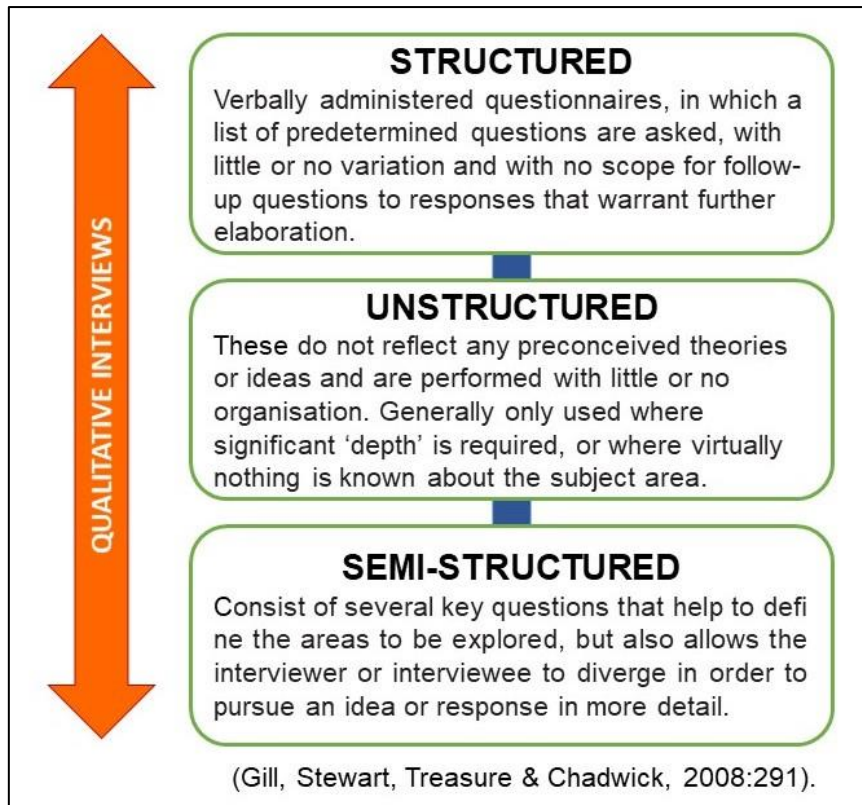
### **3.4.2 Data Collection**

As noted previously, 34 students were selected to participate in this study. Participants were sent a *Consent Reply Slip* (Appendix C) to complete prior to any further engagement. On receipt of same, a list of dates and times for proposed sessions was shared, and students were able to select to participate either in an online focus group interview or an online one-on-one SSI. Based on their responses, an email (Appendix D) was sent thanking them for their willingness to give of their time and to provide them with the link to their selected session. Because the 34 participants were based at various locals across the country, the decision was made to conduct all engagement fully online using a secure digital platform with which the participants were already familiar. The questions that would be used to initiate the discussion and facilitate the engagement were also shared (Appendix E).

For the purpose of this study, two data collection instruments were selected: the SSI and the focus group session. Each of these will now be addressed in more detail.

#### ***3.4.2.1 Justification for the Use of Semi-Structured Interviews***

There are essentially three types of qualitative interviews that can be used: (i) structured, (ii) semi-structured, and (iii) unstructured (Gill et al., 2008). These are summarised in the figure below.



**Fig. 3.4.2.1 Three Types of Qualitative Interviews.**

The SSI format was selected for this study because the use of several key questions would provide participants with some necessary guidance on what to share while also allowing for the “discovery or elaboration of information that [was] important” to the participants and, therefore, to the study, but that I, as the researcher, may not initially have considered (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008:291).

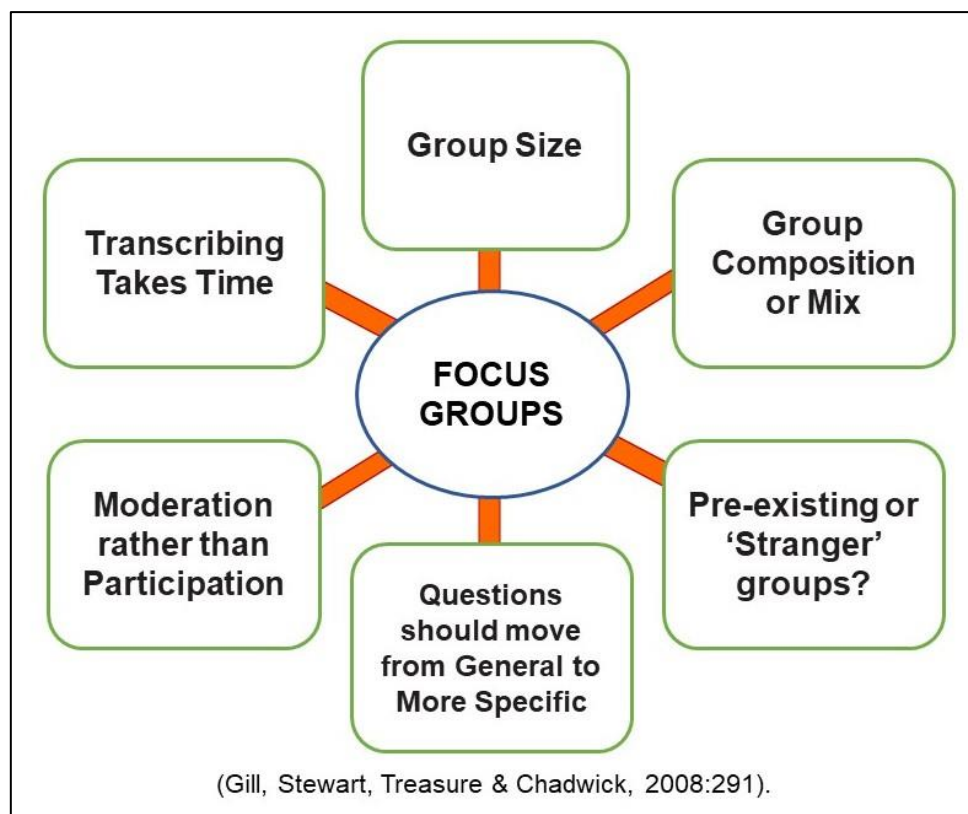
These engagements were used to explore the views and experiences of the participants as these pertained to their engagement with their PST and the way in which they experienced the affective support offered by this role. Students were asked to comment on how they understood the PST role, to explain the types of engagement they had had with their PST, to share whether they placed any value in the support received, and why this was (or was not) the case. By using the questions to guide rather than control the conversation, participants were able to share their experiences from their perspective, thereby allowing me to glean a far deeper understanding of the

student experience than I would have been able to if using a structured interview or survey approach<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.4.2.2 Justification for the Use of Focus Group Discussions

While focus groups have much in common with SSIs, there is more to them than simply collecting data from a number of participants at once (Gill et al., 2008). A focus group allows for discussion among participants, where they may build on, or even challenge, each other's ideas or perceptions. Allowing this type of engagement to unfold is the role of the researcher – also referred to as the moderator (*ibid*).

There are a number of factors to take into consideration when using a focus group to collect data, both in the planning and execution phase. These are summarised in the figure below and then elaborated upon further as each pertains to this particular study.



**Fig. 3.4.2.2 Factors to consider with Focus Groups.**

---

<sup>8</sup> All engagements took place fully online and were recorded with the consent of the participants.

According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, cited in Gill et al., 2008), group size is an important consideration when planning a focus group, and they suggest that the researcher over-recruits for these sessions as there are often participants who are unable to attend or who simply opt out without notification. Based on the responses received from the participants regarding their willingness and availability, five focus groups comprising between three and five members were created. Although three participants requested to move sessions due to unforeseen changes in their schedules, there were no non-attendees, meaning that a total of 22 students participated in focus group discussions. The composition of the focus groups was also carefully considered as I wished to conduct at least two sessions with students who had a PST in common. The rationale for this was to gauge how students who had engaged with the same individual experienced the support that was provided. Although Gill et al. (2008) suggest that the group composition and the mix of age, sex and professional status “will always impact on the data”, it is not something that was taken into consideration in this study. Participants were placed in groups based, for the most part, on their willingness and availability and, as noted above, to ensure that at least two groups of participants shared the same PST.

As distance students, it was highly probable that participants would not know each other personally, although some may well have been part of the same online module peer grouping. In this study, there was no deliberate selection to ensure that participants were strangers or that they were members of a pre-existing group. During the focus group sessions, it was established that, while some participants were familiar with each other, the majority were not.

Questions moved, as recommended by Gill et al. (2008), from the general to the more specific with participants being encouraged to share their initial ideas about the PST role and the individuals with whom they had been paired. As suggested by Gill et al. (2008), it was important that, as the moderator, I allowed the participants in each session to do most of the talking, share their views and respond to each other in an active, positive manner while remaining respectful. This required “moderation without participation” and the need to refrain from expressing my own views as much as possible so as not to impose my own bias on the discussion (*ibid*:294). Ultimately, I discovered that the best approach to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and

able to freely converse was to just be myself and to engender a relaxed but respectful environment<sup>9</sup>.

Once the 12 SSIs and five focus group sessions were completed, it was necessary to consult all the recordings and begin the process of transcription. As noted by Gill et al. (2008), this is a very time-consuming but necessary process as “the systematic analysis of interview and focus group transcripts is essential” for the next phase of the study: data analysis and interpretation. This is discussed next.

### **3.4.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Creswell (2012) identifies three procedural objectives for qualitative data analysis: (i) organising the data, (ii) distilling the data into themes, and then (iii) presenting the data in a final report. Of the myriad of ways to approach data analysis, I chose the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) as I believed it was best suited to address my research questions and to gain a richly detailed understanding of the participants’ experiences of the PST role and the perceived importance of affective support in an ODL setting.

#### **3.4.3.1 What is Thematic Analysis?**

“Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning and [themes] across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012:57). More than simply being organised data described in rich detail, thematic analysis “allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences” (*ibid*). Simply put, thematic analysis (TA) is a way of “identifying what is common about the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities” (Braun & Clarke, 2012:57).

#### **3.4.3.2 Justification for a Thematic Approach**

According to Braun and Clarke (2006:78), TA is essentially “independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches”. Rather than being a way in which to conduct qualitative analysis, TA is

---

<sup>9</sup> Once again, engagement was fully online, and sessions were recorded with the consent of the participants.

only a method of *analysis*, and this, according to Braun and Clarke (2012), is a strength because it offers an approach that is both flexible and accessible. TA is positioned in this way not only because of its theoretical flexibility, but also in terms of “research question, sample size and constitution, data collection method, and approaches to meaning generation” (Braun & Clarke, 2012:298). This study lends itself to TA for two reasons: firstly, because a relatively small case study has been selected as the research strategy, and, secondly, because of the focus on “participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives... and seeking to understand what participants’ think, feel, and do” (*ibid*).

Having explained why TA was selected as the method for data analysis, it becomes necessary to look at the model itself in order to better understand each of the six phases that make up this approach. This is considered in the next section.

#### **3.4.3.3 The Six-Phase Approach of Thematic Analysis**

What became clear when familiarising myself with TA was that some of its phases are very similar to phases in other qualitative analysis approaches. As such, the phases explained in this section are not necessarily unique to TA. This observation is supported by the writings of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012).

The TA process essentially began during the data collection stage of this study as I started to notice, and then actively looked for, patterns of meaning and other areas of potential interest that were evident in the data. Although the final phase of TA is producing the report, the actual analysis involved a continued back and forth between the “entire data set, the coded extracts of data that [I was] analysing, and the analysis of the data that [I was] producing” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:86). What also became evident fairly quickly was that writing would be an integral part of the TA process and not something I would merely have to do at the end. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006:86), writing needs to begin in “phase one, with the jotting down of ideas and potential coding schemes, which then continues right through the entire coding/analysis process”.

Before addressing each of the six phases in more detail, it is important to note that analysis is never a *linear* process that moves smoothly from one phase or step to the

next; instead, as I discovered, it is a *recursive* process, requiring one to move backwards, forwards, and between the data points and the notes one makes as the study unfolds.

- Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with your data

Having collected the data by personally engaging with the participants in this study, I gained a level of familiarity with the data prior to beginning the process of analysis. Despite this, however, it was still essential for me to fully immerse myself in the data to the “extent that [I was] familiar with the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87). This required me to read, read, and reread the transcriptions, while actively looking for patterns and meaning in the data. This process was incredibly time-consuming, yet, as Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise, it is critical not to gloss over this phase as it provides the foundations upon which one’s entire analysis rests. During this first phase, it was beneficial to make notes and to mark ideas for possible coding that I could then review in the subsequent phases. Once this was complete, the more formal coding began, which became increasingly defined and refined throughout the five phases which followed (*ibid*). Because I was working with verbal data collected from SSIs and focus groups sessions, it was necessary to transcribe these into a written format. Although a time intensive activity, it is, as Riessman (1993, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006:87) explains, “an excellent way to start familiarizing yourself with the data”.

- Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Once I had familiarised myself with the data and generated my initial list of ideas regarding the data and what I found to be of interest, it was time to move on to phase two. This phase, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), involves the identification of initial codes. “Codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting” (*ibid*:88) to the researcher. The table below provides an example of how codes were applied to a short segment of the data extracted from one of the SSIs.



Data Extract	Coded For
<p>It's really just having someone there for you, you know going from contact to distance I was worried... (pauses, laughs), you know now that I am in distance, I realises I was probably more lonely in contact than I am now in distance (laughs) ja<sup>10</sup>, crazy. (Student SVR04)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Having someone there for you</li> <li>2. Feelings of loneliness</li> </ol>

**Table 3.4.3.3a Data Extract with Codes Applied.**

The process of coding in this way is part of the analysis process (Miles & Huberman, 1994, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006:88). What is important to recognise, however, is that your coded data will differ from your themes, which are often broader (*ibid*). Although Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) offer a number of different ways to code, I found the use of differently coloured highlighters and photocopies of the transcripts to be the approach I preferred. For the process of collation, all data segments were coded, extracted along with sufficient context, and then grouped within each code to identify as many patterns as possible. What is of importance to understand is that “no data set is without contradiction” and it is not necessary to “smooth out or ignore the tensions and inconsistencies within and across data items” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:89). I found it of value to retain those accounts that departed from the dominant story as I felt that these brought an added depth, together with a sense of authenticity, to the narratives that were shared.

- Phase 3: Searching for themes

This phase begins with the long list of codes that were generated across the dataset. The aim next was to refocus the analysis by sorting the various codes into potential themes. By grouping all the relevant extracts within the themes that I had identified, it became possible to consider how “different codes may combine to form an overarching theme” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:89). During this phase, the themes for this study began to develop as the interpretive analysis began to take place. Working systematically was key; it was essential to give my full attention to each data point in

---

<sup>10</sup> ‘Ja’ is a recognised word in the South African variety of English and is defined in detail in the *Dictionary of South African English* (<https://www.dsae.co.za/entry/ja/e03411>). Broadly speaking, it is often used as an equivalent to what may be considered the more standard ‘yes’. This applies to all instances of ‘ja’ in this mini dissertation.

order to identify aspects of interest that then led to patterns, or themes. I found it useful to adopt a visual approach for this process: working with coloured paper and pens and arranging each of my codes into “theme-piles” (*ibid*). The thematic ‘map’ that I created during this early stage of analysis is represented in the figure below, and it illustrates some of my initial thinking about the relationships between the codes and the themes that emerged from them, and between different themes. At this stage, I found that I had a number of codes that did not seem to fit anywhere. This necessitated creating an “other” folder to temporarily house these codes until I could decide what to do with them.

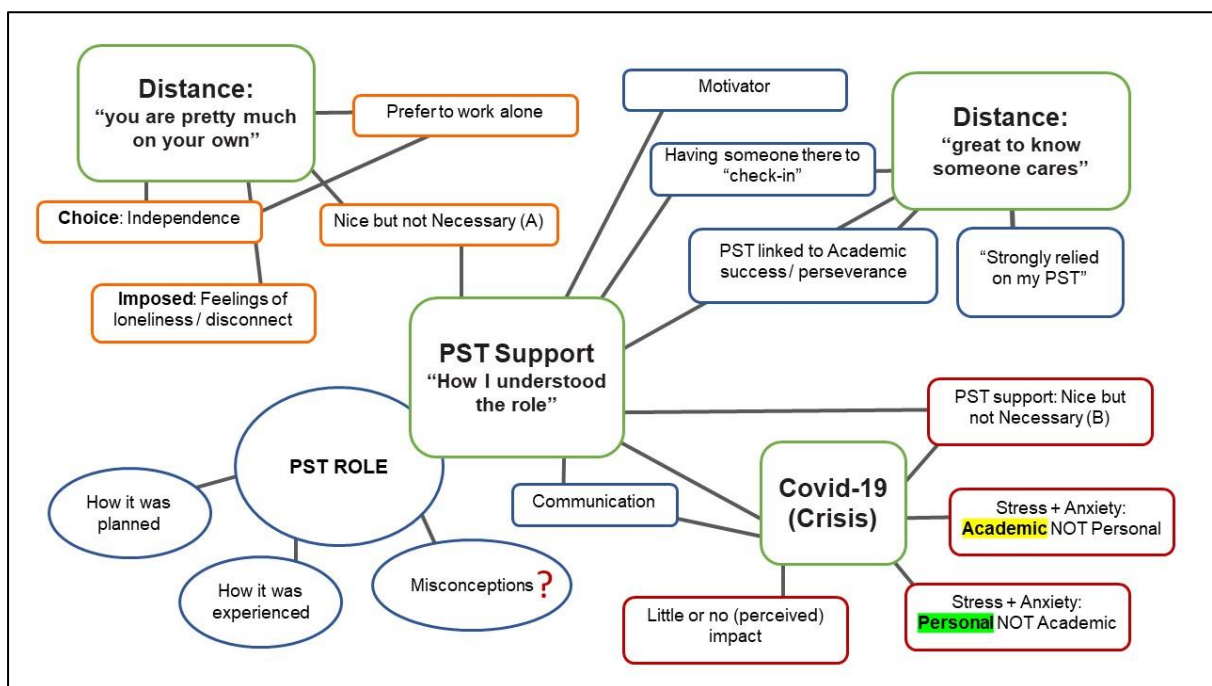


Fig. 3.4.3.3a Early Thematic Map – Phase 3.

This phase ends with a collection of possible themes, subthemes, and all the coded extracts that had been assigned to each theme and subtheme. Although there was some measure of clarification at this stage, it was still important that I not abandon anything – even those codes that I had allocated to my “other” theme-pile. Braun and Clarke (2012:65) highlight that it is important to keep in mind that the role of the researcher is to analyse the data and report on it in such a way that tells “a *particular* story about the data that answers the research question. It is not to represent everything that was said in the data” (emphasis added). In the next phase, reviewing the potential themes is discussed.

- Phase 4: Reviewing themes

This next phase began with what Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) refer to as the “candidate themes”, which still needed to be further refined. It is not unusual to discover that some of the candidate themes do not have sufficient data to support them as themes, or perhaps that the data initially allocated to a theme are too diverse. In either case, these themes may need to be discarded as themes but retained as codes. In this study, two of the candidate themes “collapsed into each other” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:90) because they were too similar. This is also something that quite easily occurs during phase four. As Patton (1990, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006:90) explains, “data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should also be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes”.

The reviewing of themes involves two stages. The first stage required that I review “at the level of the coded data extracts” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:91). This involved rereading all the extracts that had been collated for each of the themes I had initially identified and interrogating whether these appeared to form a clear and coherent pattern (*ibid*). Because I found that some of my candidate themes did not fit, I needed to rework two of them and find a new ‘home’ for some of my original extracts, while also discarding a few others from the analysis. Once I was satisfied with my candidate themes and the “contours of the coded data” (*ibid*:91), I was able to move on to the next step in the process. The outcome of this first stage of review can be seen in the figure below.

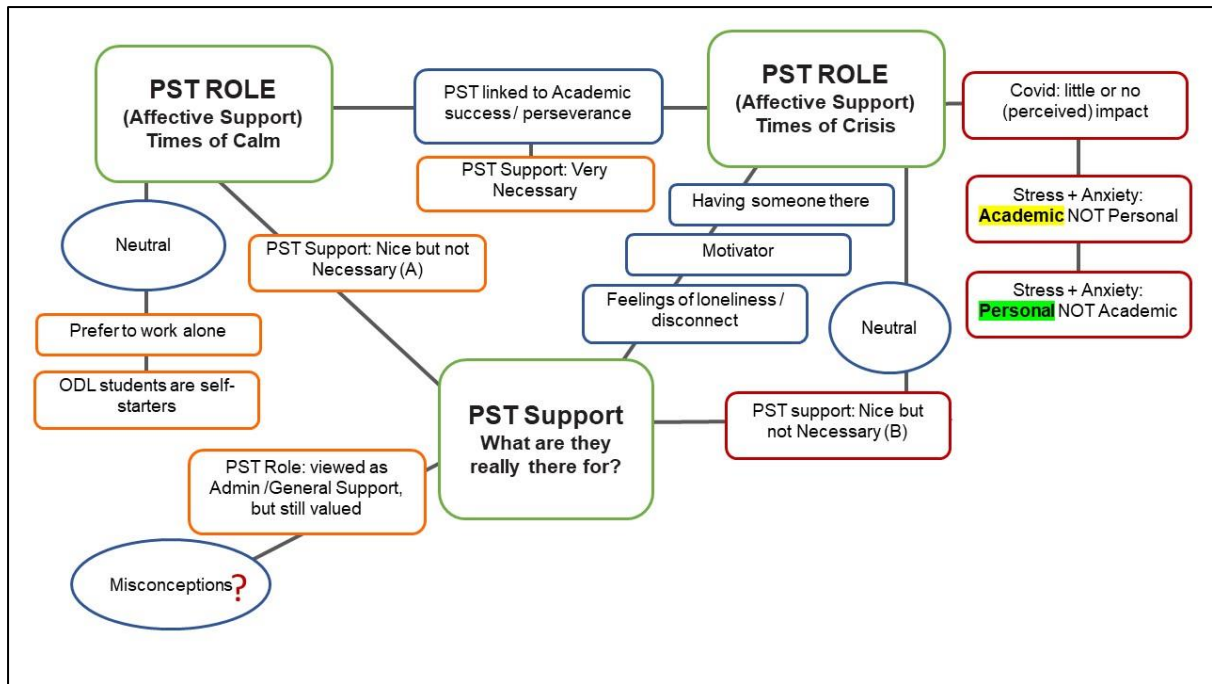
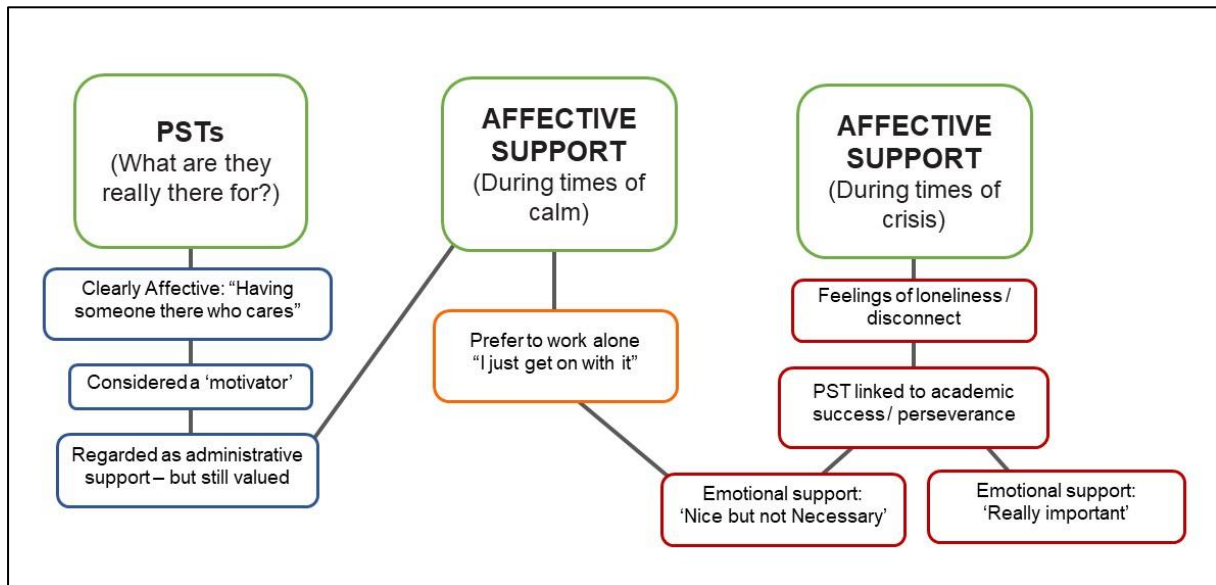


Fig. 3.4.3.3b Thematic Map – Phase 4: Stage 1.

The next step in the reviewing-and-refining process is similar to the first but focuses instead on the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this point, I needed to consider the validity of my individual themes and how these related to my dataset. I also needed to scrutinise my thematic map as a whole and question whether this provided an accurate representation of “the meanings evident in the data set as a whole” (*ibid*:91). Braun and Clarke (2006:92) explain that “what counts as ‘accurate representation’ depends on your theoretical and analytic approach”, and highlight, therefore, the importance of taking the time to reread your entire dataset before moving on to the fifth phase of analysis. By working through my entire dataset again, I was able to determine whether I had perhaps missed something important in the earlier stages of the coding process. The need to potentially recode or adjust themes in this way is considered to be “expected, as coding is an ongoing organic process” (*ibid*:92). At the end of phase 4, I had settled on the themes that I would retain and had gained a far clearer understanding of the overall story that they told – in other words, about the data that I had collected.

- Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Phase 5 begins once the researcher believes that they have a thematic map that provides a satisfactory representation of their data. The figure below presents a more refined map that I created at the end of phase 4.



**Fig. 3.4.3.3c Thematic Map – Phase 4: Stage 2.**

At this point, Clarke and Braun (2006: 92) explain the need to define and refine each theme. By this, they mean that the researcher needs to interrogate the ‘essence’ of each theme and then confirm whether the chosen themes clearly connect to tell the intended story. They warn against trying to “get a theme to do too much, or to be too diverse and complex”. To achieve this, I returned to the data extracts and arranged them in such a way that allowed me to track the narrative. This step was not just about paraphrasing the content; it also served to ensure that I had identified what was interesting about the extracts and why. As I investigated the ‘story’ that each theme told, I was also able to check how each related to the overall story that I was aiming to tell – keeping in mind the research questions that guided this study. As part of this important process, I needed to decide if perhaps any subthemes were required. These, according to Clarke and Braun (2006:92), “can be useful for giving structure to a particularly large and complex theme, and also for demonstrating the hierarchy of meaning within the data”.

In this study, I decided on three overarching themes: (i) PSTs, what are they really there for?, (ii) Affective Support during times of calm, and (iii) Affective Support during times of crisis. Within each of these themes, a number of subthemes were identified. These are illustrated in the table below.

<b>Theme 1: PSTs, what are they really there for?</b>	
Subtheme 1	PST as emotional support
Subtheme 2	PST as motivator
Subtheme 3	PST as administrative / general support
<b>Theme 2: Affective support during times of calm</b>	
Subtheme 1	Nice but not necessary
Subtheme 2	Only necessary at the beginning of the academic year
Subtheme 3	Definitely necessary throughout the year
<b>Theme 3: Affective support during times of crisis</b>	
Subtheme 1	The affective aspect of the PST support was not a priority
Subtheme 2	The affective aspect of the PST support was extremely important

**Table 3.4.3.3b Overarching Themes and Subthemes.**

These themes and subthemes resulted from the process of refinement that can be tracked from figures 3.4.3.3a to 3.4.3.3c above. Before one produces the report, Braun and Clarke (2006:92) recommend giving consideration to how each theme will be named in the final analysis and suggest that “names need to be concise, punchy, and immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about”. With their recommendations in mind, I was satisfied with the naming conventions I had selected and did not make any changes.

- Phase 6: Producing the report

This final phase is initiated once the researcher has settled on the final themes and subthemes and the detailed analysis can begin (Braun & Clarke, 2006:93). Writing the report involves telling the complicated story that has been revealed by the data in such a way that the reader is convinced of “the merit and validity of your analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:93). It was important that I made sure that the way in which I wrote the analysis included direct references to data extracts, while remaining “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:93). The data presented need to clearly evidence the need for each theme. This was achieved by embedding extracts within the narrative that offered clear and compelling support of

the story I was telling about my data while also building an argument in relation to my research question (*ibid*). The detail of the analysis that was conducted will be shared in the next chapter of this study.

The final two sections of this chapter focus on the ethical measures that were taken while conducting this study, and a discussion of the notion of trustworthiness in qualitative research.

### **3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the mainstay of ethical research is informed consent. In order to ensure that participants were *informed*, they were provided with detailed information regarding the focus and purpose of this study; they were also given access to the questions that would be asked during the SSIs and focus group sessions. Signed *consent* forms were requested, and only upon receipt of same were sessions scheduled and later conducted. Students were also made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without reprisal.

As noted in chapter 1 (section: 1.8), the ODL model of a leading South African PHT institution served as the setting for the case study used in the qualitative study that this mini dissertation reports on. Ethics clearance was, therefore, required and obtained from the College of Education at UNISA (Appendix F). Additionally, permission to conduct research at the PHT institution in question was also obtained (Appendix G) from the institution prior to any and all engagement with its students. The organisation's research policy (007), outlines three fundamental principles<sup>11</sup> that guide ethical research:

1. **Beneficence:** "Research rarely directly benefits participants, but it also cannot harm them and should contribute to the ability to improve practise at least" (007:13). Insights into the efficacy and importance of the PST role, as it pertains to students' emotional wellbeing, can be used to further improve the online learning experience and could be leveraged to inform the development and design of ODL models in the future. A deeper understanding of the value of the

---

<sup>11</sup> "If these are protected in the manner in which research is carried out, all the other more technical approaches to ethics will be addressed" (007: 13).

PST role during the Covid-19 pandemic will allow the organisation, as well as external stakeholders, to become more proactive in their management of the potential risk to student online engagement that can occur during times of crisis.

2. Respect for persons: This demands that all “participants will have their dignity respected during the process of gathering and sharing information” (007:13). Before commencing this study, the necessary procedures were followed in accordance with policy to obtain both permission from the organisation that served as case study and ethics clearance from the examining body responsible for evaluating the final report. To ensure that all “participants [had] their dignity respected during the process of gathering and sharing information” (007:13), informed consent was requested and received from all involved. Consideration was also given to the timing of the SSIs and planned focus group sessions, while remaining cognisant of the participants’ assessment schedule, workload and personal constraints associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Justice: In the research context “requires research to be fair, valid and reliable... and should not be manipulated to provide answers that serve specific agendas” (007:13). Should this study reveal that the PST role is perceived to have no significant impact on student emotional wellness, whether during times of crisis or calm, these findings will be made clear in the final summation of the study.

### **3.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS**

According to Mays and Pope (1995), qualitative research has historically been criticised for lacking scientific rigor. The reasons cited for this include the subjective and anecdotal nature of the research, as well as the potential for researcher bias. Cope (2014:89) argues, however, that rather than being inferior to quantitative research, which uses “experimental, objective methods”, qualitative research is simply “a different approach in studying humans”. Qualitative research, Cope (2014:89) explains, emphasises the exploration of “individual experiences, describing phenomena, and developing theory”. A major challenge that qualitative researchers face is achieving the “highest possible quality” when conducting their research. Because the methodological approach to quantitative and qualitative research differs, different criteria are used to critique each. While quantitative research is evaluated according to rigor and validity, the perspectives used for qualitative research are credibility and trustworthiness (*ibid*:89). Cope (2014), citing the work of Lincoln and



Guba (1985) and Whitemore, Chase and Mandle (2001), identifies the most common criteria used to evaluate qualitative research:

1. Credibility (truth),
2. Transferability (applicability),
3. Dependability (consistency), and
4. Confirmability (neutrality).

I now address each of these individually as they pertain to the present study.

### **3.6.1 Credibility (truth)**

According to Terrell (2016:173), credibility in qualitative research is considered to be equivalent to internal validity in a quantitative study. Credibility will be established once the researcher can evidence that the results of their study are “believable or credible from the perspective of a participant in the study” (*ibid*). For the purpose of the research reported on in this mini dissertation, I used the following three approaches to establish credibility:

1. Triangulation,
2. Peer debriefing, and
3. Member checking.

To triangulate the data, the questions that were to be used in both the SSIs and the focus group sessions were shared with all the participants ahead of time. In each of the engagements that took place, these same questions were used to guide the conversation (*ibid*). A member of the online academic team, the coordinator of online teaching and learning, served as my “impartial peer” (Terrell, 2016:174). This role involved reviewing the research methodology that I had used, reading over the transcripts (once all personal details had been redacted), and providing me with feedback during an online session that was arranged prior to the drafting of chapter 3<sup>12</sup>. Member checking was done by sending all participants a link to the recording of their session as well as providing them with the transcript of their session. Feedback and comment on same were invited (*ibid*).

---

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix H: Impartial Peer Review

### **3.6.2 Transferability (applicability)**

Transferability is comparable to “the idea of external validity in quantitative research” (Terrell, 2016:174). Transferability will demonstrate that it is possible to apply your findings to other contexts outside of your study (*ibid*). My aim in writing up this study is for people, or organisations, outside of the study to find meaning in the results and to use the findings to improve the learning experience of students enrolled in their distance programmes through the targeted provision of non-academic or affective support (Cope, 2014). Thirty (30) of the participants in this study were distance students to whom a PST had been assigned and who were registered for an online qualification during the Covid-19 pandemic. Four (4s) students who had completed their studies prior to 2020 were also included as the quota sample. By providing a suitably thick description of the findings of this study, my aim is two-fold: firstly, to improve on the PST role as it currently exists, and, secondly, to promote the inclusion of the same, or similar, role in other ODL models.

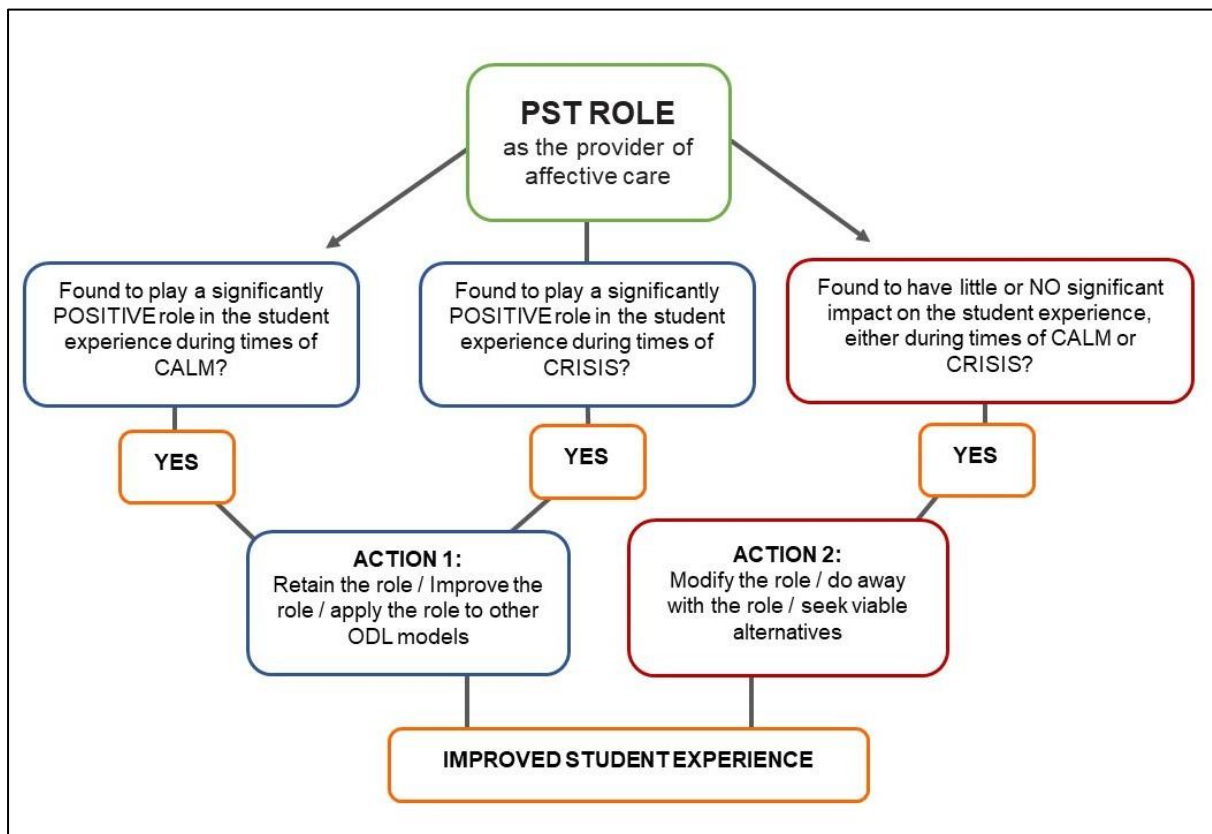
### **3.6.3 Dependability (consistency)**

Terrell (2016:175) asserts that, “much like the function of reliability in quantitative research, dependability refers to the consistency and the replicability of the results”. According to Cope (2014:89, citing Polit & Beck, 2012), “dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions”, which is something that can be replicated by following the same processes and descriptions (*ibid*). For the purpose of this study, I have ensured dependability by documenting the research process that was followed and carefully reporting on all aspects of the research design and research methods that I used. Dependability will further be determined through examination and evaluation by an external examiner.

### **3.6.4 Confirmability (neutrality)**

Confirmability in qualitative research is aligned with the concept of *neutrality* (Cope, 2014; Terrell, 2016). It is essential that the data that are presented represents the ideas and responses of the participants and “not the researcher’s biases or viewpoints” (Cope, 2014:89). Lincoln and Guba (1985:np) concur, emphasising the need for “other researchers to be able to replicate the results” and in so doing evidence that the “results are a product of independent research methods and not of conscious or unconscious bias” (*ibid*).

As illustrated in the figure below, there was no preferred outcome guiding the process for me as the researcher as any result would potentially lead to the same outcome: that of an improved student experience in an ODL context. Instead of allowing any personal biases to guide the findings, I have relied on the rich quotes from the participants to lead the way.



**Fig. 3.6.4 Establishing Confirmability.**

### 3.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the rationale and context of this study were first established before proceeding to look at the research design. Four possible research paradigms were interrogated before selecting an interpretivist approach, which was best suited to this study. Based on four guiding questions, it was determined that a qualitative research approach was most appropriate to address the research problem and its associated questions. The research strategy for this study is based on a case study which then determined the identification of the population, selection of participants, and appropriate data collection methods. The six-phase thematic analysis model of Braun

and Clarke (2006, 2012) that was selected for the analysis and interpretation of the data was explained in some detail with examples of thematic maps used to illustrate the identification and refinement of codes and themes that emerged from this study. The chapter concludes by addressing the necessary ethical considerations that were required and showing how the trustworthiness of this exploratory research was established.

The next chapter covers the findings and discussions relevant to this study.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, the research design and research methodology were addressed, as well as the six-phase TA model of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). The ethical measures that were used in the study were also discussed, and the chapter concluded with the construct of trustworthiness as it pertains to this study. In this chapter, I begin by providing some general information pertaining to the participants in this study before reporting on the three main themes and their subthemes. The chapter concludes with a summary of the empirical findings of this study.

### **4.2 GENERAL PARTICIPANT INFORMATION**

As noted in chapters 1 and 3, a total of 34 participants were included in this study. Thirty (30) were enrolled as ODL students with the institution during the pandemic in 2020, and four had completed their studies in 2019, prior to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, thus serving as the quota sample. The table below provides an overview of the participants and includes their pseudonyms (indicating their initials and the sequential number allocated to each), the sessions in which they participated (either an SSI or a focus group session) as well as their status as either a current student (at the time of data collection) or one who had completed their qualification in 2019. Due to the pandemic and Covid-19 protocols, all engagement took place fully online. Sessions were recorded with the consent of the participants.

<b>STUDY PARTICIPANTS</b>				
Pseudonym	Completed Studies 2019	Registered during 2020/2021	Semi-structured Interview	Focus Group
ST01		Yes		FG1
DP02		Yes		FG1
AG03		Yes		FG1
MS04		Yes		FG1
AC05		Yes		FG1
SST06		Yes	Yes	
BK07	Yes (Quota 1)		Yes	
EM08		Yes	Yes	
EP09		Yes	Yes	
MT10	Yes (Quota 2)		Yes	
AR11		Yes	Yes	
TC12		Yes	Yes	
NG13		Yes	Yes	
CK14		Yes	Yes	
GA15	Yes (Quota 3)		Yes	
SG16		Yes		FG2
QT17		Yes		FG2
BZ18		Yes		FG2
AA19		Yes		FG2
MVV20		Yes		FG3
DB21		Yes		FG3
AN22		Yes		FG3
AA23		Yes		FG3
SVR24		Yes	Yes	
SL25	Yes (Quota 4)		Yes	
JCC26		Yes		FG4
TS27		Yes		FG4
TD28		Yes		FG4
JC29		Yes		FG4
JR30		Yes		FG4
MH31		Yes		FG5
RF32		Yes		FG5
MD33		Yes		FG5
TN34		Yes		FG5

**Table 4.2 General participant information.**

### **4.3 REPORTING ON THE IDENTIFIED THEMES AND SUBTHEMES**

During the analysis process, I identified three key themes and eight subthemes. These were first noted in section 3.4.3.3 and are again summarised in the table below.

<b>Theme 1: PSTs, what are they really there for?</b>	
Subtheme 1	PST as emotional support
Subtheme 2	PST as motivator
Subtheme 3	PST as administrative / general support
<b>Theme 2: Affective support during times of calm</b>	
Subtheme 1	Nice but not necessary
Subtheme 2	Only necessary at the beginning of the academic year
Subtheme 3	Definitely necessary throughout the year
<b>Theme 3: Affective support during times of calm</b>	
Subtheme 1	The affective aspect of the PST support was not a priority
Subtheme 2	The affective aspect of the PST support was extremely important

**Table 4.3 Themes and Subthemes (revisited).**

In keeping with the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), the naming convention of each theme was selected to ensure a clear and apparent link to the research question. Each theme builds on the next, offering the reader a seamless line of inductive reasoning to follow as the story of the data unfolds. Additionally, each of the themes relating to this study, and any of the subthemes that were identified, is reported on. The link between each theme, the data that were collected, and the overarching research question that is driving this study (*ibid*) is shown.

#### **4.3.1 Theme 1: PSTs, what are they really there for?**

During my engagement with the participants, it was evident that the vast majority were very familiar with who their PST was, in the case of current students, or had been, in the case of former students. Almost without exception, participants readily referred to their PST by name when asked to do so, and on the few occasions where there was some hesitation, they were able to recall the name of their PST with only minor prompting. I interpreted this as an indication of PSTs having actively sought to establish a relationship with, or connection to, their assigned students. As additional evidence of this, each of the 34 participants was able to recall at least some form of regular engagement with their PST during the course of each year that they had been registered as an online student. Participants referred to contact being made in the form of personal phone calls, group or individual emails, and via the WhatsApp group that each PST sets up and invites their students to join should they wish to. When asked

about this form of engagement with their PST, two participants offered the following responses:

**JC29:** *“Oh, yes, I heard from (redacted) at the beginning of the semester, I think that was a phone call, or maybe an email, I can’t be sure. Then again around the time we had some assignments to submit, and then I think it was also towards the end of the year, you know, just to, just to make sure we were ok to write the exam”.*

**SG16:** *“Oh, (redacted) she’s so sweet, she often sends us these inspirational quotes on WhatsApp or just like a fun meme to let us know ‘hey, I’m around if you need me’. Also, she did call me once because I hadn’t logged on in like a week or something and she wanted to check if there was some problem or something”.*

At the beginning of both the SSIs and focus group sessions, I began by providing the participants with some background information pertaining to the PST role and its intended purpose as a provider of non-academic or affective student support.<sup>13</sup> What was evident from the responses I received was that there was very little common understanding of the PST role as being one that was specifically created to address the emotional wellbeing of students. When referring to the intended nature of PST support, participant AR11 indicated that he did not understand the role as being *emotionally* supportive, but rather viewed it to be one which offered administrative support.

**AR11:** *Yes, yes... like I said, when I needed (redacted) he was always quick to respond and to help me with whatever, so I don’t want it to sound negative (laughs). Also, I suppose, I never really felt the need for what you are talking about, the emotional stuff, if I can say that. So, my perspective on it was, well that was how I understood the role, because that’s what I needed from the role.*

Participant AA19 was also surprised to hear that the PST role was intended to specifically focus on student emotional wellness.

---

<sup>13</sup> For the detail of this background information, please refer to the transcripts provided (Appendices I, J and K).



*AA19: Now that you explain it like that, I guess I can see the link, but I have to be honest, it's not what I thought (redacted) was there for. I mean she does all of that, and I guess I would say that she is very involved and is happy to do whatever for all of us students and that's great, I mean we need that support. Some maybe more than others, sure, but (redacted) is always happy to, ja, she's involved like I said, but I didn't really put that together with emotions, if you know what I mean?*

Although nine of the participants did comment that their PST was “very involved”, and that their PST “cared about” or “worried about” them, at least 20 referred instead to their PST in more general terms as being “great”, “helpful”, or “always available” to assist. Participants readily shared examples of PSTs assisting them with academic counselling or administrative-type support: discussing module choices, the registration process, and financial queries they may have had at the beginning of each semester. Other support was more aligned to the institution’s systems and its LMS: providing guidance on password access, platform navigation and digital student cards (AR11; BZ18). One participant also referred to their PST’s willingness to intervene when they had been experiencing problems with one of their online tutors (SVR24). Although there were many such examples shared, and each of these were spoken of in a manner that was clearly appreciative, 26 of the 34 participants did not indicate any understanding of a direct correlation between the support received and their emotional wellbeing as distance students.

This prompted me to go back to the dataset once again to better understand what appeared to be a clear disconnect for most participants between how the role was originally envisaged by the institution and how it was actually being experienced by the students. What I came to understand was that there were at least three different interpretations of the PST role and its intended purpose in the institution’s ODL model:

- PST as emotional support,
- PST as motivator, and
- PST as administrative/general support.

What follows is a brief justification for how I reached these three interpretations. In the table below I have used direct quotes from a range of participant transcripts to illustrate each. These examples are taken from the focus group interviews and the SSIs.

<b>Theme 1: PSTs, what are they really there for?</b> (with direct quotes as examples)	
PST as emotional support	<p><i>"I think I've always known that my PST is there for when things maybe get too much, um, I mean she told us that being a distance student can be challenging and if we ever feel like it's just too hectic, or whatever, that we can just send her a WhatsApp, you know, like a DM, and she will be happy to call us back and chat if we need her to. So, ja, I think it was clear from the start that she was there to take care of us emotionally, if I can say that"</i> (MD33).</p>
PST as motivator	<p><i>"Ok, so my understanding has always been that the PST is someone who will check up on me, to check on my motivation, um to really, I guess, just make sure that I am doing ok with everything that is going on"</i> (ST01).</p> <p><i>"And, I mean, that is all you need, just somebody to check in to say that they are there if you need anything...you know, like to keep you motivated and stuff"</i> (TS27).</p> <p><i>"(Redacted) sometimes just puts a message or something on our WhatsApp group that isn't, you know, about the module or anything, more like a motivational meme or something like that. I like that she takes the time to do that"</i> (RF32).</p>
PST as administrative/ general support	<p><i>"I do want to say that I wasn't aware that the PST role was there to facilitate, or, to bridge the gap between the student feeling disconnected. I just thought they were, you know, as admin support for us".</i> (DP02).</p> <p><i>"My understanding was that (redacted) was more like a programme coordinator, admin type person, if I can say that?"</i> (AR11).</p> <p><i>"Yes (redacted) helped me with that... I think it was called a digital student card? Ja, so she helped me get that sorted out because I was a bit lost with what to actually do"</i> (BZ18).</p> <p><i>"My PST is just like my 'go-to' person (laughs), you know, so anything I need, and I am not sure of, I can just reach out to (redacted), and she is so quick to just put me straight... she is great"</i> (SVR24).</p> <p><i>"So, it's just nice to have somebody to go to when you really don't know, and then she can either say like "go log a query" or, "no, I can help you with that", or... so that was nice, it was really nice to have someone like an inbetweenner, when you really don't know what to do anymore"</i> (AG03).</p>

**Table 4.3.1 Theme 1: PSTs, what are they really there for?**

I found these differing perspectives interesting, and I was left with the question of whether this indicated that the affective aspect of the PST role needed to be more explicitly clarified for the institution's ODL students, or whether this was instead an opportunity to review the role and intentionally make this non-academic support mechanism more *generic* in its scope. This idea will be further explored in chapter 5 (section: 5.5).

I will now report on Theme 2: Affective Support During Times of Calm, which addresses how the PST role was viewed or experienced prior to the advent of Covid-19.

#### **4.3.2 Theme 2: Affective support during times of calm**

The data that led me to the distillation of Theme 2 was gleaned, for the most part, from those participants who had completed their qualification in 2019. These four participants made up the quota sample as explained in chapter 3 (section: 3.4.1). Participants who had been registered prior to Covid-19, but who were still studying during 2020 and 2021, also contributed to the detail of this theme as well as to the next by being able to offer a comparative account of their engagement with their PST both during the pandemic and prior to it.

While engaging with the four quota participants, I enquired as to their experience of the PST role prior to the pandemic. My aim was to understand what value or importance they placed on having access to such an individual and the role the PST played in their learning journey during a time of relative calm. In cases where the participants had commenced their studies prior to Covid-19, but were yet to complete their qualification, I asked whether they could comment on any noticeable or significant differences in their PST engagements. What I learnt was that PST support in a pre-pandemic context was viewed in three different ways:

1. Nice, but not necessary;
2. Only necessary at the beginning of the academic journey; and
3. Definitely necessary throughout the year.

What follows is a brief justification for how I reached these three differentiators. In the table below, I have used direct quotes taken from the focus group interviews and SSIs that were conducted.

<b>Theme 2: Affective support during times of calm</b> (with direct quotes as examples)	
Nice, but not necessary	<p><i>“But, having said that, I am also a mature student, ah, so, I’m very used to just getting on with things and getting things done on my own, you know. Just getting going, getting on with, without a <b>dependency</b> on that support, if I can say that. But it has been a bonus for me. So, great to have, but for me personally, perhaps not totally essential” (DP02).</i></p> <p><i>“I am a self-starter; I like to work on my own and to just put my head down and do what needs to be done. I will say it was nice to hear from (redacted) and (the organisation), you know, to get updates and maybe the odd reminder, but none of it was really information I could not have found out on my own if I needed to. So, for me specifically, I would say the support was a nice-to-have, but I wouldn’t say it was necessary” (AN22).</i></p>
Only necessary at the beginning of the academic journey	<p><i>“He was really helpful and quick to respond in explaining all the processes and what’s required, you know, like assistance with deadlines, or questions, or anything I needed really. So, a lot of that was actually in the first year or let me say the first 6 months at least. So, thereafter, I really had a better understanding of the process, or what I needed to do for each module that was to come. So, I must say, and I don’t mean this as a negative, I have had very little interaction with (redacted) since then. I mean, I can recall him checking in and maybe even receiving the odd email message from him, but let’s say he did a great job in my first year and I didn’t really need him too much after that (laughs)” (AR11).</i></p> <p><i>“Oh, in my first year I was a bit of a mess (laughs), I really had no clue how to even get started. So, when (redacted) introduced herself, I was like ‘yes!’ here is someone who can explain all these codes and platforms and where to find all the stuff I need. She was really helpful, and patient (laughs) I don’t know if I would have been that patient with me, but, yes, she really put everything in its place for me during those first few months. After that I was happy to rather go it alone” (RF32).</i></p>
Definitely necessary throughout the year	<p><i>“Oh, I place a very high importance on it – like, I need it. I’m young and my parents have always been there to take care</i></p>

	<p><i>of stuff, so I needed that person like (redacted). I can't sit and feel like I have no help, no one to just WhatsApp like (redacted), I need that, so I place really high importance on that throughout the year" (SVR24).</i></p> <p><i>"I would say the support is necessary all through the year 'cos there's always something going on, like even before Covid, there were deadlines that changed and even once we had one of our lecturers just leave, I think she went overseas, I am not sure, but (redacted) contacted us to make sure we were ok and let us know what the plan was. So, ja, definitely, the PST is important all the time because anything could happen, and you would need to know" (BZ18).</i></p>
--	---

**Table 4.3.2 Theme 2: Affective Support During Times of Calm.**

From the data, I interpreted that the support provided by the PST role was recognised as having value when it was sought or offered. As evidenced in the table above, there was a sense that participants found the PST support to be particularly beneficial at the beginning of the year, or when they required specific information (AN22; AR11; RF32). While the two younger participants (SVR24; BZ18) both felt that PST support was necessary throughout the year, those participants who were slightly older, or perhaps more independent, preferred to manage their own learning and were less likely to seek assistance from their PST (AN22; AR11; RF32). This finding is supported by Botha (2014:244) who suggests that adult learners are “usually fairly sophisticated and independent, thus possessing the capacity to act independently” and be more self-directed than their younger peers. She explains adult self-directedness as the “capacity to pre-emptively be an active agent in one’s own learning and growth” (*ibid*:244).

The four participants from the quota sample referred to PSTs as “really helpful”, “quick to respond” and “always willing to help”, but none of them seemed to have understood the PST role as being primarily an *emotional* support mechanism – although one participant made the following observation:

**GA15:** “... but maybe the two go hand-in-hand? I mean, if I am having all these things done for me then it takes away loads of my stress. So, at the time I maybe didn't think of (redacted) as being there for me emotionally, but I guess he really sort of was”.

Rather than drawing any conclusions from the data at this point, it was essential to first understand how the PST support was experienced during the pandemic. As noted under Theme 2, adding to the richness of the data were those insights shared by the participants who had been registered in 2019, and who were yet to complete their qualification at the time of this study. Engaging with participants who had experienced PST support under significantly different circumstances provided me with comparative insights that I would not otherwise have obtained. These will be addressed under Theme 3, which looks at affective support during times of crisis.

### **4.3.3 Theme 3: Affective support during times of crisis**

It was noted in chapter 1 (section: 1.7.2) that the institution chose to intensify the PST efforts in March of 2020. This was done in recognition of the inevitable impact of the pandemic on students' emotional wellbeing, regardless of whether they had already made the choice to study online prior to the lockdown regulations coming into effect. The PST team was well-situated to assess the individual contexts of the institution's ODL students and to offer a more personalised approach to any support that students might have required.

What I interpreted from the data was that, although participants<sup>14</sup> each indicated that Covid-19 had impacted their studies, and that "some days were easier than others" (JC29), the participants tended to reflect on the impact of the pandemic in two distinctly different ways: 14 indicated that the lockdown regulations had benefitted their studies to some extent while 11 indicated that the stressors associated with the pandemic had had a negative impact. The remaining five participants felt that, while their studies had remained on track during lockdown, the reality of what was happening in the world around them did sometimes leave them feeling anxious or overwhelmed.

#### **4.3.3.1 2020 was a "good year"**

There were those participants who, because of the lockdown restrictions on travel, and subsequent work-from-home provisions made by their employers, were able to

---

<sup>14</sup> This did not include the quota group (4 participants) whose studies had been completed prior to the pandemic.

spend more time on their studies. It was within this context that they spoke of Covid-19 as “a huge benefit” or of 2020 as having been “a good year”.

When I asked two of the participants how Covid-19 had impacted their learning journey, they replied:

**AR11:** *So weirdly enough, it was a huge benefit (laughs)...hope its ok to even say that...ok, so let me rather say that, in the sense that prior to Covid I had to travel every second week, and obviously that came to a halt, and I have just literally been continuing working from home. In essence, all the time, all the travel time and being away from home etc. just stopped and that made it a whole lot easier for me. So, ja my final year was really, really good (laughs).*

**AC05:** *“...Covid started, and lockdown started. Um, although it was, ah, we were alone in lockdown. When my wife and I were alone in lockdown, we could manage to get through all the assignments, which was nice, there was nothing bad about it. I actually enjoyed 2020”.*

#### **4.3.3.2 2020 was daunting and overwhelming**

Other participants were less able to separate the reality of the pandemic from their studies, referring to the impact as “huge”, “daunting” and “overwhelming”.

**EP09:** *“Oh, the impact was absolutely huge (interviewer: oh really?), yes, huge. It was mind-blowing just how much, because those 2 or 3 hours a day that I had were all of a sudden gone. And you think, well hold on, you are sitting at home, surely you have **more** time not less? And the short answer is no... Because in the past you would get up, have a shower, have your breakfast, get in your car, drop off the kids at school and be at work 7.30 / 7.45. Then at 4.30 you would start winding down, and 5 o’ clock you would go. So, that way you can mentally and physically shut the door, and say work is over, now it’s time to be with the family and time to do A, B and C – do some exercise, go for a walk, feed the dog and then start doing some of my coursework, learning, etc. Now, those boundaries are totally gone”.*

**AG03:** *“I just wanted to say, that last year I actually went through hell because, I was working from home, and you do work harder, and you do end up working in the*

*evenings, and then you are stressing because you know you have to get to your assignments (inaudible), so it was like really, really, really tough, just totally overwhelming”.*

I believe that how participants evaluated the impact and importance of the support provided by their PST during 2020, and on into 2021, was invariably linked to how they had experienced the pandemic. For participants who had viewed the regulation to stay at home as an opportunity to focus on their studies – thereby turning the need for isolation to their advantage –, any stress or anxiety they may have been experiencing did not seem to translate into their academic pursuits (AR11; AC05). By their own account, contact with their PST, or a reliance on affective support, was not a priority for them (MH31; CK14). The opposite was true for participants who experienced a real sense of loneliness, isolation, or anxiety during this period where access to the support provided by the PST role was seen as far more critical (EP09; AG03; ST01).

As with Themes 1 and 2, the table below serves to justify my thinking by using direct quotes taken from the focus group sessions and the SSIs that were conducted.

<b>Theme 3: Affective support during times of crisis</b> (with direct quotes as examples)	
The affective aspect of PST support was not a priority	<p><i>“For me? No. I really wasn’t interested. I had my plan, I had my access to the platforms I needed, and thanks to lockdown, I had the time to do what needed to be done. So, no, I didn’t really think about what my PST could offer me. I think she had her hands full with some of the other guys in our group though (laughs).”</i> (MH31).</p> <p><i>“So, we knew (redacted) was there. He kept in touch through the WhatsApp group and encouraged us to contact him if we needed to. I guess some people must have, but for me it really wasn’t a priority”</i> (CK14).</p>
The affective aspect of PST support was extremely important	<p><i>“Oh, huge! Absolutely huge. Never more so than in the last 18 months, call it 24 months, with Covid. For me Covid has really proved the role, or rather the value, of emotional wellness, and the need for that. The need to feel supported, the need to feel that there is a support mechanism because burn-out is real. I think burnout is more real, especially for distance students that has a job, has a family, trying to do a course... Burnout emotionally, not physically because you are sitting at your ... desk for 10 hours per day, but emotionally it is huge”</i> (EP09).</p>



	<p><i>“When lockdown happened, my husband was away and couldn’t get back, it was really terrible. I mean, I wasn’t sick or anything, but I just felt really vulnerable you know? So, we would WhatsApp video every night and I needed that, but my PST was also a lifesaver. She knew my situation and made sure that she checked in really often. We wouldn’t even talk about my studies, sometimes it was just to say hi and she would tell me how her kids were doing – or her dogs – and that honestly meant the world. I was feeling so isolated, and she was like my link to a bit of reality, if you know what I mean? (TC12).</i></p>
--	---

**Table 4.3.3 Theme 3: Affective Support During Times of Crisis.**

The question then remained: Did those participants who had an established relationship with their PST prior to 2020 experience the support they received during the pandemic any differently? Reading through the transcripts yet again, I realised that there was very little to substantiate a comparable difference in the *nature* of the support sought from or provided by the PSTs during this timeframe. What was evident, however, was that the *importance* placed on that support differed. As two participants (QT17, AG03) shared:

**QT17:** *“I have had (redacted) as my PST for 3 years now. She has always been pretty involved with our group, so I can’t say that I noticed anything really different during Covid, but maybe that’s just because of who she is. For me though, I think I could say that I relied on her help a bit more during Covid than I did before, you know, just for small things, but if I can say, and maybe it’s weird, but I felt like having her there was really quite important last year”.*

Referring to reaching out to her PST during lockdown, participant AG03 shared the following:

**AG03:** *“... but I feel silly, am I being silly, am I being weak because I’m moaning about this silly thing to my PST when other people have got more serious things going on. I don’t even know what I want (redacted) to say to make it better (laughs). I mean, I definitely didn’t expect this kind of thing from her before Covid”.*

The above quotation suggested that, although participants might well have been aware of the PST role and the support PSTs offered prior to the pandemic, it was not until participants found themselves in a time of crisis that the importance of, or the need for, this form of support was more acutely felt.

[For examples of a full transcript of two of the semi-structured interviews and one of the focus group interviews, please refer to Appendices I, J and K.]

Having shared the findings of each of the three identified themes, I will now move on to the discussion of these findings, and what I believe they suggest about the PST role and the provision of affective support to ODL students – particularly during times of crisis.

#### **4.4 SUMMARY OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

The figure below provides a visual summary of the results, framed in terms of Themes 1 to 3, and brings together what I believe to be the key insights gained from my engagements with the participants in this study. I will use this summary to guide the discussion that follows.

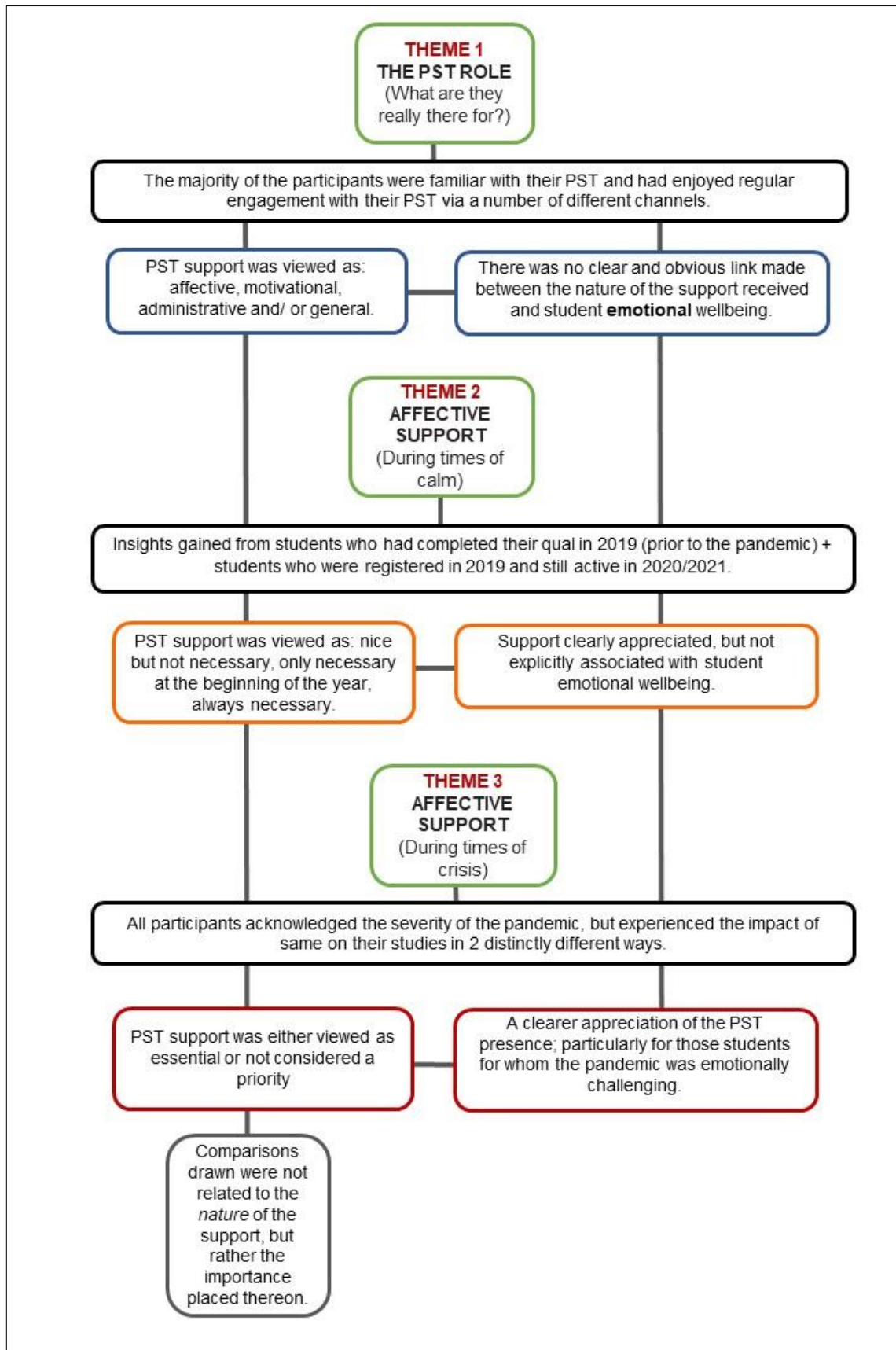


Fig 4.4 Summary of Themes 1 to 3.

As noted under Theme 1, it was clear from my engagements with the participants in this study that they were very familiar with who their PST was or had been. It was also noted that, without exception, participants had had some form of regular engagement with their PST over the course of their enrolment in their respective programmes. Despite this, 26 of the 34 participants initially failed to make any direct connection between the support provided by the PST role and their personal sense of emotional wellbeing. I believe the reason for this may be that either the role was not sufficiently explained to students from the outset, or that, because there is typically so much information to process at the beginning of an academic year, the detail of the intention behind the PST role had somehow become lost or misconstrued.

Those participants who did not make the initial connection between the PST role and affective support spoke of their PST as being a great motivator (ST01; TS27; RF32), or as someone who was always available to answer a question or to steer them in the right direction when they had a query that the PST could not resolve (SVR24; AG03; BZ18; DP02). It was interesting to note that, although each participant spoke of how much they appreciated or relied on the support provided, they did not immediately equate this with having contributed to their emotional wellness. It was only as the discussions unfolded that many of these participants began to make the connection and share that, as they were talking to me, or amongst themselves in the focus groups, they began to realise just how much of their uncertainty or anxiety the PST had alleviated through their support interventions and care (GA15; EM08). Perhaps this was because, as 18 of the 34 participants suggested, they had simply taken their PST's presence "for granted", considering the role to be one of more generic support offered by the institution, rather than one which was intentionally crafted for their emotional wellbeing. This impression of the generic nature of the PST role was not dissimilar to the observations made by those participants who had completed their studies prior to the advent of pandemic: all four participants from the quota group indicated that, although they had appreciated the support provided by the PST, they had viewed it more as a value-add service rather than a role that was directly focused on their emotional wellness or academic success.

As noted under Theme 3, participants were divided in how they experienced the Covid-19 pandemic: while 13 viewed the resultant need to minimise travel and avoid social

gatherings as an opportunity to spend more time on their studies (AR11; AC05), 11 indicated that there were times they felt overwhelmed by events and could not separate what was happening in the world at large from their academic pursuits (EP09; AG03). For the former group, the non-academic support offered by the PST was not something they actively sought out. The predominant response from these participants was that they felt that, because they had access to the resources they needed, a clear idea of the work that was required, and the time available to meet the demands of their studies, they did not need any additional or external support (MH31; CK14). I did consider whether this apparent high level of planning, focus and organisation was not perhaps their way of attempting to control their immediate environment in a time when so much seemed beyond anyone's control. Although I directly posed this question to four of the participants, none were able to provide me with a definitive answer.

The latter group of participants were those who shared that the pandemic had resulted in them experiencing heightened levels of stress and anxiety, leaving them feeling "overwhelmed", "isolated" and "afraid" (TC12; EM08; JR30). For these participants, the affective presence of their PST was regarded as being far more important or meaningful. Participants who had been ill or separated from family members, who were front-line workers, or who were simply ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary situation spoke of the PST presence in a significantly different way. When engaging with these participants, it seemed that any form of contact – whether from family, the institution, or their PST – was viewed as being affective in nature. As one participant noted when she shared her experience of having contracted Covid-19 and being alone at home in isolation:

**ST01:** *"I mean I had support over the phone, so I had people checking in over the phone. It's the same with the PST; you have somebody checking in over the phone and it's just that little bit extra that they give you that says, "its ok, you are gonna get through this", you know, that gives you so much motivation and doesn't make you feel like you are alone. It makes you feel like there are people going through the same thing with us, and I mean (redacted) was a big help, even with that. She stuck with me, she said to me that everything was going to be fine, she helped me with everything. And, I mean, that is all you need, just somebody to check in, to say that it's going to be ok".*

I interpreted this as being context-driven: participants who felt particularly vulnerable during 2020 were far more receptive to offers of support and appreciative of someone who took the time to check in on them than they might have been prior to the pandemic. With people having to live in comparative isolation, contact, even virtual or telephonic, took on far more value than it otherwise might have.

Regardless of how the PST role was understood by the participants, 32 of the 34 who were asked whether the PST role should be retained or done away with by the institution indicated that it should be retained. The two participants who indicated that the role need not be retained based their suggestion on their understanding of the PST role as offering general support, which they both suggested should be offered at every touchpoint in the organisation rather than being the responsibility of a dedicated individual, or a team of individuals like the PSTs.

#### **4.5 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, each of the themes and subthemes identified in chapter 3 was addressed in detail. Themes were informed by a thorough analysis of the dataset and a process of reiterative referral to the transcripts compiled from my engagements with the 34 participants in this study. Quotes taken from these SSI and focus group session transcripts were used to justify my interpretation of the dataset, a summary of which was then used to inform the discussion that followed.

In the next chapter, the synthesis of these results, the conclusions I have drawn, and the resultant recommendations are addressed. I will also set out the limitations of this study and offer a number of recommendations based on the conclusions I have drawn. The chapter will conclude with my suggestions for further research into the concept of affective care in an ODL context.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, the findings of the TA that was conducted were shared, and each of the themes were discussed in sequence. This chapter begins by providing a summary of the literature review that was conducted in chapter 2, followed by a summation of the exploratory qualitative study that is reported on in this mini dissertation. A synthesis of the research findings from chapter 4 is then shared, and a consideration of the similarities or contradictions that might exist between the literature and the empirical study is included. The next section addresses the conclusions I have drawn from the analysis that was conducted and it will include commentary on whether the objectives of this study have been met and the research question answered. The limitations of this study are identified before moving on to the recommendations I would like to make regarding the PST role, both as it exists within the PHT organisation's current ODL model, and for other institutions considering the implementation of a role dedicated to the non-academic support of its ODL students. Before concluding this chapter, I will offer possible suggestions for further research.

### **5.2 A SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review reported on in chapters 1 and 2 was conducted, firstly, to establish what research was already available to guide and support me in the justification for this study, and, secondly, to establish a theoretical framework on which to base the research this mini dissertation reports on. What this review of the literature made clear was that there is a growing recognition that, rather than being an obstacle to "reason and the development of knowledge" (Dirkx, 2008:11), emotion has a role to play in the learning process (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Lehman, 2006; Zembylas et al., 2008). The bulk of the research with which I engaged, however, tended to either focus on the *types* of emotions as experienced by online students (Christie et al., 2007, cited in Bharuthram, 2018; O'Regan, 2013; Pekrun & Stephens, 2011; You & Kang, 2014; Weiss, 2000; Zembylas, 2008), or on emotion as it pertains to the notion of *social presence* in online learning communities (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999; Zembylas, 2008). While social presence is recognised as one of the three presences in the Col model of Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), it is social presence that has evolved most significantly

since the initial inception of the model (Garrison, 2009). Social presence, in this Col context, is further broken down into three sub-categories: (i) expression of emotion, (ii) open communication, and (iii) group cohesion (Garrison et al., 2000). Collectively, these three aspects of social presence lend to the facilitation of students being perceived of, and of perceiving others, as ‘real’ people within an online learning environment (*ibid*). This, in turn, fosters a sense of belonging (Cobb, 2009) to a community that is “thoroughly social and communal” (Lipman, 2003:18). While I was able to find a number of examples of supporting literature that referred to this sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing, these were either fostered by the online instructor (Britt, 2015, cited in Williams, 2015; Eloff, O’Neil & Kanengoni, 2021; Hughes, Ventura & Dando, 2007; Lehman, 2006; Weiss, 2000), or via peer-to-peer engagement (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Majeski, Stover & Valais, 2018; Zembylas et al., 2008). What I could not locate, however, was any reference to a purposefully created role whose presence was specifically intended to facilitate this sense of connection and emotional wellbeing. Realising that this apparent gap exists prompted me to continue in my efforts to understand what value such a third-party role would bring to the online learning experience of an ODL student, specifically during times of crisis, such as was experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I will now provide a brief summary of the empirical study that was conducted for this mini dissertation.

### **5.3 A SUMMARY OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY**

The PST role is central to the ODL model of a leading South African PHT institution. PSTs, in this context, are tasked with the targeted provision of non-academic or affective support of the distance students who enrol with the institution. The PST role was created to address the fact that distance students often report experiencing a sense of disconnect or isolation in an online learning environment (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). The PST role is seen as a means of facilitating a greater sense of being connected to “part of a larger community of learning” (Shea, 2006:35), one that is “thoroughly social and communal” (Lipman, 2003:18). Having failed to identify any reference in the literature to a role of this specific nature – that is, one integrated into the academic team of an organisation but separate from the course facilitators or



student peer group –, I was interested in investigating the impact of such a role on the student learning journey, particularly during the pandemic.

In chapter 1 (sections: 1.3 and 1.4), the problem statement and research questions were identified, with the main research question being established as follows:

***What value is there in intentionally establishing a role that is dedicated to the emotional wellbeing of students in an ODL context, particularly during times of crisis?***

From this main research question, three research sub-questions arose, and each of these, including the main question, is covered in more detail in section 5.5 of this chapter under the heading ‘Conclusions’. The research design, or “framework for action” (Durrheim, 2006:34), was also briefly addressed in chapter 1 (section: 1.6) and covered the following three aspects: (i) the research paradigm, (ii) research approach, and (iii) research strategy. An interpretivist research paradigm was selected for this explorative qualitative study, and the rationale for adopting a case study as my research strategy was explained. Each of the aforementioned are addressed in more detail in chapter 3.

The population for this study comprised students who were registered with the institution between 2019 and 2021, and to whom a PST had been assigned for the duration of their studies. The population numbered 1200 students. From this population, a sample of 34 students was selected to participate in the research this mini dissertation reports on. The purposive sample was made up of the first 30 students to respond to the invitation to participate who also met the following criteria: (i) they indicated their willingness to participate in this study, (ii) they were available to participate, and (iii) they were registered with the institution as an ODL student during 2020/2021. The remaining four participants comprised the quota sample and were selected based on them having completed in 2019, prior to the advent of Covid-19. The quota sample participants were, therefore, able to offer insights into their experience of such an affective support mechanism during a time of relative calm. The selection of the participants for this study is discussed in greater detail in chapter 3 (section: 3.4.1).

Having secured the necessary permission to conduct research from the PHT institution that provided the setting for the case study and the necessary ethics clearance from the College of Education at UNISA, I was able to begin the process of collecting the data. Using SSIs and focus group sessions, I engaged with participants using Microsoft Teams and recorded each of the sessions with the permission of those present. Transcripts were made of each session and shared with participants for member checking. Using the six-phase TA model of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), the dataset was coded into three main themes: (i) PSTs, what are they really there for?, (ii) Affective care in times of calm, (iii) Affective care in times of crisis; and eight subthemes. Using verbatim quotes taken from the various transcripts, each theme was analysed and discussed in chapter 4 of this mini dissertation. The synthesis of these findings, including any similarities or differences between the literature review and the study I conducted, are addressed in the next section.

#### **5.4 SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, three main themes and eight subthemes were identified during the thematic analysis of the data that were collected from the participants in this study. The story that unfolded across these themes and subthemes is synthesised in this section before addressing each of the research questions as a means of providing the conclusions of this study in section 5.5.

While engaging with the data, it soon became clear that, although each of the 34 participants was familiar with the PST role and the individual who had been assigned to them in that capacity, participants did not understand the role as having been created specifically for student emotional wellness. The findings also indicated that, although there was a general sense of appreciation for the support that was offered and provided by the PST, the majority of the participants (28 of 34) viewed the support as motivational or generic in nature rather than having a specifically affective purpose. Findings from the quota group supported this: participants expressed surprise at hearing that the role was intended to facilitate their emotional wellbeing, indicating that they had understood the role as being more general or administrative in nature and that this understanding had influenced how they had made use of the PST role. Participants did concede that having access to this perceived generic support had real value, which is in keeping with the ideas of Tait (2000) who emphasises the importance

of tailoring support to the needs of the students and suggests that support need not only be affective in nature but should also include cognitive and systemic support. This finding also aligns to the work of Karp (2011:2), who suggests that non-academic support is “distinct from academic [support] in that it addresses different skills and knowledge and encourages student success via different processes”, which should include, but need not be restricted to, affective support.

When addressing the nature and impact of the PST role during the pandemic, the participants were divided. Although 11 of the 30<sup>15</sup> participants indicated that they had experienced some form of emotional impact resulting from the crisis, they had not necessarily turned to their PST for support. Those that had reached out to their PST expressed how important this access was, while others indicated that, although they appreciated the PST checking in on them, they had not sought to initiate contact themselves. Close to half of the participants (14 of the 30) shared that they had either intentionally selected distance studies for the autonomy this afforded them, and, therefore, had no immediate need for PST support, or that they had viewed lockdown as an opportunity to rally their resources and work in relative isolation, also negating the need to leverage the support offered by the PST. This willingness to self-manage their learning, or intentionally electing to work in relatively unsupported isolation, does seem to contradict the ideas of Shea (2006) and Cobb (2009) who suggests that what distance students really want is to be part of an integrated community, and to experience a sense of cohesion and belonging. It must be noted, however, that the observations of Shea (2006) and Cobb (2009) were made in a pre-pandemic context and may not necessarily translate into what students need or prefer when faced with a global crisis.

The remaining five participants indicated that they had been in fairly regular contact with their PST but viewed this access as more of a value-add than an essential support mechanism. When asked if the organisation should retain the PST role, 32 of the 34 participants (94%) indicated that the role should be retained, with 27 of these suggesting that the role be adapted to more closely align with how they had

---

<sup>15</sup> This did not include the quota participants who had completed their studies prior to the pandemic.

understood and valued the role. This recommendation by participants closely aligns with the ideas of Karp (2011) and will be addressed in more detail in my recommendations (section: 5.7).

## **5.5 CONCLUSIONS**

In chapter 1 (section: 1.4), the main question that directed the focus of this study was presented and is reproduced here:

***What value is there in intentionally establishing a role that is dedicated to the emotional wellbeing of students in an ODL context, particularly during times of crisis?***

From this main research question, three research sub-questions were posed:

1. What commonalities (and differences) exist in terms of distance students' understanding of the PST role?
2. What value, if any, do distance students place on having access to a PST, and the emotional support they provide, during the course of a normal academic year?
3. What is the impact of a crisis – as that experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic – on the perceived value of having access to PST support?

This section is structured by answering each of the research questions in this study, culminating in the main question.

### **5.5.1 What commonalities (and differences) exist in terms of distance students' understanding of the PST role?**

The data collected strongly suggested that, while each of the participants was familiar with who their PST was (or had been), there was no shared or common understanding of the role as being intentionally affective in nature. While nine of the participants shared that they had, at least to some extent, experienced the role as emotionally supportive, the remaining 25 either viewed the PST as motivational or as relating to administrative or overall support. I found these differing perspectives to be of interest, and I was left with the question of whether this indicated that the affective nature of the PST role needed to be more explicitly stated to the institution's ODL students, or whether this was an opportunity to review the role and intentionally make this non-

academic support mechanism more *generic* in its scope. This idea is further explored in section 5.7 of this chapter.

### **5.5.2 What value, if any, do distance students place on having access to a PST, and the emotional support they provide, during the course of the academic year**

Each of the 34 participants indicated that they had appreciated having access to their allocated PST and had enjoyed regular engagement with same. Within a pre-pandemic context, however, this appreciation was almost exclusively related to the provision of the general or motivational support the PST provided. As indicated in chapter 4 (section: 4.3.2), there were three distinctly different views that participants shared in terms of the value they placed on having access to their PST during times of relative calm:

1. Nice, but not necessary,
2. Only necessary at the beginning of the academic journey, and
3. Definitely necessary throughout the year.

As these three categories suggest, participants expressed their appreciation for having access to someone who was on hand to address their queries, or to steer them in the right direction if they could not personally assist. While some viewed this access as a nice-to-have, particularly at the beginning of the academic year, they did not indicate that they viewed this form of support as essential throughout the year. Only two of the participants indicated that this generic support (as they understood the PST role to be) was definitely necessary throughout the year. This could be attributed to the fact that they were also the youngest of the 34 participants and were, therefore, perhaps more reliant on this form of assistance (see section: 4.3.2). Despite this shared acknowledgement of the value inherent in the PST role, there was no explicit statement made that indicated that this support was understood as ensuring student emotional wellbeing.

### **5.5.3 What is the impact of a crisis – as that experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic – on the perceived value of having access to PST support?**

Within the context of this study, and with specific reference to their academic pursuits, the Covid-19 crisis was viewed by participants in two distinctly different ways: there

were those participants (14 of 30<sup>16</sup>) who viewed the lockdown regulations as an opportunity to focus on their studies, while others (11 of 30) were less able to separate this global event from their academic or personal lives. The remaining five oscillated between feeling able to cope with their studies to experiencing levels of stress or anxiety that left them feeling less able to focus. The group that indicated that the regulations associated with the pandemic had allowed them to immerse themselves more fully in their studies was also the group that felt no real need for the affective support provided by their PST during this time (see section: 4.3.3.1). The group that felt less able to separate their academic pursuits from the reality of the health crisis were also those who indicated that they placed real value in having the option to access the non-academic support provided by their PST, but this group had not necessarily relied on this support in any significant way. The five participants that felt that their experience fell somewhere in between were appreciative of the contact made by their PST but did not initiate any contact themselves.

#### **5.5.4 What value is there in intentionally establishing a role that is dedicated to the emotional wellbeing of students in an ODL context, particularly during times of crisis?**

This was the main question that the study aimed to address and takes into consideration the answers to all three of the sub-questions. As with any support mechanism, I believe there will always be those students who place great value on what is offered by an organisation, while others will do so to a far lesser extent. In terms of the PST role, my interpretation of the data suggests that the impact of this role is less about the value of affective support in an ODL setting and more about the nature and needs of each student and the context in which they find themselves. While some of the participants emphasised that they had selected distance studies specifically because it offers them greater autonomy, the ability to work alone and at their own pace (AN22; DP02), others, as highlighted by TC12 and ST01 in chapter 4 (sections: 4.3.3 and 4.4), stressed the importance of feeling connected and experiencing a sense of belonging, just as Cobb (2009), Garrison (2009) and Lipman (2003) suggest they will. The data also indicate that, even during times of crisis, the

---

<sup>16</sup> This did not include the quota group who had completed their studies prior to the pandemic.

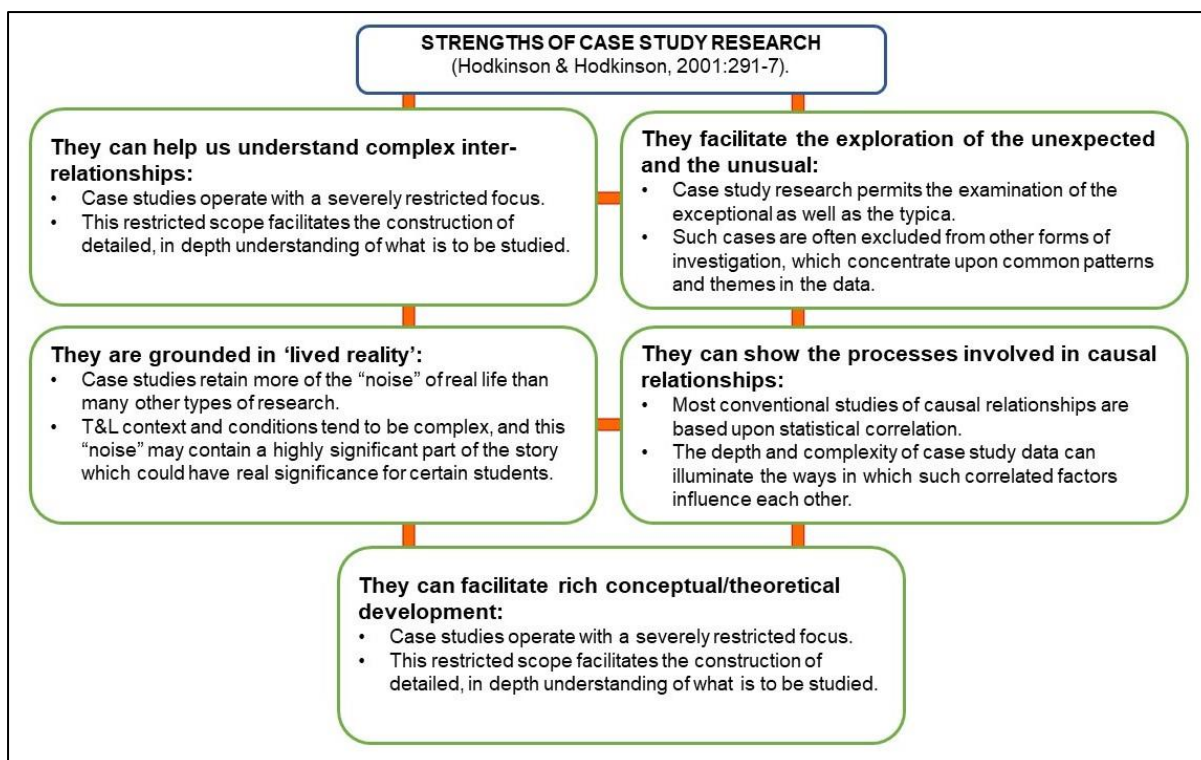
more autonomous students are less likely to seek non-academic or affective support from a role such as the PST, while the latter group, those who placed more importance on the PST's presence, will value this support regardless of context or setting.

Whether the PST role is understood as it was envisaged – that is, to provide affective support to ODL students – or perceived of in more general terms, the conclusion of this study is that there is real value in establishing a presence, other than a facilitator or peer, whose primary focus is the provision of affective support to ODL students – particularly during times of crisis. Each of the participants, regardless of context, was able to account for at least some engagement with their PST, and, without exception, spoke of these experiences in a positive and appreciative light. Although it was clear that the majority of the participants did not initially equate PST support with their emotional wellbeing, this connection was often made during the course of conversation. As one participant noted: "... in fact I... I want to rescind my comment (laughs) that perhaps I didn't know what she was there for (laughs again) because now that I think back it really does become clear to me" (DP02). As noted, there were certainly those who considered the role as 'nice but not necessary', or purely administrative in nature; however, 32 of the 34 participants indicated that the organisation should retain the role, albeit in a broader support capacity rather than one which was purely affective. I believe there is merit acknowledging the voice of the students and adapting the PST role as a mechanism that can provide for students a wider range of support, including an affective component. This role adaptation is addressed in more detail in section 5.7 of this chapter.

In the next section, the limitations of this study are highlighted.

## **5.6 LIMITATIONS**

Before discussing the limitations of case study research, in general, and in this study, in particular, there is merit in first understanding why there is value in using case studies for research purposes. To do this, I will refer to the ideas of Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001), who highlight five positive attributes of case study research in the field of teaching and learning. These are illustrated in the figure below.



**Fig. 5.6 Strengths of Case Study Research (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001).**

I now examine three limitations of case study research, as identified by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001), and relate each of these to my own study.

### **5.6.1 There is a Great Deal of Data to Analyse**

According to Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001), case studies provide the researcher with a great deal of data. In this study, there were transcripts from five focus group sessions and 12 individual SSIs. While all data were analysed in detail, it was necessary to omit certain contributions (Colley & Diment, 2001, cited in Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). In the analysis and reporting of the dataset, some participants were quoted more than others and some of the stories shared were inevitably simplified (*ibid*). This could mean that revisiting the data might "reveal other issues and aspects of [the PST role] that are at least as interesting and important" as those I chose to focus on for the purpose of answering my research questions (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001:8).

### **5.6.2 The Complexity Examined is Difficult to Represent Simply**

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001:9) explain that, in situations where case studies reveal some of the "complexities of social or educational situations", it can be a



challenge to represent these in all their subtleties. As an example of this, they explain that writing is a linear process, “with a beginning, middle and end, but much of what case study research reveals is simply not like that” (*ibid*:9). This was true of my own experience as I found that when I was writing about a particular facet of the PST role as experienced by one of the participants there was the risk of unintentionally glossing over other aspects of that person’s story. As noted by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001), because there are often a number of different ways to present the same dataset – each with its own nuances and areas of emphasis –, it can make the findings of case study research a little challenging to summarise.

### **5.6.3 Case Studies are not Generalisable in the Conventional Sense**

Case studies, by definition, make no claims about being ‘typical’ (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). In this study, specific attention was paid to how PST support was experienced during a time of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants were, therefore, limited to those who were enrolled in an online programme with the organisation between 2019 and 2021. Students who completed in 2019 were included to provide comparative insights into how this role was perceived during a time before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of this study, the pandemic was ongoing, limiting the student experience of the PST role during a time of crisis to a period of 19 months. Because of this restricted focus, I have no way of knowing empirically to what extent the views and opinions of the 34 participants with whom I engaged are similar or different to the other distance students enrolled with the institution. In addition to this, because my sample was relatively small and my data non-numerical, there is no way to definitively establish that the data I collected are representative of the larger population.

Having established the limitations of this study, I now address the recommendations I would like to make to the institution’s Online Centre academic team regarding the possible restructuring of the PST role.

## **5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS**

I now make my recommendation pertaining to the nature of the PST role and how this can be more meaningfully tailored to the needs of students – whether during times of relative calm or times of crisis.

### **5.7.1 PST as a Generic Support Role**

In chapter 4 (section: 4.2.1), and again in section 5.5 of this chapter, it was noted that the PST role was viewed by the participants in three distinctly different ways:

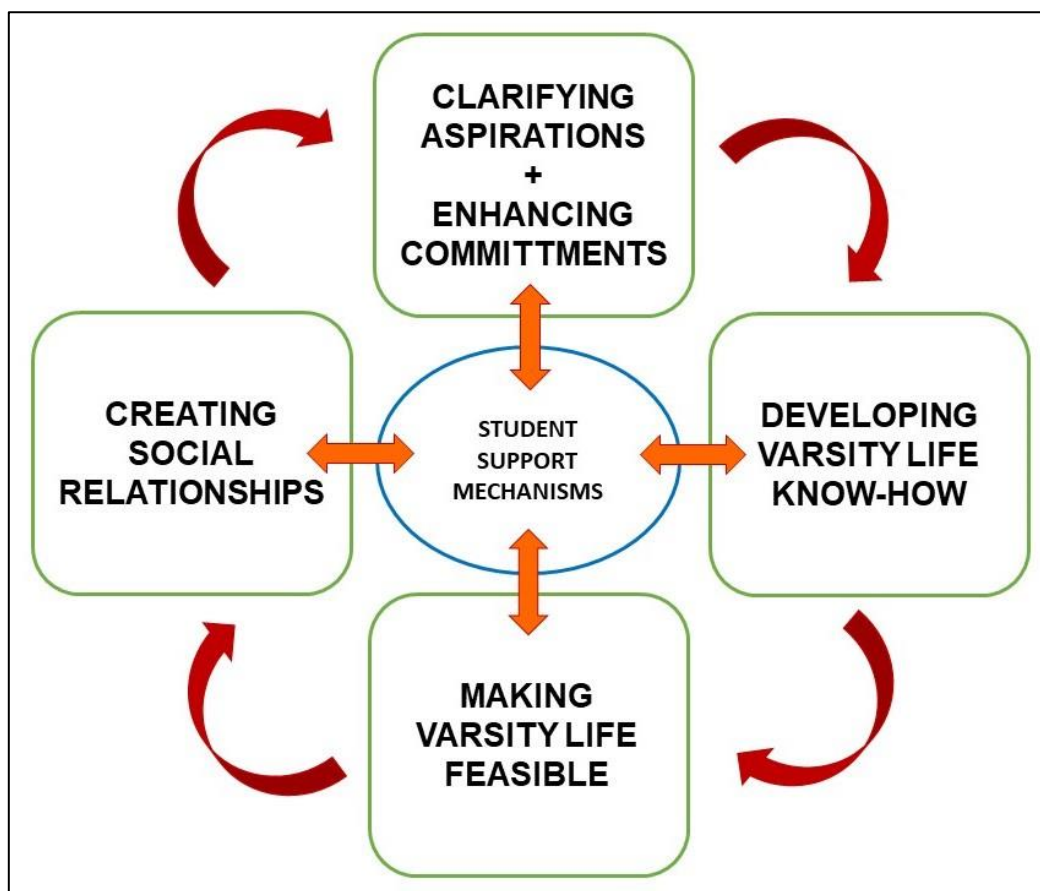
1. PST as emotional support,
2. PST as motivator, and
3. PST as administrative/general support.

In light of this, I had initially planned to recommend that the institution's distance team that is responsible for student orientation and onboarding make a more structured and intentional effort to explain the PST role to both new and existing students. Additionally, I thought to recommend that PSTs themselves be more proactive about explaining the role they play, and the nature of the support they provide their students. Having reviewed the findings of this study over the last few months of writing this report and reconsidering as a result, however, I believe there is greater merit in flipping this approach and using the input from the participants to adapt the PST role to more closely align with the needs and expectations of the students for whom this role was created. What was clear from the data was that very few participants understood the PST role as one of emotional support. Despite the small number of references to appreciating the support received from their PST because it had relieved participants' anxiety about something or had resolved an issue of a more personal nature, very few participants articulated any real understanding of the role as being primarily affective. Instead, what was very apparent was that, while the vast majority of participants did place value on the PST role (94%), it was most often within the context of their understanding the role as a general support mechanism, one which could be relied upon to assist with their general acclimation as distance students.

Based on the above, my recommendation is that the institution in question, as well as any other institution who may be envisaging such a role within their own ODL model, embrace this perception of the PST role, allowing it to become more intentionally structured as a generic support mechanism, though not to the exclusion of the affective component as endorsed by Tait (2000), but in addition to it. I believe that Karp's (2011) four non-academic support mechanisms, as noted in chapter 2 (section: 2.4.3), can be used as the framework on which to build the PST role in its next iteration. Karp

(2011:5) defines *mechanisms* as “the ‘things that happen’ within programmes or activities that support students and help them succeed in and graduate from postsecondary education”. The four mechanisms that she believes appear to encourage student success are listed next and, thereafter, illustrated in the figure that follows:

1. Creating social relationships,
2. Clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment,
3. Developing varsity life know-how, and
4. Making varsity life feasible.



**Fig. 5.7.1 Karp's (2011) Mechanisms of Student Support.**

Each of these will now be explained in more detail as I believe they can be assimilated into the PST role.

- Creating Social Relationships

Here, the assertion is that social relationships can play an important role in the promotion of persistence: when students feel comfortable and safe, they are more likely to ask for assistance or to request access to information, both of which can facilitate their path to academic success (Karp, 2011). Bensimon (2007, cited in Karp, 2011:9) concurs and refers to ways in which “institutional agents” can be called upon to facilitate these connections and to build interpersonal relationships.

The PST role is already perfectly positioned to become just such an “institutional agent” – that is, someone who is a member of the online academic team and who is tasked with establishing a relationship with each of their students. Part of the current PST role is to initiate and maintain a connection with each of their allocated students. This is achieved via a personalised phone call at the beginning of each semester, which is then followed up by regular contact via the various online platforms over the duration of the academic year. The opportunity exists for these engagements to now include information of a more general nature, including perhaps submission due dates, following up after identifying a decline in online engagement, congratulations on assessment achievements, or simply checking in to offer any support or assistance that may be required.

- Clarifying Aspirations and Enhancing Commitment

Grub (2006, cited in Karp, 2011:10) suggests that students who do not have clear goals or a genuine understanding of the importance of tertiary education are more likely to be “derailed by relatively minor challenges and setbacks”. Non-academic support that can assist students in clarifying their goals and understanding the value in what it is they are doing can lead to students who are far more likely to persist (Karp, 2011). Tinto (1993, cited in Karp, 2011:11) argues that the more students relate positively to their learning environment and to the institution with which they are registered, the more likely they are to view their academic pursuits as important and worthwhile.

The revised PST role should provide this support. PSTs need to be better positioned to represent the institution as one which is invested in their students’ academic

achievements and as an institution with a 'human face' that recognises the work that is being done and the commitment that success requires.

- Developing Varsity Life Know-How

Karp (2011) posits that managing student expectations is key to encouraging positive outcomes: students who understand what is expected of them, and what they can expect from their organisation, have an improved chance of settling down faster and progressing sooner. Tinto (1993, cited in Karp, 2011:14) agrees, arguing that students need to understand the “unwritten rules” of the institution, and even goes so far as to suggest that “failure to persist is more often a function of poor understanding and internalisation” of the organisational ethos than it is of “poor academic performance” (*ibid*).

PSTs need to become more intentionally involved in the student onboarding and orientation sessions. During these sessions, the institution’s ODL model should be thoroughly explained, and the various role players clearly identified. Expectations must be made clear: what the student can expect from the institution and what the expectation is of them as ODL students within the organisation. The PST role and the importance of student emotional wellbeing must be highlighted as being key to academic success, and students should be encouraged to engage with their PST at regular intervals during the academic year.

- Making Varsity Life Manageable

According to Karp (2011:19), day-to-day life can sometimes interfere with a student’s focus and ability to stay on track with their academic commitments. She suggests that having a mechanism in place that can occasionally provide students “with a little nudge” will go a long way in helping them overcome “small obstacles which, left unaddressed, might become large enough to stymie their progress”. Bean and Metzner (1985, cited in Karp, 2011:19) support this idea and suggest that external factors such as “hours of employment, family responsibilities, and outside encouragement” have a direct and important impact on “student dropout, academic outcomes, and intent to leave”.

I recommend that the PST role become that “little nudge” to which Karp (2011) refers. Although PSTs already track their students’ online engagement, these efforts need to be monitored more closely by the academic team. PSTs should be provided with a clear timeframe during which they need to pull user activity reports from the institution’s LMS and make contact with students where they detect a decline in engagement. This should be done just prior to each assessment point during the year. Support should be offered as it pertains to the current PST mandate; however, at-risk students should be referred to the academic team for additional support.

- Gradually Shifting the Relationship from PST-to-Student to Student-to-PST

The first six months is a critical period for students new to a distance mode of delivery (Bharuthram, 2018; Pekrun & Stephens, 2011), and the sooner a student feels settled and familiar with the various rules and procedures for engagement in an ODL setting, the more likely they are to persevere (Rumble, 2000). I recommend that this be the PST focus for the first 18 months of a student’s enrolment<sup>17</sup>. This time can be spent building a relationship with each assigned student while also ensuring that they have a clear expectation of the requirements for online study, and a familiarity with the various platforms that need to be navigated as well as the administrative procedures required by the institution. After this initial period, the proactive PST-to-student relationship can be set aside, shifting the onus for engagement to the student and allowing them to request support should *they* choose – effectively reversing the relationship, that is, student-to-PST. This will negate the current impact on the PST’s capacity spent reaching out to students who do not seek or require PST support.

I will now offer my suggestions for further study. These are based on the literature review and research undertaken in preparation for this study.

## **5.8 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

What became apparent while conducting the literature review and the subsequent research for this study was that very little seems to have been written about the value of providing dedicated affective support for students studying in the distance mode –

---

<sup>17</sup> This 18-month timeframe will ensure that Higher Certificate students (completed over 18 months) receive active PST support for the full duration of their qualification.

particularly during times of crisis. The findings of this study suggest that there is still much to be discovered about the emotional impact of the pandemic on ODL students and how this can be better managed by institutions' student support structures. Of further interest to this researcher is ensuring the emotional wellbeing of online teachers during the pandemic, especially in a South African context. As such, a further suggestion is that, rather than asking the same questions that were posed in this study, and, thereby, simply shifting the focus from student to teacher, there is value in first understanding the emotional impact of the pandemic on teachers and how they have, or have not, coped with the stress that inevitably accompanies such a time of uncertainty and change. To achieve this, I propose using a different approach. In this study, I have investigated the value of a role dedicated to the emotional wellbeing of students. This role is an *external* mechanism put in place by the institution for the purpose of providing affective support. My suggestion is to investigate the construct of teacher self-efficacy as an *internal* mechanism – one that can be developed and harnessed by teachers as a moderator of stress, hence making them less emotionally vulnerable and, therefore, less in danger of succumbing to the pressures brought about by the pandemic and other crisis situations (Ma, Chutiyami, Zang & Nicoll, 2021; Rabaglietti, Lattke, Tesauri, Settanni & De Lorenzo, 2021). By assisting teachers to become more self-efficacious, especially during times of heightened anxiety or change, they will be better able to focus on the continued support and academic success of their students (Yang, 2021).

## **5.9 CONCLUSION**

This study began with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and the growing realisation that its emotional impact would be truly significant. The focus of this study was to investigate the value of providing ODL students with a role dedicated to the provision of affective support, particularly during times of crisis. This final chapter began with a summary of the literature review, followed by an overview of the empirical qualitative study that was conducted. A synthesis of the findings was then provided and each of the research questions were addressed in detail. The limitations of this study were then outlined before making suggestions for possible further research. To conclude, I offer a summary of the research followed by some concluding remarks.

There is mounting evidence to support the idea that emotion has a significant role to play in the learning journey of an ODL student, either as directly experienced by the student or as orchestrated by the online facilitator (see section: 1.1). In the wake of March 2020, and the ensuing lockdown regulations imposed by the South African government, the emotional wellbeing of students became a priority (see section: 1.2). The PST role is one that has been explicitly crafted to provide ODL students with non-academic or affective support and is a role which forms an integral part of the ODL model of a leading South African PHT institution. It is this role that provided the case study for this research, the aim of which was to determine what value there is in the provision of such targeted support for online students (see section: 1.3). A series of SSIs and focus group sessions were used as means of compiling a qualitative dataset, which was then analysed using a TA model (see section: 3.4). It was determined that, while students were appreciative of the access they had to a dedicated support mechanism in the form of the PST, they did not immediately make the connection between having access to this support and their personal wellbeing (see section: 4.4). Despite this apparent disconnect between how the role was envisaged by the organisation and how it was perceived by the students, the findings still strongly support the need for a dedicated support mechanism being made available to ODL students, particularly during times of crisis. This mechanism is one that provides more general support, along with an inherent component of care.

“It helps to know that you are not alone, and you are not the only one” (DP02).



## REFERENCES

- Adams, W.C. 2015. Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews. *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation: Fourth Edition*. (August 2015):492–505. DOI: 10.1002/9781119171386.ch19.
- Arghode, V. 2012. Qualitative and Quantitative Research: Paradigmatic Differences. *Global Education Journal*. 4:155-163. [Online] available at: <[https://search-ebscohost-com.ezroxy.iielearn.ac.za/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=85678192&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com.ezroxy.iielearn.ac.za/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=85678192&site=ehost-live&scope=site)>.
- Asenahabi, B.M. 2019. Basics of Research Design: A Guide to selecting appropriate research design. *International Journal of Contemporary Applied Researches*.6(5).
- Barbalet, J. 2002. Introduction: Why Emotions are Crucial. In *Emotions and Sociology*. J. Barbalet, Ed. Oxford, Blackwell. 1–19.
- Botha, J. (2014). The relationship between adult learner self-directedness and employability attributes: An open distance learning perspective (Unpublished master's dissertation). University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Bharuthram, S. 2018. Attending to the affective: Exploring first year students' emotional experiences at university. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 32(2):27–42. DOI: 10.20853/32-2-2113.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 3(2):77-101.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2012. Chp. 2. Thematic Analysis. *Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology*. 2:57-71.
- Brookfield, S. 2006. *The skilful teacher: On technique, trust and responsiveness in the classroom*. Jossey-Bass, Ed. San Francisco.
- Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E., Hounsell, J., and McCune, V.2007. 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': learning to be a university student, online papers archived by The Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh.
- Cleveland-innes, M. & Campbell, P. 2012. Cleveland-Jones - Emotional Presence Learning Online Environ. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*. 13(4):269–292.
- Cobb, S., C. 2009. Social Presence and online learning: a current view from a research

- perspective. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 8(3): 241 - 254.
- Creswell, J. W. 1994. *Research design: Qualitative & quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. 2012. *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among the five approaches*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Damasio, A. 1999. *Feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. New York: Harcourt, Inc.
- Daniels, L. Stupnisky, L. 2012. Not that different in theory: Discussing the control-value theory of emotions in online learning environments. *The Internet and Higher Education*. 15(3):222–226.
- DeCarlo, M. 2018. *Scientific Enquiry in Social Work*. Available: <https://scientificinquiryinsocialwork.pressbooks.com/front-matter/copyright-information-and-attributions-index/>.
- Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. 2011. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Department of Higher Education. 2021. Continuing Education and Training Act, 2006 (Act 16 of 2006). [Online] Available at: <[https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/202033/43096gon313.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202033/43096gon313.pdf)>.
- Dirkx, J.M. 2008. The meaning and role of emotions in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. 120:7–18.
- Durrheim, K. 2006. Research design. In: Terre Blanche, M. and Durrheim, K. (eds). 1999. *Research in practice: applied methods for the social sciences*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Eloff, I., O'Neil, S., and Kanengoni, H. 2021. Student's well-being in tertiary environments: insights into the (unrecognised) role of lecturers. *Teaching in Higher Education*. DOI:10.1080/13562517.2021.1931836.
- Fynn, A., Janse van Vuuren, H. 2017. Investigating the role of non-academic support systems of students completing a Master's Degree in Open, Distance and eLearning. *Perspectives in Education*. 35(1):189-199.
- Garrison, D. R. 2009. Communities of Inquiry in Online Learning. *Encyclopaedia of distance learning, Second edition*.
- Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T. and Archer, W. 2000. Critical Inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and*

- Higher Education*.2(2-3):87-105.
- Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. 2010. The first decade of the community of inquiry framework: A retrospective. *Internet and Higher Education*. 13(1–2):5–9. DOI: 10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.10.003.
- Gerring, J. 2004. What is a Case Study, and what is it good for? *The American Political Science Review*. 98(2):341-354.
- Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E. and Chadwick, B. 2008. Methods of Data Collection in Qualitative Research: Interviews and Focus Groups. *British Dental Journal*. 204(6):291-295.
- Grix, J. 2004. *The Foundations of Research*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hancock, D.R., Algozzine, B. 2017. *Doing Case Study Research: A Practical Guide for Beginning Researchers*. Teachers College Press, New York.
- Hughes, M., Ventura, S. & Dando, M. 2007. Assessing social presence in online discussion groups: A replication study. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*. 44(1):17–29. DOI: 10.1080/14703290601090366.
- Hunter, D., McCallum, J. and Howes, D. 2019. Defining Exploratory-Descriptive Qualitative (EDQ) research and considering its implication to healthcare. *Journal of Nursing and Health Care*. 4(1).
- IIE (009). 2020. *Assessment Strategy and Policy Covid19 (Pandemic Version)*. The Independent Institute of Education (Pty) Ltd.
- IIE (027). 2020. *Student Services, Academic Development and Lecturer Resource Allocation Policy, V2*. The Independent Institute of Education (Pty) Ltd.
- IIE (022). 2020. *Teaching and Learning Strategy, V7*. The Independent Institute of Education (Pty) Ltd.
- Jager, R. & Halliday, T. 1998. On Confirmatory versus Exploratory Research Author ( s ): Robert G . Jaeger and Tim R . Halliday Source : *Herpetologica* , Jun . , 1998 , Vol . 54 , Supplement : Points of View on Contemporary Education in Herpetology ( Jun . , 1998 ) , pp . S64-S66 Published. *Herpetologica*. 54:54–57.
- Karp, M.M. 2011. *Towards a New Understanding of Non-Academic Student Support: Four Mechanisms Encouraging Positive Student Outcomes in the Community College*. Columbia University, Working Paper, 28.
- Kivunya, C. and Kuyini, A.B. 2017. Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*. 6(5):26-41.
- Krueger, R.A., and Casey, M.A. 2001. *Designing and Conducting Focus Group*

- Interviews. In *Social Analysis: Select Tools and Techniques. Social Development Papers*, (36):4-23.
- LeDoux, J. 1999. *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*. London: Phoenix.
- Lehman, R., Outreach, S. & Education, D. 2006. The role of emotion in creating instructor and learner presence in the distance education experience. *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning*. 2(2):12–26.
- Lietz, C.A., Langer, C.L., and Furman, R. 2006. Establishing Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research in Social Work: Implications from a Study Regarding Spirituality. *Qualitative Social Work*. 5(4):441-458.
- Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. 1985. *Naturalistic Enquiry*. Newbury Park: CA: Sage.
- Lipman, M. 1991. *Thinking in Education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lipman, M. 2003. *Thinking in education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [Online] Available at: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511840272>>.
- Ma, K., Chutiyami, M., Zang, Y., Nicoll, S. 2021. Online Teaching Self-Efficacy during COVID-19: Changes, Its Associated Factors and Moderators. *Educ. Inf. Technol*, 226:1-23.
- Mainardes, E.W., Alves, H. & Raposo, M. 2010. An Exploratory Research on the Stakeholders of a University. *Journal of Management and Strategy*. 1(1):76–88. DOI: 10.5430/jms.v1n1p76.
- Majeski, R.A., Stover, M. & Valais, T. 2018. The Community of Inquiry and Emotional Presence. *Adult Learning*. 29(2):104515951875869. DOI: 10.1177/1045159518758696.
- Mayhanya, M., Mays, T., Ryan, P. 2013. Beyond Access: tailoring ODL provision to advance social justice and development. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 27(6):1384–1400.
- Mays, N. and Pope, C. 1995. Qualitative Research: Rigor and Qualitative Research. *BMJ* (311):109-112.
- McInerney, J., Roberts, T. S. 2004. Online Learning: Social Interaction and the Creation of a Sense of Community. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 7(3): 73-81.
- Merriam, S. B. 2002. Introduction to Qualitative Research. In S.B. Merriam (Ed.), *Qualitative research in practice: examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco: USA. Jossey-Bass.

- Mortiboys, A. 2012. Teaching with Emotional Intelligence. *A step by step guide for higher and further education professionals (2nd ed.)*. 2.
- Näykki, P., Laru, J., Vuopala, E., Siklander, P. & Järvelä, S. 2019. Affective Learning in Digital Education—Case Studies of Social Networking Systems, Games for Learning, and Digital Fabrication. *Frontiers in Education*. 4(November):1–14. DOI: 10.3389/educ.2019.00128.
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E., Moules, M.J. 2017. Thematic Analysis: Striving to meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 16:1-13: DOI:10.1177/1609406917733847.
- O'Regan, K. 2003. Emotion and E-learning. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Network*. 7(3):78–92. DOI: 10.24059/olj.v7i3.1847.
- Paloff, R. and Pratt, K. 1999. Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pekrun, R. Stephens, E. 2010. Achievement Emotions in Higher Education. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. 25th ed. J.C. Smart, Ed. California, USA: Springer. 257–306.
- Plutchik, R. 2003. *Emotions and life: Perspectives from psychology, biology, and evolution*. American Psychological Association.
- Rehman, R., Hussain, N.S., Khan, R., and Katpar, S. 2015. Exploring emotional wellness: The art of being cheerful about life at medical campus. *Eur J Psychol Edu Studies*. 7(2):57 -64.
- Rehman, A. A. and Alharthi, K. 2016. An Introduction to Research Paradigms. *International Journal of Educational Investigations*. (3) 8:51-59.
- Sönmez, A. 2013. Research methodology and design. *Contributions to Management Science*. 63–112. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-02033-4\_3.
- Rabaglietti, E., Lattke, L. S., Tesauri, B., Settanni, M., and De Lorenzo, A. 2021. A balancing act during covid-19: teachers' self-efficacy, perception of stress in the distance learning experience. *Front. Psychol*. 12:644108. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.644108.
- Richardson, J.C. and Swan, K. 2003. Examining social presence in online courses in relation to students' perceived learning and satisfaction. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*.7(1):68-88.

- Rotar, O. 2021. Online Student Support: A Framework for Embedding Support Interventions into the Online Learning Cycle. Centre for Higher Education Research and Evaluation, Lancaster University.
- Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D. R., and Archer, W. 1999. Assessing social presence in asynchronous text-based computer conferencing. *Journal of Distance Education*.14(2):50-71.
- Rumble, G. 2000. Student support in distance education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: learning from service management. *Distance Education*.21(2):216-235.
- Shea, P. 2006. A Study of Students' Sense of Learning Community in Online Environments. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*.
- Stephan, M., Markus, S. & Gläser-Zikuda, M. 2019. Students' achievement emotions and online learning in teacher education. *Frontiers in Education*. 4(October):1–12. DOI: 10.3389/educ.2019.00109.
- Stets, J. Turner, J. 2006. *Handbook of the sociology of emotions*. New York: Springer.
- Karp, A. 2000. Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Learning. *The Journal of Open , Distance and eLearning*. 15(3). Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
- Taylor, S., Rivizi, F. and Henry, M. 1997. (Transferred to digital, 2005). *Educational Policy and the Politics of Change*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Terrell, S.R. 2016. *Writing a Proposal for Your Dissertation*. Guilford Press (E Book).
- Värlander, S. 2008. The role of students' emotions in formal feedback situations. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 13(2):145–156.
- Walsh, K. 2003. Qualitative Research: Advancing the Science and Practice of Hospitality. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*. 44(2):66-74.
- Waight, E. and Giordano, A. 2018. Doctoral students' access to non-academic support for mental health. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management* (in press):pp (in press).
- Wegerif, R. 1998. The social dimension of asynchronous learning networks. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*. 2(1).
- Weiss, R.E. 2000. Humanizing the online classroom. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. 2000(84):47–51. DOI: 10.1002/tl.847.
- Williams, L.S. 2017. The Managed Heart: Adult Learners and Emotional Presence Online. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*. 65(2):124–131. DOI: 10.1080/07377363.2017.1320204.

- Woodside, A.G. 2017. Case Study Research: Core Skills in using 15 Genres. vol Second Edition, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Bingley, England, viewed 19 August 2021, <<https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.iielearn.ac.za/login?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=1423587&site=e=ehost-live&scope=site>>.
- Wosnitza, M. & Volet, S. 2005. Origin, direction and impact of emotions in social online learning. *Learning and Instruction*. 15(5):449–464.
- Yang, C. (2021). Online Teaching Self-Efficacy, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies, and Compassion Fatigue Among Educators During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *School Psychology Review*, DOI: 10.1080/2372966X.2021.1903815.
- Yin, R, 1994. Case study research: Design and methods. Beverly Hills: CA: Sage Publishing.
- You, J. Kang, M. 2014. The role of academic emotions in the relationship between perceived academic control and self-regulated learning in online learning. *Computers and Education*. 77:125–133.
- Zembylas, M. 2008. Adult Learners' Emotions in Online Learning. *Distance Education*. 29(1):71-87. doi:10.1080/01587910802004852.
- Zembylas, M., Theodorou, M. and Pavalakis, A. 2008. The role of emotions in the experience of online learning: challenges and opportunities. *Educational Media International*. 45(2):107-117. Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

## APPENDIX A: EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

**From:** [Student AG019](#)  
**To:** [Researcher](#)  
**Subject:** Re: REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT  
**Date:** Saturday, 01 May 2021 11:58:26  
**Attachments:** [image001.png](#)

---

Dear Researcher  
I would be gladly participate in the research project.  
Let me know what you need from me.  
Regards.  
Student AG019.

On Fri, 30 Apr 2021, 10:30 The Researcher, <[redacted](#)> wrote:

Hi there Student AG019,

As a past / current (redacted) Distance student, you are being contacted to determine if you might be willing to participate in a Research Project I am currently working on.

I am hoping to chat to (redacted) Distance students who were registered before and / or during 2020: my focus is on the student experience of the Programme Success Tutor role; particularly during the Covid pandemic and lockdown etc. and I would really benefit from your input

**Please read the letter attached that outlines the project and requests your consent – if you are willing to give me about an hour of your time it would be most appreciated, and if you have any questions I would be happy to give you a call**

Kind regards,

**The Researcher**



## APPENDIX B: LETTER OF CONSENT

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT

My name is **Liesl Helene Scheepers** I am conducting research under the supervision of **Prof. Geesje van den Berg**, a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies – ODL towards an **M. Ed in Open and Distance Learning** at the University of South Africa (UNISA).

We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled:

*'Tell someone who cares': the value of intentionally establishing an online presence dedicated to student emotional-wellness; particularly during times of crisis.*

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study is expected to collect important information that could improve the quality of emotional support that is provided to students studying in an online mode – during both times of calm and times of crisis: such as that experienced during the Covid19 lockdown regulations.

### WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited because, as a student of the (**redacted**) Online Centre, you would have been allocated a Programme Success Tutor (PST) for the full duration of your studies. Your participation in this study will provide greater insights into the efficacy of this role in terms of the provision of emotional wellness support for online students.

#### Contact Details:

I obtained your contact details from the database of students currently / previously enrolled with the (**redacted**) Online Centre.

#### Study Size:

All (**redacted**) students have been invited to participate in this study: approx. 1800. The first 30 students who respond and who meet the necessary criteria (either registered between 2016 and 2021 or registered for the first time in 2020) will be selected to participate.

### WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The study involves focus groups and semi-structured interviews – these will be carried out online at a time that is most convenient for the participant and the researcher. Ten questions will be posed that relate to your experiences as an online student, the nature of your engagement with your PST and the emotional support you received from your PST (if any)

during the 2020, Covid19 lockdown. Each focus group and/or Semi-Structured interview will be allocated a one to two (1 - 2) hour timeslot – depending on the level of engagement and feedback, these sessions may require slightly more, or slightly less than the allocated time. Focus groups and interviews will be scheduled during June, July and August of 2021.

**CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?**

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

**WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Current research would suggest a growing recognition that the role of emotion in an online context should not be ignored. The aim of this study is to investigate the value of introducing a third-party role: that of a Programme Success Tutor (PST); whose sole focus it is to nurture student wellness through relationship-building and support across a student's entire programme of study. The emotional impact of the Covid19 pandemic of 2020, was acutely felt, and brought with it a renewed focus on the PST role and the nature of the support they provide to the ODL students. By engaging with students who are able to share personal accounts of the support provided by their PST, I am hoping to gain greater insights regarding the impact and efficacy of this role on the student experience; especially during times of crisis. The findings from this study may either be used to inform ODL models of the future, or they may determine that the presence of PST in the online student's learning journey in fact makes no significant difference.

**ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?**

All records of engagement will remain anonymous and, as much as participation in focus groups will allow, confidential. I do not foresee any negative consequences resulting from your participation in this study.

**WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

You have the right to insist that your name will not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will know about your

involvement in this research. Your name will not be recorded anywhere, and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your answers will be given a code number, or a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings.

Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly; including the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

A report of the study will be submitted as a research report and may also be used for publication or conference proceedings, however individual participants will not be identifiable in such endeavour.

According to Krueger and Casey (2000:5), **focus groups** are planned discussions designed to elicit group interaction and “obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment”. In keeping with the suggestion of Agar and MacDonald (1995), participants in each focus group will not necessarily know each other. As participants will be online students this is almost inevitable; however, each group will comprise of students who were under the care of the same PST. Grouping students by PST will establish at least some level of what Morgan (1997:36) refers to as a “homogeneity (of) background” although not necessarily a “homogeneity (of) attitudes”. Understanding how different students experienced the same PST will provide important insights into how different people respond to the same level or forms of emotional support as provided by the PST. The expectation is that having the same PST in common will serve as a unifying starting point for conversation, while still leaving room for participants to share insights that are unique to their own experiences and context: While every effort will be made to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I advise you not to disclose personally sensitive information in the focus group.

**References:**

- Agar, M., and MacDonald, J. 1995. Focus Groups and Ethnography. *Society for Applied Anthropology*. 54(1):78-86.
- Krueger, R.A., & Casey, M.A. 2000. Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research. *Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage*.

Morgan, D.L. 1997. Planning and Research Design for Focus Groups. *Sage Publishers*:  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412984287.n4>.

**HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?**

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet based at the (**redacted**) campus for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a secure server. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. After the requisite 5 years, all hard copies will be shredded, and/or electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the server.

**WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?**

There are no incentives attached to the participation in this study, nor will participants receive payment for their involvement.

**HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?**

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the College of Education, Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

**HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?**

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact **Liesl Helene Scheepers** via email: [Ischeepers@varsitycollege.co.za](mailto:Ischeepers@varsitycollege.co.za). The findings are accessible for a period of 18months from conclusion of the project.

Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact **Liesl Scheepers at: 072 445 3960 (email):**

[Ischeepers@varsitycollege.co.za](mailto:Ischeepers@varsitycollege.co.za)

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact **Prof. Geesje van den Berg** ([vdberg@unisa.ac.za](mailto:vdberg@unisa.ac.za))

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Sincerely



**Liesl Scheepers**

## APPENDIX C: REPLY SLIP

I, (**redacted**) confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the semi-structured interview and/or the focus group engagement.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname (Please Print)

(**Redacted**)

Redacted

Participant Signature

05 May 2021

Date

Researcher's Name & Surname (please print)

Liesl Scheepers



Researcher's signature

06 May 2021

Date

## APPENDIX D: REMINDER/CONFIRMATION OF SESSION

**From:** [Liesl Scheepers](#)  
**To:** [REDACTED](#)  
**Subject:** RESEARCH PROJECT: FOCUS GROUP 1  
**Date:** Saturday, 22 May 2021 10:31:00  
**Attachments:** [image001.png](#)  
[RESEARCH PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.pdf](#)  
**Importance:** High

---

Morning All,

Firstly a HUGE thank you for your willingness to assist me with my research into the Programme Success Tutor (PST) role which forms an integral part of the VC Online Model.

The Collab session is scheduled for **6pm on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> May** – access to test your connectivity and sound will open 15mins before the session.

Here is the link we will use: <https://eu.bbcollab.com/guest/a5b410fd4dc1411d8880bb0ff899d26b>

**The session will be recorded in order for me to transcribe afterwards – no names will be included in the transcript.**

I have attached the questions so that you have a chance to think about your responses.

I look forward to chatting to you on Monday – enjoy the rest of your weekend.

Kind regards,

**Liesl Scheepers**  
**Manager: Online Teaching and Learning**

## APPENDIX E: QUESTIONS: SEMI-STRUCTURED/FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

The Programme Success Tutor (PST) role will serve as the *case-study* for this exploratory research. The focus of this qualitative study will be to answer the following main question:

***What inherent value is there in intentionally establishing an online presence dedicated to student emotional wellness; particularly during times of crisis?***

From this question, the following sub-questions have been devised:

---

Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Male / Female  
Current Year of Study: \_\_\_\_\_ Qualification: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Part 1: The Programme Success Tutor Role**

1. As a distance student you would have been allocated a Programme Success Tutor (or PST) for the duration of your studies – do you know who your PST is (or was)?
2. In the context of being a distance student, please share your understanding of the PST role.
3. Since embarking on your online learning journey, what kind of engagements (if any) have you had with your PST?

### **Part 2: Emotional Wellness**

4. In the Distance space, *emotional wellness* relates to a student's sense of wellbeing and the level of connectedness they experience. As an online student, how much importance do you place on feeling *emotionally* supported during your studies?
5. During your time as a distance student, did you feel that your emotional wellbeing was of importance to your PST?
  - **If yes** – please share an example of how this care was demonstrated?
  - **If no** - please explain what impact (if any) this *absence* of PST care had on your studies?

### Part 3: Perceived Value

6. As a distance student, did you find that having access to a PST made a difference to how you experienced your academic journey?
  - If yes – please elaborate
  - If no – please share why this was your experience
7. In 2020, the Covid19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdown implemented in this country, had a significant impact on everyone's life – how did these events impact your *learning journey* as a distance student?
8. Did your PST make personal contact with you during the first few months of the lockdown?
  - If yes – please share the nature of this engagement and the impact it made
  - If no – do you believe that having that contact would have made a difference?

### Part 4: Times of Calm versus Times of Crisis

9. Rather than offering *academic* support, the PST role was created specifically to provide a dedicated online presence focused on the *emotional* wellness of students. **Generally speaking**, do you believe that there is value in having someone like a PST available to online students?
  - If yes – please explain why you believe this to be the case?
  - If no – please explain why you believe this to be the case?
10. In times of crisis (as experienced during the Covid19 pandemic) would your answer to the previous question be the same?
  - a. If yes – please explain why this would be the case?
  - b. If no – please explain why you would change your answer?

### Part 5: In Summary

In light of the discussion and exchange generated by the 10 questions that have been posed – would you vote to:

1. Retain the PST role
2. Remove the PST role



## APPENDIX F: ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE (UNISA)



### UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 2021/04/14

Ref: 2021/04/14/44530684/09/AM

Name: Ms LH Scheepers

Student No.:44530684

Dear Ms LH Scheepers

**Decision:** Ethics Approval from  
2021/04/14 to 2024/04/14

**Researcher(s):** Name: Ms LH Scheepers  
E-mail address: lscheepers@varsitycollege.co.za  
Telephone: 0724453960

**Supervisor(s):** Name: Prof G van den Berg  
E-mail address: vdberg@unisa.ac.za  
Telephone: 012 429 4895

#### Title of research:

**'Tell someone who cares': the value of intentionally establishing an online presence dedicated to student emotional-wellness; particularly during times of crisis.**

**Qualification:** MEd ODL

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period 2021/04/14 to 2024/04/14.

*The low risk application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on 2021/04/14 in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



University of South Africa  
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane  
PO Box 392 UNISA 0003 South Africa  
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4150  
[www.unisa.ac.za](http://www.unisa.ac.za)

3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2024/04/14**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

*Note:*

*The reference number 2021/04/14/44530684/09/AM should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*


Kind regards,



**Prof AT Motlhabane**  
**CHAIRPERSON: CEDU RERC**  
motlhat@unisa.ac.za



**Prof PM Sebate**  
**EXECUTIVE DEAN**  
Sebatpm@unisa.ac.za



Approved - decision template – updated 16 Feb 2017

University of South Africa  
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane  
PO Box 392 UNISA 0003 South Africa  
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4150  
[www.unisa.ac.za](http://www.unisa.ac.za)

## APPENDIX G: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH



Reference: R.15519  
 Enquiries: [bvanwyk@iie.ac.za](mailto:bvanwyk@iie.ac.za)  
[research@iie.ac.za](mailto:research@iie.ac.za)

30 April 2021



Permission to conduct research on IIE staff, students, sites or artefacts with standard conditions



<b>Initials and surname:</b>	L.H. Scheepers
<b>Institution:</b>	University of South Africa
<b>Qualification:</b>	Master in Open and Distance Learning
<b>Research to be conducted in:</b>	2021
<b>Title of study:</b>	'Tell someone who cares': the value of intentionally establishing an online presence dedicated to student emotional-wellness; particularly during times of crisis



Dear Ms Scheepers,



The committee considered your request and have granted permission to conduct research on IIE staff, students, sites or artefacts in accordance with your request – on condition that you strictly adhere to the conditions stipulated below. This approval is based on the assumptions that (1) the information you have provided is true and factually correct and that (2) the study will be conducted in an ethical manner.

Permission is granted to proceed with the above study subject to meeting the conditions listed below. Permission may be withdrawn should any of these conditions not be met.

**Please note:** The panel has not considered the merits, accuracy or ethical soundness of the research. The only merits examined are the use of The IIE as a sample.

Conditions to be met	
1.	A copy of the final paper must be submitted electronically to The IIE's Dean for Research and Postgraduate Studies at <a href="mailto:research@iie.ac.za">research@iie.ac.za</a> no later than 30 days post finalisation.
2.	The researcher(s) is neither permitted to refer to The IIE or any of its educational brands nor to the name, logo, brand or any other identifiers of The IIE or any of its educational brands in any way, including, but not limited to, in questionnaires, surveys, interviews, proposal or research reports. The IIE or educational brand in question must be referred to in a generic manner, for example 'A private provider'.
3.	The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from all of the participants in his/ her sample if the study is not anonymous.
4.	If the Learning Management System (LMS) of The IIE is used, the researcher(s) is not permitted to refer to it by name. Learn needs to be referred to in a generic manner, for example "the Learning Management System of a Higher Education provider."
5.	A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the relevant person(s) at the brand or The IIE that would be involved in the study.
6.	Research must be conducted in such a way that the normal programme and operations of the site/ offices is not interrupted.

ADVTECH HOUSE

Inanda Greens  
 54 Wierda Rd West  
 Wierda Valley 2196  
 P.O. Box 2369  
 Randburg 2125



Directors: RJ Douglas (UK), JDR Oesch, MD Aitken, FJ Coughlan  
 Group Company Secretary: CB Crouse

The Independent Institute of Education (Pty) Ltd is registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training as a private education institution under the Higher Education Act, 1997 (reg. no. 2007/HE07/002). Company registration number: 1987/004754/07.

7. The principal/ manager of a site must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher(s) may carry out the research at the site.
8. The researcher(s) may only use this data for these research purposes and in no other way.
9. Should the researcher(s) wish to publish this research or in any way make the results public, for example by publishing the results on a social media platform, this committee will need to approve a request to this end first.
10. No names or identifying information of participants may be used within the research and the research must be voluntary.
11. Photographs of human subjects may only be taken if relevant to the research and informed consent from the participants or respondents was obtained, and, even with informed consent, the photographs may not be published.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/ her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. If any of The IIE reports or policies are used as part of the research, all identifying information needs to be removed.
14. Please make it clear that the information will not be used punitively in any way and participants may in no way be counselled or advised based on this.
15. The reference number for this letter must appear, in one format or another, on all research documentation distributed amongst IIE staff or students.

All the best with your research.

Yours sincerely,



Dr B. van Wyk  
Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies  
The Independent Institute of Education



## APPENDIX H: IMPARTIAL PEER FEEDBACK

<b>Date:</b>	18 September 2021		
<b>Name:</b>	Alison M Engelbrecht		
<b>Designation:</b>	Coordinator, Teaching & Learning IIE Varsity Collge: Online Centre		
<b>Signature:</b>	[REDACTED]		
<b>Having reviewed the study, I have the following feedback to provide:</b>			
Overemphasised points	YES	NO	No
Underemphasised points	YES	NO	No
Vague descriptions	YES	NO	No
Potential errors in the data	YES	NO	No
Apparent bias / assumptions made by researcher	YES	NO	No
<b>If you have indicated YES to any of the above, please elaborate below:</b>			
<b>I have read the study, including Chapter 3 and have the following feedback to provide:</b>			
I believe the rationale for this study is justified	YES	NO	Yes
The main research question is clearly articulated	YES	NO	Yes
The sub-questions link back to the main question	YES	NO	Yes
<b>Research Design:</b>			
The research paradigm selected is appropriate	YES	NO	Yes
A qualitative approach is best suited to this study	YES	NO	Yes
A case study approach is justified	YES	NO	Yes
<b>Research Methodology:</b>			
The population for this study is clearly defined	YES	NO	Yes
The sampling method is clear and justified	YES	NO	Yes
Data collection is clearly explained and appropriate	YES	NO	Yes
The use of semi-structured interviews is supported	YES	NO	Yes
The use of focus group interviews is supported	YES	NO	Yes
The use of thematic analysis is supported	YES	NO	Yes
<b>Data Analysis:</b>			
I am satisfied with the themes and sub-themes that the researcher has identified			Yes
I am satisfied that the transcripts provide a fair and true reflection of the recorded sessions			Yes
<b>If you have indicated NO to any of the above, please elaborate below:</b>			
Research has been thoroughly conducted with with clearly defined findings. An interesting and dynamic document which has given insights into the way in which students are supported and how these students perceive this support.			
Thoroughly enjoyable read which has triggered thought and further investigation.			

## APPENDIX I: TRANSCRIPT: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW EXAMPLE 1

**Semi-Structured Interview: Transcript**

**Recording duration: 21.15**

**Student: AR11**

---

Recording begins:

**Interviewer:** Firstly, I just want to thank you for making the time to chat to me; I realise with the time zone difference, there was a little juggling to do – so, I really do appreciate this.

**AR11:** Sure, not problem

**Interviewer:** Ok, so let me begin by giving you a little bit of background, um, I know you read the supporting letter that I sent you and the questions we will be working through in this session, but just for the sake of clarification, and for this recording, I would like...if you don't mind...just to recap on a few things?

**AR11:** No, that's fine

**Interviewer:** Great, ok, so when (the organisation) first launched their distance model, that was in 2016, and we included in the model the Programme Success Tutor role, or the PST role. Essentially, our thinking at the time was just that... you know, research has shown that one of the main reasons students drop out of online programmes and stuff like that, is because of that feeling they have of just being disconnected – feeling a little isolated because no one is really seeing them, or acknowledging them, or assisting them, and they start feeling like they are putting in a lot of work and... its just such a different experience to being on a campus, in a classroom, and they just don't enjoy it and they fall out, or step away. And so we brought in the Programme Success Tutor role as part of an acknowledgement of this, and to add an element of what we referred to as student emotional wellness. So now that we are just over 5 years in, it is time to take a look at the role; to see how its evolved, to see how it is being rolled out by the people currently in those positions, and to just hear from the students themselves, how they are experiencing this role. Ultimately, where we are going with this, is wanting to understand what to do with this role. Do we modify it, so we fine-tune it, do we just do away with it all together?

So, we are looking for an understanding of how students are experiencing this role, the importance they place on it and so on – especially in light of 2020, Covid and the whole lockdown situation that came about as a result.

**AR11:** Ok, definitely...yes, that sounds interesting

**Interviewer:** Ok, so first things first – what year of study are you in?

**AR11:** Um, I completed last year.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so you graduated in 2021? (student acknowledges that this is correct), ok, perfect. And what was your qualification?

**AR11:** Oh, um, it was the BCom Strategic Management.

**Interviewer:** Ok, great, thanks. So, as a distance student you would have been allocated a PST, who was that?

**AR11:** Oh, that was (redacted), I don't recall his surname though

**Interviewer:** (redacted)?

**AR11:** Yes, yes, that was him

**Interviewer:** So, just from your perspective – and please, there are no right or wrong answers here – how did you understand the PST role, if at all?

**AR11:** So, I didn't understand it the way you have introduced it now (laughs), so, that was not my understanding of it at all. My understanding was that he was more like just a programme co-ordinator, if I can say that? That was my understanding, um, ja.

**Interviewer:** Ok, no that's fine, like I said, its important to just tell it like you experienced it (laughs...student also laughs). And so what kind of engagements did you have with (redacted) during the course of your studies?

**AR11:** So, in my first year... I think he was also the tutor for one of my modules... so there was a lot more engagement with him in my first year, purely for those reasons. He was really helpful in explaining all the processes and what's required; you know, like assistance with deadlines or questions, or anything I needed really. So a lot of that was actually in the first year, or let me say the first 6 months at least. So, thereafter, I really had a better understanding of the process, or what I needed to do for each module that was to come. So, I must say... and I don't mean this as a

negative, I have had very little interaction with (redacted) since then. I mean, I can recall him checking in and maybe even receiving the odd email message from him, but... let's say... he did a great job in my first year and I didn't really need him too much after that (laughs).

**Interviewer:** No, that is absolutely fine. You know, the reality is that there are some students, clearly like yourself, who are completely comfortable as online students; they get on with things, they do what they need to do, and they don't always need the kind of support other students find very necessary.

**AR11:** Ja, ja... exactly... that is definitely how I am like.

**Interviewer:** Yes, for some students they have selected the distance mode specifically **because** it suits them: they have the discipline, or the work ethic (student: ja, ja). So when we created the PST role, we understood from the beginning that it was not necessarily a 'one-size-fits-all', and that while some students would certainly need this kind of support, others may very well not.

**AR11:** Yes, yes... like I said, when I needed (redacted) he was always quick to respond and to help me with whatever... so I don't want it to sound negative (laughs). Also, I suppose, I never really felt the need for what you are talking about... the emotional stuff... If I can say that. So my perspective on it was, well that was how I understood the role, because that's what I needed from the role. So, how I understood the tutor for each module, I understood their role from the beginning, but I think there was a lot of uncertainty... well I understood it that it was my responsibility... well, I suppose all of the responsibility is ultimately on you as a student, but what I felt like to be quite difficult, well not for me personally but for a lot of other people in the group, who I think fundamentally understood... well, let me rather say, their understanding was that the person allocated for you to a particular module is more like a lecturer as apposed to a tutor, or as apposed to someone who was there to check-in. So, there were a lot of people who were at first unhappy because they didn't really understand things... but I, understood it, overall, I understood it as ok, this is it, this is what is required of me. This is the assignment due date; this is when we are writing exams and so on. What I needed from (redacted) at the beginning of the year was just to make sure that I understood things correctly – after that, I was really just on my own – and that worked for me



completely fine. You know, my work requires me to travel, so I was not always able to attend the sessions when they were happening, but the recordings really supported me in that. And so I didn't attend, not because I didn't think the sessions were valuable, I just didn't attend because my schedule didn't allow me to. But I was really comfortable with what was available online and, if I needed (redacted) I knew I could just send him a WhatsApp... oh, that's right, there was a WhatsApp group, I recall now (laughs).

**Interviewer:** Ok, thanks for that. And, yes, I mean if you look at ODL models in general, the student journey is very much a self-managed process and, um, I think what we tried to do at (the organisation) was to add an additional level of support that was non-academic in nature, that a student possibly wouldn't get if they had signed up with a different organisation (student: "exactly, yes"). Yes, so the PST role was very much aimed at those who needed it, and if there were students who didn't then that was also ok. So, do you think... and this brings me to the next question... do you think that even though you perhaps didn't rely on the PST role that there are students, or were students, that would have benefitted from the PST role the way I have described it to you? Do you feel there is value in a role like this for distance students?

**AR11:** In my opinion, no (laughs) sorry... but I would explain that, or qualify that, by saying that if there is just strong initial communication to explain what the entire plan is for each year... yes, things like Covid will come along and change everything (laughs), but if there was still strong communication up front; explaining roles and responsibilities... So, for example if I had had that right at the beginning, because it took me about 6 months to really figure out...and yes, (redacted) did help... to figure out who does what, and what's required of me... then, then I think that students will feel far more settled far more quickly.

**Interviewer:** Ok, well you mentioned Covid...so how has Covid, or did Covid, impact your learning journey in any way?

**AR11:** So weirdly enough, it was a huge benefit (laughs)...hope its ok to even say that...ok, so let me rather say that, in the sense that prior to Covid I had to travel every second week, and obviously that came to a halt and, um, I have just literally been continuing working from home. In essence, all the time, all the travel time and

being away from home etc. just stopped and that made it a whole lot easier for me. So, um, ja...my final year was really, um, ja, really good (laughs).

**Interviewer:** Ja, please, don't feel guilty. I have spoken to quite a few students now who say that while Covid was obviously a hugely stressful time for everyone, it actually ended up benefitting their studies in a big way. So, ja, don't feel bad at all. And what we asked our PSTs to do over that time was to make contact with students, especially first year students and, um, well because it was a time of anxiety and a time of stress, and we wanted to make sure and not assume that, just because someone had signed up as a Distance student, that they were automatically fine with everything that was going on. And that's why its great being able to talk to you, well having you part of this study, because you were wrapping up in 2020, so the impact of Covid on you was possibly very different for, say, someone who was just starting in 2020.

**AR11:** Yes, oh definitely

**Interviewer:** Yes, and when 'the world changed' in 2020, what that meant to them and their studies was, I imagine, very different to how it was for you (student agrees). Ok, so you have indicated that you personally do not place much value in a role dedicated to student wellness – you would prefer greater clarification up front and then being left to manage your own journey. Does that sum it up accurately?

**AR11:** Ja, and I mean like, there may also be a case for another model for you guys to consider, one where there's... or to the point where there are no online tutors; where there is nobody guiding the module and there is no...you know, that role we are discussing (interviewer: PST) ...yes, PST, sorry. And maybe you could just say to an individual who is opting for that model, you know, here is all the material, here's access to, you know, everything online, the (organisation's LMS), this is the literature that you require, this is the, you know, framework of the module, with the assignments and the exam etc.

**Interviewer:** So, what about feedback on work done, or Collab sessions to go over more challenging aspects of the module content, or just answering questions if you are stuck on something? I mean, would you not see that as having any real value?

**AR11:** Ja, so I would say, or maybe let me clarify. In first year, I would say, yes have the online tutors, but once you are in 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year, then no. Ok, so what happened

in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year was that, I think it was the Economics lecturer, they left and for like a month or so there was no one, so I just said to myself, you know what, you just have to sit down and do this. And, you know, I didn't mind it. I knew that life happens, and people move around, but I couldn't let it stop my studies, so I just got on with it and I think what I am saying is that I could, so maybe that is why I gave my answer as no to lecturers.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so first let me say, it makes you far more of the exception than the rule (laughs...and student laughs). So, maybe what we are talking about here is gradually reducing the support. So, more intensive support in first year and then by 3<sup>rd</sup> year or 4<sup>th</sup> year, students are pretty much working by themselves... (student: yes, exactly like that). Ok, well it is certainly something to consider... I mean it is not what we do, and maybe it never will be because the feedback and the research seem to indicate that students want regular access to a lecturer, or online tutor, throughout their qualification – but, like you, there are always exceptions.

**AR11:** yes, you know and from an (organisational) point of view, you've got a fantastic archive of your IP which sits across various online repositories that students could have access to though the LMS. You also have your tutors who facilitate the same module year on year, so you could use those recordings as another layer of resources, you know. So, instead of having access to a lecturer in real time, you can have someone who say does an introductory session and explains what is available and where to find it and so on, and then the rest is up to the student. I think something like that can open up to a new market, where students could have access to a qualification at a more reduced price because (the organisation) does not have to cover lecturer costs and so forth.

**Interviewer:** Ok, well, ja...definitely some food for thought there, thank you. So, well, I was going to wrap up this session by asking you the final question about whether or not you feel the PST role is something that should be retained (laughs) I think I know your answer, but let me ask you anyway. Would you vote to keep the role or to abandon it?

**AR11:** Um, I would vote to abandon it.

**Interviewer:** Ok, but with the proviso that you set up that initial briefing session and resources that you were referring to earlier?

**AR11:** Yes, and I think with the PST role in particular it could be replaced with just really strong communication. You know, well positioned, strong communication and like a content heavy, well lots of detail, in the introduction to the entire programme so that you know, up front, exactly what you are getting yourself into as a distance student, and you would know that 90... or even 100% of the responsibility lies with you... so you know, um, ja.

**Interviewer:** Ok, well thank you so much for giving me your time and sharing your ideas with me, and its really important to get these differing perspectives and how students have experienced the PST role, because, you know, we can sit here and presume, but unless we actually ask the questions, we could be getting things very wrong instead of very right...well, mostly right (laughs).

**AR11:** (laughs) yes, look, I hope it was clear that I really enjoyed my studies with (the organisation) and its not like I would have preferred some other organisation if I had to do it over, but I think that distance studies is more about doing it on your own and the sooner you realise that as a student, the sooner you can just get on and do what has to be done.

(Recording ends)

## APPENDIX J: TRANSCRIPT: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW EXAMPLE 2

**Recording duration:** 29.33

**Student:** SVR24

---

Recording begins:

**Interviewer:** Firstly, thank you for agreeing to give of your time to chat with me...

**Student SVR04:** Pleasure

**Interviewer:** this conversation will not be particularly formal, there are some structured questions I want to go through with you, but please just stop me, interject and share your ideas as they come to you. There are no right or wrong answers. Let me start by giving you some background: essentially the (private tertiary organisation's) distance model that we currently use was launched in 2016, and one of the key components of that model was bringing in what we call the Programme Success Tutor, or PST. Now, the main thinking behind the PST role was that these people would be there for something that we refer to as student emotional wellness. If you look at current research, you will see that one of the main reasons people drop out of online studies is because they have just got that sense of being slightly disconnected, um, they don't feel like they are part of a unit because they don't go onto a campus, (student interjects, "ja"), they don't go into a classroom and they don't really see anybody. These students work alone at their desk, and it can become quite a lonely experience. So, a number of people drop out of an online course because they just feel like they are doing this alone and it is all too much, and no one seems to be recognising the work that is being done. So, the Programme Success Tutor role was brought onboard to take care of this aspect of the student experience. We are just over 6 years in now and it is time to review the role; its time to look at how it is working, and to ask is it working, do we need to change it, do we need to just do away with it? But one of the main reasons for conducting this study is obviously based on this last year, when Covid hit, and it was a terribly emotional and stressful time for a lot of people (student interjects, "ja"), and we looked to the PSTs to see how we could engage with our students and just add an extra layer of care and attention – just to see how they were managing. So, what you are going to be contributing today is your insights, your experiences; whatever they are: positive, negative (student interjects, "ok"), indifferent, it doesn't matter.

Ok, so let me begin by asking what year you are in? How many years have you been with us online?

**Student SVR04:** Well, this is my third year. I started in 2019, as a full-time student and then I moved online at the beginning of 2020.

**Interviewer:** Oh, your timing was fantastic (laughs)

**Student SVR04:** Ja I know, what a coincidence (laughs)

**Interviewer:** And what qual are you studying?

**Student SVR04:** Um, I am BCom Strategic Management.

**Interviewer:** Ok, Strat Man, ok.

**Student SVR04:** Ja, I actually wanted to do financial management as my core discipline, but the online does not offer that right now, so I chose strategic management. Which is fine, you know.

**Interviewer:** Ok, we have launched the financial core, but it is just in its first year (student: "yes"), so maybe what you can do is look at, once you are done, some form of post graduate qual that takes you back to a more financial management focus (student: "yes, exactly").

**Student SVR04:** Yes, I would actually like to do that, because its like my main area of what I am interested in.

**Interviewer:** Ok, fantastic. We are looking at offering a number of post graduate quals in the future so there may well be something for you.

**Student SVR04:** Oh really, that's great. That would work out perfectly because I actually finish next year around June.

**Interviewer:** Ok, great. I will just make a note and keep you informed as we go (student talking: "ok, ja, great, thanks).

Ok, so as a distance student you would have been allocated a Programme Success Tutor, and obviously that is slightly different to how things happen on a contact campus (student interjects, "ja"), do you know who your PST is or was?

**Student SVR04:** Ja, last year I had... I can't really remember her name, but she was also my lecturer in PE, I met her in PE (Interviewer: "was that maybe **redacted**?"), yes, **redacted**, yes, yes, yes, that's her. And now it is **redacted**, I think she took over from **redacted**?

**Interviewer:** Ok, so you have been a contact student, then you became a distance student, so if you could just share with me – if you had to explain how you understand the PST role to someone else, so someone on a contact campus who does not have a PST – how would you explain the role?

**Student SVR04:** Um, for me I would understand it as someone who is just like always there, all the time. If I have any questions, I can just ask. In the beginning of the year when I wanted to register and get all the financial details and pick my subjects, which was very helpful, I could just speak to **redacted**, she was so amazing. She sent me everything I needed, took me through all the steps, like how I would pay and the best subjects to choose. Its really just having someone there for you, you know going from contact to distance I was worried... (pauses, laughs), you know now that I am in distance, I realise I was probably more lonely in contact than I am now in distance. Don't get me wrong, PE was great, I could go in and ask anyone – you know you *are* there, it is your choice to go ask – but I think having someone right there, like on WhatsApp, you can just ask little questions... you know, whatever it is, she doesn't mind answering. Its just really nice, its comforting, if I can say that? (Interviewer: "that's great"). Even if it was like a lecturer concern, where I had one lecturer who wasn't really active online and **redacted**, I think spoke to them (Interviewer: "and did that get sorted"?), yes it did, yes it did. Ja, it is just really about having someone there who can guide you through stuff, you know, get you through it because they care. You know, because without her and without this whole PST role, whatever you guys call it, I don't think I would have enjoyed online as much. Like I know many people who study through other organisations and they just, you don't hear back from people – you are on your own, you know? (Interviewer: "Ja"), and that's just what this is about, just really having someone there.

**Interviewer:** yes, and your engagements with **redacted**, how do those happen? Is it WhatsApp, is it email, has there been a phone call?

**Student SVR04:** Um, ja, with **redacted** and now with **redacted**, we have a WhatsApp group and there is email. You can also call her. She did call me when this whole Covid thing happened and then again when I was having those problems with a lecturer, and we had a nice chat on the phone. Then she called again at the beginning of this year when I was registering and all that kind of stuff. I also called her and chatted to her about what subjects I needed and stuff. No, ja, whatever *you* want she is always there. Obviously, I don't know how all the others are, but she is really accommodating.

**Interviewer:** No, well, that is the thing – this is about you sharing your experiences with your specific PST. I am looking to chat to at least 30 people and trying to get a broad spectrum of experiences. You know, we have 13 PSTs (student interjects, "wow"). So, I would like to talk to these students and get their thoughts on as many of the PSTs as I can. So, its not a "**Redacted** Study" (laughs, student also laughs), it's a PST study (student, "yes, for sure"), so if the experiences are different, that will inform the findings, it will inform how we go

forward. And if we find consistency in student experiences, although it is really early stages so we would not know that, then it could also inform decisions. So, as I said earlier, we understood that emotional wellness was really important – or put it this way, we believed it was important, so what I want to do is ask you: as a distance student, and the interesting thing with you is that you have been in both settings; you have been in the full time contact space, you then moved across to become a distance student, how importance do you place on feeling emotionally supported in your studies?

**Student SVR04:** Um, like my own personal importance?

**Interviewer:** So, yes, does it matter to you? Because you know, some people are very independent and they just prefer to be left alone to get on with things, but other people might say that they like knowing that they have someone there (student, “oh, ok, yes”), that they can reach out to while other people say “ja, well it doesn’t really make a difference”.

**Student SVR04:** Ok, so for me, I am quite independent (laughs, “ok, actually not really), but I am a bit younger than some of the people online; you know, some people have jobs, they have families (Interviewer, “yes”), so they are a bit older than me. I am pretty young, I only moved online because of my personal circumstances (Interviewer, “sure), so for me I do need, I do need it. I place a very high importance on it – like, I need it. I’m young and my parents have always been like that, so I needed that person like **redacted**. I can’t sit and feel like I have no help, no one to like just WhatsApp like **redacted**, I need that, so I place really high importance on that – especially during Covid, because on PE there was contact, you were physically there. Going online and then *that* happening, having someone there, it didn’t make the transition that hard.

**Interviewer:** So, you would say, and I don’t want to put words in your mouth, you would say you felt like **redacted** was invested (student interjects, “yes, yes, definitely”), and she cared about how you were coping and all the rest of it?

**Student SVR04:** oh yes, for sure. Ja, no 100%, and I think what made it even better is that she is a lecturer, and she actually lectures me, so on top of that she is in PE. I don’t know where the others are, but I love that she is just around the corner. I don’t like literally have to see her, but I feel like there is that connection – if that makes sense (Interviewer: “yes, sure”).

**Interviewer:** Ok, I hear you. Just to let you know though, we have Programme Success Tutors around the country, and it is not always a case of... let’s say **redacted**, not all her students are based in PE (student interjects, “oh ok”). Yes, we also have a PST who takes care of all our overseas students (student interjects, “oh wow, ok”), so it might be a slightly



different approach, but their role is exactly as you are explaining. That is their role, regardless of where they are based in the world.

**Student SVR04:** well, **redacted** has certainly ticked all the boxes for me; she is very helpful, very helpful.

**Interviewer:** So, if we look at 2020, and as I said, your timing was fantastic (laughs), if we look at 2020, and Covid - what was the impact of all that on your *learning* journey – and I am sure it impacted you on a personal level, but if you could share what impact there was specifically on your learning, that would be great.

**Student SVR04:** Um, I think because, like you said, my timing was perfect and I knew I already wanted to move online, it didn't affect me that much. I think it actually helped, because I know my friends who were still on the campus from 2019, they ended up being like 3 weeks behind me with the work. In online nothing stopped, it just kept going and with everything that was going on outside, it was good to just know that my studies would be ok. I think the only major thing was the whole 'take home exam', it wasn't difficult, it was just different, and I am not sure if things will go back to us writing on a campus again and what that will be like. But other than that, Covid didn't really play a big role in my actual studies, if I can say that.

**Interviewer:** So you had to transition *out* of contact and now you might have to transition back *into* it for a sit-down exam (student, "ja, exactly). So, are all your exams for this year still take home or will some of them be on campus?

**Student SVR04:** No, I think they are all on campus, but who knows, that could also change again.

(14:22 – 14:38 – student refers to the Covid protocols on the contact campus)

**Interviewer:** I'm really glad you didn't feel a massive impact from Covid, because you know, I have chatted to students who mentioned that they had limited Wi-Fi, or they were suddenly having to share a workspace with their folks or their brother or sister, or because everyone was at home, they could not find a quiet space. Then I had the opposite, I actually spoke to a student yesterday who said that he did not want to sound callous, but Covid was a real blessing because he could no longer travel for work, I think he is a Rep of some sort, and because he was now based at home, he actually had far more time to dedicate to his studies and really engage with the content. So, the fact that he could not travel and have so much time wasted at airports, or being on the road, actually worked *for* him. I guess it really is different for everyone, it just depends.

**Student SVR04:** ja, you are absolutely right. On our group last year there was a lot of that; people talking about Wi-Fi or not having a place to like actually do their work, or their financial situation because of Covid and stuff like that. And I have noticed that everyone is in a different place, if I can say that.

**Interviewer:** And you have been ok?

**Student SVR04:** Ja, for me personally, my family is not that big, we have Wi-Fi, so for me my life can adjust for online studies because of Covid, but I can also see that it is not like that for everyone.

**Interviewer:** Oh, definitely. In the focus group we held last night, people were sharing about how external stresses, like salary cuts or even other members of their family having job security issues, were impacting on their studies. So, not directly, but outside forces that were causing stress that then spilled over into other things like their learning because their mind was basically elsewhere.

**Student SVR04:** Oh, no for sure and I think if that was me who was going through that it would have been much worse.

**Interviewer:** So, you mentioned that both **redacted**, in 2020, and now **redacted** in 2021, have both really been engaged? (student, "definitely, for sure"). So, if I was to ask you for a *general* opinion, and I understand this is just your opinion, but I am sure you engage with other students studying online – do you think there is value in having a role like the PST for distance students?

**Student SVR04:** Yes, ja, no 100%, 100%. I know many people here in East London, I live in East London, I know many people who are studying online with **redacted** because there is no big university here. So, they had like no choice, but to go with **redacted** and I promise it is like polar opposites from what they tell me. You don't hear from people, they don't get back to you, you are on your own, you know. You can't just email and ask a simple question. You can't just call, because no one picks up. I have friends who are very frustrated with everything there. So, ja, I think having this PST role in place is very, very important. It has helped me with everything so I would suggest (laughs) they never take it away, also I don't know if they can improve it...

**Interviewer:** well, that was going to be my next question, if we were able to, is there anything that we could 'dial up' or 'dial down', or add, or not? Ultimately, I was going to ask you if you would vote to keep or take away the role, but you have pretty much answered that.

**Student SVR04:** Um, if anything, I would say definitely keep it (laughs), please don't take it away; it's amazing, it has helped me so much.

(22:58 – 28:16 – student raises concerns about a particular online tutor)

**Student SVR04:** sorry to have gone off topic, but ja, my PST really helped with all of that. I honestly couldn't imagine not having them (referring to the two PSTs), I don't think I would have enjoyed it as much, I possibly might even have moved back to PE to go back to the campus there (laughs). But I don't think I ever thought of that again after the help redacted gave me, it was amazing.

**Interviewer:** Ok, well, thank you so much for your time. The next step is for me to complete the rest of the interviews and a few more focus groups. Then I will begin the process of transcribing all these conversations. I will need to send you your transcript, just so that you can read through it and make sure I have accurately captured our conversation and not misrepresented anything that you have shared (student, "oh, ok, that's fine).

Thank you again, and now that we have been introduced, please feel free to contact me if there is anything you want to follow up on.

**Student SVR04:** Thank you, it was nice to meet you.

**Interviewer:** Pleasure, take care.

Recording ends.

## APPENDIX K: TRANSCRIPT: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW EXAMPLE 1

**Focus Group:** Transcript

**Recording duration:** 58:17

**Participants:** ST01; DP02; AG03; MS04; AC05

---

Recording begins:

**Interviewer:** Firstly, thank you to everyone for setting this time aside to talk with me, and thank you for agreeing to be part of one of my focus groups. We have set aside an hour for this session and I really do not want to keep you any longer than that, so let's get started.

Just to note before we get started, our conversation this evening does not need to be formal, um, in fact, I would like it to be just that - a conversation. Obviously, there are some questions I want to go through with you, but these are really just to guide the conversation and move us through the various key things I would like to touch on. There are no right or wrong answers, so let me start by giving you some background – and excuse me while I read this part: essentially the (private tertiary organisation's) distance model that we currently use was launched in 2016, and one of the key components of that model was bringing in what we call the Programme Success Tutor, or PST. Now, the main thinking behind the PST role was that these people would be there for something that we refer to as student emotional wellness. If you look at current research, you will see that one of the main reasons people drop out of online studies is because they have just got that sense of being slightly disconnected, um, they don't feel like they are part of a unit because they don't go onto a campus, (some 'beeps' as students type in the chat) they don't go into a classroom and they don't really see anybody. These students work alone at their desk, and it can become quite a lonely experience. So, a number of people drop out of an online course because they just feel like they are doing this alone and it is all too much, and no one seems to be recognising the work that is being done. So, the Programme Success Tutor role was brought onboard to take care of this aspect of the student experience. We are just over 6 years in now and it is time to review the role; it's time to look at how it is working, and to ask is it working, do we need to change it, do we need to just do away with it? But one of the main reasons for conducting this study is obviously based on this last year, when Covid hit, and it was a terribly emotional and stressful time for a lot of people (some more 'beeps' as students type in the chat) and we looked to the PSTs to see how we could engage with our students and just add an extra layer of care and attention – just to see how they were managing. So, what this group is going to be contributing today is your insights, your experiences; whatever they are: positive, negative, indifferent, it doesn't matter.

Ok, so let me hand over to you... I see a few of you have already commented in the chat section, so let me start with you (**redacted**).

**ST01:** Hi there, hi everyone. Ok, so my understanding has always been, um that the PST is someone who will check up on me, to check on my motivation, um to really, I guess, just make sure that I am feeling ok with everything that is going on. Not just at the beginning of the year but also during the year. Ja, just someone who checks in, I suppose.

**Interviewer:** Ok, thank you (**redacted**), anyone else like to share their thoughts?

**DP02:** I am always liaising with the PST at the beginning of the semester, due to all the admin intensive tasks that we have to do with registration and getting, um, all our modules and things in order before we actually start with academic work. Um, my PST has always been very helpful, kind and, um you know, hands on when it comes to doing those things for me. However, I do want to say that, um, I wasn't aware that the PST role was there to facilitate, or...or, to bridge the gap between the student feeling disconnected. I just thought they were, you know, an admin support for us.

**Interviewer:** Ok, thank you for sharing and I will, I will come back to that comment you made (**redacted**), it is interesting that that is how you view, or viewed, the role. Anybody else? (**Redacted**), you said that for you the PST is "someone that needs to check that we are ok, motivated, um, on-track and feeling ok with everything in general. (**Redacted**) do you want to add something?

**AG03:** Hi there (laugh...inaudible). Alright, so I also didn't know that they were supposed to... well, like I said, I don't really know what they are supposed to do. I have just gathered little bits and pieces, you know from (**redacted**: refers to PST by name), when she answers my questions or when she sends little motivational things. So, to be quite honest I didn't really know what their role was. I'm just so glad we have (**redacted**: refers to PST by name), because she, um, she assists with everything like the student digital card that we needed, she showed us how to get that. So, it's just nice to have somebody to go to when you really don't know, and then she can either say like "go log a query" or, "no, I can help you with that", or...so that was nice, it was really nice to have someone like an inbetweenener, when you really don't know what to do anymore. And she keeps you motivated, but ja, I guess I didn't exactly know that they had any other function.

**Interviewer:** Ok, Ok. Um, (**redacted**), I see you had your hand up as well?

**MS04:** Hi there, ja, I think I was in the same boat in the beginning, like (**redacted**), said, we had 2 different tutors for the same subject and then (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) ended up being our tutor and our PST, so I think maybe the difference in the role was not

maybe communicated as well to us, or maybe it was and we were just in a complete panic at the beginning and didn't really (laughs) get the hang of it. But I must say, I kind of got it as we were going along because (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) has gone above and beyond. She has phoned me personally, a few times, to help me through some situations to check if I am ok. To check if the stress is too much and if I am, you know, updated with the work, if I need any help with anything, if I need someone from (the organisation) to phone me to help me a bit more. Um, she has added us to a WhatsApp group, which is absolutely fantastic because not just asking the question to her, we can communicate with... um, amongst ourselves. She answers all of our questions and, um, sends motivational pictures and all of those kinds of things. So I think that through that process it kind of became clear what the role was, and she was like supporting us overall and in general with questions that we may have and just motivation. So, I think that became clear in that sense.

**Interviewer:** Ok, fantastic. Um (**redacted**)?

**AC05:** Hi guys, can you hear me?

**Interviewer:** Yes, loud and clear.

**AC05:** Ok, fantastic, alright. Um, Liesl, thank you for the opportunity to speak, and hi guys, um, to be honest with you, I actually knew from the start that (**redacted**: refers to PST by name), is my PST. He introduced himself to me and also made calls and introduced himself to the group. He actually, what do you call it, explained to me like his role in, in everything, and that he was there for the full time I am studying with (the organisation). So I was actually aware of everything, I must be honest with you, he is quite a good communicator, first of all. Secondly, he is a good motivator as well and... ah...I also want to say that during the lockdown period we felt lost and we felt...well, I felt lost and bit disconnected from the other students and he was the one that actually sent mails out to us, saying that he is looking out for us, and... and, if we need anything we can just contact him. So, yes, I must be honest with you (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) is a really good PST, and I am actually happy that he is my PST.

**Interviewer:** Thank you, that's great. That's good to hear. Ok, so I've asked a little bit generally, I don't know if anyone wants to add anything because, I suppose my next question is whether you understood specifically what (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) was there for? I mean, (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) obviously explained his role to you (**redacted**), and made his role quite clear, which is great. Um, the kind of engagements you've had from her, what I have gathered, and please if anyone wants to add, please do so. So, I am understanding that there are WhatsApps, or she gets hold of you telephonically, or by email – so there's quite, um, a range of ways that she makes contact at different times

and for different reasons. Am I correct? (**Redacted**), do you want to say something? I see your hand is up.

**DP02:** Ja, so I just wanted to say that, um, (**redacted:** refers to PST by name) did introduce herself in a call and then in an email to me, and it was actually at the beginning of the semester, where she counselled my on the modules I would need to take for the semester because I wanted to take an increased load. And, and, she was very helpful...in fact I...I, um, want to rescind my comment (laughs) that perhaps I didn't know what she was there for (laughs again) because now that I think back it really does become clear to me, um, that it was sort of compulsory for us to, um...meet...or discuss the modules, before the semester even started and, and, I do recall that I did that with her. That's what I wanted to add.

**Interviewer:** Ja, and you know, that's fine. I think there is just so much going on at the beginning of each semester, and there was so much going on last year (**participant:** yes), and we will touch on Covid just now, but ja, that's absolutely fine and that's why we have these conversations because something will jog your memory and you will say "oh yes, I remember now". You know, the thing with the PST role is that we don't give them directives, we don't say you have to **have** a WhatsApp group, or you **have** to get in touch so many times a semester, and so on. So, we really are, we are looking to you as students to tell us what is working and what isn't. I mean, this is a caring role, if I can say that, its an emotional wellness role and we are reluctant to give PSTs directives like you must do this, or you must do that because we really want the PST caring role to roll out in such a way that it suits the personality of the person who is delivering it. But, in the same token, they are there to give emotional support; sometimes subtly, just in the background just so that you know they are there. And if we do have students who are not feeling that level of care or connectedness, then it would be important for me to know that. So, if you want to raise any names, completely anonymously and confidentially, then just drop me an email and I am very happy to have a look and see what's going on.

**DP02:** Thank you, I am actually going to ask the two of them to get in touch with you themselves.

**Interviewer:** Please, yes, I am happy with that.

**AG03:** Um, Liesl, I just wanted to ask. Is there a list or something that they send out that tells you what your PST should be doing? Because I think that would also help people going forward because they wouldn't, you know, be 100% sure what to ask that person, or... I can't remember seeing something like that, maybe there is something like that, but just saying that maybe that can help other people. Also then, you know, the PST can tell people to contact them directly, because you know, sometimes you are on a group, and you might feel silly to ask a question. Or, you know (inaudible) you might like to know the answer yourself, so it's

nice if it's on the group. Um, so ja, those are just little things. I mean, I feel nothing to contact (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) directly because I am a little bit older, but I think some younger people still have that teacher...oooh I am not allowed to contact them. So, I think if they know that the communication is open, then its great and it will also help them a lot.

**Interviewer:** I absolutely agree. I am busy making a note here. Um, yes, so basically, in an ideal world, at the time when students apply or express an interest in joining (the organisation), right from the sales consultants, they are supposed to unpack a little bit about the fact that there are PSTs, and this is what they do, and all the rest of it. But I also understand that sometimes at the beginning of things there is just information overload, and there is just so much coming at you that you, and by that I mean students, might not be listening to the finer details. But there is nothing wrong with, you know, once people have settled in for PSTs to say "hey, this is who I am, and this is what I do". A little bit of self-promotion, please feel free to contact me... you know, I do say to the PSTs that it is really important for them to manage their time, because some of the just jump all in and are quite happy to get messages at 10 'o clock at night and answer messages at 10 'o clock at night, and I just say to them, you know, you also need to draw the line somewhere. So I agree with you (**redacted**) I think that maybe students don't know and (**redacted**), you said much the same thing. What is their scope of practice? So I agree that there is absolutely value in letting students know that, but I think that in the same token, what they have to say is something like "I am happy to answer a call, or answer your email, up until let's say, 6 at night, and thereafter I'll get back to you the next day. Um, because with this role, where there is no **formal** engagement taking place, I think for the PSTs: the (**redacted**), of this world or the (**redacted**), to feel like they almost have to be "on tap" 24hrs. But, yes, I have noted your idea, thank you, and I will make sure we do a better job of highlighting who they are and what they are there to do.

Ok, so that the next part that we go onto relates to the students' sense of emotional wellbeing, and, and whether it's really important for distance students to have that sense of wellbeing. Well, I think the presumption is that. Are any of you able to share, I mean, how much value or importance – and if its none, it is also fine – how much importance do you place on your emotional wellbeing when it comes to your studies?

**ST01:** Sorry, I do actually remember (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) sending an email, now that that was brought up (laughs), but I think, like I said earlier, I think at the beginning... I've studies with (the organisation) three times before, and this is the first time I am doing Distance, and um, my husband is overseas, I am alone at home, so this is like a nerve wrecking (sic), totally new situation and I felt extremely alone trying to figure out what was



going on, how to navigate the system, how to like get everything, like get everything in order. I'm a very organised type of person as well, I've got schedules and all of that, and I felt like there were no proper schedules within the modules, and I joined the WhatsApp group right from the get-go and the support that we got from our students and stuff studying these modules with us was incredible. And thank goodness we had (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) as well, because like I said earlier, she emailed us, she added us to the WhatsApp group, she phoned us to check in on us. There was actually one of the girls that was studying with us that was working in a hospital, and, um, she was having a really difficult time – with staff getting sick and, um, just the anxiety of just having to go to work, being over-worked, and stuff. Having to go home to her family, and then doing the studying on top of it. So we were kind of like supporting each other, all of us, you know. Um, and (**redacted**: refers to PST by name) is one of the main reasons that she made it to the end of the year last year. So I think your emotional wellness, just like general guiding through this whole thing, is extremely important. Its, its important to have the support. I've done distance studying through (a different organisation), I didn't finish it, because I had no support. I had nobody to guide me, I had no idea who my fellow students were, I had no idea who... there was no one checking in on me to make sure everything was ok. So, I think it is extremely important to make sure. And if somebody is not submitting their tasks and everything, I think it is also important then to follow up with that person; why are they never in the Collabs, why are they not... because they might have some issue and you need to have somebody to check in on that.

**Interviewer:** Ja, and that's what the PST does as well. The PST does have the necessary permissions to just go in and see who has submitted ICE, who has submitted assignments, and follow up and so on. (**Redacted**), you wanted to say something?

**DP02:** Ja, um...um, its actually so ironic, that you know (**redacted**), spoke about the support that her classmate, or fellow student needed last year. I also work in the private health care industry, and it was an extremely tough year, and you know, it's still really tough, and to have the support of fellow classmates and the PST, and being part of those WhatsApp groups, has been a tremendous comfort for me. But, having said that, I am also a mature student, ah, so, I'm very used to just getting on with things and getting things done on my own, you know. Just getting going, getting on with...without a **dependency** on that support, if I can say that. But it has been a bonus for me. So, great to have, but for me personally, perhaps not totally essential.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely, ok, great. (**Redacted**), you have your hand up?

**AC05:** Thank you. Liesl, I just want to... I just want to quickly give you a... a short version of what I went through. Um, first year was quite, um, overwhelming; I didn't know what quite to expect in the first year, in terms of the studies and how to, um, set a programme and how to stick to a programme. Um, so first year it was quite difficult for me. Um, and I didn't reach out to anybody in the first year. Um, in fact it was my wife who actually motivated me and kept me going and I had to learn disciplines quite quick, and you know, stick to disciplines. So, ja, the first year was quite overwhelming and then I thought, ok, the second year would be better and then Covid started, and lockdown started. Um, although it was... ah... we were alone in lockdown, when me and my wife was alone in lockdown, we could manage to get through all the assignments, which was nice, there was nothing bad about it. I actually enjoyed it, just to give you a slight indication, we set programmes together – we started together at the same time and we ended together at the same time, cos she is also studying... she is studying with (another organisation), and so, ja, we motivated each other. Then third year started (laughs), and I thought ok, second year wasn't too bad and third year might also be better, but I think third year is a challenge. I was so overwhelmed with all the assignments and tasks that needs to be done, and the deadlines were so close to each other, um, then I spoke to (**redacted**: refers to PST by name), and he said to me (**redacted**), you probably, I heard when you... you see because I chose 4 modules for the first semester and then 3 for the last semester, and the reason for that is because I work in retail and the end of the year is quite a busy time and I don't want to make it too heavy for me at the end of the year. So, ja, so third year was a bit hectic. I didn't reach out too much to him because, like the others said, I'm also a self-starter, I can motivate myself, I can go out on my own. I have studied online before which was very nice, er... I prefer studying online, and the reason for that is because its in the comfort of my home, I don't have to travel, its safe, ja so, um... so that is kind of the emotions that I went through and how I dealt with it.

**Interviewer:** Ok, it's quite interesting though because you know, I've spoken to quite a few students now as part of this study, and its almost... I've got distance students who feel a bit guilty, but they tell me they want to say that Covid wasn't a terrible thing for their **studies** because, you know, a lot of students are also working and suddenly with Covid they didn't have to travel and they didn't have to... they weren't away from home, they didn't have to go into the office to do presentations and so on, so they actually got to have more time for their studies because there wasn't the option of going out and about, and all the rest of it. And I think the other thing is that 2020, (laughs at a remark a participant wrote in the chat: "I loved it because we didn't have to write exams"), I think that 2020 and Covid was a shock, I think that no one had lived through something like that before, and... um.... people were sort of making it up as they went along because they had no choice. And I have had quite a few

people mention that 2021 is almost tougher. Because now we are living with some of the consequences of some of the decisions that were made, or because we have a better understanding now of what this thing is, and its almost that 2021, for some people from a stress level, from an anxiety level, is worse than it was last year. It wasn't like lockdown came, lockdown is gone and its all over now, you know. Its not like that, if that was the expectation. So, quite a few people have shared that they are finding 2021 tougher than last year. (Redacted), you mentioned that you are now in your third year of study, and it seems like there is a knock-on effect from last year, and that its not over. Not from the point of view of the pandemic but let's say the residual effect of...of last year is lingering now in terms of what people are trying to manage and cope with. (Redacted), I see your hand is up?

**AG03:** I just wanted to say, that last year I actually went through hell because...er... I had a... you know I was working from home, and you do work harder and you do end up working in the evenings, and then you are stressing because you know you have to get to your assignments (in audible), so it was like really, really, really tough...um, I am just committed to every night at 8 'o clock I come here to my desk and sit here 'till 11 and do whatever I have to do. But I think that you do still have to have a balance, but I'm quite honest, with the studies, I didn't even have a life, but (laughs) I still don't have a life (some laughter in the background from other participants). Ja, we here understand it, but I feel silly, am I being silly, am I being weak because I'm moaning about this silly thing to my PST when other people have got more serious things going on. I don't even know what I want them to say to make it better...(laughs).

**Interviewer:** You know, maybe its not even about making it better, but maybe it's about someone else that you can just vent to, or someone who will just listen, because maybe your family is tired of hearing you moan about it or you are even tired of hearing yourself moan about it. So, its just about having someone else that you can have a bit of a moan or a vent to and then feel better so that you can go back to whatever it is that you need to do.

**AG03:** Ja, for sure, I mean the one thing that my husband did say to me that made me feel better was that "you don't have to get full marks, you just need to pass", and I kept on thinking I've got to do well, I've got to do well, because that was the standard I set for myself. But ja, that helped me and calmed me down and I was like, ok, as long as I can just pass, I will be ok. We do put a lot of pressure on ourselves.

**Interviewer:** (Redacted), you wanted to say something?

**ST01:** (laughs), I've got the same issue there...like trying to do the best possible, and then my husband is like, you know what, that is a really good mark, as long as you've passed its

ok. And I am like, no I wanted to do better! (laughs). Because you feel like you can and... ja (laughs).

**Interviewer:** (laughs)..yes, and also, If I am hearing you guys correctly, you feel if you are going to put in this kind of effort and its going to be late nights at your desk and time away from your family and stuff like that, for the sacrifice you don't want to walk away with something that's mediocre, you want to walk away with something that says, "you know what, yes it was tough, but look what I did and it was worth it" (participants agreeing in the background).

**ST01:** Absolutely, and I mean, um, with (**redacted:** refers to PST by name), you get so into reading the questions and feeling the pressure of trying to do so well and everything that you don't necessarily understand the question that's right in front of you, like you start confusing yourself at the end of the day. And what's nice about having a PST is that, yes you can email your tutor and they will come back to you, but sometimes they will talk to you directly on WhatsApp and just that one moment, or with the students you are studying with, just that one moment when you can say, um, "how do you understand this question?", or "am I understanding this correctly?" and they are assisting you and that just gives you that clarity and understanding that you don't feel so overwhelmed anymore. And I mean, during this Covid situation, I had Covid last year December, so thank goodness it wasn't over the like studying stage, but I can't even imagine being able to study while I had that because I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move, I was in so much pain I was lying here by myself at home. I mean I had support over the phone, so I had people checking in over the phone. It's the same with the PST; you have somebody checking in over the phone and its just that little bit extra that they give you that says "its ok, you are gonna get through this", you know, that gives you so much motivation and doesn't make you feel like you are alone. It makes you feel like there are people going through the same thing with us, and I mean (**redacted:** refers to PST by name) was a big help, even with that. She stuck with me, she said to me that everything was going to be fine, she helped me with everything. And, I mean, that is all you need, just somebody to check in, to say that its going to be ok; here's the support, here's the... yes you are understanding this right, or, no you are not, but here's the way to do it, just the basic stuff like that. And to know that the effort that you **are** putting in is enough. It's ok.

**Interviewer:** You know, I was talking to someone, I think it was yesterday, who said "yes, its great, you can log an assist ticket", and they had found the assist service very efficient, but he said "sometimes you just want to hear a voice", as he said, "you just want to let off a bit of steam" and tell someone that you are not happy or that you feel irritated, or whatever, and you just.. its just, the voice, you know, that makes all the difference. Not that the PST can

always do something about it really, or can do it faster than the assist service, but it was the fact that he could talk to a person that made the difference.

(Message in chat asked about PST to student ratio)

**Interviewer:** To answer your question (**redacted**), it depends on the PST's capacity. There is a limit of 120 students to a PST. Some of them might have slightly less because of their lecturing loads. Um, we also allocate a certain number of hours in a semester to, um, spend on this role and they are set up with TEAMS numbers, email addresses and so on. Um, the ratio was higher initially, and we understood that, with the ratio being higher, as much as PSTs could still contact people, they didn't have the time to do it more than quite *superficially*, if I can use that word without criticising anybody. And so, in 2019, we lowered the ratio, but um, I do negotiate the ratio with the PST, and they let **me** know – especially the ones that understand the roll or, should I say they have been in the role for a long time, - they let me know. So, we have some that are sitting with 80 and some that are sitting with 120, and I think there is one with 150, but that is only because she does not do any lecturing and so she has the time to take on extra. Sorry, (**redacted**), you want to ask something?

**DP02:** Ja, so, I just wanted to ask because I can tell there is varying quality of the PST, and I do also find there is varying quality with my lecturers as well, so what qualifies a PST? So, as long as you are a lecturer you can become a PST? Because I do feel there are certain qualities that, you know, goes in to becoming a successful PST, you know to make sure you are adding value and making it a meaningful role. So, what qualifies a PST?

**Interviewer:** Absolutely. You know what, and this is probably going to sound quite silly to you, but when I have conversations with people it's often because they have been referred to me. Ok? And then I have a conversation with that person, and I ask them to tell me why they want to do this. And, just to let you know, we have got 15 PSTs this year, and 5 of them don't lecture. Five of them do other things, but what they are is kind, patient, nurturing, invested, people who, I believe, and I probably don't get it right every time, but I believe have a real caring heart. I think they are kind. And (laughs) I don't know if that really sounds silly to you, but I think that something a PST has **got** to be is kind...

**DP02:** Ja, no, absolutely. I totally agree...

**Interviewer:** Yes, so, I want you to be kind, and I want you to be caring and I want you to tell me that it matters to you that the students do well, that the students pass, it matters to you if they are having a horrible day. It matters to you that Covid was a horrible, scary space and they wanted to just bring a little bit of relief into that space. So there is no *formal* qualification. We have lost some PSTs along the way who just found it too much for them,

and I've also had people say, "I really want to do this because I think I would be great at it", you know, and they've proven to be great at it. So, I don't know if that is the answer you expected, but it's really not just because they are lecturers. Some of them are, as I've said, but it's not a prerequisite. (Redacted), I see you wanted to say something?

**AC05:** Ja, I was just, um, thinking, and I am also being silly now, but I wish my lecturers for my 3 modules were also PSTs (laughs), not to say bad about them, but I could have done with that PST caring for some of my modules, if you know what I mean? Sometimes I don't know how to ask a question, or I don't really understand the work... so when it comes to (redacted: refers to PST by name), he's my lecturer and my PST, he takes more care with us. So that's why I am saying, I wish the others were also like that...

**Interviewer:** Ok, yes, I hear you. I mean the Distance space only started for (the organisation) in 2016, and we are starting to grow a very strong group of online tutors, but I agree with you that some are better than others, and there is also the personality to consider: some OTs are one way online and others are more another way, if I can say that – you know what I mean. Some people are possibly more *formal*, and others are more familiar or friendly, or whatever. So, I mean, we are never going to get it totally perfect, but I do think that was also one of the reasons why PSTs were brought in, so that if a softer touch was needed, we could offer that to students. Right, so we have touched a little bit on Covid, and um, some of you have explained how your PSTs supported you during that time...um, sorry, I am just reading something in the chat (reading) *"I am so thankful that I went with (this organisation) because I heard that (another organisation) offers no support"*. Well, you know the reality is, and this is not a criticism of (that organisation), it's just that the, um, that the idea of the PST role was something that we understood wasn't part of many, or even any, of the ODL models in this country and it just made sense because those of us that were on the team that developed this model together were just saying, you know, "what about that feeling of just being alone out there, and late nights on your own in front of your laptop. Who recognises that, who sees that, who tells you, you are doing a good job? Who do you moan to when you are just having a bit of a moment? Maybe it is your online tutor, but maybe also it's not. And, that emotional support, I mean, is so vital. But I will say that at first (the organisation) didn't get it. There was real skepticism. What are these people for, why do we need them, what will they be doing? These are adults, surely, they don't need this kind of hand-holding...and so on. So, I must say, that possibly one of my Covid silver-linings was that when education around the country, and beyond our borders, suddenly had to make the move online and everyone was taken by surprise, there was a new understanding that this was a scary space for a lot of students and someone who cared, someone who picked up the phone, someone who... started a WhatsApp group, sent a motivational message, the

impact of that was so much more than I think they gave it credit for, at least to start with. (Reading from the Chat), yes, (redacted), I do think you are right, I do think people underestimate how difficult online studies can be. They think, oh please, these are grown-ups, they will be fine, but for a lot of our shall I say, more mature learners, they hadn't studied for ages, so now they are trying to get back into it and trying to understand how it fits in with kids, and work, and home life and all kinds of things (Laughs...reading from the chat: "It's worse when you are a grown-up), so here is a question: you have all indicated that you were students during Covid.. so, um, would it have been more difficult without a PST or would it have been just as difficult? So, if I can maybe ask it this way...what did they do during 2020, that they possibly didn't do during 2019...and did it make any difference?

**DP02:** Um, ja, so I just wanted to relay a story... I think I had (redacted) last year, and um, you know, at the peak of the second wave, when people were going through job losses, and um, salary cuts, I remember that there was somebody that posted on our group that they were just not coping and that they were, you know, that they were just not coping. And it ensued an entire discussion about how everyone's feeling and, um, (redacted) got involved and a few months after that she just showed a little bit more, you know, empathy, motivation and kindness towards the group and not only did **she** show us that, people in the group actually started supporting each other. Um, you know, students in the group would check on other students in the group, um, whether it was in the group or via DM (direct message), but um, ja, so I would say that it helped me to realise that you know I am not the only one experiencing this, mine isn't the only family carrying this stress. All those discussions started on the PST group...so, ja, I just wanted to share that.

**Interviewer:** Thank you... I think that just demonstrates the power of taking a moment to be kind. You can't fix it, but...

**DP02:** Absolutely, but at least you know someone is thinking about you and that there really is a whole lot of empathy in this world and there's a whole lot of support from your colleagues that are, um, also going through similar things. It helps to know that you are not alone, and you are not the only one.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for sharing that. (Redacted), you have your hand up?

**AG03:** So, I actually never had a class without a Covid situation, so I can't actually say if anything was *better* or different. So, I started in 2020, so I can't really compare to before. So, ja, I just wanted to clarify that.

**Interviewer:** That's absolutely fine and, like I said, that is the value of these types of conversations, because it helps me to understand, both the similarities and the differences in

the student experience. An example is, I spoke to a student yesterday who graduated in 2019, so Covid didn't, or couldn't let's say, impact his studies at all, but he still had a PST and he still said that the PST support was something he truly appreciated. And then there was someone else who also graduated before Covid and his experience was, can I say, quite different...

**ST01:** So, just on that note, I also only started distance last year, so I don't know what it was like before. But, like I said, I was with (another organisation) and the difference... I mean I can't even explain... and I think for me being alone, you get depressed, you get lonely, you get sad, you get a whole like rollercoaster ride full of emotions and having just like a PST who calls you and checks up on you... you know, like "I see you are a bit quiet" or whatever and I am just checking to see if you're ok. I mean, that made a world of difference for me during the Covid stage when you were locked inside your house, where it was so hectic, you couldn't go out, you couldn't see your family... That made a difference for me, because I can't imagine studying through (a different organisation) through that stage as well. I mean, I dropped out in a **normal** time (laughs), so I think that this is possibly the best thing to give you that sense of, you know, when you are a contact student you go into class, you see your tutor or your lecturer, you see the other students, you do things together with them, and now its kind of like you, yourself and that's it. You have to do all of the assignments on your own, you have to do all of the work on your own... which is fine, most of us work better on our own in any case, but just having somebody look out for you made a massive difference. I think this is definitely **the** best way to do distance studies.

**Interviewer:** Ok, thank you. (Redacted), you wanted to add...

**AC05:** Ja, with the lockdown, as I said, my PST did make contact with me by phone and by email and it was actually nice to hear, or know that someone is actually thinking about you, um, I think his message to me was that he is cheering for me and he's looking out for me, and if there is anything I need, or need to talk to him about, um, he's just a phone call away. And that was just nice to know there was someone out there, you know, er... lockdown was scary because, um, we were confined to our own homes and, um, you didn't see anybody outside, and it was already worrying because you were worried about your family, your children and, aah, ja. It was scary, and obviously the fact we were not sure about our jobs even, and, um, there was talks that they were going to start maybe doing retrenchments and it was scary because I didn't know how I was gonna support the payment every month. It was just good to know that people at (the organisation) were actually thinking of us, you know...

**Interviewer:** Ok, well that's good, that's good to hear. You know we don't always get it right with the PSTs and, um, we have had one or two step away since the whole idea was rolled



out, but I am very confident that the team that we currently have, well let's say I'm 90% confident that we have exactly the right people (laughs). I think I have also realised that I need to also understand what is going on in each of their lives. I mean, we did have one PST who stepped away purely because of everything that was going on in her own life – so, it wasn't the PST role, it was more that she couldn't give students what they needed from her...and I totally respect that as well, you know. I mean, listening to students and hearing everything that is going on in their lives... it can become quite emotionally overwhelming for PSTs as well. Um, because when you have 120 people that you are talking to, and especially last year (2020), there was a very good chance that you were going to be engaging with some very anxious, scared, sad, overwhelmed people... Sorry, (redacted), I see you wanted to say something...

**AG03:** Um, yes, somebody mentioned just now ..I don't know if I heard right, but maybe a SMS or something can go out and say something like "if you are feeling..." I don't know, just something short because I know people don't really read anything, but something like "if you are feeling like this or that, let us know and someone will contact you", because we don't know if (redacted) can actually help us, or offer us any financial support and stuff if we do have any problems. Or a PST can send out a message like "if you are feeling overwhelmed" or whatever, "let me know and I will contact you", you know – just so that we can know exactly what their functions are. I mean, maybe they actually did that and I just missed it?

**Interviewer:** Thank you for that... you know, as I said earlier, I think there was just so much coming **at us** last year that we probably filtered what we felt we absolutely needed to understand in the moment and pushed everything else into like a "file 13", and ignored it until it maybe became important. Um, so off of this the PSTs... well, they know that this study is happening, and they are very keen to hear, you know, what are we doing that works, what should we do better, how can we extend our reach? What more is there that we can do? What is reasonable?, you know, so I am definitely taking notes and will definitely share those kinds of things because I think something like what you are suggesting is very doable without being a massive amount of additional work.

**ST01:** Ja, just on what (redacted) just said, I think that is a fantastic idea. I used to work for (an organisation) that did staff wellness checks through like a survey, and if you scored a certain amount or noted something of concern, your line manager would get in touch to offer you support or like if you wanted to chat to like a professional or something. So, maybe the PSTs can do that, just like a smaller version, you know, just seeing who needs support and letting students know that support like that is available.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so what I am going to do to just sort of wrap up this session, because we have like a minute or so to go... so, the final question (although I think I may know the answer), the final question is "if you had for vote for us as (our organisation) to retain the PST role, albeit maybe with some modifications, or do away with the PST role, would you vote to keep it?" Ok, so I am reading this from the chat section, "retain, retain, retain, retain, retain" ... ok, great, so a full house. I am just going to take a screen grab here, just for my notes, because as great as this platform is, it does not record the chats. Ok, so just to wrap up, basically what will happen next is that I have a couple more interviews to carry out and, I think it is one more focus group like this. I will save all the recordings and then I've got the job of, um, doing the transcripts, and then I will give you a synopsis of some of the salient points that were raised and shared during this session and share that with you. And what I would like you to do is read through what I send you, and if there is anything that I haven't interpreted correctly or I haven't explained properly then please...its almost your **duty** to say, hang on, I didn't mean that, or you misunderstood what I was trying to say. Also, you might go away now having been in a room with five people and some things might come to mind that you didn't think of during the session, and you feel you want to add or share... if that happens, then please just drop me an email. So, like I said, I will be putting together all the transcripts and going through those many, many times to look for patterns or trends that are important before I put the final report together, and because each of you are participating in this project, when I am done you would be welcome to read the final paper or report if you are interested. No one is obliging you to read it (laughs), but if you want to, you certainly can. Also, just to reaffirm, all contributions are anonymous. None of you will be mentioned by name, nor will any other companies, organisations, PSTs etc be identified in the final report. Thank you so much, I know it is 7 'o clock, you have families to go to... and I have dinner to go and cook. Thank you so much... I am going to stop the recording and wish you good night. (recording ends).

## APPENDIX L: LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE

DECEMBER 2021

### LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE

#### Document and author specifics:

**Type of document:**

Mini dissertation for MEd in Open and Distance Learning (for submission in January 2022)

**Title of document:**

'Tell someone who cares': the value of intentionally establishing an online presence dedicated to student emotional-wellness; particularly during times of crisis

**Author:**

Liesl Helene Scheepers

**Student number:**

44530684

**Affiliation:**

University of South Africa (UNISA)

#### Declaration by language editor:

I, Neill Daniel van Graan, hereby confirm that I have, in consultation with and according to the specifications provided by the author of the work referred to above, formatted and language-edited same work. I also confirm that I have proofread said work after initial formatting and language editing. Formatting and language editing included but was not limited to

- deep reading and commenting on sense and structure,
- editing according to academic writing conventions,
- general formatting according to specifications,
- reading figures and tables against the text, and
- checking in-text references.

Changes and suggestions were accepted, rejected, or adapted by the author of said work. As such, this declaration does not constitute a claim for sole or shared authorship.

Sincerely,

**N.D. van Graan**

BA: Languages Honours (French) (cum laude) (UP, 2021)

BA: Languages (English and French) (UP, 2020)

Diploma in Journalism (IIE, 2014)

Email address: [neill.grain@gmail.com](mailto:neill.grain@gmail.com)

Cell phone number: 072 056 4457