



**Factors Influencing the Academic Attainment of Undergraduate Sponsored  
Students at the University of the Western Cape: A Strength-Based  
Approach**

**by**

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## **KEYWORDS**

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Critical Race Theory

Poor communities

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Community cultural wealth

Counter stories

## ABSTRACT

Deficit models dominate current research on academic retention and success in South African higher education and internationally. Most studies focus on students who are at risk of exiting higher education prematurely or those who fail academically because of their socio-economic conditions. Dropout and failure in existing research is often correlated to class and lack of access to financial resources. The prevailing philosophy based on needs assessment, deficit intervention and problem-solving does not sufficiently facilitate the academic success of diverse learners. Yet, surveys in most countries show that addressing weakness does not necessarily help people improve in their performance more than will highlighting their strengths (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). In contrast, this study adopts a strength-based approach, drawing largely on ‘ecological’ perspectives which recognize the importance of people’s surroundings and the multifaceted variables constantly at play, impacting the lives of students throughout the world. A strength-based model is posited as a pragmatic approach to pedagogy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This perspective recognizes the resilience of individuals and focuses on potential, strengths, interests, abilities, determination and capabilities rather than limits.

This study accepts that there are persistent challenges to widening participation in South African universities, and leakages in the education pipeline continue with little improvement in graduation rates. However, there are numerous undocumented examples of academically successful students from working-class backgrounds whose academic attainment is not accounted for. Empirical data is required to establish the relationship between academic success and the resilience of undergraduate sponsored students from working class backgrounds.

The case study examines factors that influence the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students and the institutional practices that enhance their performance at the University of the Western Cape. Factors motivating sponsored students from poor communities to succeed were explored. Furthermore, institutional influences that are relevant to, and inform students’ academic attainment are investigated. The study utilized a variety of data including relevant institutional documents, interviews with sponsored students and secondary data sourced from the Institutional Quality Assurance and Planning department.

Findings of the study show that affordability through funding for equitable access to higher education is a motivating factor in academic attainment for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Also, participants in this study attributed their success to nurtured resilience across the institution, and the supportive relationships established through structured intervention programmes in and out of class. It is important to note, contrary to findings in other studies, that low socio economic background was more of a motivational factor and being resourceful for social mobility.

This study adds to the limited understanding of the academic attainment of students from poor backgrounds who succeed against all odds. This provides direction to universities for adopting different approaches and offers insights for the University of the Western Cape into the experiences of its graduates. Based on the findings, the study highlights recommendations and opportunities for future investigation.

## DECLARATION

I, Lulama Ngalo-Morrison, hereby declare that *Factors Influencing the Academic Attainment of Undergraduate Sponsored Students at the University of the Western Cape: A Strength-Based Approach* is my work and all references and sources have been acknowledged.

L.T. Ngalo-Morrison

15 July 2017

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my late parents Ranana Fred Ngalo and Nontsapho Hilda Ngalo who instilled in me the importance of education saying: “Zenzeli’gama nge mfundo”

I know for sure that this would make you proud, and hopefully this will inspire all your grand and great-grandchildren to follow suite. Your beliefs are an affirmation that every child has the capacity to succeed in life, contrary to the perception that only those who come from “certain” cultures have educational ideals. So, it is important to reflect alternative realities and “truth” stories. I hope this body of work contributes to the clarion call for equity and access made by the South African students in the recent #Fees Must Fall protests on campuses around the country in 2015 and 2016, highlighting the fact that there are many eager and talented students who want to ensure a future for them through quality tertiary education. This is a call for institutions of higher learning to lead the process of transformation by leveling the playing fields.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| CHE    | Council on Higher Education                              |
| C-REAL | Center for Research on Educational Access and Leadership |
| CSR    | Corporate Social Responsibility                          |
| CSUF   | California State University Fullerton                    |
| DHET   | Department of Higher Education and Training              |
| DoE    | Department of Education                                  |
| EEC    | Economically & Educationally Challenged                  |
| EMS    | Economic and Management Sciences                         |
| ESKOM  | Electricity Supply Commission                            |
| GPA    | Grade Point Average                                      |
| HDI    | Historically Disadvantaged Institution                   |
| HEI    | Higher Education Institution                             |
| HEQC   | Higher Education Qualification Committee                 |
| HEMIS  | Higher Education Management Information Systems          |
| HESA   | Higher Education South Africa                            |
| HSRC   | Human Sciences Research Council                          |
| IOP    | Institutional Operating Plan                             |
| KZN    | Kwa-Zulu Natal   |
| NEET   | Not employed not in Education & Training                 |
| NGO    | Non-Governmental Organisation                            |
| NSFAS  | National Student Financial Aid Scheme                    |
| NPHE   | National Plan for Higher Education                       |
| NQF    | National Qualifications Framework                        |
| NSC    | National Senior Certificate                              |
| OMET   | Old Mutual Education Trust                               |
| PDA    | Previously Disadvantaged African                         |
| REAP   | Rural Education Access Program                           |
| SADC   | Southern African Development Community                   |
| SAQA   | South African Qualifications Authority                   |
| SAICA  | South African Institute of Chartered Accountants         |
| SAUS   | South African Union of Students                          |

|       |   |
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| SES   | Socio-Economic Status                                 |
| SPSS  | Statistical Package for Social Sciences               |
| SU    | Stellenbosch University                               |
| TDG   | Teaching Development Grant                            |
| TIMSS | Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study |
| UCT   | University of Cape Town                               |
| USS   | Undergraduate Sponsored Students                      |
| UK    | United Kingdom  |
| UWC   | University of the Western Cape                        |

# 1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

## Introduction

For the better part of the past few decades deficit models have dominated research on academic access and success in higher education globally, mostly influenced by Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (1997). It is for example established by the dominant culture that children from high status backgrounds profit from the cultural resources in education, and generate educational advantage. Subsequently, numerous studies focus on students who are at risk of premature departure and failure because of their socio-economic backgrounds, and dropout and failure is often correlated with a lack of financial resources. Many of these studies (CHE, 2013; Letseka 2005; Badat, 2009; Sccott et al, 2007) use deficit conceptions of students while acknowledging that persistent problems limit the quality of learning and therefore constrain student success. Others (Morrow, 2009; Jansen, 2004; Marshall, 2010) rebut these conceptions, and tend to focus on deficit logic of institutions such as the remedial interventions and socio-cultural and knowledge practices of universities. Assuming a deficit perspective and approaching students from a perspective of weakness rather than strength depreciates expectations for students and weakens educators' abilities to recognize giftedness in various forms. The prevailing philosophy of needs assessment, deficit intervention and problem solving is not adequate for facilitating the success of diverse learners; rather alternative approaches offer an opportunity to review their methodologies (Tierney, 1997; Devlin, 2011; Pym & Kapp, 2013).

In South Africa, the post-1994 democracy era has resulted in a dramatic increase in access to higher education for previously disadvantaged students (Subotsky, 2003; Cloete&Moja, 2005 Mentz, 2012). However, access to post school education is strongly aligned with factors of educational status, income, and race (Letseka et al., 2010;Walpole, 2007; Bedsworth et al., 2006; Ball 2010). Graduation rates show some internal inefficiency in the higher education system especially when viewed along racial lines where, in 2009 graduation rates were 38.30% for Africans, 42.10% for Coloureds, 48.50% for Indians and 63.50% for Whites (DHET, 2011). The concern is that the focus of deficit thinking identifies and locates the problems of inequalities as socially linked limitations to students from poor communities. As a result, interventions to address these inequalities are directed at fixing students from poor communities

rather than the conditions that disadvantage them. Yet systemic factors such as inequalities in financing schools and curriculum differentiation are held blameless.

Challenges to widening participation persist and there are leakages in the education pipeline with little improvement in the graduation rates, particularly among Africans, institutions often only exploring what works where the results are satisfactory. Interventions of alternative mechanisms, likely to make a difference in the academic experience and the trajectory of disadvantaged students must be identified and documented, particularly, students from low socio-economic and rural backgrounds. This is central to the focus of the study. In an attempt to contribute to existing bodies of knowledge, the study explores different conceptions of both the student and the institution of learning, with the intention to unearth student and institutional practices that deepen participation and enable student success. For a change, we focus on what students perceive as helpful in welcoming them to the institution and what the institution offers to empower them.

This chapter serves to frame how I navigated the study by situating the study in the context of South Africa, and providing a background to the study to explain this context. I present the problem statement to anchor the approach to the study. The objectives of the study are described alongside the significance of the study, key terms and questions probing needed understandings to achieve these objectives.

## **1.1 Background to the Study**

To contextualize the challenges related to success and throughput this section briefly highlights the role of financial aid and its impact on student retention against the backdrop of the recent recommendations made by the NSFAS Ministerial Review Committee (DHET, 2010). An analysis of the inequalities created by the legacy of apartheid and a reflection on the transformation oriented initiatives aimed at bringing systemic changes in higher education are discussed. Finally, results of the gross enrolment rates as well as the dropout and graduation rates are presented to highlight the inefficiencies in the higher education system.

Achieving equal educational opportunity has always been a concern for most countries in the world. One major challenge is the persistent disparity in higher education outcomes across population groups. In the United States (US), especially in low income areas, just as is the case in South Africa, Black students lag behind their White peers in completing their studies because

it often takes five years to complete a three-year degree (Chen & DesJardins, 2010; CHE, 2010b; Cloete & Moja, 2005). According to Long and Riley (2007) there are many barriers to educational opportunities for minority students in the United States of America and a major one is related to affordability of higher education. Long and Riley (2007) found that over 56% of the African American and 58% of the Hispanic students had unmet needs after all aid was considered. Anderson and Hearn (1992) observe that higher education in the United States (US) has become not only a provider of individual, social and economic opportunity, but also a critical element in the national quest for equality of opportunity across socio-economic, gender, and racial lines. According to Park (1996) the greater the dispersion of education among the labour force, the greater the income inequality. Additionally, Bowen (1997) suggests that a democratic-capitalist society such as the United States could use education, especially higher education as a means of gradually reducing inequalities in the human condition, by providing training to improve the skills development of the working class.

In South Africa, while a myriad of financial aid programs are available to help families pay for college, recent shifts in policy (for example, reliance on loans and merit aid) may have materially changed the way aid influences student behavior, especially regarding enrollment and continuation decisions. In light of this gap in educational attainment by race, higher education stakeholders are increasingly interested in equalizing post-secondary opportunities for underrepresented groups and are examining how financial aid may help remedy this condition. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) contributes much needed access and financial resources towards positively influencing the pedagogic experiences of previously disadvantaged youth, yet dropout rates are still high and graduation rates low. The above scenario persists and is predicated upon the backdrop of the education system inherited from the apartheid regime which, over two decades since the inception of democracy in South Africa, is yet to be reversed. As a result of massification in higher education, a new and diverse student population brought a range of needs and challenges in relation to the student experience.

These challenges are reflected in the institutional outputs and success rates in the higher education system, especially at the first year level. The poor student outcome especially during the transition period from high school to higher education is largely shaped by a lack of preparedness of students and staff. This includes the nature and organization of teaching and learning in higher education, the conceptualization of the education process particularly in terms of appropriateness of content and assessment methods and its relationship to institutional cultures. Included in the problems is also the extent of professionalization of academic staff

and the nature and extent of funding required to address this (Scott et al., 2007). This has forced researchers to want to understand what should constitute student success as there are differing views on where responsibility for lack of success at university lies. Despite the initiatives by government and the private sector to increase access and retention in higher education, very little progress has been made, given the growing proportion of the young people in the 18-24 cohort sliding into the “not employed not in education and training” (NEET) category (DHET, 2010). It therefore seems that it will take more than funding in higher education to translate an educational opportunity into a complete qualification and marketable skill in the current economy.

A pivotal objective of the policy of the new democratic government with respect to higher education was to promote equity of access and fair chance of success while supporting the ethos of human rights to advance redress for the past inequalities (DoE, 1997:1.13, 1.14). Current higher educational policy conceptualizes higher education in South Africa as a single coordinated system and seeks to diversify the system in terms of the mix of institutional missions and programmes that will meet the regional needs in social, cultural and economic development (DoE, 1997:1.27, 2.37). The policy recognises the need to create an enabling institutional environment and culture that is sensitive to and affirms diversity, to improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the system, and in particular to ensure that curricula are responsive to the national and regional contexts (DoE, 1997).

This transformational policy agenda had serious financial implications that would create or break the requisite changes. The question remains: are these goals being realized? Research clearly notes the serious challenges of inefficiency in the higher education system where the enrolment rate only increased from 13.6% in 2001 to 17.8% in 2010 (HEMIS, 2011). The 18-24 cohort analyses conducted by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2011) shows that by 2009 only 45.6% of the first-time entering undergraduate cohort of 2004 had graduated, while 40.3% had dropped out. The picture is even worse when viewed by race where 38.3 % of African students, 42.1% of Coloured students, 48.5% Indian students and 65.5% of white students had graduated by 2009. According to Badat (2010:31), equity of opportunity and outcomes for Black students remains to be achieved. The difference in student success across racial groups is unacceptably high. There are a number of theories explaining the high dropout rates among non-White students, however there is no clear understanding about why those who remain persist and in fact realize academic success. Similar to other countries there is evidence in the continuing failure of low income students when compared to

high income, and even more disparities between racial groups (DHET, 2011; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Tinto & Pisser, 2006). Student persistence is still largely a reflection of institutional practice (Scott et. al, 2007; CHE, 2010b, Kuh, 2003; Pascerella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1993) and therefore considering the nature of theories and research on student persistence is critical.

## **1.2 Statement of the Research Problem**

Since achieving its formal democracy South Africa has made better quality higher education accessible to more students irrespective of socio-economic backgrounds, race or gender with the aim of creating equity and addressing historical imbalances. As a result, the student population in South Africa's academic institutions has increased, with students from diverse backgrounds including students from poor households and communities. As such, these diverse students, many of whom belong to what is known in South Africa as "Previously Disadvantaged African" (PDA) segment of the population, enter into tertiary education with a range of gaps and challenges due to existing inequalities which are not of their own making. Consequently, institutions themselves have somewhat new challenges that need attention which often result in poor outcomes (Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007; HESA, 2010).

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) introduced in 1999 was another initiative by government to provide financial support to students to access higher education. The NSFAS initially provided funds to 659,000 students, distributing R12 billion between 1999 and 2009, yet dropout rates remained alarmingly high (DHET, 2010:106; CHE, 2013). It then follows that sponsorship alone does not lead to high levels of success, as evidenced by the 72% dropout rate and 28% graduation rate of students funded by NSFAS (CHE, 2013:69). This explains the deficiency in the administration and support model of the main government student financial aid scheme in South Africa for students from low socio-economic communities.

Tinto (1975) and Kuh (2004) argue that student integration into university is a key determinant of how they engage henceforth with university life and the associated activities of living and learning. Research based evidence shows that students from low income groups can succeed when provided with financial resources and support necessary for their studies (Hatt, Hannan, Baxter & Harrison, 2005; Pym, 2013). However, much research, especially in the United States, has focused on student characteristics because students' academic performance correlates with disadvantage (Walter, 1992; Walpole, 2007). Surveys in other countries show that addressing

weakness does not help people improve more than will emphasis on strength (Pym, 2013). Addressing weaknesses has short term improvement as attrition remains high and performance increases to a certain extent. There is no student who will rise to low expectations because focusing on weakness lowers the energy, as a result a vicious cycle is created. As Meier's (1995) study shows, looking at students through deficit lenses masks their individuality and uniqueness, and therefore obscures recognition of their capacities and strengths. She argues that it is only when all students are encouraged equally to be competent and when students who have difficulty are encouraged to build on the competences they have rather than be discouraged by the emphasis on failure, that competence will be attained. Similarly, Devlin's (2011) study illustrates that remediation based on deficit fails to address the most central challenges in producing high academic achievement. As Tinto (2004) reminds us, understanding student departure does not necessarily clarify why they persist and remain at the university.

Importantly, previous studies do not speak to the experiences of academically successful students from working class backgrounds whose academic attainment remains largely undocumented. This is to say, very little is known about the resilience of those students who succeed in their undergraduate studies despite their low socio-economic backgrounds. Statistics have been effective in depicting the demographic reality of student dropout and throughput rates (DHET, 2015). However, quantitative measures of throughput have not been able to capture the intricacies of social conditions and teaching and learning processes (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; CHE, 2010b). As such, there is a need to first examine and understand the factors that motivate students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds to succeed academically in order to work out how institutions of higher learning can promote their retention and success.

Now more than ever before, universities are faced with the challenge of creating best practice solutions that replicate and multiply examples of university success, particularly among previously disadvantaged groups. Whilst retention theories (Tinto, 1975, 1993) provide us with some valuable insights regarding student departure and dropout, this case study helps us understand the interplay between student resilience and effective institutional conditions and practices that provide motivational and enriching learning experiences for sponsored students to succeed. The focus is on strengths instead of deficit, which obstructs educational reform by adhering to a risk focus.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Improving graduate output depends on humanizing the performance of well performing students from poor backgrounds rather than focusing on limitations. The main research question that guides this study is: What are the factors influencing the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students who have completed their first year of study at the University of the Western Cape?

The sub-questions investigated in this study include:

- a. What is the academic performance of undergraduate sponsored students who had completed at least one year of study at UWC by 2010?
- b. What is the effect of financial support on undergraduate sponsored students at UWC?
- c. What kind of institutional support do undergraduate sponsored students who had completed at least one year of study received from the University of the Western Cape that contribute to their academic success?
- d. What are the perceived barriers and catalysts to the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students at UWC?

### **1.4 Aim and objectives of the study**

This study aims to identify the factors influencing the academic attainment of sponsored students who have completed their first year at the UWC.

The objectives of the study are

1. To evaluate the academic performance of undergraduate sponsored students who had completed at least one year of study at UWC by 2010.
2. To describe the experiences of undergraduate sponsored students who have completed at least one year of study in their academic attainment and success at the UWC.
3. To determine the factors that contribute to the resilience of undergraduate sponsored students in their academic attainment at UWC.
4. To determine the kind of support that undergraduate sponsored students who have completed at least one year of study receive from the UWC as contributing to their academic success.

The study, therefore, ought to give insights into the protective factors that enhance and promote learning and success, and the effectiveness of universities in meeting the requirements of diverse students to be able to succeed.

## **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The DHET (2011) informs us that current higher education outcomes are far from satisfactory. However, it is important to build on the existing findings of student retention theories, with a view to deepening the understanding of student persistence and success. Given the fact that funding is cited as one of the critical causes of failure and high dropout rates (CHE 2010 b; CHE 2009; Letseka et al. 2010) empirical data is required to establish the influence of funding on the academic attainment among scholarship beneficiaries.

Retention studies, especially in the United States, have mostly focused on deficit models (Walpole 2007) as indicated earlier in this chapter. Dropout is mostly correlated with lack of financial and cultural resources and therefore it is important to gather accurate information regarding disadvantaged groups of students at tertiary institutions where funding had been provided.

While statistics related to dropout rates paint a morbid picture of academic success (particularly of disadvantaged groups), it is important to transcend the limitations of deficit theorizing. This concept, according Devlin (2011), refers to the focus on negative stereotyped characteristics such as lack of family support for finance or study as the cause of lack of success. This view is now seen as unhelpful and detrimental, and is increasingly being abandoned. Alternative, non-deficit frameworks will enable researchers to imagine different institutional practices that create nurturing environments for academic success. Needless to say, while there are general internal inefficiencies in the Higher Education system as illustrated by the NSFAS model, there are some pockets of success such as the Old Mutual Education Trust (OMET) initiative with an average 80% pass rate (OMET, 2012) and Thuthuka sponsored students with over 90% pass rate of students from poor communities (Morta, 2010). Gathering empirical evidence on what constitutes success, in particular, of the financially aided students from disadvantaged communities, is an important leading step.

The study provides insight into the understandings of what has made academic success possible based on the undergraduate sponsored students' reflections on their individual experiences and

the educational practices of the institution. Following Grant and Cadell's (2009) support for a strengths perspective in social work, I argue that there is a need for a paradigm shift in educational research and practice, focusing on potential, strengths, abilities, and knowledge of students, rather than limits. The findings of this study make recommendations for good practice and will inform current South African debates on free education for deserving students from poor communities. As Tinto (2012) warns, improvement in student success rates does not come by chance, it requires intentional structural and proactive actions that are systemic in nature and coordinated in application. I believe the findings of this study will positively inform such change, including the creation of welcoming institutional environments and holistic integrated campus wide relational supports that are nurturing to incoming diverse students.

## **1.6 Delimitation of the study**

As Kuh (2005, 2007) suggests, the satisfactory academic performance during the first year sets a solid foundation for future success. Sponsored students are widely dispersed across all the different universities in South Africa. However, the study focuses only on the case of undergraduate sponsored students at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), one of the historically disadvantaged institutions. The majority of UWC students come from poor and working class families, and are government or privately sponsored, based on individual needs. There are various types of sponsors including the university administered funds catering for staff dependents, who are not primarily the focus of this study. The sample includes only those sponsored undergraduate students who have completed their first year of study and are financially supported because they otherwise would not have afforded to access university studies because of their socio-economic status. Studies in higher education research have used variables that combine SES, parental level of education and occupation status to define students. In order to understand the educational experience, resilience and academic attainment and success the study focuses on undergraduate sponsored students who have completed at least one year of study.

## **1.7 Interpretation of Key Terms**

### **1.7.1 Sponsored students**

Sponsored students refer primarily to low-income and working class students who are provided financial support to create an opportunity to access higher education, which they otherwise would not afford (DHET, 2010). These students are those whose education at an institution is funded by a third party called a sponsor, such as an employer, a government programme or a foundation, trust or any other institution. Walpole (2007) refers to them as economically and educationally challenged (EEC) and invariably are first-generation university students. Most are from low socio-economic, rural backgrounds and are often under-prepared because of the poorly resourced schools they come from. Walpole (2007) states that EEC students are at a disadvantage because they do not have sufficient access to rigorous course work at high school and lack necessary information about applying to university. Knowing and understanding the definitions used and the conceptual frameworks engaged in research on EEC students provides a platform to examine students access to, experiences in and outcome of tertiary learning.

### **1.7.2 Academic attainment**

Academic attainment refers to reaching a desired goal of completion and graduating from a programme studied (Arnold, 1999). The mastering of the first academic year is critical because the bulk of the knowledge achievement and cognitive skills occur during the first year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006). Furthermore, adequate academic performance during the first year lays a solid groundwork for future success and has been linked to increased retention and better graduation rates (Bowel et al., 2009; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Kuh et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 1986). In this study, academic attainment refers to performance of students who have completed their first year of the study at the UWC and aim to complete their programme within the requisite time of study depending on the specified length of the degree. It is also defined as something accomplished through effort.

### **1.7.3 Resilience and strength-based approach**

In the field of education, resilience occurs when students succeed in school despite personal vulnerability that is compounded by ongoing environmental conditions and experiences (Wang et al., 1994). The resilience framework focuses on strengths over problems, and incorporates

key contextual factors in its structure, emphasizing the transaction between the individual and the social and physical environment. It is believed that resilience is a function of an individual's interface with the physical and social environment. This reminds us how people behave is a function of their interaction with their environment (Kurt Lewin in Ungar, 2008). In this study, resiliency refers to the academic attainment of students from poor communities who have completed their first year at the UWC despite the challenging conditions and the educational experiences in their under-resourced high schools. A strength-based approach provides a new lens through which students are viewed, shifting from areas of need to areas of talent and engagement. This therefore is an approach that recognises motivation as the central objective and attempt to promote excellence in the student (Anderson & Mc Guire, 1997).

#### **1.7.4 Institutional factors**

Institutional factors refer to the impact made by the institutional environment on the students' experience during tertiary education. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005:18), institutional impact is a model of student change that focuses on how the educational environment transforms the students individually and collectively. This emphasizes changes associated with the characteristics of the institution that students attend with experiences students have when they are enrolled at the university. Astin's (1984) theory posits that institutional impact can be measured by student involvement (Long, 2012); the more students are academically and socially competent, the more they are involved in the academic and social aspects of institutional life. In this study, institutional impact refers to the interaction between the student and the institution. It concerns activities that demonstrate the multiple connections between university staff and campus-wide activities to improve student learning and development at the university. These are based on the mission, including academic, social and cultural services of the institution.

### **1.8 Framework for the Research**

In this study, I investigate the academic performance and academic experiences of sponsored students who have been provided funding to be able to access higher education. This group also comprises other forms of definitional categories such as low socio-economic status which is defined by their parental income, occupation and education, their geographic location, gender, ethnicity and being first-generation university students. Socio-economic status significantly

influences the participation of students in higher education, especially those who come from poor backgrounds. These variables are commonly used by researchers with a focus on disadvantage, to explain from a deficit perspective the challenges and inability of students from poor backgrounds to access higher education and graduate. Although there are concerns around the skills gaps and conceptual knowledge that students bring, use of disadvantage has become a cover-up of structural injustice in education that has existed in South Africa for years. Structural factors that exist such as poorly resourced schools, untrained teachers and lingering oppressive policies are not addressed adequately and the reality of students from poor backgrounds cannot be denied.

This study has adopted an alternative conceptual framework (community cultural wealth) which avoids a deficit conception of students from poor backgrounds and embraces the idea of various forms of capital. I have also used alternative concepts, such as resilience, as well as alternative approaches that have different views from the dominant discourse on access and success, which tends to put the blame on students from poor and working class backgrounds instead of critically examining the systemic unequal structuring of opportunity in South African society.

Yosso (2005) highlights the strength of community cultural wealth, which provides new insights into the educational experiences of students from poor backgrounds. Community cultural wealth embraces various forms of capital, including aspirational, social, navigational, familial, resistant and linguistic capital. Yosso's study draws attention therefore to alternative approaches that recognize and nurture the strengths that students from poor communities bring to higher education. This idea calls for institutions to be adapted and changed to better meet the needs of increasingly diverse students in higher education today.

Added to the many definitions are a number of theoretical approaches, conceptual frameworks and models that have guided research on inequalities in higher education. I believe that among all the scholarly tasks facing researchers, practitioners and policy makers is to account for the ways in which educational ideas, activity and structure contribute to students' academic attainment and success, especially those who come from low socio-economic background. Devlin (2011) problematizes the socio-cultural incongruence in which students from poor communities attempt to engage with expectations and norms of higher education they are not familiar with. This inflexibility shows the role played by educational institutions in perpetuating inequality.

In the literature chapter, I examine deficit models used to explain the academic performance of students from poor communities. I critique Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) cultural capital theory which is largely used by researchers to explain the disparities in the educational attainment of students from different social classes. Bourdieu's view is that the cultural capital valued in schools is taught in higher class homes and enables students from high class families to be more successful in education than students from low-class families. Yosso (2005) views this concept as deterministic and privileges the cultural capital possessed by the elite social groups. Inherent in this view is the principle that structures in the educational institutions reproduce the dominant class. This view casts students as docile bodies with no agency

The Asset-based thinkers such as Devlin (2011) and Yosso (2005) have problematized the notion of accumulated disadvantage in relation to cultural capital or deficit thinking where individuals are compared to a dominant and affluent class and deemed lacking. This deficit thinking has had the longest currency in research to explain the poor academic performance among low income groups. Yosso (2005) emphasizes the richness that emanates from cultural wealth, knowledge and abilities and networks possessed and utilized by other communities to resist forms of domination. First-generation university students can draw upon the strength of their own aspirations, their families' support, their ability to navigate through social institutions and their legacy of resistance to subordination, to succeed in educational settings. According to Pym (2013), students bring internal and external assets that need nurturing as soon as they reach the gates of higher education. This requires a shift in the teaching and learning practices of fixing limitations to a more flexible approach of engaging. In Chapter Two of this study I critique deficit models, and in the third chapter investigate strength-based theories as an alternative theoretical starting point from which to approach the problem.

## **1.9 Outline of the study**

This case of UWC undergraduate sponsored students' academic attainment study is developed in six chapters. Chapter One has provided an overview of the study undertaken, showing how I navigated the study. The second chapter describes the literature reviewed, theorizing the educational conditions that limit equitable access to education. Many studies use deficit models to understand student academic performance, especially of those who come from poor communities. In this study, I particularly highlight the use of Bourdieu's theory with its

deterministic feature in the academic performance of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. While I understand that Bourdieu's theory was intended to explain unequal social realities especially in higher educational opportunities among social groups, it provided a space for deficit framing. I gather that in explaining educational inequalities, researchers attach too much importance to Bourdieu's suggestion that lack of recognition of cultural capital adversely shapes the attitude and outlook of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. The chapter reviews literature and challenges the prevailing philosophy of needs assessment, deficit intervention and problem solving approaches which have not managed to improve the success rates of diverse learners in higher education currently. The study therefore argues that research incorporate or focus on asset-based approaches as alternatives to the overstated cultural capital approaches, which embrace other variables like resilience and community cultural wealth.

Unveiling alternative approaches in the third chapter, the study examines what works for students who come from low-socio economic backgrounds, and who succeed academically. Conceptualization of asset-based approaches that invest on potential are embedded in the critical education tradition, particularly in Critical Race Theory and in the strong democratic education models. The use of Yosso's (2007) community cultural wealth and Bernard's (2005) resilience models are discussed in chapter three. The asset-based approaches have been used to frame the investigation of assumptions of shared stereotyped thinking and offering counter narratives. The asset-based approach draws on an ecological perspective which recognizes the importance of people's environments and multiple contexts that influence their lives. Building on some existing reviewed studies (Pym, 2013, Boughey, 2002), the study conceptualizes the academic attainment of previously disadvantaged students, focusing on potential, strengths, determination and capabilities and the impact of the institutional environment on diverse students. As stated by Marshall and Case (2010) and Pym (2013) socio-cultural perspectives on student learning go beyond the perception of learning as a cognitive process only, as broader aspects related to student experience are considered. There is a need to develop both a supportive community and a culture of learning focusing on the provision of academic skills that promote social connectedness and agency throughout the degree. It is in positive relationships where high expectations and students' feeling of self-assurance arising from an appreciation of their abilities and qualities that good result are realized for the benefit of the teacher and the learner.

The fourth chapter describes the case study design and methodology. A case study was chosen because it is an intensive description and analysis of a contemporary phenomenon with a

bounded group focused on understanding the academic performance of students from poor backgrounds, not confirming existing theories especially those with a focus on deficiency. The corpus of data includes higher education policies and policy-related reports, institutional records (annual reports; institutional planning documents; secondary analysis of student records) and in-depth interviews. Chapter Five first presents the descriptive statistical findings from the secondary data analysis of the academic performance of South African undergraduate sponsored students. The data comprised of 6660 undergraduate sponsored students registered in 2010 in the seven faculties of UWC: namely; Arts, Science, Law, Education, Dentistry, Community and Health Sciences and Dentistry, Economic and Management Sciences. The performance of students is cross tabulated by gender, age and type of sponsor to see if there are any significant differences in academic attainment in relation to these independent variables. This is then followed by an analysis of in-depth interviews with twelve students who had completed their first year of study successfully. The details of demographic and socioeconomic independent variables such as high school attended and geographic location, level of parental education, age, gender, and type of sponsor are documented. The relevance of these variables is that they are commonly used to measure cultural capital, deemed an important resource which contributes to educational success.

The last chapter summarises findings and concludes with recommendations and implications for practice. The findings of this study show that providing funding to students irrespective of background has a positive impact on performance. Furthermore there is an association between student academic performance and provision of financial and wholesome support, as such equality of educational opportunity is important. Nurtured resilience is an important concept in education and enables researchers to focus on what helps students to persist in their undergraduate studies rather than why they fail. This provides an opportunity for a paradigm shift; to reflect on successful students from disadvantaged backgrounds focusing on their strengths rather than labels that mask unidentified and unexamined assumptions.

The study therefore recommends more research around what works, raising the impact students' nurtured resilience brings as well as believing that one's background cannot determine who one becomes. More exploration of what strengths and resources students from poor communities bring into higher education and how they can be harnessed positively is recommended. Researchers need to actively tap into student competences with a changed mind-set from deficit thinking, especially because the demographics of the incoming students in higher education continue to change.

## **2 CHAPTER TWO: DISMANTLING DEFICIT IDEOLOGY IN EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSES RELATED TO INEQUALITIES OF EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I investigate several theories that chronicle the plight of people who have not been afforded educational opportunities in society because of a lack of financial support. Firstly, researchers have examined the difficulties faced by students from poor and working class backgrounds which are related more often than not to economic status and disadvantage resulting in them being pathologized and marginalised. This includes students from rural and peri-urban areas, their experience of poor quality secondary education and therefore under-preparedness for higher education. Added to that, contrasts in student academic performance are set up in terms of social differences such as language, race, gender and culture.

Secondly, in South Africa the inequalities reflected in the education system relate to the historical racialized education system. During the apartheid era opportunities for black students, particularly those who came from poor backgrounds were severely limited and segregated. Students entered higher education in very low numbers and could only do so through racialized access at particular institutions. Access to higher education began as a paradigm of inherited merit, where a handpicked group of academically proficient students were admitted solely on the basis of their socio-economic and educational backgrounds.

Thirdly, this has however progressed to equal rights, where demographic, economic, political and ideological imperatives have influenced the massification of higher education such that it represents national diversity. To inspire, motivate and serve the diverse population of students in higher education today, there is a need to acknowledge and fully address the systemic and institutional challenges encountered by students from poor communities. It is necessary to know and support how they navigate teaching and learning, persist, and finally attain their aspirations. Problems of access and success are vast and need to be tackled and acted upon with all the information provided by researchers in order to improve the pass rate. For a change, this

study suggests focusing on what works for poor and working class students as they struggle to adjust to the middle-class world dictated by the dominant form of cultural capital.

The focus of the study is to examine the factors that contribute to the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students. The first section provided an overview of the impact of public finance as a way of offsetting the inability to self-fund in higher education. In this chapter, I critique deficit models whose focus on ‘at risk’, the so-called culturally deprived or low-income families are a dominant feature in research on equity of access and success. According to Mentz (2012), while there is no formal definition of at risk students in the South African literature, students who are first generation, low socioeconomic and were racially excluded from educational opportunities and are underprepared for higher education, are considered at risk. Also, massification of higher education resulted in challenges of access and quality assurance that impact on throughput and graduation rates.

Particularly, research in the past decades focused on student access and success in higher education globally. This involved research in the following areas: retention and persistence, transformation issues, involvement and student engagement, cultural capital and its influence on attainment and this is encountered in the literature of Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1994), Beattie (2002), Thomas (2002), Letseka et al.(2010), Long (2007), CHE(2009), and CHE (2013). In South Africa Letseka et al. (2010) and Essack (2010) highlight the throughput rates based on racial lines and marginalized groups and causes mentioned are financial and academic exclusions, under preparedness whilst emphasizing that marginalized encompasses gender bias, poor quality of secondary education, economic status, language and racial and ethnic marginalization by political regimes. In the USA, Kuh (2005) and Tinto (1993) suggested that student engagement and student integration are the key factors that contribute to student success and are linked to student socio-economic status. Largely, even though the researchers have different focuses and approaches to the problem the common thread is that there are limitations identified. This deficit thinking has had the longest existence among researchers, educators and policy makers to explain the poor academic attainment among low income groups. Though these prior studies have laid the groundwork for exploring the educational inequalities, I suggest that it is high time we looked at what works for students, make improvements and intensify on that.

This study critiques and challenges risk factor models which view students from poor communities through deficit lenses. Valencia (1997) stated that risk factor is rooted in

assumptions of classism, sexism and flawed methodological research. Risk-focus labels students from poor communities and often fails to account for their success.

## **2.1 What is Deficit Thinking**

The Concise English Dictionary defines deficit as “*it is lacking from*”. According to Valencia& Solorzano (1997) the deficit construct is a process of blaming the victim, a form of oppression and based on assumptions of cultural inferiority. It is connected to genetic pathology where inferiority is transmitted by genetic code and regulated by aptitude tests and a culture of poverty. Consequently, deficit thinking occurs when we see students or talk about them in terms of what needs fixing in them, the weakness that students have, where they are ranked in the internal tests or how unqualified the teachers are to teach the students. Valencia (1997) indicates that school environments are created to showcase the worst abilities students have instead of nurturing what they have. Fixing what is broken often sets barriers to re-imagining what works so that the passion that the students have is encouraged. Students who have self-confidence can only be helped to build on their strengths and not mitigate their weakness. Indeed, interventions are needed to make sure the expectations of students are raised and that the schools are doing what needs to be done for learning.

Secondly, deficit thinking is also at play when we view student experience and academic attainment based on economic status, when students are seen as less affluent because of their parental educational levels and having no interest in higher education and inability to self-fund. Thirdly, the idea of “deficit” is also evident when difficulties of students from working class backgrounds are documented as lack of cultural capital, and not recognised for what they are. Researchers influenced by Bourdieu’s Cultural Reproduction theory adopt the idea of a lack of cultural capital, referring to unwritten rules of interaction and preferred tastes of the dominant economic group in society. This according to Warnock and Appel (2011) is because schools, especially institutions of higher learning, serve to socialize students into middle class society which the students from working class are not exposed to. Bourdieu (1984, 1997) suggests that inequalities in capital and the resulting differences in habitus affect academic outcomes. His theory of cultural reproduction suggests that a lack of familiarity with the dominant culture or cultural capital serves as a barrier to upward mobility for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. So, the belief is that parents’ educational levels affect the schooling levels of their children in that highly educated parents will be more familiar with the system of higher

education and that will be an advantage for their children in terms of intergenerational educational reproduction. Therefore, while Bourdieu's work intended to provide a structural critique of social and cultural reproduction, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor (Yosso, 2005).

I purposely use the term advantage because in countries like South Africa there is evidence that the historical analysis of the apartheid laws have contributed to the manifestation of advantaged and disadvantaged groupings. To humanize the realities of educational discourse, it is important that construction of alternative scenarios for success are shared and structures and practices that facilitate inequalities are contextualized and addressed. Therefore, in Chapter Three I present alternative theories related to this study to create an interpretive framework which explains the trajectories of academic success for previously disadvantaged students.

Central to the economic empowerment of any country is the development of human capital and therefore, it is obligatory for governments to ensure that education is accessible to all its citizens regardless of their backgrounds. So, affordable student fees remain a major vehicle to expedite greater access for families from disadvantaged and poor backgrounds. I now proceed to discuss how socio-economic status influences the participation of individuals in higher education.

## **2.2 Re-contextualizing the Access and Success Gap**

Socio-economic status influences the participation of individuals in higher education to a large extent. According to a substantial volume of research, one cause of the growing gap in university education levels between high income and low income groups is linked to the increasingly unaffordable costs of higher education.

In South Africa, the legacy of the apartheid system continues to affect the educational opportunities of previously disadvantaged groups. This legacy left a racially differentiated education system that privileged the white minority while excluding the black majority, especially Africans, from opportunities and privileges (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007; CHE, 2004). According to Letseka (1997) in 1993, just shortly before the transition from apartheid to democracy, the white minority government allocated R4 504 for education of a white pupil, R3 625 for the education of an Indian pupil, R2 855 for the education of a coloured pupil, and R1 532 for the education of an African pupil. This undoubtedly shows that the white pupils

benefited from the educational expenditure that was way too higher than the average African pupil (Lemon, 2004; Ramphela, 2000).

In the student pathways study, Letseka (2009) revealed that four reasons stood out prominently about why South African students dropped out without obtaining a qualification. Firstly, lack of finance, where on average about 70% of the surveyed students came from family backgrounds with low socio-economic status. Added to that, their parents or guardians' level of education ranged between no-formal education to high school levels. As a result, their monthly income ranged from no-income to between R1-R400 and R801-R1 600 per month (Letseka, 2005). Secondly, academic failure, and poor or no career guidance were cited as other reasons for dropping out of school and failure. There was evidence of mismatch between student's choice of field of study and the ability to do well in that chosen field. Students also reported that they struggled with concepts and terminology in their chosen field of study. Letseka (2005) indicated that there was also consensus among interviewed senior academics and management that upon arrival at higher education institutions most young people do not know what to expect or what to study. These short-comings are consistent with research in South Africa and internationally, suggesting that most university entrants lack the necessary epistemological access. Access is not only about providing a place for a student to study at university, but must be contextualized within an academic development and supportive environment that enables an epistemological access. This, Morrow (1993) describes as an academic way of knowing that sustains, and is required in universities (Morrow, 1993 Boughey & Niven, 2012). This access then enables students to engage meaningfully and effectively in higher education. For students to be successful they are engaged in quality programmes in a congruent manner in which teaching and learning occurs and students are empowered with skills and attributes that prepare them holistically for the world. Epistemological access must be addressed by teacher education, structural policy-related interventions and differentiated curriculum that allows an emergence of reflexivity in response to risk and thus quality of education. Many students are underprepared for university studies (Moll, 2004; Nyamapfene & Letseka, 1995) and in most cases are first-generation university students who have no access to social networks that have knowledge and experience of university study (Walpole, 2007; Slonimsky & Shalem, 2006). All these problems are a manifestation of exclusion from opportunities and privileges for many, especially Black South African families, by the apartheid policies and legislation.

The third reason is related to the institutional culture which may be traced back to the Bantu Education that was legislated in 1953 advocating the acceptance of allocated social roles for children of different population groups in South Africa (Lodge in Bereng, 2008:20). As such, race and ethnicity have shaped the development of higher education in South Africa to the extent that inequality became projected into the future of the White and African products of that system (Weber & Vandeyar, 2004). This is clear as stated by Verwoerd, the architect of Bantu education, who believed that:

*There is no place for the Bantu in European community above the level of certain forms of labour, what is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when he cannot use it in practice (Verwoerd, cited in Tabata, 1960).*

Jansen (in CHE, 2010) describes this culture as having to do with the content of what appears on the emblem of the institution, the content for talking about others and the way in which universities perceived the future. According to Letseka et al.(2010), a survey reported a deepened dilemma where student failure still tended to blame the victim or the institution's academic support services. Furthermore, students reported that culturally they did not belong: they were frustrated by the way the university administration dealt with their concerns, or how processes unfolded with no respect for their valuable time. Additionally, services that were perceived as critical for students who came from previously disadvantaged communities, regarded as 'at risk', were not taken seriously and were poorly resourced and seen as not core to the curriculum.

Lastly, personal or family reasons were attributed to personal lifestyles that sidetracked students from their studies and succumb to peer-pressure. Poor quality in student life was cited as one of the contributing factors. Expounding on this assertion, some students reported that they had to juggle studies with work to compensate for the inadequate funding they received. Highlighting the implications of these extracurricular activities on their studies, students reported that taking on work adversely affected their studies because it brought on high stress levels. Other reasons were health related issues pertaining to family members where, for example, a student had to be the care-giver or look after siblings in child-headed families. This is not uncommon in South Africa where children are sometimes orphaned as a result of the HIV-related pandemic.

There are many theories that have been developed in order to explain the problems identified in the past decades that are related to access and success, especially students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Ishanti, 2003; Kuh 2005; Tinto, 1993; CHE, 2010). However, little progress has been made in closing the gap despite the knowledge and significant amounts of research. The next section discusses issues surrounding the persistence of undergraduate sponsored students who invariably come from low income, working class backgrounds and are first-generation university students. Little is known about the relief that the scholarship provides in enhancing or inhibiting access.

### **2.3 Creating Possibilities: Impact of student financial aid and bursary opportunities**

Issues of increasing access to university and improving chances of student success continue to be an important research focus within higher education in South Africa and globally. However, affordability remains one of the barriers that prevent students from enrolling and successfully completing post-secondary education.

For many students from working class and poor families, post-secondary opportunities remain elusive. Financial aid and bursary opportunities help students to gain access to academic and social settings of tertiary institutions, and influence students' commitment to stay on course with their studies. Money alone is however not enough to keep students at university. It takes commitment, support from significant others, adequate funding, institutional fit and positive social settings for students to stay in higher education, hence the interest of this study is the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students.

#### **2.3.1 Student Funding as Means for Access to Higher Education**

In South Africa, with the dismantling of the Apartheid system in 1994, the education *White Paper 3: A Programme for Transformation of Higher Education* set out a broad framework for the development and transformation of higher education (DoE, 1997). This programme provided a policy framework within which the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) was established. The purpose of establishing the NSFAS was to provide access to higher education, particularly to individuals from historically disadvantaged and poor communities. This would also ensure equitable representation so that capable students are not excluded from access to higher education because of poverty and social inequalities.

In many countries worldwide, the issue of economic disadvantage and low social class has an adverse effect on higher education participation. Previous research has shown that there is a correlation between high socio economic status and choice to study [or not] (Cosser & du Toit, 2004). Attempts are being made in various parts of the world to address the financial inequalities to ensure that no student is denied access to post-secondary education (Chen & Desjardin, 2008; Billingham, 2009).

In England, the Opportunity Bursary scheme was introduced for the first time in 2001 as one of the initiatives to widen participation. This was the government's commitment of targeting about 50% of young people to gain experience of higher education by 2010, especially those from low income backgrounds (Hatt, Hannah, Baxter & Harrison, 2005). A study on the performance of the first cohort of students to enter university with an Opportunity Bursary was conducted by the University of West England. Although the introduction of the bursary scheme was a national initiative, its implementation was left to higher education institutions, with the result that there were variations in how the scheme was advertised and implemented. In examining the effects of bursaries on individuals in the West England study, two key questions were posed;

1. Why do students from low income backgrounds, without a family history of higher education are as or more likely to continue their studies as compared to those from more privileged backgrounds?
2. Why is it that a small amount of financial support is positively associated with increased continuation rates?

Results, in this United Kingdom (UK) context, drawn from qualitative and quantitative data, show that bursary students are well motivated and determined to succeed, though it is not clear whether it is because of the bursary or the conscious choice of entering higher education, unlike the middle class students who unquestionably go to university as a norm. It would therefore be important to establish the impact a provision of bursaries and other mediated learning interventions have among typically disadvantaged youth in the education system.

The identified gap will be mitigated in this study by relating the declining effect of family background on offspring's educational careers to a decreasing relevance of parental financial resources. In a study conducted in the Netherlands where the Dutch Social policy aimed to reduce socio-economic barriers inhibiting youth access to education, the government opted to

provide an education system that is practically free of cost, and the study found that students did better (De Graaf et al 1986). In another study, Chen and Desjardin (2007) examined whether student financial aid mediates the relationship between parental income and student drop out behavior. Some time ago the United States Higher Education Act institutionalized federal support for higher education as a national interest, pledging that no child would be denied the opportunity for postsecondary education due to financial constraints. In this study, Chen & Desjardin (2007) undertook a longitudinal study on undergraduate students using national survey at the beginning of their postsecondary schooling. The study, focused on student drop out at four year institutions only, following a sample of 6,733 students from 1995 to 2001 (Chen & Desjardin, 2007). The study provided a comprehensive picture of drop out risk differences by income groups and the effects of financial aid on student outcomes across income groups. There were consistently high dropout risks for the low-income group as compared to the upper income counterparts in the 1996-2001 periods.

However, after controlling for other factors, loans and work-study aid are significantly associated with lowering the risk of drop out. The findings also showed that academic preparation and experience, including aspirations and Grade-Point Average (GPA) and academic integration are important factors associated with dropout risk (Chen et al., 2007). This could be helpful for planners in adjusting student retention programs at institutional level. The results also found that the dropping out was largest at the first-year level, though the estimated risk was also high at other levels of academic years. This finding suggested that interventions should be designed differently according to the time varying nature of dropout risks. Both these studies show that socioeconomic inequalities in higher education remain prevalent, and this is similar in South Africa, which requires the state to provide robust financial aid policies to reduce educational inequalities (DHET, 2010).

Coupled with the important process of providing students with access to more options in terms of financial aid, the South African government must begin by clearly defining and differentiating process and impact of those accessing bursaries versus students accessing government aid and support. Do the inherent perceptions about bursaries and government aid impact on the student's ability to secure further education at reputable institutions? What can be done to bridge such gaps and or perceptions? Is this a legitimate concern that students face?

Bourdieu believed that economic obstacles are not sufficient to explain disparities in the educational attainment of students from different social classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

This provides an opportunity for this research to examine Bourdieu's cultural reproduction thesis that he posits, affects educational outcomes. This dominant framing is discussed in the following section.

## **2.4 Challenging Dominant Framing**

Deficit-centered theories are characterized by negative beliefs and assumptions regarding the ability and aspirations of systematically marginalized people. It asserts that students from low-income backgrounds often fail to do well in school and especially the use of educated language. Also, this applies to lack of exposure to cultural models privileged in school and is therefore more congruent with school success which Bourdieu refers to as cultural capital. (Bourdieu, 1997). The possession of cultural capital varies with social class yet the education system assumes the possession of cultural capital, which makes it difficult for lower class pupils to succeed in the system.

Doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the education system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1977, p 494).

There is also an assumption that families of students from poor socio-economic backgrounds do not value education in the same way as those from middle and upper class backgrounds (Terenzini et al., 1996; Horn and Nunez, 2000). These perceptions and negative beliefs can result in stereotypes that affect the academic performance of students from poor backgrounds. It is the deficit view that provides educators to have low expectations academically and behaviourally from students based upon socioeconomic status. In my view this dominant deficit view places an added burden on the students who are trying their best to achieve. In the following section I revisit Bourdieu's Cultural reproduction theory and challenge the deficit centered theories by looking at the studies related to deficit models and student pretension and persistence.

### **2.4.1 Bourdieu's Cultural Reproduction Thesis**

Bourdieu (1977, 1984) used the theory of cultural capital to define the dynamics of examining people through their social class, and to examine its impact on their social status. According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital the education system of industrialized societies perpetuates and legitimates class inequalities. He uses the concept of cultural capital to clarify how, in addition to socio-economic and family background characteristics, cultural knowledge, traits and behaviours affect educational outcomes. Capital, whether social, cultural or economic, represents resources that individuals have at their disposal and are valued. Bourdieu (1977, 1984) suggests that cultural capital promotes academic success through different ways. Firstly, parents possess cultural capital which they transfer to their children either passively or deliberately. This cultural capital is entrenched in children's knowledge, language and mannerism. Secondly, the education system is designed to recognize and reward the cultural capital of the dominant group in society, as Bourdieu (1974: 32) stated:

Education is one of the effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one.

This structure according to Jaeger (2011) implies that teachers and other gate keepers misread the learners' familiarity with high status cultural signals as manifestations of academic capability and develop upwardly biased perceptions of them. Inevitably, learners who possess the cultural capital valued in the school are put at an advantage and they receive preferential treatment from their teachers and peers.

Success in the education system is therefore facilitated by possession of the dominant cultural capital and higher class habitus. The concept of habitus, according to Bourdieu is inculcated primarily by early childhood experiences and that differences in habitus are based on social class. Yet, the habitus is also transformed by subsequent experiences in communities and all aspects of family settings. Proper use of capital naturally results in success and positive feedback from teachers. Typically, this builds the students' confidence and alters their habitus.

The notion of habitus denotes that lower class learners generally do not perform well academically because they do not possess the cultural capital valued in schools. This theory of cultural reproduction suggests that lack of familiarity with the dominant culture privileged in the school serves as a barrier to upward mobility. It is therefore argued that actors in schools value certain cultural characteristics, which are conveyed through speech, attitudes, and

mannerisms in the school environment. Schools tend to reproduce inequalities based on SES because the environment tilts in favour of middle class learners and such rewards translate into uneven distribution of higher levels of educational achievement and attainment.

Bourdieu (1974) took account of the structural differences between the poor and the rich and the ways in which the social institutions supported those differences. In his view, the fundamental social division is derived from the economic structure in which there are advantaged and disadvantaged sectors, and where those who are advantaged need to continually work to maintain their position. Added to that, he saw educational institutions as key in the work of containing the contestation and of legitimating and reproducing class divisions. It is, therefore, understood that Bourdieu's analysis suggests that these class differences are built into the way in which educational institutions function. The value of the dominant culture is recognized and unevenly rewarded in schools (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Children who come from elite cultures are advantaged in schools as compared to children who lack similar cultural capital in that teachers recognise and reward such advantage. This pedagogic action subjects working class and poor pupils to unfair competitive mechanisms that reward only learners with dominant cultural capital. Yet, in a just and democratic environment education should be easily accessed by every individual regardless of background for the advancement of societies.

Conversely, DiMaggio (1982, 1985) posits that cultural capital, rather than block upward mobility, benefits the low-SES learners by letting them to better pilot the education system and intermingle with education gatekeepers that they otherwise would not. DiMaggio's findings in studying cultural capital were that while returns to cultural capital for females were greatest from high status families, in line with Bourdieu's social reproduction model, the returns to cultural capital were also greatest for males from low status families. Furthermore, DiMaggio (1982) distinguishes two hypotheses about interaction between social background and the effect of cultural capital. Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory formulates the hypothesis that cultural capital is especially advantageous for children from higher status groups. On the other hand, DiMaggio's hypothesis on cultural mobility theory states that it is especially children from lower status groups who are supported by their parents' cultural capital.

DiMaggio believes that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have an extra incentive in cultural capital to offset their disadvantage so the returns to cultural capital are relatively higher for children from disadvantaged backgrounds than those from advantaged ones. This simply

means that the difference between cultural reproduction and cultural mobility concerns which socioeconomic groups benefit the most in cultural capital, which both theorists believe matter. Furthermore, he argues that involvement and participation in high status cultures may be a practical and useful strategy for low status students who aspire towards upwards social mobility, even if their cultural capital is not by reproductive means. Cultural capital provides an opportunity to low-SES students to navigate the world that values middle and high-SES culture. Cultural capital can be developed over a period of time by successfully navigating the process of applying to university. I further note that cultural capital is also established through strong family motivation and the student's direct interaction with the educational gatekeepers.

As students develop the skill to advocate for services and meet requirement deadlines they acquire autonomy and the cultural capital needed to be successful in tertiary education. These strengths are reinforced as the student builds confidence in their ability to succeed in these settings. Other strengths that students bring are the dreams of their extended families for them to succeed. However, though Bourdieu and DiMaggio's theories differ on who benefits from cultural capital, there is sufficient evidence in research that supports the thesis on cultural reproduction (Aschaffenburg & Mass, 1977; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Also, there is empirical evidence that is in support of cultural mobility (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; De Graaf *et al.*, 2000; Dumais, 2006), which needs to be unpacked. The extent to which cultural mobility relates to the experiences and outcomes of students from poor social or family backgrounds is not well documented.

#### **2.4.2 Studies Related to Deficit Models**

The prolonged achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students raises the notion that answers to closing or addressing the gap depends on the implementation of practices and policies and generally on how things are done within the institutions of higher learning. This calls for scrutinizing the practices of institutions, educators and staff and the impact that all this has on students. As Walpole (2007: ix) states:

Low socioeconomic (SES) college students 'college attendance rate is 30percent lower than their more advantaged peers, a gap that has been consistent for a decade. These students face unique challenges in every aspect of post-secondary education, and yet despite the knowledge and significant amounts of research little progress been made in closing the gap.

It is time alternative approaches are applied because the research grounded on a deficit perspective blames the victims of institutional oppression by referring to negative stereotypes and assumptions regarding certain groups (Gorinski & Abernethy, 2007). These models frame the problem as one of students and families, often failing to address problems meaningfully within school and society at large that combine to inhibit the performance of certain groups of students.

Hawkes (2002) suggests that most literature to date continues to focus on deficit models in explaining student attrition rates. For example, issues of participation and retention that confront the indigenous Maori students in New Zealand indicate curriculum transformation, classroom pedagogy and relationships are critical areas for development if enhanced retention and success are to be realized. According to Hawkes, literature that discusses issues related to student participation and retention at the tertiary level often cites student characteristics as determinants of success and failure. Maori students who are the indigenous people of New Zealand from poor backgrounds may experience further barriers than those commonly known and well cited in literature. These include negative stereotyping of identity and ability, family obligations, lack of family support for finance and little opportunity to contribute to social and political change.

This approach provides a view of students as lacking in skills, knowledge and attitude that would support their success and retention. Advocates recommend increased student support services and programming to help at risk students overcome factors such as self-doubt, lack of student skills, and inappropriate attitudes to academic studies. In a way, it is suggested that students need to acculturate to the environment of tertiary study in order to gain the institutional fit and commitment (Lake, 1998:1). This deficit perspective presents the student as the problem and exempts teachers and institutions from scrutiny (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Simon, 1990; Smith, 1991). In the South African context, inequalities and racially defined disparities linked to success continue to constrain transformative gains and limit the success experienced by students in most institutions (Badat, 2009, Shay 2012). However, there is a renewed urgency to reconsider how researchers can show sensitivity towards avoiding deficit conceptualizations of students in their learning. To avoid turning the spotlight onto students and their perceived defiance, calls are being made to focus the attention onto universities themselves, suggesting that socio-cultural values, principles and knowledge practices of universities are key to student success (Haggis, 2009). According to Coleman (2012) one way to work towards achieving this

idea is to ensure that the research focus is on students and their learning without neglecting the role of institutional structures and values on learning. I therefore look at the retention and persistence theories to understand the impact of institutions on retention and student persistence.

### 2.4.3 Retention and Persistence Theories

Despite the very extensive literature, there is still inadequate attention given to the question of the definition of retention and to the development of theoretical models that seek to explain the process that leads to students dropping-out of higher education. This has often resulted in producing findings that are contradictory in character and misleading in implications or in some instances having an impact upon questions of policy in higher education.

The trend of providing support in the first year at university is the critical break or make period in shaping the student learning and persistence (Kuh, 2005). Previous studies on students' retention and adjustment have reported that transition to university can be a stressful experience for many new undergraduate students (Tinto, 1996; Popejoy, 1994; Thomas, 2002; Abdullah, 2009). Students are often confronted with various personal and interpersonal challenges which include, but are not limited to, making new friends, developing academic habits, issues of coping with transition to emotional and financial independence.

A study on adjustment among first year students at a university in Malaysia showed that key problems faced by first year students were academic problems, health and financial crises as well as social and personal problems. These were compounded by receiving money late from providers, understanding textbooks written in the English language, and time management with classes starting early in the day.

The study revealed that serious attention needs to be given to adjustment problems as this could lead to student failure or drop out (Abdullah *et al.*, 2009). My study supports the notion that change and adjustment requires supportive coping strategies in any given situation at all stages of human life, let alone students who invariably would need that guidance and support. According to Abdullah the results of his study as mentioned earlier indicated that throughout the first semester the students' academic achievement was found to be significantly predicted by college adjustment, academic adjustment, personal and emotional adjustment.

Similarly, Tinto's theory of student development posits that students enter college or university with varying patterns of personal family and academic characteristics and skills, including initial dispositions and intentions with respect to college attendance and personal growth. These intentions and commitments are subsequently modified and reshaped on a continuing basis through a longitudinal series of interactions between the individual, the structures and members of the academic and social systems of the institution (Tinto, 2001).

In South Africa first year attrition is an indicator of the higher education sector's capacity to meet the need of entering students. Scott *et al.* (2007) suggest that first year attrition is a long-standing problem. In particular, there has been very little change since 2000 (Scott *et al.*, 2007:28). The 2006 attrition rates show a continuation of racial disparities: African 34 percent, Coloured 39 percent, Indian 34 percent and White 29 percent. The African attrition was on par with Indian rates which is not usual and this could be attributed to the growth of extended curriculum programmes which generally improve the first-year retention. The first year and the graduation rates in regulation time support the contention that much of the performance in higher education can be attributed to the articulation gap between school and higher education. It is evident that the systemic problems affect the whole school system; the poorly resourced schools as well as the dysfunctional and poor schooling in South Africa in general. It also supports the theory that articulation gap affects the majority of students hence the suggestion to redesign the higher education curricula (CHE, 2013:45).

According to Hunter (2006), institutions in all sectors of higher education attempt to increase success by focusing on retention. Retention is a campus based phenomenon due to the fact that campuses attract different types of students and it is, therefore, imperative that institutions provide an environment and climate that fit well with their particular student population. It is, therefore, the responsibility of each institution to ensure that students who gain admission to university graduate.

Each institution must tailor retention to fit the specific needs of its students in the context of that particular institutional environment (Berger & Lyon, 2005). More often than not it is somewhat easier to blame the new student constituent for early withdrawal from higher education which lets the institutions off the hook.

There is evidence that there are variations in the drop-out rate which appears to be linked more to institutional culture than the background and nature of students recruited (CHE, 2013, CHE,

2010). It is therefore pertinent to examine how these students can be supported to succeed given that their access is more of a struggle and less of a right, than for other students from the dominant culture (Thomas, 2002).

In the following section, it is important to understand who the so called “at-risk students” are by looking at some important and useful demographic characteristics of students.

#### **2.4.4 Student Demographics Related to Socioeconomic Status**

In order to examine and improve the Low-SES students’ access to, experiences in, and performances in higher education we must understand who these students are. Walpole (2007) suggests that though researchers agree that students from families with low income, whose parents did not attend college and therefore work in lower-status occupations, are less likely to attend or graduate from university, there has been little cohesiveness in defining and examining these students’ experiences. There is also very little known about those who succeed even though they are from poor backgrounds. In this case study, the very variables I used to operationalize the parents’ SES were used such as parental education, occupational status including high school attended and geographic location. The following section illustrates the diversity of characteristics used.

##### *a. Sponsored Students*

In the context of this case study, sponsored students can be described as those who have been provided funding by private, public or government organizations to access higher education. The majority of these students at UWC come from the working class and poor families and would otherwise not be in a position to access higher education. UWC attracts students who come from areas characterized by unemployment and from families that are dependent on social welfare grants and pensions. Invariably schools in these areas are under resourced and as a result learners usually come underprepared to higher education. This then poses challenges where institutions are not ready for such learners and thus inadvertently maintaining racially discriminatory practices and cultures. Most parents of these learners did not attend tertiary and work at lower-status occupations or have no employment. Many researchers believe that a combination of all these descriptions define socio-economic status (Walpole, 2007; Terenzini *et al*, 2001). Each of these variables will further be described as they were utilised in this study. Students with such characteristics are perceived to be “at risk”, and this view is perpetuated by the fact that Bourdieu believes that institutions’ structures reproduce social class. Furthermore,

social class is pertinent to higher education because of its impact on access and admissions of students, as well as their collegiate experiences and outcomes. Walpole (2007) believes that social class comprises socio-economic status, parental education, parental income and occupation, and these are used to define SES in higher education studies. In this case study, it is important to examine the resilience of those who manage to succeed whilst coming from such backgrounds, those who manage to overcome obstacles that are being maintained by the dominant group.

*b. Parental Education*

Parental education is often included in SES and is used to define first generation students. Many researchers delimited first generation students as those whose parents did not have education above a high school diploma (Pascarella et al, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Ishitani, 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005), as is understood even in the data of this study. In other studies (Letseka et al, 2010, Walpole, 2005) first generation students are defined as those whose parents or guardians do not have a bachelors' degree. Though this is an accepted definition, in other contexts it could be limiting as parents could refer to other members of the extended family as is the case in African communities.

Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005) investigated predictors of first generation students' GPA, college adjustment and commitment. They found background variables did not predict either adjustment or commitment and that only high school GPA was associated with college GPA. Peer support and motivational factors were other significant indicators. Yet, students from low-income backgrounds may benefit extremely from engaging in class activities or collaborative activities as well as faculty interaction as was the case in this study.

*c. Occupation and Income of Parents*

Parental occupation and income have been used by researchers to define particular groups of students for studies, even though mostly for working class students. In this study, parental education, occupation and income were closely linked as it was observed that where the education of a parent was low there would either be low occupation status or unemployment and state grant benefits. Paulsen and St John (2002) found that low-income students earned higher grades than their higher income peers. This, according to Paulsen and St John was attributed to the fact that almost half of the low-income students in their study were not traditionally aged students. Thus, the low-income population in their sample may have included returning students who were highly motivated and focused on their academic rigors

of college. Moreover, Paulsen and St John (2002) noted that low-income students were less likely to live on campus than high-income students. Similar research on low-SES students, found that low income students work harder and are less likely to be involved in co-curricular activities than their peers from high- income families (Arzy, Davies & Harbour, 2006). Students ascribed their cautious social and co-curricular involvement to their lack of comfort with their peers and the campus environment. Students decide to become involved based on their comfort levels. Littrell (1999) and O'Dair (2003) viewed working-class students' experiences as socially dislocating because of the hegemonic bourgeois culture that college campuses perpetuated.

*d. First Generation Students*

Students whose parents have not attended tertiary education are referred to as first generation. The deficit model suggests that at undergraduate level, this group is at a disadvantage compared to their non-first generation peers. They have poor grades on average while in school, lower enrolment rates, and lower levels of academic and social integration, as well as lower rates of retention and graduation (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003; 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Social class differences were found in cultural capital when studying how female high school students selected colleges (McDonough, 1997). Families from more privileged backgrounds had better access to information and could access any information they required with ease. On the contrary, students whose parents had not attended college were supportive of their children's desires to go to college, although they were not in a position to provide assistance or information about college. Hsiao (1992) reported that in addition to adjustment to the college environment, courses, and campus life, first generation students also found themselves learning a new culture involving certain life styles, vocabulary and even music. The new styles found in the college environment were closely aligned with cultural capital possessed by non-first generation students (Loudon, 1989).

The few existing studies on cultural capital and first generation students have not so much concentrated on outcomes such as GPA than how things are done here (institutionalized capital). However, it is expected that if first generation students are exposed to high arts activities early in their lives, they feel comfortable in elite settings such as universities. Similarly, first generation students with access to cultural capital in the form of strategic interactions may benefit educationally. Parents may make an effort to secure information for

their children, or students themselves interact regularly with teachers and guidance counselors. These interactions may help students with the application process or when meeting with professors and counsellors once in college.

Being first generation seems to serve more as a barrier to initial university access than does for attainment of bachelor's degree (Dumais & Ward, 2009). This is evidenced in findings of research done in South Africa where results show that socially and economically disadvantaged individuals are less likely to access and successfully complete higher education because they come from poor backgrounds (Letseka et al., 2005). Dumais and Ward (2009) observed that first generation status did not have an effect on the educational success once they are in an educational environment. It is for this reason that this study will determine, using empirical data, what actually works in such instances and whether the first generation begins to take a new dimension as a response to their new habitat. Dumais and Ward (2009) suggest that while educators know that the dominant cultural capital deliberately excludes those who come from poor backgrounds not recognizing that they also have culture, not much has been done to examine the realities of less privileged individuals in such environments. Future research is therefore recommended to focus on access to institutions to determine if forms of dominant cultural capital such as language style, comfort in a middle-class environment, and knowledge about graduation requirements do not significantly affect college enrolment and success. Higher education policy interventions have not accompanied policies for expanding comprehensive access and success, especially of students from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

#### *e. Gender*

It is noted that massification internationally has been the key driver of transformation and has contributed to the creation of fundamental challenging situations facing Higher Education institutions today (Altbach et al, 2009; Krause, 2005). In most African countries, while the number of women is in the majority in higher education, they however are in disciplines that have lower premium in labour markets (Oanda et al., 2010). Inequalities are especially apparent among socio-economically disadvantaged females and those who seek enrollment in the male dominated fields such as the sciences and technology. It is also noted that equity intervention policies have only targeted a quantitative increase in female enrolment in higher education but have not addressed some of the qualitative gendered contexts in higher education that circumvent female retention and completion (Oanda & Akudoli, 2010).

According to Scott (2009) in South Africa, the overall demographic profile of the student enrolling at institutions of higher learning has drastically changed over the years both in terms of race and gender. Enrollments for Blacks and Coloured cohort have more than doubled since 1994 comprising more than 70 percent of the total enrolment. There are now more female students in higher education than male (Jansen *et al.*, 2007). The concern is over the emerging evidence that despite the nominal increase in the number of female students accessing the institutions, the social and class composition from where such female students are drawn has largely remained the same and remains restricted to those who can afford the rising costs of higher education (Morley *et al.*, 2008). The needed responses and initiatives are those that go beyond access and address the gendered cultures of higher education institutions. They need to provide practical support mechanisms that enhance chances of retention and completion and contribute to deepening gender responsive policies in higher education institutions.

*f. Academic strength in High school*

The quality of educational intensity and experience of the high school curriculum affect almost every dimension of success in post-secondary education. Students who are best prepared coming out of high school are best positioned to do well in college, regardless of who they are and how much money they have. All students notice a huge gap between the academic demands of high school and university academic expectations. Students from well-resourced schools claim that they worked hard and had developed skills to cope with the demands of intellectual work at university. The only challenge was the huge volumes of books and concentration in keeping up with the speed in class, which overwhelmed them. The other aspect was the transition whereas in high school there was guidance and systematic support through difficult work, at university there was no such consideration.

It must be highlighted that there are those students who come from under-resourced communities who manage to rise up to the challenges against all odds. This requires that institutions must know who their students are and what their needs are, to be able to come up with meaningful interventions. To fully understand this phenomenon, a brief historical overview on access, quality and standards in South Africa need to be revisited.

In 1936, the minister of education commissioned studies to examine the high failure rate in South Africa. This was conducted by the National Bureau for Education and Social Research (Malherbe, 1977). Furthermore, this study surveyed 8000 White students entering South African universities over a six-year period. Its main finding was that almost 47 percent of all

first-year students failed at least one subject and 25 percent in more than one subject. Malherbe's (1977) study demystified the notion that it was the "youthfulness" of students that was the main cause of high failure rate. Instead, reasons such as the transition from high school to university, and the inadequacy of the university teaching system were noted. It is interesting that poor school preparation and weakness of university teaching and learning were identified seven decades ago (Malherbe, 1977:485). In an attempt to curb that, measures suggested included school level quality improvement. This example shows that the more things change, the more things stay the same. Even way back then the Malherbe commission noted that unless action was taken, the danger was that familiarity with that situation would breed acceptance (Malherbe, 1977:487).

With the 1994 democratization of the system of government in South Africa, large-scale reforms of the school system took place in terms of the structure, financial spending and curricula. The school system was realigned to form part of the National Qualifications Framework which would undertake a fundamental overhaul of the curricula. This culminated in all learners in the school system nationally having the same curricula in 2008. The first cohort of students to have completed the new National Senior Certificate (NSC) entered higher education at the start of 2009 amidst the controversy and evidence that curriculum change had not adequately prepared them (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2007; Patou, 2009; Prince & Yeld, 2010; Yeld, 2007). It is clear that the school system still has severe limitations and this has serious implications for higher education. Evidently, there is still a need to focus on the functionality of the school system as a basic foundation of education in South Africa.

## **2.5 What Constitutes Student Success**

One of the most critical issues facing higher education currently is how to create a model for access thereby enabling students to succeed in fulfilling their post-secondary aspirations. To understand what is meant by student success it is important to first acknowledge that there are diverse views and perspectives of student success.

Analyses of the different views of student success indicate that the concept of student success includes a number of benchmarks such as, firstly, completing a desired qualification (Kuh, 1993). Secondly, it also refers to student satisfaction with their experience of feeling comfortable and affirmed in their learning environment (Astin, 1993). This satisfaction includes personal development outcomes that confer specific benefits on individuals and

society Kuh (1993). It also entails cognitive complexity, knowledge acquisition and use of practical competency, proficiency in writing, critical thinking and civic engagements are essential in developing student satisfaction. Trends and strategies that have been adopted in widening participation for students from diverse backgrounds have been an additional exploration to adequately support undergraduate students and lead them to success. To add to the definition of success, Smart, Feldman and Ethington (2000) suggest the importance of judging student success within a particular context. It is advocated that the institutional vision is taken into account given that different academic environments seek to reward different types of competences. It is proposed that judgment of success should be relative to the interests, abilities and values that respective academic environments seek to reinforce and reward at the time students enter the program. This provides clarity of expectation for all students, faculty and academic leaders.

It is, however, important that researchers approach the study of student success from every angle given the complexities of educational processes and the many varying contexts in which it takes place. It is also necessary to note that quantifiable outcomes are more easily defined and measured but cannot capture the full meaning of success in education. It is for this reason that a combination of qualitative and quantitative outcomes is sometimes preferred. The most frequently used quantitative outcome from an institutional perspective includes academic achievement (measured in grades). It also includes retention from first year to second year and time taken to completion, retention or dropout rates and graduation rates. On the qualitative side of the spectrum, outcomes such as student satisfaction, a sense of belonging in the educational environment and personal development have been used as indicators of success for higher education (Kuh, 2007). Personal development includes cognitive and non-cognitive competencies such as acquisition of interpersonal and personal skills, as well as developed senses of identity, humanitarian and civic engagement (Kuh, 1993; Kuh, et al., 2007). In the South African context, these outcomes resonate strongly with the critical cross-field outcomes set out by the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA). The critical cross-field outcomes are qualities that include (but not limited to) the ability to identify and solve problems, work effectively with others to promote life-long learning, to communicate effectively, organize and manage oneself and show responsibility to the environment and others (SAQA, 1998).

It must however, be noted that if the deficit ideology is not abandoned there will be very little chance to address, in any authentic way, its gross inequalities. To offset the limitations of low socio-economic trajectories a clear process for providing access with support to education is

paramount. In the following chapter, alternative models that attempt to uproot deficit are discussed.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

To conclude, it must be noted that the struggle for access is deeper than widening the gates of higher education. It involves enabling students to participate and, most importantly, to engage in a meaningful way. It must be acknowledged that students from disadvantaged communities have to navigate the teaching and learning space in a second or third language while those from the dominant culture adjust relatively well. Among other things it is important to understand that students from poor communities do not learn from a point of reference that is familiar to their reality nor is it positively affirmed as they are seen as the other, and who do not know the rules. When these students walk into the gates of higher education they park a great part of who they are by the gate because of the layers of complexities of their realities which do not fit well in the checks and balances of the gatekeepers. It is often forgotten that with the diversity of the student population today and the differentiated education system they are products of, embedded with inequalities, students cannot conform to a one-size-fit-all logic. The barriers to access and success that have been identified in research ought to be taken into consideration. Subsequently, the institutions of higher learning have to be reconfigured accordingly, instead of expecting students to fit in. In the following chapter a different model is constructed to conceptualize a different framing strategy using asset-based literature and theories that draw the attention of researchers to shift their stereotypical views of students from poor communities.

### **3 CHAPTER THREE. ASSET-BASED APPROACHES: ALTERNATIVES TO DEFICIT PERSPECTIVE.**

#### **Introduction**

The focus of this chapter is to critique deficit thinking, and signal alternative theories that are clear on the suggestion that deficit remediation fails to address the most fundamental challenges which produce high academic achievement (DiMaggio, 1982; Yosso, 2005; Moleli, 2005; Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Steyn, 2006; Christie & Huber, 2009; Theron, 2013; Marshall & Case, 2010; Devlin, 2011; Pym, 2013; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2014; Theron & Theron 2014). Deficit models highlight the challenges that students face in coping with educational structures and systems but fail to eliminate the pathologisation of students from poor communities. This approach defines merit in ways that do not privilege the students from poor communities not because they lack capability, motivation, or are somehow deficient (Karabel, 2005; McNamee & Miller, 2004 in Walpole, 2007:15). This chapter develops a conceptual framework that underpins this study, highlighting and using asset-based models such as resilience and community cultural wealth. This helps in challenging the limits of a deficit framing that has become omnipresent in circular discourses and therefore normalized through repetition in explaining the educational inequalities. Documenting asset-based approaches could be helpful in pushing forward the collective thinking, practices and policy recommendations. Furthermore, different perspectives are required in order to start making progress in pursuit of better access with success for these students. The more researchers raise the voices of students who perform against all odds, the more humanized the approach will be, so that diverse students, their families and communities are fully recognized human beings.

Shifting the attention to strengths provides key developmental and supportive opportunities that create positive experiences. Instead of the traditional manner of engaging a person with a risk focus, a strength-based approach seeks to understand and develop the strengths and capabilities that transform the lives of learners in a positive way (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Barton, 2005). A caring and supportive learning environment where educators and support staff have a profound opportunity to interact with students will facilitate academic achievement and healthy social development. A strength-based approach is a positive perspective that emphasizes the strength, capabilities and resourcefulness of individuals enabling them to recover from adversity. This perspective indicates a paradigm shift from emphasis on limitations, susceptibility and deficit. It identifies internal strengths and resources as they materialize and allows one to see prospect, hope and solution (Alvord & Grados, 2005). This does not imply a

denial that there are challenges that need to be addressed. However, when a problem is a starting point the expectations become lowered and opportunities for change are obscured. The deficit perspective usually results in outcomes such as labeling and limiting options, masking the recognition of unique capabilities and strengths, focusing on “can not’s” as opposed to “cans”, ignoring potential and growth that could result from adversity. It also results in professionals looking for patterns such as poverty or dysfunctional backgrounds to explain difficulties, and information lacking in credibility, in order to show the cause as opposed to effect (Sharry, 2004; Peterson, 1996).

In a strength-based practice the real challenge lies with the fact that change needs to start with educators not the student. A strength-based approach involves a different way of thinking about students and of interpreting their coping patterns with life changes. It advocates interacting in ways that invite curious exploration of possibilities based on a clear set of values and attitudes. It also carries the belief that every student has potential, unique strengths and capabilities that will determine how they evolve and define who they are. Strength-based approaches focus on what students can do as a starting point and see challenges as opportunities to explore; it builds on small success to create a foundation of hope and optimism. Notably, positive change occurs in the context of authentic relationships.

Additionally, a strength-based approach also requires respect for culture and what has already been attained and is sustainable. This calls for committed leadership, supported by all staff and community (McCaston, 2005; O’Connell, 2006). A strength-based school culture creates conditions and unique opportunities that enable teachers and students to identify value and draw upon their strength. It also builds capacity in a way that creates meaningful and sustainable progression towards change and goals. It provides and mobilizes resources in a way that complements student’s existing strengths as opposed to compensating for perceived deficits. It combines excellent instruction with supporting the students’ wellbeing and seeks to identify and address social, personal, cultural and structural constraints to a student’s desired goals, growth and self-determination. In this chapter, I draw from the literature that speaks to countering deficit thinking by focusing on the concepts of resilience, community cultural wealth, which are asset-based. These approaches emphasize the recognition of forms capital historically excluded from colonial institutions.

### **3.1 Resilience: A strength Approach**

First, it is important to look at resiliency as one concept that underpins this study. Resilience as a concept has been studied world-wide over a period of almost 50 years in studies of education, psychology, sociology, social work and economics (Dugan & Coles, 1989; Glatz & Johnson, 1999; Wang, 2000; Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Theron & Theron, 2008). In most of these fields the essence of resiliency is described as the ability to bounce back from some stress and difficult life circumstances, changes or disruptions. Among at-risk children and youth in society are those born under conditions of entrenched socio-economic disadvantage, the effects of which can be far-reaching. In South Africa, for example, the socio-economically disadvantaged groups are faced by social and psychological challenges that are integrally linked to a variety of political and historical factors.

Even though apartheid ended in 1994 the majority of the youth are still exposed to the inequalities related to poverty, unemployment, and the climate of strained resources which contribute to continued racial tensions. It is therefore clear that race and socio-economic status are integrally linked in South Africa as is the case in many other countries. There are a few studies that have been conducted regarding resiliency however there is not enough documentation that provides insights as to how some youth are able to overcome the toxic effects of inequalities. This study has chosen to focus on the academic achievement of sponsored students in higher education as an indicator of resilience because it is an accomplishment of an important progressive task to break the cycle of poverty.

### **3.1 Resilience Studies in Education**

When children fare better than expected given the adversities they encounter they are considered resilient. The conceptualization and application of the resilience concept and protective factors in education are still minimal especially in South Africa. However, findings from the initial formal applications of resiliency to the educational process are encouraging as shown by the Child Development Program (Brown, 2013). For example, there are a number of significant outcomes observed among young people who through holistic school interventions initiated at elementary schools exhibit highly significant progression by middle school. They include positive effects on students' related attitudes, social attitudes, skills and values (Battistich et al., 2000). These studies show that when compared with results from control groups, early evidence of the application of resilience to education reveals higher test scores,

higher grades in core academic subjects, more involvement in positive youth school activities and community activities. Based on extensive research, components of educational resilience research and practices are identified which can be used in any learning situation anywhere. This involves a way of thinking and working that includes participation, observation, reflection and transformation, elements that are designed to promote learning and thriving.

Resilience education processes are therefore much more interactive than the traditional didactic educational process. A cross-discipline integrated analysis of nearly 40 years of research indicates that identifying and nurturing an individual's capacities rather than focusing on deficits creates a capable, productive and compassionate person (Brown, D'Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001). According to Brown *et al.*, (2001), even in already crowded classrooms, learning how to effectively engage weaving in positives that promote resilience only requires conscious and carefully selected contact. A move towards resilience also shows how to work with groups to create an inter-connected resilience-based learning community within schools. This kind of community shares a youth development philosophy that creates and facilitates participation and buy-in among all members, administrators, educators and students.

Theron (2010) carried out a study on pathways to resilience that spanned five countries including South Africa, China, Canada, Colombia and New Zealand. Theron's (2010) study wanted to understand which patterns of formal services and support work best to mitigate risk and foster well-being across varied socio-cultural contexts. Theron (2010) believes that positive adaptation is dependent on meaningful partnerships between children and their socio-cultural ecologies. Therefore, adjusting well is not a process that youth can solely be held accountable for, instead, societies need to shape their life-worlds to be more resilience- supporting rather than focusing on supporting strengths in youth. In this study, I believe that sociological transactional explanations of resilience explain positive adjustment as a process of constructive, culturally congruent interactions between youth and their environment.

Part of the complexity of a sociological transactional explanation of resilience is that it is context and culturally based. As a result, in the study *Pathways to Resilience (2010)* various team members had to explore formal services and informal support to decipher which processes worked best to mitigate risk and promote wellbeing. In the South African team the focus was on Sesotho-speaking youth in the Free State province where a mixed method research comprised of 1209 adolescents aged 14-19 was conducted. Like many other provinces in South Africa, there are widespread poverty-related challenges faced by youth. About 60 percent of

the youth, especially of African descent live below the poverty line and survive on the monthly equivalent of US\$50 (Theron, 2010). Many are exposed to limited infrastructure, poor service and school opportunities, crime laden and HIV-challenged communities. Despite such compound adversities many of these youths are resilient. The results of this study show that informal support has greater probability to influence Sesotho-speaking youth's resilience processes than the usage of formal services. This simply means that a positive adjustment of the participants to their circumstances of disadvantage is mainly supported by natural resources found in their families and cultural communities. More specifically support from their female caregivers (in the absence of men), particularly mothers and/or grandmothers, spiritual beliefs (ancestors), as well as the prevalence of cultural pride were some of the factors attributed to resilience.

These informal pathways reflect the Afrocentric and socio-historical context in which participants were socialized (Theron, 2010). It is clear that providing services to youth is not enough to support positive adaptation, rather, only when service providers form constructive relationships and youth experience the service as being meaningful, are outcomes positive. One of the pathways to resilience that South African youth reported was educational aspiration, a profound hope that good education will potentiate access to university and upward trajectory thereafter. Theron (2010) indicates that research on education in South Africa has shown that children from disadvantaged communities typically attend under-resourced schools that offer inferior education and that very few of these students succeed at university level.

It is for that reason that this study explores what works for those who succeed and examines how the culture of the university supports the resilience in students. Theron's (2010) findings show that school environments that were rights-orientated and had teachers who promoted youth agency encouraged dreams of continued education and a bright future. She believes that this requires reform in policy and practice. Based on their study, their recommendations pointed out the need to lobby policy makers and practitioners to prioritize meaningful relationships with youth and to draw on and strengthen informal support. The outcome of this was an accredited course on resilience supporting strategies by North West University and many teachers, youth workers, youth leaders and social workers have been trained to support the resilience process in South Africa. This is an attempt to unlearn old ways and re-learn progressive ways.

Much of the deficit-centered literature fails to account for students who come from the poor families and backgrounds with the same alleged limitations and yet they succeed. Growing

research urges educators to acknowledge the social and cultural capital present in poor communities and people of colour (González, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Deeply embedded in the fabric of educational institutions, the deficit perspective is often disseminated through research and within the teacher training programmes (Valencia, 1997; Gonzalez, 2005). In the South African context, this can be traced back to the Bantu education Act (1953) whose scars run deep and will take a conscious effort to erase. Dr. Verwoed, the architect of Bantu Education, stated that:

When I have control of Native Education I will reform it so that natives will be taught from childhood to realize that equality with Europeans is not for them...people who believe in equality are not desired teachers for natives (Cited in Tabata, 1979:4).

In the US context Solorzano, Villalpando and Oseguera (2005) challenged the dominant frames through what they term resistant cultural capital where students of colour succeeded in higher education despite the many obstacles they encountered. This framework focuses on the unique forms of cultural capital, accumulated resources and assets that students of colour develop and utilize as coping strategies when marginalized within educational institutions. Similarly, Yosso (2005) also developed a concept of cultural wealth by outlining the various forms of capital within communities of colour known as community cultural wealth. This is examined closely in the next section.

### **3.2 Community Cultural Wealth**

Community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) is utilized to highlight the rich forms of capital that exists within families and communities of underserved students who have been able to survive, resist and navigate higher education while challenging racist nativist discourses. Yosso (2005), in assessing Bourdieu's work, highlights the strengths of critical race theory which provides new insights into the educational experiences of students who are underrepresented in the US higher education. This would, therefore, have implications for understanding the experience of students from disadvantaged backgrounds as the issue of race is under theorized in educational research (Walpole, 2007). The impact of critical race theory is significant especially in countries like South Africa with a history of a racialised society. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that critical race theory is a tool used to understand educational and societal inequalities, and can reveal the ideology of a dominant culture, the hegemonic forces of exclusion and the hierarchy of educational and social structures and practices.

Yosso (2005) and Tate (2005) suggest that the critical race theory framework in education can be used in various ways. These include first, the centering of the research focuses on race, racism, and the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. Second, the challenging of the dominant ideologies is imbedded in educational theory and practice. Third, it recognises the significance of experiential knowledge and utilises this knowledge in research. Finally, it utilizes inter-disciplinary perspectives and guides research work with a commitment to racial and social justice.

Yosso (2005) suggests that there are forms of capital that constitute community cultural wealth also highlighted in this study. Students from disadvantaged communities have the ability to maintain hopes and aspirations despite real and perceived barriers. In this study though in reality students come from impoverished backgrounds, they are determined to change their lives through education even though perceptions indicate that they hardly even have an interest in pursuing higher education. The social networks in their communities as well as their resources assist them to navigate through social institutions. Such forms of capital and their resiliency enable them to persist through institutional barriers and eventually succeed.

One of the students in the study emphasized how she felt even more determined to excel when undermined because of her background. Yosso (2005) sees those skills and knowledge as resistant capital, which is oppositional behaviour that challenges inequalities. This, she believes is grounded in a history of resistance to subordination by oppressed societies guided by the motivation to transform oppressive institutions and structures. Community cultural wealth therefore not only acknowledges strengths but is used to challenge and reframe deficit perspectives in educational research. Yosso and Garcia (2007:154) clarify:

As we de-center whiteness and re-center the research on people of colour, we can validate often overlooked forms of cultural knowledge forged in a legacy of resilience and resistance to racism and other forms of subordination.

Yosso (2005) developed a conceptual framework for community cultural wealth that exists within communities of colour in the United States of America. These are identified by six forms of capital namely aspirational capital, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant capitals. The aspirational capital concerns the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future despite real and perceived barriers. The linguistic capital consists of the skills learned through language such as drama, rhythm

and rhyme ability to communicate through visual art, music and poetry. The familial capital involves forms of knowledge that are nurtured among the kinship carrying a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition. Social capital is the networks of people and community resources that can help students navigate through social institutions. The navigational capital is a form of capital inclusive of social networks and resiliency students develop to persist through institutional barriers. Finally, the resistant capital refers to knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. This is grounded in the history of resistance to subordination by communities of colour guided by a motivation to transform oppressive institutions and structures (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; 2005; Yosso, 2005). However, it is necessary to understand the existing environmental culture in these institutions and the kind of structure and practices, which are discussed next.

### **3.3 Institutional Culture, Structure and Practices**

One trend that has increased the outcomes for marginalized student outcomes is the interaction between the individual student and his or her institutional environment. Tinto and Pusser (2006) for example, indicate that examining what role institutional policies and conditions have on students' success is important. These conditions usually include the climate established by faculty staff, administrators, the types of support provided to students, use of feedback on performance and activities that involve students as valued members of a community. Early interventions and continued support to pipeline students can also be beneficial and students are more likely to engage in beneficial educational activities if they are able to connect with others within the institutional environment (Kuh, Kinzie, Bridges & Hayek, 2007). The impression given here is that it is within the control of universities to impact on students in a positive way (Tinto & Pusser, 2006; Kuh et al., 2007).

Another trend that is worth investigation is a South African demographic change of students accessing higher education due to the allocation of the NSFAS as well as amendments in the admission processes (Subotzky, 2001). It is noteworthy to document how students perform, focusing on academic attainment that leads to graduation which my study is attempting to investigate. The interaction between the student and the institutional environment is critical from first year level through the entire duration of study. Exploring what shifts have been made in the new landscape in higher education is important. It is particularly important for purposes

of identifying factors that account for the success of sponsored students from the working-class background.

In response to concerns of low throughput rates in South Africa, the retention and graduation destination study suggested that understanding factors that influence student pathways would assist policy-makers and planners to devise interventions that would increase participation with enhanced throughput. Some of the key factors contributing to failure are; the strong correlation between SES and choice of study, insufficient career guidance, the historical apartheid policies and inequalities that persist where poverty goes beyond access to basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing and vulnerability (Mayet, Visser, & Breier duToit, 2007). In addition to this, other key factors attributed to failure include the dysfunctionality of the education system and also the under-preparedness of students for higher education (Moll, 2004; Nyampfene & Letseka, 1995; Letseka, 2005). The bedrock of this dysfunctionality was rooted in Bantu education which was designed to teach Africans to be “hewers of wood and drawers of water” for a white run economy regardless of an individual’s abilities and aspirations.

More students from disadvantaged backgrounds and low-income families are now able to attend university through various initiatives like government and private bursaries. However, this access has not easily translated into success. Lack of preparedness in terms of social class and high school curriculum are cited as some of the reasons why students fail or take longer to complete their degrees (Scott *et al.*, 2007 in CHE, 2010:9; Letseka, 2005; Bourdieu, 1984; 1997). Valid as that may be, in my view the deficit approach has not done much in changing persistence and success rates and the deep-rooted assumptions and prejudices have kept people stuck in their perspectives and world views.

There are instances where one’s socio-economic background does not exhibit a negative correlation with their academic outcome because of their resilience. Resilience is seen as the ability to spring back up from life challenges (Bernard, 1993; Saleebey, 2009). In other words, contrary to the norm that suggests that poor socio-economic background breeds poor academic performance, there are exceptions to this rule, students whose agency demonstrates the possibility of an alternative reality, a reality that detracts from the trajectory their peers have gravitated towards. It is the view of the researcher that to assume a predefined outcome, particularly a poor academic performance, based on students’ socio-economic background is not only to undermine student’s agency or resilience. Somewhat, it also does an even greater disservice, one of relegating students from poor socio-economic backgrounds to stereotypes. It

is also my view that while these students may be burdened by stereotypes, they are not defined by them.

Demanding life experiences can be an opportunity for an individual to realize their goals and life purpose, complemented by the essential resources and support provided by the relevant institution of higher learning (Soudien, 2010). Most families during the years of oppression in South Africa believed that only education could change the situation they were in. As a result of this belief they motivated their children to be educated even though they did not have any education themselves. Bernard (2004) suggests that resilience starts with what one believes. It, therefore, means that education can change the condition of poverty, the educational achievement gap has serious social, economic and political consequences as Nelson Mandela put it:

It is through education that the daughter of the peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of a mine, that the child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation (Nelson Mandela, OMET Annual Report:1 2010).

Perhaps we need a different approach that is more pragmatic because overall studies illustrate the continuing trials that students from poor communities encounter, as a result educational improvement is obscured by adherence to a risk focus. While the researcher is of the view that the focus on student resilience as opposed to student deficit is directive in improving student success, the researcher is also cognizant that the focus on the student alone has shortcomings in dealing with systemic factors that stifle resilience itself. For this reason, institutional power is considered next, as we cannot pretend that this does not exist.

There is an emergence of literature that reveals another critical approach that seeks to expose structural or systemic factors that impact on student participation and success. Authors note that the student population has become diverse and therefore, there needs to be a shift of focus from students as victims blamed, to the role of the institution in promoting success (Smith, 1991). As already suggested by Hawkes (2000), there are three institutional areas in the New Zealand context, that have been identified as fundamental to addressing issues that influence participation and retention especially of non-traditional students. These are curricular transformation, classroom pedagogy and relationships (Bishop & Glynn, 1999).

This ties in well with Zepke (2006) as his views on retention are that the focus should be on learner-centeredness for students to persist and graduate. His theoretical construct is based on the adaptation discourse that puts the interests of diverse students at the center of teaching and institutional processes. Zepke (2006) purports that while an integration discourse is appealing it seems one dimensional as it over-emphasizes the institution's ability to optimize student retention. It appears that there have been major syntheses that have been published over several decades in the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, yet, Yorke and Langden (2004) suggest that no grand theory has actually emerged that could be modified to suit the different national contexts.

There are two distinct sets of overlapping and complementary discourses that have been identified. In one, institutions seek to integrate learners into existing institutional and pedagogic norms, values and practices. In another study, researchers attempt to recognize value and accept learners' diverse cultural capital by adapting their processes to meet diverse learners' needs. The researcher views these as complementary. It is at the interface of students' cultural capital and institutional power where the researcher seeks to understand the potential that exists for scaffolding bridges between these focal points.

It is important that when integrating the learner an enabling approach is adopted by meeting them where they are at, and assisting them through socialization, as well as guiding them to where they want to be. This could be done in a relational process that facilitates and optimizes strengths, potential, and inclination that firmly and significantly builds lifelong competence. Borrowing from a strength-based perspective (Bernard, 2004; Saleebey, 2009), I seek to understand the crucial variables contributing to individual resilience and well performing students. This is by way of affirming the potential in people to enhance strength instead of a focus on deficits.

### **3.4 Nurturing Student's Potential**

Many theories have emerged over the years that explain the relationship between student retention and involvement. Research by Astin (1984) around the impact of student involvement on outcomes in college asserts that students must be actively engaged in their surroundings in order to learn and grow (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Astin (in Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005) explains involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic experience.

In a related study of what matters in college, Astin (1984) found that two environmental factors that had positive change in college students' academic development, personal development and satisfaction were interaction among students and interaction between faculty and students. His assertion is that students must be actively engaged in their surroundings in order to learn and grow in college (Astin, 1984). The focus on student engagement can help to enhance student learning and other desired outcomes as well as the efficacy and effectiveness of the higher education system. To understand student engagement, it is important to look at it in terms of two key components. The first is the amount of time and effort students spend on academic activities and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute success. The second is the way in which institutions allocate resources and organize learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in, and benefit from such activities (Kuh, 2005). Student involvement also entails designing interactive flexible and user-friendly methods of learning based on understanding the capabilities, aspirations and limitations of students (Dejene, Schippers, & Ramos, 2007; Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009).

Furthermore, universities are centers of teaching, learning and research, and teaching involves engaging students in learning (Christensen Garvin & Sweet, 1991). According to Illeris (2004) learning is commonly viewed as a process that brings together cognitive, emotional and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing or making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values and world view. Illeri's (2004) definition blends well with Astin and Kuh's (2005) involvement/engagement model. Various international explanations of research findings on retention point to the idea that institutional experiences determine the chances of successful outcomes on retention and success.

In *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Higher Education*, Chickering and Gamson (1987) stressed the concept of pedagogies of engagement, in which three principals can be identified, namely (a) "good practice encourages student-faculty contact, (b) co-operation among students and, (c) active learning" (Smith *et al.*, 2005:1). Astin's large-scale correlational study of what matters in college found that environmental factors were by far the most predictive of positive change in college student's academic development, personal development, and satisfaction (Smith *et al.*, 2005:1). These environmental factors include the interaction among students and interaction between faculty and students. This is illustrated through engagement, where students bring with them their knowledge and experiences, drawn from different backgrounds into university and interact with agents of socialization. Smith *et al.*, (2005) further suggest that

these two factors carried by far the largest weights, and affected more general educational outcomes than any other environmental variables studied including the curriculum content factors.

Studies show that student socio demographics such as race, gender, socio-economic status and parental education have a causal link to poor performance (Reason, 2009). A breakdown exists between high school and higher education transitions (Davey, 2010). Often, students are not well prepared and do not know what to expect in the first year (Kuh, 2005; Scott, 2007). In South Africa, despite the relatively large financial investment in education the system is dysfunctional because of inefficiencies and large scale inequalities. Though the student population has changed, very little has changed in terms of curriculum, teaching approaches, staff cohort and administration systems (CHE, 2010; Scott, 2006). As a result, the institutions are inadequately prepared to meet the needs of the diverse student population. The role of the institution in contributing to academic performance needs to be investigated. Understanding the gap in the intersection between the characteristics of undergraduate student population and the higher education environment is critical.

Cultural perspectives suggest that historically, underprepared students contend with additional challenges in adjusting to institutional cultures (Thomas, 2002) and this largely influenced the extent to which they engage in various campus activities and whether or not they utilize the available support services (Kuh, 2007). The extent to which students engage provides an understanding of various domains of practice and activities associated with success in higher education (Kuh, 2007). Whilst attempts have been made to explore the challenges that have become visible because of massification, very little is known about resilience in education in order to understand why some students succeed despite their overwhelming backgrounds and characteristics. Lugg and Boyd (1993) noted that students can possess educational resilience and attributes that can be developed and fostered (Padron, Waxman & Huang, 1999). Resilience is a strength-based concept that all people have strengths and that it can be fostered through protective factors, opportunities for involvement and high expectations. There is limited empirical evidence of studies in resilience, especially in higher education (Theron, 2010; Theron, 2014; Pym, 2013) and this study will fill the gap in the literature on resiliency to determine the relationship between strength that students bring, and academic achievement.

The under-theorisation of strength-based approaches is identified as a gap which will be addressed in this study, and hopefully if we “know better we will do better”. The goals of the

strength-based model are based on the resilience theory that posits that all people have a potential and ability to overcome adversity and succeed (Saleeby, 1992). Tinto (2004) suggests that campuses need to support the development of resilient students to enhance retention and graduation. He sees advising as the key component of academic, social and personal support programmes that assists students to realize their learning goals.

Possibly, through this study some model to pursue success will be developed, that will add on the existing bodies of knowledge to improve equitable access and success in South African institutions of higher learning. It is hoped that focus on enhancing strengths will create possibilities to succeed. It is also believed that this strength-based perspective would be most relevant in the South African transformation agenda in higher education. The best thing that the education system can do is to believe that in the roughness of the massification in higher education are diamonds, and begin to nurture the diverse students that are on South African campuses today.

There are several different definitions and descriptions that are available in the research literature, such that no single definition of resilience exists. Wolin and Wolin (1993) see resilient individuals as hardy, invulnerable and invisible. Resilience has also been described as a protective mechanism that modifies an individual's response to a risk, or adjustment despite negative life events (Rutter, 1987). Waxman (1992) suggests that attending a school that is considered an "at risk" school can be professed an adverse situation, and advocates that educational resilience must exist for someone to succeed. There are two definitions that will most closely speak to this study, where educational resilience is defined as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions and experiences (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1994:46). Also, McMillan and Reed (1994:139) paradoxically describes resilient at-risk students as those "who have a set of personality characteristics, dispositions and beliefs that promote their academic success regardless of their backgrounds or current circumstances".

Resilient students have self-confidence and believe that they will succeed because they want to. They also have a psychological support system both in and out of school that provides encouragement to them. They use their time positively to create supportive networks for success (McMillan & Reed, 1994). In a review of South African youth resilience studies between 1990 and 2008, that explored resilience in multiple contexts of risk including violence, residential care, sexual abuse, child-headed households, resource-poor rural areas, adolescence

and its challenges, researchers have conceptualized resilience as the product of individual traits, the product of protective resources and the product of a person-context transaction.

On the contrary, barriers to the development of resilience in academically talented Black youth were identified. These included peer pressures, complex socio-psychological and contextual factors such as racial identity, relationships with teachers and counselors and peer relations. Though theorists have explanations for resilience of talented students as well as barriers to the development of resilience in others, there is a gap in the research. There is not enough understanding about what enables students who are provided financial and other forms of support at university level to succeed, particularly students with low SES. Exploring what motivates sponsored students from working class and poor communities, with alternative cultural capital as stated by Bourdieu's cultural reproductive model, will suggest how they interact with important gatekeepers in higher education to employ resiliency and succeed to graduate.

In a longitudinal study Dumais and Ward (2010) explored the possession of dominant cultural capital by first generation college students and non-first generation students. The cultural capital was operationalised as participation in high arts rewarded by those in power as well as purposeful interaction with key gatekeepers to access information and resources. This was to highlight the importance of both structure and human agency in cultural capital theory. An analysis of the effects of cultural capital on enrolment and persistence in a four-year post-secondary education and on undergraduate grade-point average (GPA) is made. It is then determined whether cultural capital has a greater effect on non-first generation students (the reproduction model), the first-generation students or neither group. The results showed that family cultural capital, cultural classes, the number of ways parents help, as well as students receiving assistance at school with their college applications, are significant for graduation. On the other hand, no significant associations were found between cultural variables and GPA, and overall there was no support for either the reproduction or mobility model. It is perhaps important to understand how institutional experiences influence student aspirations and persistence.

### **3.5 University Access and Admission Processes**

Studies on social class differences in students' college choice processes and attendance rate show that students from poor communities are less likely to attend college and succeed than

are more advantaged students (Astin, 2004; Cabrera, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Tinto, 2006). There are many reasons for these differences that occur prior to students applying for and enrolling in tertiary such as familial considerations, organisational obstacles and individual agency. Parental expectations and what they see as success vary with social status and that mediates student aspirations. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds usually attend high schools that are poorly resourced and students are not well prepared for university and may have no career guidance services (McDonough, 1997).

Several studies have demonstrated that school's direct low SES and working class students towards vocational programmes (Macleod, 1997; Willis, 1997). Moreover, these students have fewer resources and very little knowledge about admission processes and differences among university types and financial aid. As a result, tertiary education is not seen as a realistic option instead employment is seen the best alternative. Archer and Hutchings (2008) interviewed young working class people who were not in college and found that they believed that the risk and uncertainty of not attending college outweighed the promised economic benefit. According to these students the risks included failing academically, as well as their working-class identities that put them at a disadvantage. Connor (2001), did a survey of students with a variety of social class backgrounds about their decisions to attend university. According to his report, students who did not enroll cited fear of student loans and a desire to earn money as paramount.

In another study Mark, et al. (2003) found that English and Scottish students viewed higher education as intimidating and not welcoming and merely a place for the wealthy. Students make decisions to access and enroll in tertiary based on their subjective assessment of their abilities, costs of university and availability of aid (McDonough, 1997; Paulsen & St John, 2002). Despite these obstacles, the low SES and disadvantaged students attend university after succeeding in their high school and their experiences have an effect on their aspirations and level of attainment (Astin, 1984; 1993; Tinto, 1987; Pascerella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005).

Students enter post-secondary education with a wide range of pre-university background characteristics, academic preparation, and experience, social and personal dispositions. Entering students vary in their socio demographic traits, their academic preparation and performance, personal and social experiences as well as occupational goals. Student experience in higher education influences their aspirations and persistence (Astin, 1984; 1993; Tinto, 1987; 1993, Pascerella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005). Astin's theory of involvement (1993, 1984) posits that students' involvement academically and socially results in greater intellectual and social

engagement especially students who live on campus, resulting in higher levels of persistence, aspirations and attainment.

I am of the view that student's physical presence to some extent offers stability and access to social and academic resources afforded by such proximity. This adds another dimension to student involvement which the study seeks to engage. Furthermore, the researcher is contemplative of that dimension because of the interplay between massification and student involvement given students' accommodation is both on and off campus. Adding to that is a spatial element of how the landscape of learning institutions varyingly effect social and academic integration due to student mobility in and out of campus. Social and academic integration are fundamental to Tinto's work on student persistence (1987, 1993). According to Tinto's model, persistence and attainment are increased when students are socially and academically integrated into the campus community strengthening the institutional fit and the student's commitment to the institution.

Many studies have found that differences exist between low and high SES students' academic and co-curricular experiences (Goyette & Muller, 2006; Titus, 2006; Walpole, 2003). The differences were around the decisiveness in choosing majors as well as participation in student groups. Walpole, using data from a longitudinal study, found that although all students spent time outside class, low SES students reported spending time in a more structured manner such as in a research project while the high SES would be reported even visiting faculty members' homes.

It is my view that institutions need to examine the basic assumptions about the students they serve and the way in which campuses are organised which might result in the alienation of poor and working class students. Tett (2004) suggests that class structures and discourses need to be modified for inclusivity such that working class students may benefit from classes that examine social structure. These students can also be provided with the language skills and tools to critique that structure.

Analysis of the effect of institutional characteristics upon student persistence and attainment has not been as extensive as that relating to individual student characteristics. Those characteristics, for example, shown to be related to poor academic performance refer to family socioeconomic status, level of parental education, and parental occupational status. A growing body of researchers locally and internationally indicates that success and failure in higher

education is the outcome of interplay of complex factors. These factors are both internal to the higher education system and external in relation to social, cultural and material circumstances. The institutions of higher learning attended by students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds shape their experiences and subsequent performance and outcomes. Institutional missions and organisational structures and resources determine and impact on student experiences and academic performance.

Student transition into university culture has been identified as very complex and difficult and therefore some institutions have designed programmes to facilitate first year experience that will enhance students' learning success (McInnis, 2001). In South Africa, the major underlying reason identified for the disjuncture between access and success is the mismatch between higher education and post-secondary preparedness.

The White Paper recognized that ultimately the improvement in equity of outcome depends on enhancing the quality of basic education it also states that higher education institutions have a responsibility to address the articulation gap through various approaches, such as foundation or extended programmes. The Minister of Education and Training at a Summit in April 2010 stated that although the reasons for the disjuncture between increased access and success was due to inadequate funding, poor student accommodation and poor schooling, institutions would have to adapt their teaching and learning strategies to suit the current student population. This would mean curriculum reform and improved student support programmes (DHET, 2012). It is therefore clear that central to South African higher education challenges are structural limitations of curricula as well as the other characteristics such as students' educational, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds (CHE, 2013). This calls for a paradigm shift among researchers, educators and institutional leadership.

### **3.6 Conceptual Framework for Unbundling Existing Ideologies**

To deconstruct the existing theoretical and ideological frameworks this study looks at asset based conceptual approaches, frameworks and models that have guided research on how learners from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds shape their academic attainment and success. It is supposed that these students have strengths that they bring to higher education to be able to navigate the system that would otherwise favour students from the dominant culture. Steps to learning things differently provide a space to represent the reality of students from disadvantaged backgrounds so that they advocate for themselves. This is addressed by the first

question in this research study which seeks to understand how the strengths that sponsored students bring to higher education influence their academic attainment, especially during their first year of study. Using dominant cultural capital theory to explain class difference in academic success overlooks the alternative concepts such as resilience and community cultural wealth (Angur, 2010; Yosso, 2005; OECD, 2011; Silas Casillas, 2008).

Empirical evidence is required to establish the relationship between academic successes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds where social support and economic resources are provided and the upward mobility as espoused by DiMaggio is realized. Transforming any weakness into power and the triumph of the human spirit is made possible by the touch of someone's helping hand. Resilience, as a concept, is rooted on principles of strength-based practice and has faith in human beings that characterizes a possibility focused paradigm. The strengths perspective focuses on the potential and capacities that might otherwise be invisible.

Transformation requires that the ethos that prevailed previously at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is replaced with the new democratic culture directed at undoing the race and class based disparities. Clearly using different frameworks, such as community cultural wealth and resilience models all work to incorporate both structure and agency to address the complex realities of students' lived experiences. The education system can only be improved if institutional agendas and relations are transformed. Democratizing education requires means tapping from the wider society as the "school" from which the varied and diverse way of knowing will be imminent (Bereng, 2008).

Richardson and Skinner (1991) presented a framework for South Africa which locates various strategies in terms of institutional commitment to diversity. The first strategy was access and participation of students which was considered necessary to address the diversity objective, seen as stage one and reactive. The second stage was deliberate and directed at inclusion, and it involved mentoring and assistance activities. The third stage was adaptive and very pivotal to institutional transformation in that the institution needs to be responsive to various communities to which they are accountable. It is at this stage that faculty members become involved to change the educational practices, curriculum content, teaching and learning practices to make them reflective of students they serve and not their historical groupings. This therefore needs a more coordinated institutional approach to ensure that access strategies are successful. Issues of access, redress and equity can only be achieved if the institutional transformation agenda becomes a reality (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). Unfortunately, most

institutions have not been able to translate what they have found out about student retention into forms that can improve student persistence and graduation. Experiences and outcomes of students from poor communities are a multifaceted, interrelated, and a synergistic combination of structural and individual decisions. Subsequently, I ponder over what models might be relevant to the current diverse population of students in higher education.

### **3.7 Developing a Model, Incorporating Culturally Congruent Approaches**

An asset-based educational model that represents a paradigm-changing approach in how we educate requires improving the effectiveness of programmes that cater for student diversity. Very close to the primary unit of the family, formalized and informal processes of education are powerful intergenerational and historical instruments of socializing youth for roles in sustaining human communities through time. Indigenous societies had created their own appropriate institutions and processes of socialization and education which must be acknowledged. Students bring internal and external assets that need nurturing as soon as they are admitted into institutions of learning. This means a shift in the teaching and learning of fixing limitations, to more flexible approaches of igniting and engaging (Pym, 2013). It also suggests that teachers must acquire new knowledge, skills and changed attitude by involving and engaging communities around them. This could only result in an enhanced relationship capital where positive energy outperforms negative energy.

Students manage to come as far as the gates of higher education despite a known dysfunctional basic education system in South Africa and therefore require multiple ways to straddle the difference during the transition period. This suggests consciously creating spaces to continually reflect on university-wide staff practices that are more pro-active to student requirements. For example, traditional models of teaching like conveying information need to change so that there is an increased level of engagement rather than the method of instruction. Within this context, it means developing strategies that promote involving students in some activities and thinking about what they do, giving them an opportunity to construct their knowledge and meaning, which is congruent and sense-meaning to them. It requires creating networks and relationships that feed energy and growth. Relationships that are trustworthy and reliable grow through information which is enhanced by listening allowing information to flow freely among all those involved and giving a sense of belonging. This can be referred to as relationship wealth.

For students, involvement in educational activities and societies by students from different backgrounds, geographic locations, classes and races encourages them to share their experiences in class and out of class. This provides them with an opportunity to learn from each other and in some instances, advance intellectual respect from contributions they made. The internal assets that students bring such as commitment to learning, positive values, social competences, as well as external assets such as support from extended families and communities call for institutions to raise their expectation of students. The focus develops student empowerment which encourages self-belief and strategies with clear objectives and expectations that lead to success.

In my study, I suggest that researchers in the field of education studies ought to continue to look for alternative conceptual and methodological approaches to understand academic performance. These may provide information to assist in understanding and improving access, persistence and outcomes of previously disadvantaged students. This will help in the fundamental changes of mainstream curriculum in terms of structure, goals, and salient characteristics. It involves the use of different perspectives, frames of reference and content from different cultures and a language of human thriving. The battle for new discourse is intertwined with new values, a new paradigm of knowledge production and dissemination, representation and importantly, purpose. To be able to do this, evidence-based knowledge must be continuously brought to the theorizing space. The debates over the knowledge that is deemed valuable and exist within the context of social inequalities must be replaced by transformative experiences that students from poor communities articulate. The assumptions that these students come to class with cultural deficiencies as interpreted by Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory, can only be changed through deconstructing such perceptions. Furthermore, by producing evidence of the self-representation of students themselves, who come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds themselves.

Community cultural wealth is a concept that brings alternative perspectives to the theorizing space of cultural capital. As Yosso (2005) asks, whose culture has capital? This helps shift the research lenses away from the deficit viewing of different communities as a symbol of disadvantage and as lacking in culture. Various forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth include aspirational, linguistic, social, familial and resistant capital. These are forms of capital that students from poor communities bring to the learning space that universities fail to ignite or tap into; rather, they are denied recognition in academia. Researchers and practitioners are still stuck in searching for necessary tools to effectively challenge the impact of

discriminatory injustices that exist globally. Bourdieu's theoretical insight about how hierarchical society reproduces itself has often been interpreted as a way to explain why the academic and social outcomes of people from low socioeconomic status are significantly lower than the outcomes of the upper class. Institutions of learning work from assumptions that people from poor communities lack the cultural capital required for social mobility and require some interventions to help them gain the necessary knowledge, social skills abilities and cultural capital. The interpretation here is that some knowledge systems have been ignored, silenced and marginalized however, transgressive knowledge (Hooks, 1994) can value the presence of alternative views and voices to re-envision the margins as places empowered by transformative resistance (Hooks, 1990, Delgado-Bernal, 1997, Solerzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). While Bourdieu's theory was intended to provide a critique of structural economic reproduction, his theory has been used by deficit theorists to perpetuate the belief that some cultures are superior to others. Conversely, Delgado-Bernal (2002) and Olmedo (1997) emphasize that community cultural wealth consists of aspirational capital where black students can be nurtured and empowered from their communal wealth and knowledge in the community.

It is common for example, in African communities and family traditions to draw deeply from spiritual values passed from generation to generation. When participants in this study indicate that they had dreams and aspirations to break the cycle of poverty it is because aspirations are developed within social and familial contexts and are often told in linguistic storytelling and advice that offer navigational goals to resist oppressive conditions. All these are components of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). As a result, I argue that community cultural wealth should be considered as a conceptual framework that challenges the way the dominant culture impacts on educational structures, practices and discourses.

The energy levels with which the transformation agenda of higher education traversed in post-apartheid South Africa needs to rise for better outcomes. There is no doubt that the operations of the country's institutions are still trapped in the historical contextual realities of the past. UWC for example, where this case study was conducted, is one of the historically disadvantaged institutions which has evolved from being a "bush college" to being "a place of quality, a place to grow from hope to action through knowledge". UWC prides itself for attracting students from poor communities, as reflected in this study, where about 80 percent of the undergraduate students receive funding to access higher education through NSFAS and other forms of sponsors private and public (University of the Western Cape 2010 Annual Report).

According to Ravjee et al. (2010:126) while UWC is widely recognized for its resistance to the apartheid system, elements of its inherited institutional culture influence the cultural politics of access and success in contradictory ways. I also want to point out that the kind of student who still comes to UWC has determination to beat the odds as evidenced by the participants of this study. This study has taken a different approach of investigating what works for poor and working class students even though they are perceived as “at risk”. Not many studies especially in South Africa have examined the performance of undergraduate sponsored students and therefore this is a critical gap that the study fills especially because of the current Minister’s interest in free education for students from low income and working class families. This is also important in light of the latest developments of the #FeesMustFall campaign at a time when students were to start their end of year examinations in 2015 and 2016. This was a student-led protest movement that began around October 2015 and again in 2016 in response to an increase in fees in South African universities. The protest also called for higher education low earning staff who worked for private contractors such as cleaning services and campus security to be employed directly by the universities. Although the focus of the protest was on the increase in fees a number of factors that formed the background for the protest emanated from a lack of funding for poor students to attend university. Similar to the previous student uprisings, students have shown their muscle in trying to alter the direction of the wheel of history.

The students who participated in this study came from all seven faculties of UWC and are also from different provinces and locations that are rural and peri-urban. While they are from these disadvantaging backgrounds they together with their families have had dreams and ambitions which they pursued by finding scholarships and investigating which universities were offering the best programmes in their areas of study. This is contrary to the views of the cultural reproduction theories as they are perceived to not having the “know how” (Bourdieu, 1977). This study therefore emphasizes finding what strengths and innate beliefs students have about their capacities as well as practices and services provided by the UWC as an institution of higher learning to promote success. This almost calls for a twisted approach of not fault finding but focusing on the good there is and that perhaps it can be multiplied to increase success at universities in South Africa. This study focused on the positive narratives of and about students from poor communities, humanizing the approach and seeing students, their families and communities as fully realized human beings.

There are interesting utterances from students who participated in this study that are contrary to some studies, such as being driven by the very conditions of disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure that they have better lives than what their parents experienced, through education. Some mention rising up to the opportunity of being awarded a scholarship and ensuring they succeed with their studies. Others indicate believing in themselves and wanting to prove a point to those who look down upon them because of their backgrounds. The question that comes to mind that might need deeper analysis would be: is it about cultural capital or equal opportunities? Anti-deficit thinkers, for example, assert that systemic and structural aspects strongly influence school failure among many students from poor communities because structural inequality models are organized such that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are excluded from optimal learning by not making equal educational opportunities available (Valencia, 2010).

There are also positive aspects that students experienced about UWC such as being comparably one of the leading universities in research even though it is new compared to other research universities. Though the faculties differed there are those whose programmes are well structured and have effective support systems that help students throughout their studies. The positive attitude of lecturers with open door policies and high expectations of students was another encouraging feature that students appreciated. The fact that there was variation in faculty strategies shows that the operations are not institutionalized but are left to individual's discretions. This affirms Tinto's (2013) belief that student success does not come by accident but requires institutional planning and commitment.

Ravejee et al. (2010:65) indicate that while internal steps have been taken to address the internal deficiencies in university procedures students still express a lot of frustrations with administrative functions. This is not different from what the participants of this study said with regards to financial aid administration, although they felt that there were slight improvements. What was interesting in this financial aid example was that one of the participants was not very sure whether the improvement was because as a senior student she was now known, and she also knew how to get around the system, or because it was truly an improved service.

Another important gap that the study aimed to highlight is around the implementation of research recommendations as stated by Ravjee et al.(2010) on intersecting arguments that consistently appear in institutional documents and previous research in relation to low throughput rates. These include under-preparedness which points to the deficiencies and instability in the basic education system, the transition problems that point to the readiness of

higher education in welcoming the diverse student population of today, the inadequate funding of students and institutions, and the institutional factors and cultures some of which are still stuck in the apartheid trappings of injustice. While Ravjee et al. (2010) raised questions about how institutions can re-imagine the academic project with alternative conceptions of the student; this study wants to raise questions around the attitude of educators and commitment to breaking the patterns of the past, then importantly believing that there is potential in every student who enters the gates of higher education which requires nurturing. This calls for re-imagining the training of teachers, the improvement of the basic education system and collaborative interaction of institutional strategies, policies and practices of academic and administration support services.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, alternative approaches for academic success of disadvantaged students and the responsibility that lies with the education system and its institutions are discussed. Clearly the deficit theories that saturate research findings globally need to be challenged to be more inclusive of other views, as they perpetuate educational inequalities. The asset-based approaches such as resilience and the cultural community wealth models offer options to address educational systems that are driven by deficit models. These anti-deficit ways of thinking ought to be recognized and brought to the theorizing space as legitimate alternatives to be applied. In my argument I have compared the cultural capital approach which is very much material resource based and the community cultural wealth which entails other forms of capital such as accumulated assets and resources that are often under-utilized or ignored (Yosso, 2005). Listening to the lived experiences and histories of those who come from marginalized groups could help in changing education methods where everyone else who is different from the dominant culture has to conform to the existing systems.

To further uncover this assumption of lack of capital for other cultures the following chapter outlines the methodological approach that seeks to unearth anti-deficit narratives solicited through interviews with undergraduate sponsored students at the University of the Western Cape. This approach will help bring the rhetorical provision of education as a path to equality and opportunity closer to reality by enabling the construction of alternative scenarios and asset-based models for success through schooling, holding the educational institutions accountable to all students irrespective of class, culture or colour.

## **4 CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the research design and methodology used to explore the views of sponsored students whose potential and capabilities tend to receive less if any acknowledgement in the broad research on academic performance. To date, documented evidence and literature has been minimal concerning the academic performance of students from poor backgrounds who excel at university despite their challenges. The methods and research design applied in this study were chosen in order to investigate, explore and understand the academic performance and resilience of students from poor backgrounds.

While this study accepts that there are persistent challenges to widening participation in South African universities with minimal improvement in graduation rates, there are undocumented examples of what works for academically successful students who come from working-class and poor backgrounds. The hypothesis of this study is that disparity in educational success is not necessarily contingent upon the following key indicators: socio-economic status, and different cultural context. Use of evidence from what works to inform developments and exploring alternative ways of presenting data with new findings is important. It is therefore significant to understand other approaches that are committed to implementing change to student retention and success. Evidence suggests that academic programmes and high quality student-centered learning are a primary focus of effective student learning and persistence (Thomas, 2013) and that there is a connection between investment on potential and resilience capital. Furthermore, it requires understanding the length and breadth of experiences among undergraduate sponsored students and, how those experiences influence their performance, given the kinds of institutional interventions for success in higher education. There is still a need for a wider debate about how student success is defined and how differential attainment between groups and between institutions is addressed.

### **4.1 Research Questions**

In order to understand what informs the success of sponsored students who come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, the following questions were posed: What is the academic performance of undergraduate sponsored students who have completed at least one year of study during 2010 at UWC? What are the experiences of the undergraduate sponsored students who have completed at least one year of study at the University of the Western Cape?

What factors contribute to the resilience of undergraduate sponsored students in their academic attainment at UWC? What kind of institutional support do undergraduate sponsored students who have at least completed one year of study receive from the University of the Western Cape that contribute to their academic success?

The purpose of the study is to identify, explore and understand the factors that influence sponsored students' academic resilience and persistence, as well as the institutional practices that support and enhance student success in post apartheid South Africa. Having reviewed the state of student retention research and practice, past and present, Tinto (2007) identifies other important areas that need further exploration. These include issues of concern about institutional action, programme implementation and the on-going challenges of promoting success among low-income students.

An attempt is made to bring to the fore the voice and experience of low-SES students who are provided the opportunity to access higher education through public and private funding schemes and succeed as a result. To contextualize the findings of this research undertaking, this chapter describes how the research questions will be answered. In addition, it outlines and describes the case study design including the sampling procedures employed to identify participants, and reasons why the preferred sampling technique was deemed appropriate for the study, data collected and the procedure used to collect, analyze and interpret the case study data and the ethical considerations observed in carrying out the study.

## **4.2 Research Design**

This is a case study of the experience of sponsored undergraduate students at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. A case study, according to Hofstee (2006) is useful when detailed insights are required. Given that there are significant gaps in the existing bodies of knowledge pertaining to academic progress particularly as it relates to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the most appropriate research instrument is case study design. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evidenced, in which multiple sources are used (Yin, 1984). This therefore, deepens understanding of the interface between the student experience and the collegiate environment, most importantly the resilience and success that emerges at this interface. There is a need to look at the case in depth, its context and activities scrutinized to advance the understanding of how students from poor

communities succeed against all odds. The case study research site and data collection technique is discussed next.

#### 4.2.1 Relevance of the Research Method

Adopting case study as a preferred research design allows the researcher to utilize multiple sources of information such as interviews, institutional documents and reports which make it possible to generate a thick description to provide a holistic analysis of the entire case. The analysis of each of these sources of information (interviews and institutional documents) is informed by different sets of philosophical assumptions which need elaboration.

The following authors, Baxter and Jack (2008:545), Stack (1995) and Yin (2003), base their approach to case study on a constructivist paradigm which conceives truth to be relative and dependent on one's perspective. It is premised on the social construction of reality, a subjective creation of meaning. In-depth interviews were used to understand students experience of resilience and success. While students' personal accounts were useful in unpacking the meanings that they ascribe to the various aspects of their collegiate environment and their experience of it, taken alone this would not adequately elicit the demographic factors requisite to deriving numeric expressions intricately linked to understanding the student experience.

Demographic factors are useful in depicting aspects of the students' reality that the study is trying to understand, i.e. socio-economic status and parent's level of education, in contrast, for instance with performance by gender to explore the inherent relationships and variables across multiple factors. As such, document analysis was drawn upon to elicit certain demographic factors. Analysis and presentation of desk top research data derived from collected documents informs the quantitative aspect of this study. Assumptions that underpinned this research method differed from the research that informed in-depth interview schedules, which aims to measure social reality objectively.

It is against this backdrop that case study methodology is applied to the study which ultimately seeks to determine the position that one's background alone cannot determine who one becomes. Students' background characteristics can no longer be the worst deterrents to upward mobility compared to the gate keeping forms of capital that impose challenges for most first-generation students within the institutions. An attempt was made to obtain a complete picture

of the factors that contribute to sponsored students' success given their backgrounds are highly correlated to (perceived or real) failure or poor academic attainment.

#### 4.2.2 Research Site

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) was established in 1959 as a constituent of the University of South Africa previously relegated to apartheid regime race-based system for people classified as 'Coloured'. UWC has a history of active struggle against oppression, discrimination and disadvantage. The major concern for UWC relates fundamentally to access, equity and quality in higher education rising from extensive practical engagement with supporting historically marginalized communities participate fully in the process of nation building. UWC's academic identity has evolved from being a 'bush college' to 'an institution of quality, a place to grow; from hope to action through knowledge'. The principle of equitable access has been central to the institutional mission and vision. This institution believes that its growth will come from its ability to provide a nurturing space for its staff and students to grow, driven by hope, and therefore create and share knowledge to inform lasting change.

The UWC has a track record that attests to its commitment of providing previously disadvantaged students access to higher education. To this end the University actively promotes and enables access for students from the working and lower middle classes and especially students from previously disadvantaged schools and communities. The large majority of about 80% students are enrolled at undergraduate level (HEQC Report, 2008; UWC Annual Report, 2010). According to the 2010 UWC annual report, 47 % of the student body were Coloured, 43% African, 5% White and 5% Indian. The majority of students at UWC are women. Central to UWC's transformation agenda is the implementation of processes that would strengthen the institution to provide excellent academic opportunities to students most of whom come from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Informing this strategy is the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) which enables the majority of poor students to study.

In 2010, UWC's financial aid office administered R213 million, and of this fund R112.3 million was a NSFAS allocation which included bursaries (UWC Annual Report, 2010, 2011). The university's own allocation was R9million (UWC, 2011). The university also has long standing relationships with numerous donors whose continued support on an annual basis increases the number of students receiving financial aid. It is against this backdrop that this institution was

identified as a basis from which to understand the case of sponsored undergraduate students' academic attainment and factors that enhance success.

### 4.2.3 Triangulation

A case study generally uses a combination of data collection methods through triangulation. Triangulation is typically a strategy for improving the validity and reliability of research or evaluation of findings (Patton, 2001). Triangulation is defined to be “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000:126). Triangulation uses multiple techniques within a given method to collect and interpret data. According to Stake (1995) the sole criterion for selecting a case for a case study is to provide “the opportunity to learn”. The product of this research is therefore an in-depth description of a case of sponsored students from disadvantaged backgrounds at the University of the Western Cape. More often than not, very little is expected from these students with regards to educational attainment. Poverty and lack of funds to access tertiary education for most of these students is one of the major factors that lead to failure and dropout (Letseka, 2005; Essack, 2010). Secondly, it is instrumental in that some insights need to be provided on the Bourdieuan theory that overlooks resilience capital and possibilities of upward mobility.

In this instance, a case of sponsored students at UWC is examined through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. The case seeks to explore what works for succeeding students, whose university attendance rate is 30 percent lower than their more advantaged peers, and who Walpole (2007) refers to as economically and educationally challenged (EEC). Data came from Interviews, review of institutional data and analysis of secondary data that was sourced from the Quality Assurance Unit of the institution. The criteria used to select the students are described below. By using a combination of procedures such as secondary analysis, document study, and interviewing the researcher is in a position to cross check findings for validation (Patton, 2002). In this way, each data source has its strengths and weaknesses, using triangulation helps to complement the weaknesses of one with the strengths of another (Patton, 2002).

### **4.3 Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure**

The sampling method applied is the non-probability sampling method and is better suited to the study where purposive sampling technique was used rather than random sampling. In purposive sampling a particular case is chosen because it illustrates some process that is of interest in the particular study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 270). I am therefore required to critically think about the parameters of the population and then choose the sample case accordingly. Clear identification and formulation of criteria for the selection of respondents is of cardinal importance (Creswell, 2000). The population is described below.

#### **4.3.1 Population and Sample for Secondary Data Analysis**

The focus sample of this study has been restricted to those undergraduate students in the university whose education is financially aided by public or private funders. This sampling strategy informs the process of establishing if provision of funding, amongst other things, has an impact on academic performance. The registered student population at the University of the Western Cape student in 2010 was 18059. Of those registered, 14297 were undergraduate students in total (UWC Annual Report, 2011, 2012), inclusive of students funded by private and public scholarships across all seven faculties of UWC registered in 2010.

The total sample size for this study (N=10860) was identified as sponsored students. This data however included post graduate and international students (Morta, 2010). Post graduate and international students were excluded from the sample; their inclusion would introduce multiple layers and complexities that would shift the focus of the study. As such, only sponsored undergraduate students with South African citizenship were targeted. Once the data was cleaned, analysis of 6660 participants commenced to define the unit of analysis described below.

#### **4.3.2 Unit of Analysis**

As part of South Africa's ongoing transformation agenda, UWC remains committed to providing access to students who were previously excluded from higher education and who struggle to afford a university education. Part of the strategy to give effect to this is NSFAS as well as a range of bursaries, including other programs such as the work study initiative that support students in need. The unit of analysis was the collegiate experience of resilient

undergraduate sponsored students from disadvantaged backgrounds who exhibit academic aptitude for success. The criteria used to select these students are discussed later.

#### 4.3.3 Criteria for Selection of Interview Participants

The selection criteria required undergraduate sponsored students who are South African citizen and had at least completed the first year of study at UWC. The basis for the afore-mentioned criteria includes that:

1. The selected group meets Spradley's (1979) criterion of selecting participants, i.e. thorough enculturation, current involvement and adequate time. The implication of this is that the selected participants have been at UWC long enough to be immersed in the collegiate experience tantamount to this study.
2. Research (Kuh, 2009) shows that students who manage the transition year from high school to University successfully are most likely to complete a degree. The selected participants demonstrate resilience based on achieving 'academic progress' into a second year of study despite the under resourced backgrounds they came from.
3. The twelve undergraduate sponsored students who responded and were interviewed were sponsored by different funders or scholarship programmes, public and private. They came from different faculties covering all seven existing faculties at the university. Each interview was scheduled at a location within the university and at a time that would be convenient for the participant, except for one who chose an off-campus venue.

### 4.4 Data Collection and Analysis

#### 4.4.1 Interviews

Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to collect data in a face-to-face situation by interacting with selected participants exploring the phenomenon that is being investigated (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Interviewing is one of the predominant modes of data or information collection because of an interest in other people's stories. Stories are a way of knowing and therefore story telling is essentially a meaning-making process (Seidman, 1998). In this study, the interviews provided sponsored students an opportunity to share their personal experiences related to the institutional practices that contribute to their resilience in order to achieve and succeed. These involved undergraduate sponsored students as participants and relevant information was

collected by semi-structured interviews and a biographical form in order to understand their backgrounds. This study considers pseudo-coded names instead of real names. Twelve students who were contacted with the help of the Financial and Bursary office were interviewed. Letters were sent to sponsored students and about 50 participants responded agreeing to be interviewed, however only 12 were successfully met face-to face for recorded interviews which lasted for an hour and a half to two on average. The twelve participants were from the seven existing faculties of the university.

The agreed upon venues for interviewing were mostly on campus which were set during the recruitment process except for one participant who was interviewed in an off- campus venue. Prior to the interviews each participant completed a short questionnaire on background information consisting of demographic details, faculty, high school attended, parental education, parental occupations, type of sponsors of these participants. The challenges encountered were changes made in postponing the dates and times where participants could not honor the set appointments. Another problem was finding quiet places where there would be minimal interference with the audio- recording of the interviews. Most of the participants in the 50 that had initially responded did not honor the appointments and following on them telephonically was difficult because students did not respond to calls either because they were in the library or in class.

The qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Interviews were audio-recorded for each participant and transcribed verbatim. The 12 interviews recorded averaged an hour and a half to two hours per session. After each recording, the interviews were transcribed and all other important cues that were noted during the process. The analysis process was done in two phases. First, a thematic description of each interview was developed. This was done by reading the complete transcripts and then identified connecting statements, words or phrases that provided an understanding of participants' experiences through coding (Creswell, 2007). These codes were then used as the basis for themes developed. The second phase of analysis process occurred after coding where patterns and themes emerged so that the thematic structure could be developed. These themes are described in chapter 4.

#### 4.4.2 Review of Institutional Documents

Utilization of documents enables the qualitative researcher to investigate people events and systems in depth by analyzing authentic written material. Official and public documents therefore constitute another important source of information. With the permission of the Registrar general documents were examined from various units and departments. These included annual reports, Strategic plans, institutional plans, audit reports financial and bursary documents, student residents' information policies and some research reports.

#### 4.4.3 Secondary Data

The quantitative approach was applied to determine the number of sponsored undergraduate students at UWC and their performance per sponsors. It was also to determine the student resilience and their performance based on demographic factors. The use of quantitative analysis also involves demographic factors including, people, events and an in-depth assessment of institutional systems (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delpport, 2005). A variety of sources can be used in analysis, such as personal or official documents, mass media and archival material. Creswell (2003) makes a distinction between private and public documents, for instance, government publications and meeting minutes. Furthermore, Newman (2003) refers to secondary analysis as the reworking of data that has previously been analyzed, and with which subsequent researchers had no direct involvement. In this study official documents are utilized, which according to Bailey (1994: 294) implies documents that are continuously observed and maintained by organizations. For the purposes of this study, internal secondary data is utilized as given while conducting surveys requires significant resources both in terms of time, and financial investment. As such, baseline data was drawn from the institutional records sourced from the Quality Assurance and Planning unit.

The baseline data used was collected from institutional records sourced from the Quality Assurance and Planning Unit of the preceding year. It contained all the variables needed to answer the research questions and met the objectives of the study. The data consisted of 6660 undergraduate students registered in 2010 at UWC with completed records. The secondary data was used because it helps to identify and define the problem better as well as develop an approach to the problem. It also assists in answering certain research questions, test some hypothesis and interpret the primary data more insightfully. The advantages of secondary data are that it provides contextual data; also, it can result in unforeseen discoveries and is often

longitudinal and permanent. The disadvantage however, is that it might be difficult to access. In this case, existing data consisted of sponsored students' experience and outcome. The social demographics which are important to highlight the backgrounds that students came from were also documented. The secondary data (official statistical data on academic performance documents) was exported from Microsoft Office Excel to SPSS, where tests of consistency in the data were applied. Chi square tests were applied to determine associations between variables.

Data analysis involved examining several dimensions which are at the heart of this study. The variables explored include; faculties, gender, age, name of bursary or sponsor (Funders), mode of study (full or part- time), and academic attainment (performance). The rationale for this approach of analysis being, there are many definitions of low socio-economic status which researchers associate with and believe impact the experience and performance in higher education. This study therefore places emphasis on high school preparation and post school experience which influences outcomes more than demographic background. In the context of this study, background included socioeconomic status, High school attended, parental educational level, as well as occupation which in general researchers believe determines access to higher education graduation.

Given the fact that students from poorer backgrounds are regarded as significantly underprepared it is important to apply the research and extrapolate developmental education to problems of retention and success. In particular, the importance of understanding the links between institutional actions that enhance the performance of academically underprepared students from poor backgrounds to that of their persistence and success. What is important to note here is that funding is provided as a control to socio-economic background. As confirmed by Siu (1996) a focus on socio economic and cultural characteristics are avoided.

The fact that these students were from poor communities is mitigated by providing them financial support to access higher education based on their potential and innate academic gifts. However, it is critical that institutions are cognizant of the broad range of student needs, and support them accordingly. It is against this backdrop that Siu (1996) for instance recommends a view that institution ought to know its students to provide required support and raise expectations. It is for this reason that Siu for instance, recommended a more ecological view by highlighting the shortcomings of the educational systems and inequity of access.

Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Two methods of analysis were used: descriptive statistics and bivariate analysis. In the descriptive statistics, a frequency table was applied, as well as the mean and standard deviation to interpret the data. In order to determine the association between two variables, the bivariate analysis was applied through the chi square test. The findings were tabulated and analysed in chapter four.

#### **4.5 Ethical Considerations**

The research was conducted in accordance to the institutional research ethics protocols of the University of The Western Cape. The protocol observed in collecting each of data sets discussed above is described in the next section. Ahead of the interview data collection process, letters were sent to prospective participants explaining the purpose of the study as well as, the requirement to complete and sign consent forms if they were available to be involved. The financial aid office of the institution helped facilitate the process of inviting students to participate. The researcher discussed the scope of the research to ensure that participants understood the objective of the research. Once the students had accepted the terms of participation, follow up calls were made to determine the time of availability on campus where the researcher met each participant. The individual schedules were set indicating venue and time where the interviews would be audio- recorded

Ethical considerations that were observed at the analysis stage included the following, (1) numeric codes were used to avoid using the names of the participants in order to maintain anonymity; (2) participants were listed in alpha-numeric order, demographic profiles are presented in the analysis chapter (see Tables5-8), and a copy of the informed consent form is provided as Appendix D. Permission was granted by the UWC Senate Research Ethics Committee and the Registrar to have access to institutional documents and information from various offices. Permission was granted in July 2012 (Appendix E). Certain procedures were followed to ensure the protection of the rights of participants; therefore names of students are not disclosed in the presentation of the data.

#### **4.6 Reliability and Validity**

To ensure reliability, the interview schedule was piloted to see if the tool elicits the data required to answer the questions that the study set out to answer. A group of students who are sponsored by The Old Mutual Education Trust which is one of the corporate sponsors in this

study were used for piloting the study. The Old Mutual Education Trust was established to provide scholarships for trade union dependents and their staff in order to access higher education. This group was then not included in the group that would be selected for the main study as it was used for piloting. The results of the pilot study supported refinement of the data gathering tool for the in-depth questions where initially questions were not very clear, and the duration of the interviews was long.

To ensure validity the interview transcripts were also reviewed by two other peers to independently identify themes which were then compared to the themes that had been developed. This allowed for the discussion of commonalities or variances of themes. The themes identified by the two peer readers matched what was identified. The checking by other members is a method of data triangulation to ensure that the analysis represents the participants' expressed experiences (Creswell, 2007). In some instances, once the thematic structure is developed, it could be re-presented to the participants so that they can reflect the overall findings and determine whether the thematic structure represents their individual experiences. This was not done in this study only two colleagues were used to crosscheck the thematic structure.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

This section has detailed the research design and methodology. It explored the research questions that informed the study outline along with the research design which framed how the research was implemented. A case study design was used and a variety of data collection methods were used, such as analysis of existing institutional secondary data, review of documents and in-depth interviews. The secondary data and review of documents played an important role as data collection sources. The secondary statistical data included academic performance records of all undergraduate sponsored South African students in 2010. The institutional documents that were reviewed included the Audit reports and recommendations thereof, annual reports, sponsor reports, and university newsletters. Added to that there were interviews with 12 participants from all seven faculties of the institution. The in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the experiences of the students to understand what worked for them as well as document recommendations they made, in particular for first year students. The protocol followed in the process of collecting, analyzing and reporting data was described and the ethical considerations observed were outlined. The following chapter

presents the findings that emerged once the methodology described in this chapter was operationalised.

## **5 CHAPTER FIVE: A CASE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE SPONSORED STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE**

### **Introduction**

The University of the Western Cape is among the leading historically Black institutions that attract students from poverty-stricken backgrounds because the university's fees are lower than most other South African universities. A large number of its students are assisted through national initiatives such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (UWC Annual Report, 2010). UWC Annual Reports point to a complex relationship between the commitment to access and tuition fees that requires ongoing stringent financial management (UWC Annual Reports, 2010, 2011). In 2010, the head count of the student population was 18059 and 10862 of this number were sponsored students both at undergraduate and post-graduate level (Morta, 2010). Ravjee et. al. (2010) observe that while access is fundamental to UWC's mission recent studies have found academic underperformance to be a key challenge affecting not only UWC but other higher learning institutions in South Africa (CHE, 2010). While it is important to understand factors contributing to the low throughput rates in the undergraduate and postgraduate studies, it is equally important to identify what works for those who succeed. This is what is unique about this case study even though it focuses only on undergraduate sponsored students at UWC.

The findings of this study show that among the students who come from poor backgrounds, there is a strong belief in education as the weapon that can change the world. The essential factor is that providing funding for equitable access has a positive influence on the overall performance of previously disadvantaged students. This means that access to networks and resources, knowledge and insights into various opportunities creates possibilities. Participants of this case study, however strongly argue that full funding in terms of covering student requirements is critical to their success.

Secondly, the majority of the participants in this study attribute part of their success to nurtured resilience across the institution, such as the welcoming and inclusive climate established by faculty and administrative staff. The students positively described the type of support and mentoring programs and services the institution provided as well as the quality of teaching they received. They described their lecturers as caring and engaging individuals, who also

recognized ability and aspirations. Furthermore, they always were available to help students, and had high expectations from them because they believed in them.

Thirdly, results show that nurturing relationships became the source of the energy that drove participants to realize their goals, an aspect that is seldom taken into account in the theorizing space. Behaviour that exhibits resilience such as perseverance, aspirations and having dreams, hard work, goal-setting, coupled with support from family, friends and peers motivated them and gave them hope for success. Family and community support and prospects that educational achievements would alleviate poverty and bring financial stability were important in raising hope that led to success. This allows for the interpreting of results from a different perspective, which is in line with the idea of community cultural wealth.

The first three sections of this chapter present the case study results derived from the secondary data on undergraduate sponsored students at UWC. The extracted secondary data was drawn from a sample size of 6660 undergraduate sponsored students registered at UWC during the year 2010 and were South African by citizenship. The results presented show socio-demographic institutional variables such as gender and age, the typology of sponsors as well as the academic performance for that year. The final two sections present findings from the in-depth interviews with students.

## **5.1 Who are Undergraduate Sponsored Students at UWC?**

In 2009, the South African Minister of Higher Education and Training supported calls for making education free for students who come from poor communities as a means of addressing historical inequalities (DoE, 2010). Students are sponsored in higher education through various funding from public and private sectors. This study therefore took an interest on how undergraduate sponsored students perform, and whether there were any variations by gender, age and type of sponsor. The variation by race was not included as that variable was not included in the secondary data I had retrieved. According to the UWC Annual Report (2010, 2011), the UWC attracts students from poverty stricken communities primarily because of its decidedly low fee structure. This study considers the USS at UWC as including all students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds who otherwise would possibly not be in a position to access higher education without financial assistance. These students usually come from township and rural high schools, and are first generation university students. Furthermore, these factors are viewed in the dominant discourse to negatively impact the academic performance

of students. However, successful USS and the elements that help them achieve academically against all odds, is the focus of this study.

The institutional documents at UWC show that about 80% of the student population was undergraduates in 2010. Furthermore, the racial split of students shows that 47% were Coloured while 45% were Black, 6% Indian and 2% white (IOP 2010-2014).

The population of students in South African higher education has changed with more students accessing post-school learning through various means and there are more females than males as is the case in this sample (Table 5-1). Of the total of 6660 participants sampled, 30 students (0.5%) chose not to disclose their gender against 6630 participants who did. Table 5-1 indicates that of the 6630 participants (65.7%) were females and (34.3%) were males. Evidently there are more women at the university as shown in recent literature, even though the numbers are skewed when it comes to areas of study (CHE, 2009). This aspect of area of study by gender was not looked into in this study. However, at UWC female students account for a larger proportion of the student enrolment, but they do not represent the majority in every discipline. The university at the time did not have enrolment strategies aimed at influencing the gender split (UWC Annual Report, 2011).

**Table 5-1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender**

| Gender        | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------|-----------|------------|
| Female        | 4358      | 65.4       |
| Male          | 2272      | 34.1       |
| Not Specified | 30        | 0.5        |
| <b>Total</b>  | 6660      | 100        |

The results from the sample of 6660 sponsored students in Table 5- 2 show that the ages of students ranged from 20 to over 55 years old (Morta, 2010). The majority of participants sponsored (52.8%) were within the age range from 20-24, while (31.1%) were 25-29, and (6.7%) were 30-34 and the rest represent (9.4%) with the age range between 35 and above 55. It is evident that 83% of the total participants are under the age of 30 years. It is however important to note that the 20-24 age group is the group that represents a particular percentage in the enrolment in higher education. However, according to Lewin & Mawoyo(2014) the

participation rates are still low by international standards for the equivalent middle-income Countries (DOE 1997, NPC, 2011). The national target set by the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) is 20% which has not yet been achieved as it still reflects as 1,7%. At a national level, there is however a concern that inequity is still glaring and it is questionable as to who gains meaningful access to universities (Scott *et al*, 2007, CHE 2013).

**Table 5-2: Distribution of Respondents per Age Group**

| Age group    | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| 20-24        | 3516      | 52.8       |
| 25-29        | 2073      | 31.1       |
| 30-34        | 443       | 6.7        |
| 35-39        | 266       | 4.0        |
| 40-44        | 190       | 2.9        |
| 45-49        | 98        | 1.5        |
| 50-54        | 45        | 0.7        |
| 55 above     | 29        | 0.4        |
| <b>Total</b> | 6660      | 100        |

There are seven faculties at UWC and 80% of the student population is at undergraduate level (CHE, 2008). Faced with the numerous challenges of underprepared students, UWC's approach to teaching and learning is to create a supportive environment. Teaching and learning values not only the development of academic ability but also a variety of other competencies. The institution offers academic development activities and foundation programmes and has introduced a system of tutors for undergraduate students as a way of giving effect to the institution's understanding of equity and quality. Each faculty has a designated Teaching and Learning Specialist and the majority of faculties operate in a context in which the demand for support is in relation to both the student and the lecturing staff. The UWC has the disadvantage and advantage of having been a historically disadvantaged institution (HDI). Its long record of underfunding particularly with regards to meeting the needs of some of the educationally

disadvantaged students is remarkable, including a status which has not been conducive to developing a strong financial support base. It also has a record of getting the most out of limited resources enabling generations of ill-prepared students to succeed, a deep community network and has given real meaning to the value of diversity in all its manifestations. During the 2010 academic year, the Teaching and Learning Directorate collaboratively developed an implementation plan (UWC Annual Report, 2010, IOP 2010-2014). The generic plan was used by faculties to develop their teaching and learning implementation plans to be aligned to the vision that had been developed for UWC as a whole. The university Foundation Programme and Extended Curriculum Programme were launched in 2005, and 2010 was the sixth year of implementation in the faculties of Arts, Law, Natural Science, and Economic Management Sciences. This study did not look into how the undergraduate sponsored students in these faculties performed comparatively speaking. The distribution of undergraduate sponsored student by faculty is tabled below.

**Table 5-3: Faculty distribution**

| <b>Name of Faculty</b>           | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage%</b> |
|----------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Arts</b>                      | 1304             | 20                 |
| <b>Community Health Sciences</b> | 1124             | 17                 |
| <b>Dentistry</b>                 | 585              | 9                  |
| <b>Education</b>                 | 491              | 7                  |
| <b>Economic Management</b>       | 1458             | 22                 |
| <b>Law</b>                       | 608              | 9                  |
| <b>Natural Sciences</b>          | 1090             | 16                 |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                     | 6660             | 100                |

**5.2 Typology of Sponsors**

Scholarship programs, referred to as sponsors in the study, play an important role in providing financial support to students from poor and working class backgrounds. UWC remains committed to providing access to students who were previously excluded from higher education

and who struggle to afford university education (UWC Annual Report, 2011). Tables 5- 4 and 5-5 present the typology of sponsors that assist undergraduate students financially. In 2010, the Financial Aid office at UWC administered a total allocation of R213.9 million and of that total, the NSFAS allocation was R112.3 million and the University’s own allocation to bursaries was R9.5million (University of the Western Cape Annual Report, 2010).

**Table 5-4: Typology of sponsors by number of students sponsored**

| <b>Name of sponsor</b>         | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|--------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Government</b>              | 909              | 13.6                  |
| <b>Corporate</b>               | 367              | 5.5                   |
| <b>Municipalities</b>          | 43               | 0.6                   |
| <b>NSFAS</b>                   | 2235             | 33.6                  |
| <b>NGO</b>                     | 193              | 2.9                   |
| <b>Religion</b>                | 2                | 0.0                   |
| <b>Semi-State</b>              | 47               | 0.7                   |
| <b>Trust Funds</b>             | 39               | 0.6                   |
| <b>University Administered</b> | 2825             | 42.4                  |
| <b>Total</b>                   | 6660             | 100%                  |

**Table 5-5: Typology of sponsors by number of students sponsored (summary view)**

| <b>Name of Sponsor</b>  | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage %</b> |
|---|------------------|---------------------|
| <b>NSFAS, Gov. Departments, Municipalities, Semi-State Department</b> | 3234             | 48.6                |
| <b>University Administered Funds</b>                                  | 2825             | 42.4                |
| <b>Cooperate and Trust Funds</b>                                      | 406              | 6.1                 |
| <b>NGO and Religious Organizations</b>                                | 192              | 2.9                 |
| <b>Total</b>  | 6660             | 100                 |

Table 5-4 shows nine categories of sponsors which for the purpose of this analysis have been reduced to four with all government funders grouped together as shown in Table 5-5. It is therefore apparent that there are four main categories of sponsors. NSFAS and government departments, municipalities and semi-state department represents 48.6 % (N=3234). The university administered funds represent 42.4 % (N=2825), cooperate and trust funds represent 6.1 % (N=406), and NGO and religious organisations are 2.9% (N=195). These sponsors also provide full or in some cases part scholarships depending on the availability of resources as is the case with the NSFAS. These categories also differed in strength in terms of criteria and the kind of support they provided.

The NGO and Religious sponsorship focuses on rural based students whose challenges are as a result of being geographically compromised with no access to resources. This type of sponsorship seeks to equip rural youth with skills, qualifications, values and motivation necessary to effectively enrich and serve their communities. The provision of this funding and support enables talented students from marginalised rural schools an opportunity to study at any high quality tertiary institution in the country.

The Corporate and Trust Funds whose focus is often on social investments and equity, focus on areas of specialization that previously disadvantaged South Africans could not access. These are funders like Thuthuka (SAICA) whose interest is deserving students in accounting, TELKOM whose interest is engineering, Dell whose interest is on students' determination more than tests scores focusing on potential and ambition rewarding low income highly motivated students. Such youth are also those who demonstrate and indicate the drive to succeed despite

personal obstacles and are first generation university students from poor families. Another example is OMET which sponsors trade union dependents who otherwise would not be in a position to afford tertiary education.

The students sponsored by university administered funding are largely university staff dependents whose fees are paid by the institution by virtue of the fact that they are university employees. This category includes merit awards provided to students who excel in their academic work and co-curricular activities. Added to the university administered funds is the work-study program which employs students in various university-wide areas such as academic mentoring, peer counseling programs and support in residence community life as part of the Student Representative Council (SRC) programmes that are residence based.

Another category is the NSFAS, combined with municipality and semi-state departments which made the financing of students from poor families a government priority to increase access because of the high levels of poverty and socio-economic inequalities in South Africa. This category was intentionally the government's fundamental vehicle to distribute the state's obligations for this purpose. It is believed that the number of student awards by NSFAS increased rapidly by 16.7% per annum between 2009 and 2011, although unevenly from one year to another (CHE, 2016). The largest sponsor is the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) combined with other government departments (48.6%) (Municipalities, and semi-state departments). These sponsors differ in programmes because some like REAP, and other corporate sponsors such as OMET and Thuthuka (SAICA) provide added psycho-social support where students are identified at high school level. However, others like ESKOM, mostly only focus on financial help.

The government student loans have increased over the years to benefit deserving students from poor communities. Most of these students come from families whose household income is less than R122, 000 per annum and is tax based or means tested (DHET, 2010). In the first ten years of operation NSFAS funded 659 000 students in all universities in the country distributing R12 billion in financial aid (DHET, 2010.) However, the student fees have continued to rise putting pressure on families, the public and private funders. As stated by the South African Student Union (SAUS) for example, NSFAS has not been able to extend its reach to the increasing numbers of students whose family income is just above the current NSFAS eligibility threshold. This group constitutes a high percentage of students from families who cannot afford to access higher education without financial aid. HESA also supports this view stating that the real

sufferers are students who have a mean family income a little higher than the threshold value. According to HESA, a family income of R140 000 per annum cannot afford to support a student at a university (DHET, 2010). Cele (2014) points to UWC student activism in 1998 which sought to assist about 7000 students facing financial exclusion through a landmark series of protests and negotiations that occurred in an institutional environment characterized by antagonism. Cele's argument was based on how the UWC as an institution confronted the paradoxical post-apartheid higher education policy of expansion of access to historically disadvantaged students and limited funding. Evidently, unmet financial student needs have been a burning issue within the context of political and social change in South Africa since the first decade of democracy and the transformation of higher education. Regrettably, this continues to be problematic even in 2016 as witnessed by the 2015/2016 #FeesMustFall Campaign in which students in all universities of South Africa demand free quality education.

Even in 2016, of UWC's 21 548 registered students, 14 800 required financial clearance which means that 69% of students were not able to pay their registration initial payment fee (UWC Presidential commission, 2016). In a response to student's 40 demands, it is stated that 80-90 percent of UWC students will benefit from the government intervention especially because families whose combined income is up to R600 000 per annum are regarded as the latest threshold for NSFAS funded students (Management Response to Student Demands, 2016).

The second largest sponsor at UWC is the university administered funding (42.4%) that supports staff dependents, merit awards, and the work study programme, intended to assist deserving students and recognize excellence. UWC has a merit system in place that assists in attracting academically strong school leavers and that also rewards registered students for academic excellence. The merit award operates in various categories such as First years, Senior and UWC Bursary awards. During 2014, there were 4866 students who were awarded about R14 118 162 and in 2015, 4857 students were awarded R18 272 577 while in 2016, 5759 were awarded R19 182 925 (UWC Presidential Commission, 2016). The university also has a well-established Work-Study programme which is a university-wide program. Students are employed within faculties as tutors in different academic departments and as peer assistants in various administrative jobs for a set period and hours and are then financially compensated. This usually helps students to pay for outstanding fees where there are shortfalls, in some instances assist with accommodation and meals.

According to the UWC Annual Report (2012) the university has longstanding relationships with numerous donors as illustrated in this case study. The donors' continued support assists UWC to increase the number of students receiving financial support on an annual basis to help students realize their academic endeavors. UWC is one of the institutions in the country that attracts a high percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds because of the low fee structure compared to its neighboring universities in the Western Cape (UWC Annual Report 2010, 2011).

The third type was corporate and trust funds (6.1%) most of which provide full scholarships from their social responsibility funds. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to voluntary actions undertaken by companies to improve living conditions (economic, social and environmental). Although CSR programmes are viewed as part of companies' public relations strategy, they are now recognized as efforts to deliver sustainable benefits to improve the well being of communities in which companies operate.

The last type comprised Non-Governmental and Religious Organizations (2.9%) who target students from rural settings since lack of financial resources is associated with geographic disadvantage and other socio-cultural factors. It must also be noted that although this has not been highlighted in this study, the programmes offered by some of these sponsors and scholarships are focused on areas of study, such as accounting and actuarial studies. Such sponsors provide extensive support usually by identifying their beneficiaries during their schooling period and offer preparation for university entrance through workshops and winter or summer schools (Thuthuka Report, 2012). Others target rural youth like Rural Education Access Programme (REAP) whose mission is to provide higher education opportunities to marginalized rural youth. This programme provides holistic development support to young people to enable them to overcome inherent economic, academic and social hurdles (Jones et al, 2008).

### **5.3 Academic Performance of Sponsored Students**

The academic performance of undergraduate students sponsored in 2010 is drawn from Faculty results in all seven Faculties of the institution. The majority of the students in 2010 were in the faculty of EMS and the Education faculty had the smallest numbers. Table 5-6 shows that the overall performance output of sponsored students was 73.9% with a failure rate of 26.1% (Morta, 2010). The performance is based on promotion to the next level and is a pass that will

allow the student to complete the degree within the requisite time. If the length of a degree is 3years or 4years and the student completes it within that period that is regarded as good performance without being graded as distinction or average.

**Table 5-6: Performance of Sponsored Students by Gender**

| Variables     | Total |     | Success |      | Fail/Dropped |      | Chi-square |
|---------------|-------|-----|---------|------|--------------|------|------------|
|               | N     | %   | N       | %    | N            | %    |            |
| <b>Gender</b> |       |     |         |      |              |      |            |
| <b>Male</b>   | 1869  | 100 | 1302    | 69.7 | 567          | 30   | 27.89***   |
| <b>Female</b> | 3558  | 100 | 2707    | 76.1 | 851          | 23.9 |            |
| <b>Total</b>  | 5427  | 100 | 4009    | 73.9 | 1418         | 26.1 |            |

\*\*\*: results were significant statistically at 1% level.

**Table 5-7: Performance of Sponsored Students by Age Group**

| Age group       | Success     |            | Fail/Dropout |            | Total       |            | Chi-square |
|-----------------|-------------|------------|--------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|
|                 | N           | %          | N            | %          | n           | %          |            |
| <b>20-24</b>    | 2295        | 57.1       | 879          | 62.0       | 3174        | 58.4       | 74.29***   |
| <b>25-29</b>    | 1149        | 28.6       | 368          | 26         | 1517        | 27.9       |            |
| <b>30-34</b>    | 245         | 6.1        | 71           | 5          | 316         | 5.8        |            |
| <b>35-39</b>    | 144         | 3.6        | 44           | 3          | 188         | 3.5        |            |
| <b>40-44</b>    | 105         | 2.6        | 34           | 2          | 139         | 2.6        |            |
| <b>45-49</b>    | 52          | 1.3        | 14           | 1          | 66          | 1.2        |            |
| <b>50-54</b>    | 24          | 6          | 4            | 3          | 28          | 0.5        |            |
| <b>55 above</b> | 6           | 1          | 4            | 3          | 10          | 0.2        |            |
| <b>Total</b>    | <b>4020</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>1418</b>  | <b>100</b> | <b>5438</b> | <b>100</b> |            |

Source: Computation by Researcher from data set of UWC-2010

\*\*\*: results were significant statistically at 1% level; \*\* results were significant statistically at 5% level and results were significant statistically at 10% level.

### 5.3.1 Academic Performance by Demographics and Institutional Variables

The results show that of the sample of 6660 students, 1226 (18.4%) did not have full records while 5434 (81.6%) were complete. According to the Quality Assurance and Planning unit these are administrative errors that occur between the faculty and the examination offices or other units concerned. The results show that of the 5434 sponsored students with complete records, some were in their final year of study and would complete their programme in 2010. The data had various categories used to indicate “success” and these included those who completed cum laude, promoted part time, completed with fees outstanding, promoted manually, may proceed with studies, promoted and completed programme. In order to simplify the categories and tabulation only two categories were tabled namely success and fail or dropout.

Of the total of 5434 completed cases, there were n=1873 males and n=3561 females. Excluding students who were recorded as deceased (4 males and 3 females), the totals are 1869 males and 3558 females. Of 1869 males 69.7% males succeeded against 30.3% failure.

With 3558 females, there were (76.1%) females who succeeded against (23.9%) failure. In view of the data, and the comparison of the above figures for success, it can be concluded that there is a higher proportion of females in the successful category compared to males. The performance by gender indicates that a greater proportion of females passed.

In Table 5-6 it is also revealed that in the failure category 30.3% of males did not succeed compared to 23.9% of females. With regard to these figures it can be concluded that males performed poorer than females. A chi-square test through cross-tabulation was applied to see if there was any correlation between gender and performance and the results revealed that ( $\chi^2 = 27.89$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). Since, p-value (p) was less than 0.05, it was concluded that there is a correlation between gender and performance and furthermore the association is statistically significant.

Table 5-7 indicates that there were 5438 participants with age range from 20 years and above. The results show that (57.1%) of the students in the age range 20-24 succeeded followed by students in the 25-29 age range with (28.6%) and (1%) was the lowest in the 55 and above age range. The failure rate with the 20-24 age group was (62%) followed by those in the age range 25-29 (26%) and the lowest was the age range 45-49 with (1%). The results in Table 5-7 show some relational connection between age and performance to some extent, applying chi-square

test through cross-tabulation, revealed that ( $\chi^2 = 74.29$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). Since, p-value (p) was less than 0.05, it was concluded that there is an association between age group and performance and furthermore the association is statistically significant.

### 5.3.2 Academic Performance 2010 by Sponsor

The overall results in Table 5- 8 on performance by sponsor showed that the highest rate of success is found in bursaries offered by university administered funds (81.4%) followed by NGO and Religious organizations (74.3%) and the combination of NSFAS, municipalities and semi-state funded students (68.5%). Other categories achieving success among students they cater for were Corporate and Trust funds (67%). Within the aforementioned categories the university administered category had the highest success rate whilst Corporate and Trust funds had the lowest compared to other groups. It is believed that the university administered funded students were likely to be the highest achieving because they are at an advantage as the majority were staff dependents.

Students who are staff dependents are likely to have access to resources and stand a better chance of being educationally advantaged. On the other hand, the group with lower comparable pass rate was those funded by Corporate and Trusts. NSFAS does not always provide full funding and therefore such limitation could be a source of stress associated with hardship. There is an association between the type of sponsors and performance, as results show the chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 135.02$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ) and since the p-value was less than 0.05 the association is statistically significant.

**Table 5-8: Performance of Sponsored Students in 2010 by Sponsor**

| Financial Institutions                           | Success     |             | Fail/Dropout |             | Total       |            | Chi-square |
|--|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|
|  | N           | %           | N            | %           | N           | %          |            |
| Corporate and trust funds                        | 215         | 67          | 106          | 33          | 321         | 100        |            |
| NSFAS, Government, municipalities and semi-state | 1843        | 68.5        | 849          | 31.5        | 2692        | 100        | 135.02***  |
| Org NGOs and religion                            | 124         | 74.3        | 43           | 25.7        | 167         | 100        |            |
| University Administered                          | 1838        | 81.4        | 420          | 18.6        | 2258        | 100        |            |
| <b>Total</b>                                     | <b>4020</b> | <b>73.9</b> | <b>1418</b>  | <b>26.1</b> | <b>5438</b> | <b>100</b> |            |

\*\*\*: results were significant statistically at 1% level.

To conclude, it is evident that providing funding to students irrespective of background has a positive impact on student performance in that it provides the opportunities that otherwise would not be available to many. However, while we acknowledge that there is a relationship between student academic performance and provision of financial support, fees cannot be considered in isolation. The provision of quality educational experience is therefore situated in the quality of academic offerings, and student resilience, coupled with socio-economic support and a conducive learning environment promotes social mobility. While gender as a variable has been included in many studies it has shown different results. For example, Arellano (2013) suggests that males have higher mathematical achievement than females while females have higher reading and verbal achievement than males. In this study results (Table 5-6) showed that females performed better (76.1%) than males (69.7%) even though it is not specified in which fields of study.

The results also show that there is a difference in performance by sponsor. It is found that the highest performing students are those supported by the university administered funds, while those with lower pass rates are students funded by Corporate and Trusts. The university administered sponsorship includes university staff dependents and students with merit awards therefore it is likely that they would perform better as suggested by the cultural reproduction theory as well as the fact that their parents have better opportunities and have access to resources. On the other hand, the NSFAS sponsored students are those who mainly come from poor social and low economic backgrounds where the household income was R122, 000 per annum and below. More importantly, one factor that needs to be understood about NSFAS is that it does not always provide for full funding and can therefore be a source of stress, where students have no accommodation, books and sometimes meals. The two groups mentioned above namely; university administered funded students and the NSFAS students affirm the theoretical findings in deficit models in that it is the students whose parents are educated that did better for obvious reasons. A reasonable majority of the students sponsored by the university administered funds were staff dependents and therefore may have completed their schooling in well-resourced environments and could easily access information. However, it is important to note the complex realities that are glossed over to acknowledge the intricacies of the NSFAS funded students to realize their achievement yet they come from poor communities. It is the inadequate and unequal educational opportunities that limit equal access and success in schooling; therefore, focus should largely be on addressing structures, financial practices and

discourses that incapacitate better performance and therefore leveling the playing fields is fundamental. The opportunity gap must be eliminated by all means.

Notably towards the completion of this study all institutions of higher learning in South Africa had the most unprecedented united student unrest in the #FeesMustFall campaign. Students felt that South Africa, one of the unequal countries in the world, has not been able to decisively end the historical recycling of black poverty and structural racism. The repetitive tuition fee increase at universities which has always been a bitterly debated issue annually (Cele, 2014) proved to be the tipping point. South African poor black middle class families invested massively in education believing that acquisition of technical knowledge and skills were the best means for upward mobility. However, for many young people, entering university in this new democracy has turned out to be nothing but a debt trap. This is because most students for example receive the NSFAS, a loan which has to be paid on completion of studies (City Press, November 1, 2015). Students believe that government has not invested sufficiently in education in the country, yet universities have for a long time called for action on the funding problem.

To understand the performance of sponsored undergraduate students there is further exploration through the analysis of the available qualitative data derived from the interviews conducted. The undergraduate sponsored students who participated in the study were invited through the UWC Financial Aid and bursary department, as stated in the methodology chapter. The in-depth analysis of the qualitative data will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. I first present the background information obtained through introductory conversations during our interviews to build the rapport. The participants briefly gave us a glimpse of who they are and what influenced them to go to UWC to further their studies. This is then followed by analyses of the interviews.

#### **5.4 Digging Deep**

This study analyses the type of sponsors and the demographic distributions of participants. These include gender, high school attended, faculty, and parental level of education, age, and race as presented in Table 5-9 below. This is followed by the analysis of the participants' input based in part of the ad-verbatim data annexed in appendix H as an example. The participants are undergraduate sponsored students who have at least completed their first year of study at UWC. Letters were sent with the assistance of the UWC financial aid office targeting

undergraduate South African students in all of the seven faculties of the institution. This assisted in having an idea of how faculties functioned to improve student attainment in their respective programmes. Table 5-9 shows the demographics of the students who were interviewed using variables that combine parental education levels which are related to their occupational status and therefore income that researchers used to measure socio-economic status (Walpole, 2007). It is also believed that first generation students who are defined by their parental education levels face similar educational trials to low socio-economic and low-income students. However, Paulsen and St John (2002) criticized the use of SES because it fails to adequately account for the complex nature of how social status and education level synthesize to explain educational outcomes, a view I support.

**Table 5-9: Type of Sponsors and Demographic Distribution**

| Type of sponsors                 | Gender | High School category | Age | Faculty   | Race     | Parental education |      |
|----------------------------------|--------|----------------------|-----|-----------|----------|--------------------|------|
| Corporate                        | F      | Stanger              | 21  | Dentistry | Indian   | Degree             | 001  |
| Corporate//NSFAS                 | F      | Allen-Glen           | 20  | Law       | Black    | Grade 12           | 002  |
| NSFAS                            | M      | Rocklands            | 29  | Arts      | Coloured | High school        | 003  |
| Corporate                        | M      | Usasazo              | 22  | EMS       | Black    | High school        | 004  |
| Corporate                        | F      | St Stithians         | 22  | Law       | Black    | Teacher training   | 005  |
| NSAFAS/University Administration | M      | Knyasna              | 24  | Education | Coloured | Secondary          | 006  |
| Corporate                        | F      | Oostersee            | 20  | CHS.      | Black    | High school        | 007  |
| NSFAS                            | M      | Iqhayiya             | 21  | EMS       | Black    | Grade 11           | 008  |
| Corporate                        | F      | Thuso                | 20  | Nat. SC   | Coloured | Matric             | 009  |
| NSFAS                            | M      | Khayelitsha          | 23  | Education | Black    | Lower primary      | 0010 |
| NSFAS                            | M      | Sinethemba           | 24  | Law       | Black    | High school        | 0011 |
| NSFAS                            | M      | Langa                | 22  | Nat Sc.   | Black    | Primary            | 0012 |

In getting to understand who the students are whilst building a rapport, this is what the twelve participants had to say about themselves. Each participant was assigned an alpha-numerical

code. The first letter relates to the type of sponsor (C or N) namely Corporate or National Student Financial Aid Scheme, the second one refers to the gender, female or male (F or M) and the number is the sequence in which the interview was conducted 1-12 (001-0012). Example, a student sponsored by Corporate and is female numbered as 007 will be coded as (CF007).

### **Participant 1**

The first participant is a young woman, aged 21 years old. She was born and raised in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN); she is one of three children in her family and lives with her mother and father. Her mother is a house-wife, and her father a teacher in one of the KZN secondary schools. She has always excelled in her school work and was a top student in her district. Her father got her the scholarship and she decided to come to UWC because it has one of the best dentistry programmes in the country. She received a lot of support from her parents as early as in high school as they encouraged her to work hard to be able to succeed in life. She became interested in health sciences because every time she visited the clinic where she was volunteering there were long queues which she attributed to lack of professionals in dentistry. Her dream is to go back to her rural community when she completes her study so that she can help where she feels more doctors are needed. She believes that health care is everyone's right and quality health care can be provided by dedicated health-care workers. She states that poor people need to be treated with more respect and dignity. She hopefully will enrich her life by serving others to the best of her ability. Having been given this opportunity to study she believes she will also make a contribution to make a difference in the quality of health services in the rural areas of the country.

### **Participant 2**

The participant two is a 20-year-old young woman who originally comes from Soweto in Johannesburg. She lives with her mother and grandmother, aunt, uncle and cousins. Her mother has been her role model in life because she works hard and has determination to achieve in life. She put her and other family members through school working two jobs and has seen her being the pillar of the family. As a result, she would also like to make a difference in people's lives by helping ordinary people who have problems with her legal background on completion. Her grandmother always encourages her to do her best because she believes that for all the "Born – Frees" (Post-apartheid era) there should be no excuses not to reach their highest potential. The

opportunities provided by government student loans today were not available in the past and therefore opportunities that are available today cannot be taken for granted. She is therefore determined to make the best of the scholarship she received and will be somebody one day. She knows that if you put your mind to something and give it your best, you will achieve your goals.

### **Participant 3**

The third participant is a young man of 29 years old from the Western Cape Province. He lived with both parents. His mother is unemployed and father is a road-side mechanic at home. He grew up involved in church work where he did a lot of helping out with youth programmes and any other activities that were available. From childhood, he liked fixing things because his father and uncle are road side mechanics even though they did not go to school. As a result, his father did not have money most of the time if nobody in the community needed work. He began to also look for after-school work so he could bring something home to help. After he finished his matriculation, he had to continue to work for a year to raise money for registration so he could further his studies. He knew all the time that he did not want to end up like his father and because he was hard working at school his teachers encouraged him to apply for university studies and as a result he was awarded NSFAS. He has continued to be involved with the youth at church and likes to motivate them providing information and also being exemplary in that coming from a disadvantaged background should not determine anyone's future. He believes that hard work pays as long as one has dreams and is focused on the studies. He is determined to finish his studies in good time in order to get a good job to change the life of his family.

### **Participant 4**

The fourth participant is a young man aged 22 years. He lived with his family in one of the townships in the Western Cape. Father worked as a laborer and his mother as domestic worker. He chose to study at UWC because it was nearer where his school was and his teacher encouraged him to check the bursary office where they could advise them about how to apply. He visited the university and got the information, hence the scholarship. He emphasized that his mother was also very influential in his interest to go to university and believed that if you have ambitions you can improve your life. Growing up, his mother taught him how to manage his time and be productive. His mother gave them chores every morning before she left for work. He knew what was expected of them before and after school. At the end of each day each one of the siblings had to show some results of completing the given tasks. He acknowledged

having good teachers in high school who introduced him to group work. This helped him to develop skills that enabled him to work in teams with different people from different backgrounds. What is important for him is knowing how to choose friends so that you surround yourself with like-minded people and not be distracted by other things that have nothing to do with who you want to become.

### **Participant 5**

The participant five is a 22 year old young woman. She studied law and was in her final year. She comes from the Gauteng Province, where her family lives and describes it as an average family. Both her parents are working and know that education is very important and that is what they want for their children. Her teachers always believed that she was good with her school work. She got a scholarship at high school to support her studies and this allowed her to go to one of the Model C schools. It was very exciting for her family and community because very few people could afford those schools. However, she encountered some challenges trying to fit in with her peers, as she was one of the few Black girls in a predominantly white school. This helped because she began to know her strengths and used them to her advantage. She was good in debating and became popular; as a result, she had lots of friends. She wrote in the school newspaper and became a committee member for editing. She also worked hard because she felt like she needed to prove herself and not disappoint her teachers and her family. She wanted to change the mindset of how black people are perceived and believes that we are all capable of reaching our potential if given an opportunity. By the time she got to university she just knew that nothing would break her because she was already exposed to dealing with people from different backgrounds and cultures. It also helps when one knows her or his goals as well as where one comes from. Knowing that people in poor communities suffer encourages one to remain focused and succeed with an aim of going home and ploughing back.

### **Participant 6**

The participant six is a 24-year-old young man. He comes from the Eastern Cape in the rural area called Qobo-qobo. He lived with his mother and father who are both unemployed. He grew up in a Christian home. His family is poor but they believed in holding on to Christian values for guidance. Before he started at UWC he worked for a Youth organization in order to save some money for his study because his parents did not have money to support him educationally. He was always motivated by his parents to do well at school and this would change his life. He

applied to UWC even although he was not sure about funding but he heard about NSFAS. In his first year, he borrowed some of the money to add on to what he had saved for registration which he knew he had to pay back and fortunately he got the student loan. He liked the UWC vibe, people were friendly and helpful and that made life easier. He got the funds from NSFAS for his first year though it was not enough to cover all costs. Unfortunately, just before the June exams he lost his mother and he was very devastated. He thought that to celebrate his achievement, his mother would be at the graduation, hoping that they would together enjoy the fruits of his education. His dream was that on completion, he was going to work which is what his parents had prayed for. The death of his mother was hard, however, this brought him and his father closer but his mother was his greatest pillar. In his second and third year, he got additional financial assistance through the work-study programme and that allowed him to concentrate better and was sure to complete his studies.

### **Participant 7**

Participant seven is a 20-year-old female student who comes from the Western Cape and lives with her three siblings and parents. She is in the Faculty of Health Sciences and states that although the programme she registered for was her second choice it has become very enjoyable. She got her scholarship through her father's employment and therefore did not have to struggle to go to university. She likes the vibe in her department because her lecturers are very engaging and supportive. She believes that hard work at high school prepared her for higher education because it was at the time that her father encouraged her to work hard. When she got to university she was already used to hard work and therefore just spent most of her time in the library. She believes that we are all born to be leaders with equal birth rights from our heavenly Father. Though there are a lot of challenges that come on the way, it only takes perseverance and patience to make it. She believes that if you understand what you want and set your objectives you will get through to your goals. On arrival at university she made sure that she attended the orientation programme organized for first year students and that proved to be to her advantage. Her faculty also has a good mentoring programme so she received good peer support when she needed it. She also enjoys the sense of independence at the university but requires discipline and is determined to do her best and succeed.

### **Participant 8**

The eighth participant is a 21-year-old young man who grew up in one of the townships of Cape Town. He had learnt to work hard from his young age at school so that he could change his life and family circumstances. While he was at high school, his father was murdered when coming back from work and he was left to be raised by his mother who is a domestic worker. His family (him and siblings) did not have many basics to survive even when he got to the university. When he got to the university he felt different from others who had nice clothes and other fashionable clothes that youth wear today. However, he told himself not to compare himself with others as long as he could be in class and do his best he would be fine. Just before he got his scholarship early in first year, he got help from his friends. He stayed off campus and sometimes his mother could only afford to pay for the transport to the UWC class. He got involved with his Peer-help programme which is run by the Counselling unit. This broadened his outlook to life because he could see that he was not the only one who had problems and that made him stronger and determined to work hard. He also enjoyed being involved in group discussions where they were all contributing ideas and even though they were from different backgrounds when it came to school work were competing and struggling the same. He was good in group discussions and gained respect from his peers as a result and this is where he felt that with tenacity you can go a long way.

### **Participant 9**

The ninth participant is a 20-year-old young woman who comes from Limpopo who was brought up by her mother since her father left even before she was born. At home she is a sister, an aunt, and her nieces and nephews look up to her as a role model. She believes that she is a born leader and is the first not only in her family but in her community to go to university and was interested in mining and construction. She then registered in the natural science faculty largely because she was good in mathematics and science and was advised by her teachers to apply for a scholarship and that UWC had a good programme in Geology. She grew up struggling at home because they did not have much and described her background as bad. However, she was determined to ensure that her own children would not go through the same struggles as she did. She remembers missing out on school excursions while at high school because her mother could not afford to pay for school trips. She also knows that many of her peers in her neighborhood do not have information about many things especially things that would help them further their education. As a result, she has a desire to start a programme where she comes from that will promote interest in education especially females while they are still in high school. There are some opportunities that most young people do not know about

especially those in rural areas who become very isolated. She says she wants to work with schools in her community in Limpopo emphasizing that what is important is education because it can open doors.

### **Participant 10**

Participant ten is a 23 year old male, originally from the Eastern Cape but his mother came to work in Cape Town. He states that convention tells us that if you are from a poor background, raised by a single mother without formal education and employment, you do not go to university and pursue your dreams. When he finished his matriculation he did not know how he would get to university because there was no money at home, however he just believed in himself and wanted to keep his dreams alive, because his instinctive faith in the power of education was unshakable. Sometimes he thinks it was pure luck or his persistent search for help paid off. Some people give up before they even try not because they do not want education but just by being overpowered by feeling powerless. Talking to others and showing interest was very rewarding. He got the scholarship through the assistance of the members of his mother's church who knew about NSFAS. This relieved his stress and he felt like there was someone besides him who was going to hold his hand and guide him through providing the information he had no access to and certainly needed to hold on to the opportunity. He began to work harder and his performance was even better because all he needed to do was to concentrate on his books. What he knows for sure is that education changes human beings and will change the community he comes from for better. He wants to also go back and improve the community that he came from and help another child like he was also helped by others.

### **Participant 11**

The eleventh participant had this to say: "It starts with a dream; add faith it becomes a belief. Add action, it becomes a part of life, add perseverance and it becomes a goal in sight, add patience and time, it ends with a dream come true". He is 24 years old in his final year for a degree in the Faculty of Law. He was born and raised in rural Eastern Cape and when he finished his matriculation with a merit award he decided to go and work because of lack of funds even though he had hoped to go to university. This, he says was also due to lack of information about careers and what is available out there. He struggled to get a job and actually realized that most vacancies needed skills and qualifications, so his priority became to find money and go to university. He learnt the hard way that hardship, marginalization and

impoverishment can become a driving force towards success. His parents decided to send him to his uncle who was working in Cape Town because they thought it might be easier to get jobs in the city. He had to endure doing petty jobs which sometimes brought misery and pain, however, he had to dream big and remained positive, hoping that someday things will change. He then was advised to apply to UWC because the fees were not that high. When he got the scholarship, he had no regrets for trying all he could because sometimes things do not go according to plan but with his determination he continued to knock at every door. What he knows for sure is that dreaming and vision are the driving force to success so it's best never to give up.

### **Participant 12**

Participant twelve is a 22 year old male in the faculty of natural science. His interest in a science degree was inspired when his school had a career exhibition and there was a teacher who spoke about science and the kind of careers that can be followed with a science degree. This opened his eyes and was very excited because he had not known what he would do even though he was good in science. They were also told about available bursaries that they could apply for because most of them came from poor families and it would be a struggle to get money to go to university. He is sure that were it not for the visit of the teacher who came to the school, things would not have turned out this way for him. He believes that teachers can play a big role in making or breaking the future of their students and must know that they are role models to the young people around them. He understands when they say knowledge is power; however, the most important thing is not to miss an opportunity at hand and have dreams to be able to succeed in life. What helped him was being focused and goal oriented and also surrounding himself with people who have ambitions. He advises that students must get involved with student activities because that is where you to learn things that are not in text books.

In the briefs that participants gave about themselves, while they acknowledge the poor backgrounds they came from, they also show self determination to change their circumstances. In some instances, the disadvantaging conditions motivated them to aim high and they all believed in education as their salvation. This brings to light that in South Africa, the apartheid system was deliberately anchored in denying Black people education and opportunities. This system was well calculated to keep knowledge away from the majority of the people so as to exclude them. It is therefore important to raise the voices of disadvantaged students to understand their tenacity. When what is perceived as unusual is documented it will eventually

become usual and the theorizing space will transform. Only when the untold stories are told, will many of those who constantly were told they cannot achieve either because of race, gender and poverty will begin to understand the deliberate indoctrination. The voices of undergraduate sponsored students are raised up in the following section.

### **5.5 Student's Stories: Impossible being Possible**

This section analyses the qualitative data. This is then followed by analysing the factors influencing the academic attainment of USS at the UWC, their experiences, factors contributing to their resilience, and the types of support that they received from the institution. All participants are South African by citizenship and have completed at least the first year of study which is a transition period that is usually the most challenging to all students especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schooling plays a major role in preparing students for university. Ideally the journey to higher education should start at school with subject advice and choices at the end of Grade 9 based on access to information about universities.

This study interviewed twelve participants to gather the qualitative data. Table 8 shows the type of sponsors and demographics of the participants. All twelve participants are South African citizens. The typology of sponsors column, shows that the majority of the participants were sponsored by NSFAS as well as a combination with other funding, while the other five were with the cooperate sponsorship. Based on the race variable, the majority of the participants were Black Africans. All participants at least represented each of the seven faculties at the University of the Western Cape as presented in Table 5-9. With regards to gender, there were five females and seven males and their ages ranged from 20 to 29 years old. The highest level of education of the participants' parents was matriculation and below, except for two whose parents had a post matriculation diploma and a degree qualification. This information revealed that all participants except one are first generation university students. Based on high school category, the majority of the participants graduated from township or rural high schools except for two. These other two came from former Model C schools which are better resourced than public schools in South Africa. The Model C schools are the former schools that were for white learners only as schools were racially differentiated prior to 1994 under the department of education. It is important to indicate that there is a considerable difference in the kind of schools the majority participants graduated from in terms of resource provision for learners. Furthermore, the kind of facilities, service and staff qualifications, as well as curriculum content

and quality of teaching in these schools varies. Largely, all that happens in these schools is shaped by the legacy of apartheid policies of race-based school education and geographic segregation. All of the variables mentioned such as parental education being first generation student and parental occupation are a combination used by most researchers to define low-SES students and are believed to face similar challenges in their access to and completion of university.

The interviews were used to explore participants' resilience and academic experience guided by the main research question; to understand factors that influence their academic performance in higher education and the institutional practices that enhance their academic attainment. A list of open-ended questions was asked to unpack their experiences; the questions are shown in Appendices A. However, in some instances the sequence of questions was not followed chronologically to allow for a conversational approach as the emerging world views and ideas were presented by the participants. After I reached the twelfth participant's interview and coding, it was clear that themes and constructs had reached saturation point, in that there was nothing new coming up.

The outcomes of the qualitative results on factors that influence the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students are presented below according to the themes that emerged. The quotations from the interviews and verbatim transcripts are included to support the argument developed in the section to tell the alternative story about the academic attainment of students from poor backgrounds. Yes, they are from disadvantaged backgrounds but they have dreams and are hungry for education because they know it would change the trajectory of their lives. The themes that emerged from the research questions are provided with the information and supporting quotations in response to arising questions. Consequently, the factors that influence the academic attainment of USS at the UWC are categorized as follows:

- Funding and possibilities
- Psychosocial support
- Institutional culture and vibe
- Self-determination and perseverance
- Navigating speed bumps
- Transition.

### 5.5.1 Funding and possibilities

This study reveals that funding was an influencing factor in the academic attainment of USS at UWC because it created possibilities of keeping their dreams alive. Some participants had no idea where the money would come from but knew that education would improve their lives. When they received their scholarships or loans, not utilizing the opportunity was not an option. One participant said:

*When I finished my matriculation I did not know how I would get to university because we did not have money at home, however I just believed in myself and I wanted to keep my dreams alive, because my instinctive faith in the power of education was unshakable (NM0010)*

Another one put it this way:

*If you understand what you want and set your objectives you will get through to your goals. After completing my matriculation I was able to register with the help of NSFAS. Once I was accepted at the university I was determined to do my best and succeed and I have always liked Nelson Mandela's words that "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world" (N/UM006)*

Twelve participants had received funding through NSFAS and public or private scholarships that they applied for. The important aspect of NSFAS is that up to 40% of each award can be converted into a bursary which does not have to be paid back to the scheme depending on academic results.

*I chose UWC because of its reputation of the Law Faculty. I got my scholarship through my parent's work and I did well in my senior certificate even my teachers used to encourage me because I was good in debating so getting a scholarship made things better and easy for me (CF005).*

Another participant declares the following:

*The financial support from my scholarship motivated me, I felt that they did not know me but believed in me and I did not want to disappoint them also my parents...and past experiences which I needed to change for the better (NM0011).*

The above statement is affirmed as illustrated in van der Berg's (2013) study in which he found that NSFAS funded students achieved their qualifications and were retained in the system and therefore the policy intervention of state funded student financial aid has a positive impact. Another participant said the followings to show that access to funding enables students to have choices;

*I always wanted to do dentistry so I can help people and UWC has the best dental school in South Africa so that was the main reason why I wanted to come to UWC and my parents got the scholarship for me as I was the top student in the district since Grade 11 (CF001).*

With regards to provision of financial assistance to students in higher education, the UWC has a significant measure of strategies to widen participation. One participant indicates as follows:

*Because it's the closest University to home I visited the institution, and the financial aid office had the list of available bursaries for students to apply. I got the application form for the bursary from UWC student financial aid office which enabled me to register (CM004).*

Two participants indicated that funding provides an opportunity to make choices of the university you prefer to study in. One had initially wanted to study at the University of Cape Town for medicine, and the other economics and financial management but they did not attain the required points. Consequently, they opted for UWC. One participant declares as follows:

*My first choice was medicine at UCT I really liked that university from the beginning I like the culture of the university that is serious and like you can just mind your own business and just go and work...and then ok I actually feel the same about UWC now cause it's not like you don't have to engage in the whole relaxed vibe atmosphere that they have, you can just also mind your own business and stick to your work if you want to. So yeah, it's funding that helped me make those decisions (CF007).*

It is important to note that participants show determination to utilize the given opportunities although inadequate finances where the scholarship did not cover all costs pose serious threats to student persistence and success. In some instances where residence is not paid for, finding accommodation close to the university is also a challenge. This is articulated below:

*Student Accommodation: My challenge was finding affordable accommodation close to campus. I think I moved twice at first year and I was still very dissatisfied and unhappy. There is not enough accommodation for students and every year you will see student unrest*

*because of that, and that complicates things because it leads to the university closing and students being sent home (CF005)*

International research shows that living on campus improves student integration especially students who have been identified as being “at risk” (Tinto 2012). There is a link in academic performance and living in residences because literature shows that there is higher level of social integration and adaptability among students who live on campus (DHET, 2011). Living in residences is particularly important at first year level because of dropout rates which are noted as high (DHET, 2011). Residences are therefore not just places where students are living and eating but provide scaffolding for academic activities and projects (The Kregse Foundation, 2011).

### **5.5.2 Psychosocial Support**

The participants consider psychosocial support as a factor that influences the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students at UWC. All twelve participants indicated that they were motivated by teachers and various other community members. Furthermore, the majority of the participants indicated that they received support and motivation from friends, family members to work hard in order to realize their achievements at the university. As one participant declares:

*Mostly, you look around and see people struggle but doing their best and you learn to get by from others.... My friends assisted me as I was struggling with finances before I got the funding and that motivated me and encouraged me to work hard besides, I also had high dreams about my future (NM0012).*

Another participant declares as follows to show the strength of social networks:

*I got involved and formed study groups with people from different backgrounds, I only met them here at university so it was a diverse group, people who were from well off schools and township schools just different people of different backgrounds, just coming together and sharing experiences and knowledge and, just bouncing ideas off each other so that we can achieve something and we all passed in our first year (NM008).*

The support not only happens outside the classroom but made possible by approachable academic and administrative staff members. One participant said:

*It's really good, the lecturers are really interactive and it's...there isn't this barrier between lecturers and student, like...you can feel free to ask questions if you don't understand anything you go and speak to lecturers also like they don't have that problem where you are just a student so you do get to go to them and ask them questions and stuff like that, even if you have problems at home you can speak to them about that also they'll give you counseling or maybe advise you to go see a counselor on campus ... (CF007).*

This affirms the suggestion that there is a need for enhancement of student learning with a view to producing an increased number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable (CHE, 2013). Moreover, according to Ogude et al. (2012) to achieve student success, initiatives should address the entire student life cycle from registration to graduation.

### **5.5.3 Institutional Culture and Vibe**

These participants found that the culture and vibe of the institution is an important factor in academic attainment of USS at UWC. Nine participants mention that the culture (vibe) of the institution and the funding had an influence in their choice of institution. Furthermore, some participants indicate that the reputation of their programme of study, proximity to home, and affordability of the institution were influential. One participant said.

*Into endi motivatileyo ndawufumana ischolarship [what motivated me when I got a scholarship] is that bendizazi uba ndizakwenza ilaw [I wanted to be a lawyer] so the faculty of law at UWC is one of the best that I believe is recognised in the whole of the African continent (CM0011).*

Another participant states the following:

*Good very good very good yeah... very good educational experience I don't know how to describe it because I didn't expect anything less very good lecturers most of them, I mean our lecturers rotate between the different varsities, UCT and SU. Our law faculty is growing I mean we have some of the best lecturers and also our faculty is known I think if am correct I stand to be corrected I think we have the biggest law faculty in the country possibly in the continent I stand to be corrected.... UWC's*

*law faculty is the best in the continent. Yeah... apparently, a number of constitutional writers in Africa studied there (N/CF002).*

While the majority of the participants believed that being provided funding was a major factor to succeed at the university, some participants agreed that UWC has the best lecturers and tutors, the best facilities to prepare you, engaging lecturers, open door policy, and readiness to counsel about academic and personal issues. One participant declares as follows:

*Yeah, I mean also what I wanted to tell you is that they keep it structured. Besides lectures that we have, there is also the practical side of things they'll incorporate into class. So, it's not only the lectures or theory that we are experiencing. They give us 10 minutes breaks and in between they let us experience what it's like being an actual occupational therapist and the setting and stuff like that so like I wouldn't say you get practical experience and I feel that I will not go out there and be lost, I will go and work completely with no experience but I would know what to expect (CF007).*

The majority of the participants indicate that the UWC is perceived as the best in disciplines such as Dentistry, Health and Natural sciences as well as Law. They emphasize that UWC produces the best Constitutional Law lecturers in South Africa. Some participants specify that the pass rate at UWC was high in comparison to UCT. They add that Law Faculty at UWC is well structured and prepares students at every level. The participants from the Law Faculty said that their lecturers also teach across all universities in the Western Cape region. This shows that students took an interest in checking the quality of their studies to be able to highlight what they say. Also, it explains that once the students are in the system social mobility occurs unlike the belief of low expectation because they come from poor backgrounds. Firstly, one of the participants proudly said as follows:

*Always!!!....the best lectures and tutors contributed to my training.... I feel that a combination of factors resulted in me having a good quality education, and if I were to rate them, in the scale of 10 I would rate UWC 8 out of 10 (CF005).*

Secondly, another participant declares as follows:

*UWC.... the thing is I am from Johannesburg I heard a lot of good things about UWC law faculty actually. I have a distant aunt who came to study*

*here and I mean UWC, from what I'd heard was a pretty good university it wasn't any backward.... it wasn't like hard to get admitted, I had just sent out my applications to numerous varsities and UWC got me in first (N/CF002).*

Thirdly, the participant states as follows.

*The staff members in the faculty are highly educated because lecturers have a minimum qualification of a Master's degree and at that level you are still just a tutor which is not common in other Faculties, also, most of our lecturers are professors (CM0011).*

Some participants show that the UWC is the youngest university comparing it to UCT and SU with regards to research but it has already made its mark. One participant declares as follows:

*If you look at the background of UWC it is only 50 years old and if you look at institutions like SU whose existence is almost twice the age that UWC is but, UWC is competing on the same level as they do. According to me, at UWC the level of education and the level of skills that we get here is on the same level as all the other institutions and I also think what we need to take into account is that UWC was first known as a black and colored university but despite that we well placed when competing at international level. I understand that UWC is 8 or 9 on the list of the top universities in Africa so I really think the level of education here at UWC is of such quality that you can walk into any space and represent UWC well (NM0012).*

Another student felt that UWC had a welcoming vibe which he experienced when he came for career exhibition from high school. He then made up his mind then that he wants to be part of this campus. With all tha he saw and the information provided, with dedication nothing would be impossible.

*I decided the moment that I finish my matriculation I have to study further and the welcoming experience we had at UWC made me think that it had the best campus culture and seeing all the students from different cultures encouraged me to come here even though it was the first time I had visited any university. (NM006)*

Some participants reveal that the UWC provides an easier access to the learning facilities and they considered the quality of their programmes as a guiding measure for their academic attainment. The fact that students had good relationships with their lecturers and even tutors whom they respected as their mentors facilitated their sense of belonging which builds a sense of pride in them. Academic and social integration into university is an important component of becoming a successful student. Adapting to university life requires nurturing staff as indicated by the participants, being encouraged to adapt through various forms such as social interaction and academic engagement.

#### 5.5.4 Self-determination and Perseverance

This study found that self-determination and perseverance are factors that influence the academic attainment of USS at UWC. Some participants declared that they were determined to achieve their academic goals to change their lives, while others stated that they had ambitions to pursue their study at the university so that they could get better jobs. This suggests that participants in this study believed that education would be a way of breaking the chains of poverty. It also shows how these participants were drawing from the strength of their own aspirations and that funding provided them the opportunity to realise their dreams of accessing university education. This is why I argue that assuming a deficit perspective with a student focus based on the perception of their limiting backgrounds rather than their strengths fails students from low economic backgrounds. Such a perspective lowers expectations for students and denies educators the ability to ignite the talents that students bring. As one participant states:

*...ambition and dreaming big, my mother always encouraged me to work hard and that gave me hope for the future and I saw that if you worked hard you achieve, I have determination and know that if I persevere I will change my life...(NM006).*

Another student put it as follows:

*I worked hard even though I struggled with English language and I became an average student because my performance was below 60%. Knowing how competitive it is in getting a job I had to work even harder so that when the companies come to recruit on campus I would stand a chance to be selected (NM0011).*

The majority of the participants stated that they are conscious of their poverty-stricken backgrounds. However, they were determined to change their lives and therefore rather than be paralyzed by their circumstances, they felt motivated to do all they could to rescue their families out of poverty. They believe that the only way to break the circle is to be educated as they had seen other individuals in their communities doing better through education. One participant said as follows:

*I came to UWC through student financial aid. Yeah...as a person, your thought processes are influenced by the environment in which you find yourself at that particular time. So, whilst I was growing we were not well off at home, as kids we never had what we wanted we grew up basically with minimal necessities. If we had food on the table and clothes at the end of the year not any other regular time of the year we were ok. I lost my father when I was 15 years old, he was shot dead whilst coming back from work in a township where we live so we were left with our domestic worker mother. Whilst I was at high school I told myself that I want to make a success of myself that I wanted to take my family out of the poverty, and the only way I could do that is through studying and I was basically very strong in my school work and that was my only avenue to change my life direction (NM008).*

All participants acknowledged that they come from poor backgrounds, however they also believed that education would free them. Furthermore, their backgrounds strengthen their beliefs and made them to be determined and worked hard on their studies. Some participants said that they were determined to guarantee their better future by being educated. One participant declares as follows.

*When I was still at high school they used to say ok there's a trip to go to where we would learn more so I didn't afford to go there because I didn't have money to pay for trips. I was ok, I don't want my child to be like me so I have to study hard and go to university so that I can be somewhere and that my children can afford what I could not and be able to pay for my children to do whatever they needed to be involved in at school (CF009).*

Some participants stated that they persevered in their studies once provided funding and available resources to access higher education, and nothing could stop them from being successful. This participant also stated that:

*I wanted to study petroleum geology and then I made some investigation I found that the University of Western Cape is the best university for petroleum geology then I decide to come to UWC because I had a scholarship so funding made it possible for me to choose where to go (CF009).*

Some participants drew from their innate strengths and resilience in different ways. The following attributes of strength and resilience are identified within them including self-motivation, realistic goals, time management, and dealing with issues of diversity and team work, and exposure to career guidance. As mentioned by one participant:

*Perseverance. Yeah...I am driven...and hungry for knowledge at the same time... hard working, I think through perseverance comes confidence also I believe that sometimes rejection is my greatest motivation telling me “no you can’t” makes me wanna prove a point and to prove my point I do my best yes and I think I am strong minded (N/CF002).*

The majority of participants feel that perseverance and resilience give hope, having overcome challenges associated with poverty such as lack of funds to afford basic needs even at high school. They remained determined and self-driven with the belief that ‘education opens doors’. Some participants indicated that the experiences of others including teachers and siblings positively influenced their desire to succeed. They were encouraged by their parents to persevere in all the steps they made even as early as high school where they were told hard work pays.

*My parents told me that all the time even when I started grade 8 they told me grade 8 is the biggest step it’s like a leap and you have to start working from the beginning and that’s the same principle that I applied when I came to UWC, I also started working from the beginning even though lectures had just started. I think I just I basically hibernated in the library I was just studying all the time I didn’t take any breaks and then I didn’t even want to participate in other student events though that was fun for some (CF007).*

The majority of the participants expressed that innate values about education within their families and saw determination for self-development as key, for instance being the first-generation graduate was a motivational factor to everybody. They remained driven to ensure their future was far better than what their parents and other people in the community had suffered because of lack of opportunity to accessing education. One participant states as follows:

*I didn't find it difficult at all but I guess, I think it's hunger to succeed that made me succeed I think I know where I wanna go I was raised knowing that it's hard work that will make things happen. My grandmother used to make this statement; that your generation has no excuse to fail regardless of where you come from and that for a black child today there are so many opportunities where we can even use financial aid for an example to be able to access higher education regardless of your background I know that not everybody that applies gets however there are possibilities regardless of your background to access education. I just believe that if you set your mind to wanting to succeed you'll get there (N/C002)).*

Other participants showed that they persevered to achieve a good academic record because of the competitiveness of the world of work. This requires ambition and aspirations in order to succeed and be employable targeting top companies.

*We Blacks...education yes it could be a right but sometimes it is a privilege as you notice challenges that we face in life and in our families.... When I look at my background it is one of the things that made me to want to go to university and succeed .... Most employers today normally hire people with a sound academic record and there is always competition and if you have poor results and you do not have a minimum of 60-65% it's difficult to be recruited by companies. So, what encourages me is that if I face that competition I must stand a good chance of being recruited by a good or one of the best companies for work (NM0011).*

Another participant said the following.

*Ambition and dreaming big, my mother always encouraged me to work hard and that gave me hope for the future and I saw that if I worked hard I will achieve. I have determination and know that if I persevere I will change my life. Determination and tenacity.... tenacity is whenever life's challenges threaten to bring you down you always strived to get up. There were moments that I lived off campus so my mother, I could say does not earn much salary so I had nothing to eat on campus because the money that she had was only enough to buy a train ticket to come to campus and go back home (NM008).*

Some participants show that the knowing your goals and having ambitions help. Also, if you have mentors and people who are ambitious around you it helps. As one participant stated:

*I was good with numbers and also with science but I did not know what I wanted to study. So my teachers encouraged me and the visiting scientist to our school gave me an idea of what I could study. Teachers can be of help to students and are readily available role models. (NM0012)*

Another student felt that once financial help was provided and with dedication nothing would stop him.

*Having watched my family struggle to put food on the table I was determined to make it my duty to like my school work and knowing that education would free me. I had seen a number of people in my community who really suffered and some ended up in prison wanting to make a living through wrong means. I was determined to make somebody of myself. (NM003)*

When you know what you want in life it becomes easy to attract like-minded people around you but you must also have an interest. One participant states as follows:

*There were many activities that were organized either by the student leadership or other units on campus like invited guest speakers on different topics that can open your mind and can get to know more about things that you cannot hear about in class. Also, just being involved in student societies and organisations can teach you many skills and get to network with many people (N/C F002)*

The majority of participants feel that even if you come from poor backgrounds nothing stops you from achieving when you have been given an opportunity. Giving up on your life because of your background is not an option; sometimes all that matters ultimately rests on the choices you make: One participant stated:

*I was given a scholarship at high school together with some of my friends. At the time, we were all aware of the backgrounds we came from and were determined to make a success of ourselves, unfortunately some did not keep the vision but instead fell victims to pressure from peers. (CF005).*

Another participant made the following statement.

*I got here on the first day of orientation. I remember going to the lecture hall and I sat at the bottom of the steps. There were people around me and I just started to talk to them. I started to introduce myself, I said: 'I am so and so...this is where I am from. What's your name?' ... and from that point on I realized from that day on I've met fine friends that have a similar mind set like mine. So, your friends are a very important support system for you as a student like the saying says – 'show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are'. So, your friends first and fore-most is what you need, because when you study, your friends are with you most of the time, sometimes it's 8 hours a day that they are with you, and know what you are doing, so they are your first line of support (N/UM 006).*

Reflecting on what the participants said, self-determination begins with individuals recognizing and psychologically owning their talents and strengths. Added to that, individuals recognize the value derived from performing activities that are congruent with their talents and make conscious efforts to seek out opportunities to exercise their gifts.

#### 5.5.5 Navigating Speed Bumps

One of the most critical questions had to do with finding the views of students on what they perceived as contributory factors to failure of peers and friends who dropped out, because

students who failed were not interviewed. I conducted what is known as a one-way chair, a reflective way to understand otherwise. Coming to terms with failure is an inevitable aspect of transitioning to university. Most students indicated that peers failed during first year predominately due to the transitioning process and not being able to adapt. They felt that problems of adapting were entirely yours to navigate. Some of the participants who were aware of their hardships had to endure believing that there is hope for things to change in their lives. However, under such circumstances each individual student needs a champion. The relationship between resilience, engagement and social networks as well as the interplay between these core factors seem to contribute to student retention and degree attainment. The significance of this is the consideration of how universities can intentionally and positively support the development of a strength-based model rather than letting it occur by chance (Tinto, 2013). Also, placing the responsibility solely on the student when they are unaware of consequences of their lack of involvement or engagement as early as possible is unfair. As stated by the students in the 2010 summit in the Western Cape that the existing cohort of students is not necessarily underprepared and that failure to succeed has more to do with the systemic weaknesses in higher education. However, the Higher Education summit explained that expansion in terms of access to public Higher Education institutions is necessary but this must involve better articulation between schooling system and universities. There is a call for deeper understanding of who students are and smooth transition of students from diverse backgrounds into the culture of university so as to develop them to their full potential.

Some of the participants remembered some of their peers who had failed or dropped out. Students mentioned that failure arises when you lose sight of your goals given the reality of your background.

*Losing sight of your goals and the reality of your background you have come from. I was especially disappointed by friends who had been on scholarship with me at high school who ended up dropping out of university because, as I understood we all had the same ambitions which were to complete our studies, improve our lives and those around us. (CF005)*

There needs to be dedication and sacrifice otherwise little focus and attention to detail influences performance. Poor study techniques and too much time spent travelling between university and one's home and not paying attention in class or being absent is detrimental to your success. One participant stated this;

*It depends on your engagement in class and how open you are to learning. If you go there and you are basically absent-minded but you are present in class*

*if you know what I mean, it will not work for you. Like, your mind is somewhere else or whatever, you miss the vital information, the pointers that the lecturers give. If you miss out on those, then you won't make it. You can look at your text book but your text book isn't gonna help. It won't help because what they say in class is the most important, full of guidance and important information. (CF007).*

Peer pressure is inevitably cited as something that can ultimately contribute to failure. Finally, some students spend a disproportionate time on non-meaningful aspects of university life, one participant identifying this as the 'MTV generation' who only aspire to what they see on television soaps and the like, ending up with no ambitions. The following quote demonstrates what one of the participants alluded to failure.

*Peer pressure is the major thing at university, yet we have different capacities and expectations, and behaviors are different, so you cannot just be following people yet they have skills and can party as much as they want yet they will be able to catch up with their studies and pass and you find yourself not coping and then you fail. This means you have to manage yourself and know yourself (C/NF002).*

### **5.5.6 Transition**

Although inadequate funding was one critical factor that the participants felt strongly about, for most students who could not persist other factors prove to remain a challenge. The following statements support what has been indicated as a challenge for most students especially during first year. One participant explained it as follows:

*Most students failed during [the] first year because of financial problems and finding it difficult to adapt to university life. Things are done differently from what you know at high school and you do not get much help and if you have no books and are not living in the residences you miss out on many activities and help (CF005).*

If students from low-income families are not engaged equitably or at least understood as coming through repression of socio-political context, they will always be labeled as culturally and intellectually deficient. Transformation also involves improving graduate output,

revising curriculum, developing and implementing a culture in higher education institutions based on democratic principles.

Another student raises issues of language, pointing out the difficulties he encountered at first year because at high school teachers taught them in their first language which is Xhosa in his case. This what the participant says:

*[...] challenges for me, if you notice, eza high school zethu xa ziteacher [In our schools when we are taught] even subjects that are taught in English, they teach in Xhosa. So, when we get to university you also meet people from other provinces who do not speak in Xhosa so ke ngoku [now] you have to communicate in English and that creates challenges you cannot understand. When it comes to writing it's no problem but to communicate was difficult. Our teachers in high school also speak in Xhosa and yet, lecturers do not guide you like teachers used to (NM0011)*

*During the first year, there are many students and the lecture halls are big. Sometimes if you are sitting at the back you cannot follow what is being said but the lecturers just go on and give you lots of work and do not even realize you are lost (N/U006)*

It is believed that transformation in institutions also calls for valuing to provide students with decent services while practicing good governance and stamping out all forms of discrimination (Soudien, 2010). One participant states this:

*I think transport was a big issue for me. Definitely transport...! I could deal with the stress and stuff, but [transport] to and from campus, I think, was (and is currently) an issue because they [the university] have set times and, sometimes, to get in the bus is quite difficult because people push like crazy. So for sure I think transport is a nightmare that I could not get over (CF001).*

Two other students raised the issues of long queues during registration especially at the financial aid office to an extent that they would miss their lectures and being a new student it was difficult to know what decisions to take. Also, participants felt that if you are new and you have no connections you could find yourself sidelined because of language issues and not being familiar with the system. Evidently the limited growth in resources in the face of growing

service delivery mandates impacts the experience of students especially during the school to university transition period.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The research questions of this study were designed to explore factors that influence the academic performance of undergraduate sponsored students, their resiliency and institutional practices that enhance their academic learning and success. There are three major factors that are pivotal to student learning and success, first, providing full funding that will make academic opportunities available to all students. Second, empowering students through nurtured resilience based on collaborative relationships across the institution, and an enriching learning environment that embraces diversity. Furthermore, igniting the existing spark and acknowledging the strengths students bring contributes to student retention and degree attainment. Thirdly, drawing from value-based family beliefs, students' self-determination and community aspirations that they could change their lives through education were common among all the participants drawing from their community cultural wealth.

The participants in this study shared their views and acknowledged themselves as students who were provided an opportunity to access higher education which they otherwise would not have afforded. Theories of cultural capital and family educational resources explain how and why background matters for achievement but, as this study shows, it is equally important to understand the role that nurtured resilience and student-centered approaches play in creating an environment for possibilities to mediate the risk factor in achievement. As Thomas (2002) and Tinto (2012) remind us it is often easy to put the blame on new students for early withdrawal from higher education, which lets the education system off the hook. On the other hand, stigmatizing and victim blaming of students from poor backgrounds continues (Tight, 1998) while underperformance is systemic in origin (CHE, 2007). This view is also supported by the Secretary of State for Education in the UK who rather supports the importance of institutional responsibility. Tight, indicated that there were unacceptable variations in the drop-out rate which appear to be linked more to the culture and the working of the institutions than to the background or the nature of the students recruited. Institutional processes must cater for diversity of learning preferences as students expect institutions to be flexible in course requirements and administration. They expect quality teaching that accommodates multi-faceted learning preferences, and institutional staff to be supportive of diverse learners. It is therefore the institutional culture that is critical which is experienced at several levels, social,

academic and organizational. Consequently, it assists or impedes feelings of belonging and produces friendly or alienating learning environments. Tights' (1998) findings on the impact of institutional culture more than student backgrounds is supported in the interviews presented in this study where students reveal that their backgrounds, instead, motivated them to do better in order to break the cycle of poverty in their families. Others believe that pain can either kill you or make you stronger.

Research cited by Whiter, et al (1998) indicates that there are several characteristics that exhibit resilience, such as an active approach to life's problems. This includes a proactive problem-solving perspective that enables one to negotiate emotionally hazardous experiences. It also includes competence in social, educational and cognitive areas as well as the ability to gain positive attention from others, both within the family, and elsewhere. The findings of this study, as confirmed in Whiter's research, show that self-determination and perseverance, hard work, having dreams and goals such as improving the living conditions of self and family were instrumental. Being motivated by families and friends as well as the scholarship award helped students focus and not to forget the backgrounds they came from.

Data analysis also showed that institutional actions, services and the quality of teaching reported by participants helped them succeed. Participants reported that the tutors and mentors in the Law Faculty were postgraduate students while in the Faculty of Health Sciences it was indicated that lecturers and professors had an open-door policy as they made themselves available to students at all times. There were faculty based mentoring programmes and study groups of students from diverse backgrounds in the faculties of natural and health sciences as well as the Law Faculty. Lecturers were also able to counsel students on academic and social issues and where possible were referred to the institutional counseling services. Receiving support from peers through social networks and involvement in student societies and organizations may indicate that students themselves took responsibility for their navigation of the institution and therefore enlightenment and performance. The attitude of the staff in dealing with students made them feel that they matter. Access to resources and opportunity in ways that fostered their long-term social mobility meant that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit and raise their future prospects.

In utilizing asset-based approaches, this study adds to existing literature informed by critical race theory, by exploring the integration of nurtured resilience, recognizing community cultural wealth and high energy institutional readiness for students from different backgrounds. Student

academic attainment is linked to both direct academic and psychosocial support as indicated by the participants. The collaborative approaches among different university support units and academic departments have a positive effect on student performance. It is also important to listen to the different stories as told by those involved and apply other models of addressing student persistence and attainment. The findings therefore point to a broader perspective that not merely tolerates, but embraces diversity and more specifically a student strength-focused approach for universities who are determined to drive the transformation agenda in higher education. I therefore suggest a thorough investigation of the conditions that play a significant role in shaping and producing success among students from low socio-economic backgrounds to grasp the positives from the endogenous deficit perspectives. More importantly, the entrenched political and ideological battles in the merged institutions require radical transformation. Radical transformation refers to fundamental transformation of the structural and institutional legacy of apartheid. It also means innovative ways that see new ideologies created that speak to the present moment. Institutions of higher learning need to uncover and shape students' inherent potential.

## **6 CHAPTER SIX: THE IMPOSSIBLE CAN BE POSSIBLE: A JOURNEY TO THE FUTURE**

### **Introduction**

Lest we forget, the challenges of access and success are adequately addressed in the South African higher education Policy. The 1997 White paper on Higher Education Transformation States that:

The principle of equity requires fair opportunities both to enter higher education programmes and to succeed in them. Applying the principle of equity implies on the one hand a critical identification of existing inequalities which are the product of policies, structure and practices based on racial, gender, disability, and on the other hand a programme of transformation with a view to redress. Such transformation involves not only abolishing all existing unjust differentiation but all measures of empowerment including financial support to bring equal opportunity for individuals and institutions (DOE 1997:11)

This study focused on the factors that contribute to the academic attainment of undergraduate sponsored students at UWC, one of the historically black institutions in South Africa. Many students currently attend university as a result of sponsorship programmes ranging from loans and bursaries to full scholarships offered by the state or private sector. A case of undergraduate sponsored students from previously disadvantaged communities was examined to investigate what works for those who succeed. The study adopted an asset-based approach, drawing largely on an ecological perspective which recognises the importance of people's environments and the multiple contexts that influence their lives. This perspective also recognizes the resilience of individuals, their potential and capabilities, strengths, determination and is a possibility-focused paradigm.

There are undocumented examples of academically successful students from working class backgrounds, and this study amplifies the voices of these students by drawing attention to their experiences and to the empirical evidence of their academic performance. Numerous studies focus on students who are at risk of premature departure and failure because of their socio-economic backgrounds. Greatly, literature to date focused on deficit models in explaining student failure rates. This study presents an opportunity to look at what works instead of what does not. When attention is primarily directed at how wrong things are, the power to act

effectively is lost. Focusing on what works provides an opportunity to soar to highest capabilities.

There is evidence, for example, that low levels of throughput and high attrition rates among first year university students is not uniquely a post 1994 phenomenon. This concern dates back to as early as 1936, even though at the time the focus was on the high attrition of white students (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). Again, in the 1950s studies conducted to analyse the difference in performance in different faculties within universities and between different universities showed that the average failure rate was as high as 38 per cent (Malherbe, 1965). Further studies came to the conclusion that there was no correlation between school and university academic performance. For example, about 62 percent of the first class matriculants accepted in the science faculty succeeded in achieving qualifications (Malherbe, 1977). This concern engendered what is described as follows:

...the fact that the dropout rate of 45 percent of all university students 49 percent of which were men is nothing less than a national disaster not necessarily because these students should obtain degrees but because of the lamentable waste of effort. These are strong words but unless we are shocked into action there is very real danger that familiarity with the situation may breed acceptance (Malherbe, 1977).

Based on the fact that very little has changed with regards to academic performance since in the early 1930s it seems indeed familiarity has bred acceptance, hence in this study a different tune of approach is suggested. The academic attainment sourced from secondary data on 6660 undergraduate sponsored students registered in 2010 at the University of the Western Cape was analysed. This was followed by interviews with twelve purposely selected undergraduate sponsored students to explore what motivates them to succeed, a pragmatic approach that is seldom used, as well as a review of institutional documents. There is danger that unnoticed definitions, assumptions and frameworks may covertly chain researchers to the downward spiral, shaping the conditions that need changing. This investigation of factors that contribute to undergraduate sponsored students' academic performance at UWC is indeed to contribute to the existing literature by identifying possible actions that according to the students, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds, enable them to achieve their goals. Clearly there is a need to reduce the number of students who enter higher education under-prepared for the rigors of university work, as such the CHE report notes the following:

Poor performance patterns cannot be attributed simply to student deficit or poor teaching, and will not change spontaneously. Moreover, it cannot be attributed to affective and material factors. Similar or worse conditions are present in other sub-Saharan African countries without such poor outcomes. Rather the indications are that the underperformance must be systemic in origin (CHE, 2013:53).

Overall this means a shift from deficit thinking and for once, to focus on access and success, tying funding needs to enrolment, as well as institutional performance and student resilience. In order to eliminate the tolerance of the achievement gap there should rather be commitment to eradicating the achievement gap that is especially associated with income, race and gender. Moreover, a focus on learning will minimize the focus on teaching, and the individual faculty prerogative will result in collaborative and collective responsibility for student success. This unveils the emergence of a critical approach that exposes systemic factors that impact on student participation and success. As there are more students from poor backgrounds who have become the vast majority in higher education, some researchers seek to shift the focus away from the shortcomings of student to the role played by institutions in promoting success (Hawke, 2002; Smith, 1991), as is the case with this study. It also seeks to emphasise re-skilling educators to become purposeful interventionists in their teaching as politically conscious change agents that would rupture the constraints of Eurocentric approaches to education (Bereng, 2008). The primary challenge is ensuring that full participation in education, which requires bold interventions, transforms the structure of the system and the thinking that entraps universities in elitist and racially condoned enclaves.

In the following section, we address the insights as narrated by the students to challenge the questioned abilities of students because of poor background, and rather promote hope, and whenever the word “cannot” is used we should rather ask, why not?

## **6.1 Food for Thought**

It is obvious that students cannot choose the circumstances they are born into, however, providing equal opportunity to quality education can change the trajectory of their lives. Nonetheless, access is not simply about providing a place at the university for a student to study but should be conceptualized within an empowering environment for the holistic development of a student. The National Development Plan (NDP) set a target of an overall 23 percent

undergraduate graduation rate by 2030 (CHE, 2013:41). It is therefore, necessary that institutional policies create welcoming environments that help integrate and embrace students into an institutional culture(s) that is supportive in a variety of ways. According to Bereng (2008) there needs to be organised re-education programs for both academics and students so as to actualize equity in representation, emphasizing social change. Such programs would include change management, diversity in education, equity-conscious anti-racism education which would enable educators of all levels to implement decolonization policy imperatives. Without a radical strategic agenda in the education sector a combination of structural constraints and historical factors such as racial inequality and poverty will continue to stall the drive to overcome these problems.

For as long as students feel alienated in their institutions as witnessed in the student protests in South African institutions in 2015 and 2016 it means not much ground has been covered to transform the education system. Students raised concerns of racially excluding practices illustrated in Eurocentric referenced curricula, staff appointments, learning materials and even artifacts which they see as academy-related obstructions, hence the #RhodesMustFall campaign. Zepke et. Al .(2006) identified two distinct yet complementary discourses, one in which institutions seek to integrate learners into existing institutional cultures and pedagogic norms, values and practices. Also, another one is an attempt to recognize value in accepting learner's diverse cultural capital by adapting their processes to meet the needs of diverse learners. Respondents in my study appreciated the respectful relationships they had with their lecturers in the Health Science and Law Faculties because it afforded them serious engagement at all levels in and outside the classroom.

The 2011 statistics in South African universities show an average success rate of 79 percent for contact students and 69 percent for distance undergraduates (DHET, 2012). It is also noted in the 2012 green paper that funding will need to be kept up in order to continue to improve the success rates of students as shown by the improvement from 69 percent in 2004 to 74 percent in 2009 (DHET, 2012). This case study of undergraduate sponsored students had an interest in what works for funded students from poor communities, who generally are seen as "at risk", but who succeed. Furthermore, the study had an interest in the views of the students themselves on what they perceived as the environmental influences in the institution that impact on their learning experience and academic attainment. Thomas (2002) suggests that the institutional culture, social and academic, should welcome diverse cultural capital and adapts to diverse student needs. It is therefore important to note that institutional culture is experienced at

different levels, social, academic and organizational and can assist or impede a sense of belonging. The earlier trend of access with participation was underpinned by the political mandate of a new democracy which required a rapid de-racialization of higher education institutions. Although there was success of black participation at previously white institutions it appeared to succeed at a superficial level. The net effect of the absorption of poor and academically unprepared students by historically advantaged universities is not a qualitative improvement of overall access. With regards to access and success, specific strategies include sufficient student financial aid, funding of institutional development programmes, and improving the quality of schooling to provide better quality of incoming students (DoE, 2001:49). It is clear that targeted interventions must be expanded in all tertiary institutions with the support of the State.

## **6.2 Financial Capital's Relationship to Academic Attainment**

Upon reflecting on the findings of the study it is clear that the academic attainment of sponsored students is reflective of the overall performance in higher education, especially in extended programmes (CHE 2013). According to the Task Team on Undergraduate Curriculum Structure (2007-2011) the average institutional success rate in foundation courses ranged from 60 percent to 85 percent but in most institutions it was between 70 percent and 80 percent (CHE, 2013). Based on the findings of this study, in 2010 about 75 percent of the undergraduate students at UWC were financially assisted (UWC Annual Report, 2012). The majority of these students received financial assistance from the NSFAS as well as university administered funds and a few others from corporate, government departments, religious and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Adequate student funding cannot be under-estimated because one reason for high dropouts among black students is almost certainly inadequate funding in the forms of scholarships, bursaries as well as loans (Badat, 2010; Letseka, 2010; DHET, 2013; Cele, 2014). Remarkably, Cele (2014) refers to his own personal experience as a student at UWC, as that of brutality and loss of human dignity in not having enough money to access higher education, remain at university and complete higher education. Refusing the status of victimhood, he states that the power of collective struggle helped him register each year until completion without having to pay the full required registration fees. This is apparent even in the 2015/2016 student Fees Must Fall movement as students demanded that the funding model should not prejudice all financially vulnerable students. The demand was to bring to an end to the harsh decree that denies access to poor students who cannot settle debt.

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has its origins in the tertiary Education Fund for South Africa (TEFSA), and it started in 1991 with a capital of R25 million. NSFAS became a successor organization in 1999 after the National Student Aid Scheme Act was passed (DHET, 1999). The funds awarded by NSFAS have increased massively in the past number of years, about R5871 million was awarded to universities and a further R1822 million to those in further education and training colleges (CHE, 2016). In 2012, about 53% of funds awarded by NSFAS took the form of bursaries, even though as TEFSA the fund was purely a loan scheme (CHE, 2016).

Although NSFAS was successfully established to promote redress for disadvantaged students, the overall amounts allocated for this purpose do not provide effective support for all eligible students in need. This, according to Badat (2010), highlights the reality of interconnection of race and class. Furthermore, equity for students from working class and impoverished rural social backgrounds will continue to be severely compromised unless there is greater commitment of public funding for financial aid to disadvantaged students. The participants in this study indicated that while acknowledging the opportunity they have been afforded by their sponsors, more needs to be done to fully fund the students and cover all costs. This is also stated by Badat, (2010) as follows:

The recent review of NSFAS it is hoped, will effectively address the challenges of the greater funding that is required for NSFAS and especially the level of support that will be made available to indigent students (Badat, 2010:30).

Nonetheless, the bursary allocation has risen from 0% in 1991 to about 25% in 2000, 45% in 2009 and 53% in 2012 despite the fact that the income from loan recovery is very low (CHE, 2016:63). This low recovery is due to the absolving of final year students from any loan repayments provided that they passed which further increases pressure on NSFAS funds. Meanwhile the number of awards to students by NSFAS rose much more rapidly between 2009 and 2011; by 16.7% per annum (CHE, 2016:65). Although this growth continued unevenly from year to year, it is seen as unlikely to be sustainable.

The performance review of sponsored undergraduate students registered in 2010, according to this study, shows that on average 73.9% succeeded (Morta 2012). This study shows that provision of funding has a positive effect in motivating the students to access higher education and succeed. It seems there is a need to focus on how to address the increasing demand for

access and equity, the way in which students are initiated and socialized into university community life, and the manner in which quality of learning is processed, safeguarded and maintained. There has been a special appeal to government, regarding its approach to the problem of fees in the past two years in particular on the formula, to fund the missing middle that neither qualify for financial aid nor can afford university fees.

Also, based on this study, it appears that there is a link between resilience – which Cele (2014) sees as refusal to the status of victimhood – and the institutional practices that lead to success. This must be seen in light of the seriousness of the need to address the articulation gap between the demands of higher education and the preparedness of school leavers for academic study. Progress will remain slow for as long as all the past inequities are not addressed as stated by the DOE:

The effects of Bantu education, the chronic under-funding of black education during the apartheid era, and the effects of repression and resistance on the culture of learning and teaching having seriously undermined the preparedness of talented Black students in higher education (DOE, 1997:22).

Clearly, schooling plays a major role in preparing the students for university studies and in South Africa the poor quality of the majority of the public schools is now widely acknowledged. This is evidenced by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), an international evaluation of mathematics and science knowledge of fourth and eighth grade students around the world. It is indicated that South Africa performs worse than the other African countries whose expenditure on education is lower (CHE, 2013). This is an indication of how short changed students are by the school system in preparing them for tertiary education. Under-preparedness of students entering universities has been and remains a widespread problem, which is a realization that education is linked to political, social and economic problems. Therefore, implementation of important principled decisions is paramount to fundamentally change the state of education in South Africa. In 2004 funding for foundational provision was introduced and has since been integrated into extended curriculum programmes which are available in all universities. However, putting into practice of this provision has been a challenge especially in institutions where the majority of student intake is poorly prepared and the articulation gap cannot be adequately addressed. It is my belief that all learners need to be well served by their quality educational experience to develop a wide range of capabilities, personal well-being and the ability to succeed and contribute to wider communities. To meet

these demands education systems need to rise to the challenge of being more responsive to the diversity of learners and to meet the high expectation and future focus required. The DHET believes that improving student access, success and throughput rates is a serious challenge for the university sector and must become a priority for national policy. Institutions themselves must make decisions in improving access and success especially for those groups where race gender or disability status had previously disadvantaged them.

In an attempt for curriculum reform and growth in higher education by the new school education in South Africa during the period 1994-2011 a number of problems were encountered. This is evidenced by the learning conditions that are endured by learners even in the post-apartheid era. There is a shortage of classrooms, and according to Steyn et. al (2011) and Ramphele (2012) 65,000 classrooms are needed and 2.3 million learners attend school without water being available within walking distance. Furthermore, about 6.6million learners attend school without lavatories and have minimal recreational sport facilities. It is also well known that many children in South Africa are heads of households and face problems including hunger, poverty, HIV &Aids and violence (Spren & Vally, 2010).All these socio-economic problems have a distressing effect on academic achievement. As stated in the 2011 DHET Annual Report:

Not only did the entire generation of African children suffer from deprivation but most of today's teachers suffered as well. Assessments of the subject knowledge of teachers show that many have serious deficiencies of mathematical and scientific knowledge. The fact that most children generally learn in a language that is not their home language and also the second or third language of their teachers does not help either (DHET, 2011:5).

Although the school curriculum changes had critical features such as Outcomes-Based Education and Curriculum 2005, a notion of integrated knowledge system and promotion of learner-centered pedagogy, it was once again revised nationally. Concerns were raised about the failure of the OBE approach due to classroom sizes, resources and infrastructure especially in schools in poor communities. Teacher readiness and their level of skills were not appropriate for this methodology. Five years later, in 2010, radical changes were again planned for the period 2012-2014 (Maluleka, 2011) to strengthen the national curriculum statements in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. However, it is noted that the problems of the apartheid legacy and the continued changes in the education system further disabled the system. I therefore argue that until the school system has been holistically analysed

and its problems fully addressed, the blame put on students and their families will not help researchers find solutions to the solid foundation that students require for higher education. To achieve better education outcomes transformation must start in early childhood development and schooling years for learners to be life-long learners, engage in quality tertiary education and contribute to the success of the communities that they are part of. So far, student resilience, given the outlined processes, remains the saving fiber that needs to be nurtured on a continuous basis. This, combined with the foundational provision, introduced in 2004 and integrated into the extended curriculum programmes, can be looked into. However, its scope must be extensively improved and well-resourced to be able to address the articulation gap.

The student resilience and collective support from family, communities and the institution are perceived as the mitigating factors to the espoused need to come from the dominant culture. The idea of nurtured resilience especially in South Africa lies in recognizing the tenacity of students given the weaknesses that exist within the education system that need to be addressed. As indicated earlier in the literature review of this study, there are areas that have been identified as critical in addressing the participation and retention of non-traditional students such as the example found in New Zealand of curriculum transformation, classroom pedagogy and relationships. Most importantly the transformation of the curriculum not only acknowledges the diversity and value of experience and knowledge of students who are non-traditional but also to reduce alienation. Bishop (2001) suggests that students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum through acknowledgement of their prior learning by relating it to their lives. This includes their values and experiences, their traditions and cultural icons in order to effectively engage within the space of education. Furthermore, power sharing and participation are fundamental to learning for all students, and power relations cannot change unless both parties participate (Bishop & Glynn 1999:132). Thus, the role of teachers in the classroom is central to the process of practicing pedagogy and negotiating power sharing in relation to learning. There is growing recognition that people learn in different ways and that best practiced pedagogy includes effective participation, engaging learners, early feedback and transparent assessment which inspires learners (Hall et al 2001). Traditional ways of learning were based on assumptions that a lecturer conveyed information efficiently to the individual learners. Yet, to acknowledge differing learning styles require a range of alternative ways of learning and teaching. This is to assert that alternative ways are examples of best practice that is seen as important for success of all students and not just remedial techniques for helping students. Intricately linked to classroom pedagogy is the diversity of teachers themselves which is an important factor in supporting learning of non-traditional students. Diversity among staff where

power is shared becomes embedded in the culture of the institution through the diversity of the relationships it encourages among its individuals.

Relationships have an impact on student retention and attainment and it is in the context of an institutional culture that nurtures diversity where teaching and learning as well as services are in a position to meet the learning needs of students. Students make use of services if they have information about what is available, and they perceive those services as mainstream rather than those designed for special interventions. Similarly, students respond to teachers who treat them as individuals and respond to personal issues, in a way that shows that they are valued. This is well illustrated in this study where students appreciated the attention of the academic staff who were easily approachable at all times in the Faculty of Health Sciences (CF007). They could also discuss many problems they encountered and where they could not address the concerns were even referred to other services when necessary. Student relationships with the institution are therefore negotiated through the people and services that provide clear guidelines and institutional expectations, development of learning skills and success in their studies.

Such account of power relations between students and the institution by extension of its people (e.g. lecturers and administrators) tactically illustrates Bishop and Glynn's (1999) assertion regarding the fundamental role of power sharing and participation in enabling learning for students. Although the sample size of this study is too small to conclusively generalize this assertion, it does provide a basis upon which to speculate that such an account is indicative of a nurturing academic environment at UWC wherein students' narrative reflections suggest that power relations detract from the norms of authoritarianism evident in traditions of institutions of higher learning.

Education has always been central for disadvantaged people because they view it as an important avenue for social mobility just as they also believe that one's background alone cannot determine who one becomes, and the perceptions of who others are might not be their reality. In many African societies, culture and education have always occupied a very central place in the formulation of the individual, his or her socialization and the overall progress of the group. Learning and culturalisation were considered continuing processes that took place from birth till death within the family unit, extended family, the village and the entire community participation. So, in a university community raising expectation and providing student-centered support creates possibilities for increased student learning and the likelihood of increased student success. Added to what students bring is the interaction between the

student and the academic institution, the type of support provided institution-wide and the activities that involve students as valued members of the institution. Purpose, commitment and vision are peculiarities that radiate opportunities and the impossible becomes possible. Lui (2012) maintains that educational equality is essentially underpinned by people's perceptions of the purpose of education and the path of social mobility, and by concepts related to equality which is embedded in the relationships and interactions among individuals, and between an individual and a community.

This study takes a slightly different approach in focusing on student performance and success in higher education, especially those who come from poor backgrounds. It suggests a new model or perspective that leads to student success, rather than barriers and hardships which Jansen refers to as obsession with pathology (2014:67). What is unique about the study is the exploration of undergraduate sponsored students' experiences in order to understand what drives them to succeed given their backgrounds. It also examined the institutional practices and policies that support and enhance learning and success. The approach was to highlight what works from the students' perspective rather than focusing on weakness. To date, there is enough evidence from previous research studies that indicates why students fail (CHE, 2013; Tinto, 2012). In order to understand the phenomenon under study, I examined the factors that contribute to the academic performance of undergraduate sponsored students as well as their experiences as voiced by them. This could help make conscious use of the students' words to define new frameworks for possibilities that bring out the part that could be most contributory to the access and success question. The following is the outcome of the exploration of the case of UWC whose vision is, "from hope to action through knowledge".

Access and success in higher education should not be determined by class, ethnicity, geographic location or other personal characteristics. This is underpinned by the South African equity policy framework (White Paper 1997:1.27) whose priorities also included increasing the number of graduates through improving the efficiency of the higher education system, linking improvements in efficiency to improvements in equality. Students who participated in this study felt that perseverance; "hunger to achieve" (N/CF002) in order to improve family and community life was important, that hard work, attending classes, having dreams and participating in class discussions were critical to student learning and success.

The strengths-based approach was pivotal in finding out from students what they did well to succeed. This helped to understand resilience which is viewed as a relational concept conveying

connectedness to family, school and community. Resilience as a concept simply means the ability to bounce back from life difficulties. A cross discipline integrated analysis of 40 years of research tells us that identifying and nurturing an individual's capacities rather than focusing on his or her deficit creates a capable, productive and compassionate person (Brown, Emidio-Caston & Bernard, 2001). This sometimes takes as little as incorporating the language of resilience which means decreasing problems and increasing thriving. This is similar to the questions raised here such as; what works for these students or what strength did they draw from to succeed.

About three of the participants had in one way or another experienced life challenges such as death of a parent at an early age, who were the main breadwinners in the family, and all knew what poverty meant in their families and their communities. It is however believed that, "all humans, somewhere within, have the urge to be heroic; to transcend circumstances, to develop one's powers, to overcome adversity, and to stand up and be counted" Saleebey (2005). Invariably, children who grow up in challenging circumstances and have experienced traumatic events make it against all odds. As already stated, some of the participants had personal traumatic experiences, and difficulties of just getting by in life yet that became a motivating factor to improve their circumstances. One of the participants shared how hard it was watching his father being dependent on odd jobs, and decided to go back to pursue a degree because he wanted to break the cycle of poverty. He then took the student loan to register and also did part-time work as he had been the breadwinner in the family before. It is very rare to acknowledge that disadvantage can be a motivating factor and can yield positive results. Such accounts demonstrate not only student resilience but the agency that propels them to transcend the challenging circumstances they have lived through. Furthermore, such reflections illustrate that students were able to lease out what was within their grasp and their realm of possibility e.g loans and part-time jobs.

In a study conducted at UWC on resilience, Moleli (2005) found that students managed to develop adequate internal assets for academic survival despite inadequate external assets. Students who were successful scored high on internal assets such as goals and aspirations, self-awareness and self-efficacy. Moleli (2005) suggests that psychological and physical development is nurtured by the provision of external assets to support internal assets. This requires that the institution should provide a healthy learning environment and invest more into meaningful participation and encourage high expectation from students at all times (Tinto &

Pusser, 2006). Provision of resources to access higher education is one of the critical factors that ensure that no deserving student is left behind and this is looked into next.

### 6.2.1 Student Enabling Factors

While access may be secured through various means, equity of opportunity and outcomes critically depends on supportive institutional environment, culture, curriculum innovation, appropriate induction and support in academic learning (Badat, 2011; Boughey, 2007; Scott 2010; Gorinski& Abernety,2007). Financial aid is critical to student access and success and therefore the quality and efficiency of its administration and service delivery is important.

The provision of funding to assist students in higher education has been a significant component of strategies to widen participation. The Student Financial Aid Scheme was set up to assist the poorest students in the education system, and race was used as a proxy for level of need within institutions. However, eligible students from all races do qualify to receive NSFAS loans. There is a consideration by the current Minister of Higher Education and Training to contemplate ways in which free higher education can be progressively introduced for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (DHET, 2012; Ministry of HET, 2013). The importance of NSFAS in increasing access to higher education for poor students cannot be underrated. In 2013/14 government funds to NSFAS amounted to R5.769 Billion of which R3.693 Billion was for loans and bursaries to universities (Ministry of HET, 2013). The scheme is administered by the financial aid offices in all institutions as a combination of loans and bursaries and uses a means test for identifying the neediest students. NSFAS funding was at the time of writing limited to students whose family income less than R122 000 per annum, which represents the upper limit of the lowest band of the South African Revenue services tax tables (DHET, 2010).

Participants of this case study acknowledged that finances were the most tangible and critical factor that facilitated accessing higher education and they were determined to utilize that opportunity to the best of their abilities. However, sufficient financial resources to enable students to live above survival mode so as to engage fully both in academic and social life are vital for student success. The experiences shared by participants of some of their peers sponsored by NSFAS illustrate that there were students who sometimes did not have meals because of inadequate funds, or did not come to class because they did not have transport money. Some of the participants also stated that they had to find a second sponsor if funded by NSFAS to be able to focus on their studies fully. This is a fundamental problem that NSFAS

has been faced with since inception. The funds available for awards are inadequate for creating reasonable equality of opportunity despite the rapid growth in NSFAS funding over the years. To this extent, the Ministerial Committee observed that:

Current estimates are that NSFAS has less than half of the funds it needs to meet the demand for financial aid from qualifying applicants even at current participating rates ...underfunding in terms of award size contributes to many of the secondary impediments (CHE, 2016 p. 83)

More recently, concerns about the success rates of students funded by NSFAS have been looked into. Analyses of the cohort data of NSFAS students finds that relative to students not funded higher numbers of NSFAS funded students achieve qualifications and are retained in the system (Van der Berg, 2013). This is in line with what this study found, all the participants indicated that once they got funding to further their university education they were determined to succeed. This commitment was not only for their personal goals but for their families, the communities they came from and, to show gratitude to their funders. One of the participants stated that there was no way he was not going to succeed because his funders gave him the scholarship even though they did not know him, yet they believed in him.

In line with what has already been mentioned, another case study done to monitor a university scholarship program in Australia, assessing its impact on retention and success, it was indicated that scholarship targeted for low SES students had a positive impact on retention (CHSE, 2008). For example, the 2006 equity scholarship recipients had 90 percent retention rate compared to 84.4 percent of non-scholarship student, while their success rates were on par (CHSE, 2008:62). Another university analysed the results of past scholarship holders and concluded that generally providing scholarship support to equity groups yields measurable academic success outcomes. The results of this study show that deepening and entrenching inequalities can be avoided if the education system can be highly functional and students are not “judged by their covers” and written off because of certain characteristics, but rather, planning is done for successful interventions (Tinto, 2013).

It is difficult to dispute the impact of socio-economic background on academic achievement especially when trying to make sense of the racial disparities in achievement. However, the results of this study show that student resilience matched with financial and other forms of support from the institution, family and peers motivated the student to achieve.

The sponsored students who participated in this study were first generation students with the exception of two, one whose father has a degree and another whose mother has a post matriculation teacher qualification from a Teacher-Training Education College. All came from township high schools that are, more often than not, poorly resourced, and two came from former model C schools that were historically White schools. According to Corak (2003) parental aspiration for their children's education is high across all levels of income. This is also evident in this study because even though parents had no higher education experience and could not afford fees for them, they had dreams and encouraged their children to utilize the opportunity to pursue their studies believing that education would change their lives.

One of the participants shared that her grandmother believed that, for the "born free" (those born Post-1994, democratic South Africa), there should be no excuses since there were opportunities such as the NSFAS and that with self-determination the sky is the limit. This overrides the focus on affluence and class, but rather puts emphasis on investing in potential and providing support. Accordingly, this brings to light the explorative nature of this study which postulates that students possess some characteristics that symbolize an internal locus of strengths and resilience which promotes social mobility. Furthermore, to realise better learner outcomes for culturally diverse students, particular attention needs to be given to delve into teaching in ways that improve teacher-learner interactions, cultural relevance of curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogical practices and strong productive partnerships (Gorinski et al. 2006).

Higher education personnel are often not aware of what some learners have had to overcome in their lives to arrive at higher education institutions. This was evidenced by what one of the participants shared, that being raised by a single parent meant that she could not participate in school activities whilst at high school, and it was very hurtful to be left out on school trips because they could not afford. This, however, made her even more determined to work hard in order to change the family conditions and vowed that her children would not have to go through such difficulties. Most participants believed that education would help change their circumstances. The provision of financial aid to students from low socio-economic backgrounds has faced several constraints. This is significant given how important it is to student academic success to have adequate funding to meet the most basic needs. However, addressing that is not sufficient and does not preclude other needs such as systemic academic obstacles to learning. The investment by government and private bursary schemes needs to be

complemented by the effectiveness of the educational processes in higher education to enhance success and graduation (Scott et al 2007).

### **6.2.2 Targeted Institutional Funding**

Institutional readiness to welcome the diverse population of students in higher education in terms of educational socio-economic and linguistic background is determined by the targeted funding to enhance student learning in ways that lead to improved learning outcomes. This can only be achieved by sustained focus on improving the quality and impact of learning and teaching resources for meaningful pedagogical access (DHET, 2013). The Teaching Development Grant (TDG) is another key component of government funds disbursed to public universities which was first disbursed in 2004. It is an ear marked grant and all universities are eligible for funds under this grant. Initially it was only given to institutions needing the greatest improvement in learning. Critical to the TDG is the intention to ensure greater chance for students from previously marginalized groups. This would promote a scholarship of teaching and learning placing teaching at the heart of what universities must do (DHET, 2013). The TDG has been a driver of change in many institutions. The extent to which this is utilized seemingly differs by faculty at UWC as evidenced by participants, both the Natural and Health Sciences for example, seemed optimum than other faculties. The three Law participants interviewed also expressed satisfaction with the quality of their programmes in the faculty of Law which they found well structured. They also mentioned that because the lecturers were actually teaching in the other neighbouring universities in the province and when they compared the pass rate, UWC had higher pass rates than the others. The participants were also contented and very impressed that their tutors and mentors were post graduate students who were at Masters' level, unlike in other programmes where it could be honors or senior undergraduate students.

The reality is that higher education has to bring about systemic reforms within its teaching and learning system to change its status quo. It is also reasonable to expect the higher education sector to review and modify its structures and processes in order to adjust to the conditions of the country; coming to terms with the realities of the student population it serves (CHE, 2013). Reflecting on the status quo of teaching and learning at UWC, it is found that the major strength in the area of teaching and learning is in the dedicated work of its staff and their commitment to an ethic of care and social justice (HEQC, Commendation 4). However, the HEQC audit Report (2008) also identified as a significant short coming the lack of sufficient teaching and

learning expertise and resources within the institution. The effective implementation of the teaching and learning strategies will require the development of a centralized coordinating structure for support and promoting teaching and learning with the capacity and profile similar units at other leading local and national Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Such examples are the University of Cape Town's Center for Higher Education Development, Stellenbosch's Center for Teaching and Learning, CPUT's Fundani Centre and Rhodes Centre for Higher Education and Research into teaching and learning.

The 2005-2009 IOP identified several key areas which have been addressed to various degrees. The issue of access and success was, for example, addressed through successful foundation provision and extended curriculum programmes as well as alternative admission routes. The transition from school to university was partially addressed through improvements in the orientation programme at the outset of the academic year. It was however evident that more extensive orientation to the academy linked to supporting student's epistemological access to their particular areas of studies is required. Appropriate solutions can therefore be realized through timeous interventions, implementation capacity among the Faculty staff and the context specific direction to balance new higher education initiatives based on diverse student perspectives and experiences. I therefore explore how these diverse students navigate their institutional spheres which create in some instances, a bumpy transition.

### **6.3 Navigation of Academic Environment**

According to the participants the challenges start long before they enter the gates of higher education. The kind of schools and communities they come from impact their first experiences at university because of their different backgrounds. As such the policy of providing financial aid to all students may not necessarily lead to equity if poor students encounter barriers such as average examination performance because of poor quality schools or lack of financial resources for high schools. Students are not fully prepared for higher education by their schools and their families know very little about higher education as they are first generation students. All the participants indicated that the transition year was the most difficult year at tertiary. They experienced culture shock where issues of diversity had an impact on them, as well as generally not knowing what to expect.

All of the above themes are well known, however it is important to review and understand what then have universities done by way of academic interventions designed to support and improve

the concerns that will influence student success. What is important to highlight is that the HEQC agreed that quality assurance will focus on teaching and learning as a direct response to poor success rates and the importance of teaching for creating meaningful access and supporting success (CHE, 2011). To address this, institutional audits took place between 2004 and 2011 and Institutions were given improvement plans over time for implementation. Subsequent to this, CHE announced its plan for, Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) which would commence in 2014 focusing on:

The enhancement of student learning with a view to producing an increased number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable (CHE,2013b).

The key focus areas of enhancement were university teachers, student support and development, the learning environment and course and programme enrolment management (CHE, 2013). UWC had its Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) institutional quality audit during September 2007 and the Audit Report was presented in 2008 reflecting the findings, and the institution had to respond with its improvement plans. The navigation of the academic environment can therefore be made less bumpy if strategies to enhance academic performance are in place and are well communicated as students enter universities across the teaching, administrative and social spaces to improve learning and success.

Changing the attitudes of university staff especially because of the diverse population of students is an important aspect that will impact on the welcoming orientation of students. Some participants for example shared that coming from a different province posed serious challenges where students felt discriminated against in finding student accommodation. There was preferential treatment where others had good networks because they knew each other, and that worked against those who were not part of the local network. In South Africa, student housing and access to meals although also linked to finance are significant factors in student success (Jones et al, 2008).

The Ministerial Review of the Provision of Student Housing in South Africa released in 2011 had core suggestions to make. These included the provision of accessible, decent, safe and academically conducive accommodation in South African universities. This was deemed as significant, particularly in improving the quality of the higher education system and success of students especially those from rural and poor backgrounds. Many students especially those who gain admission in historically black institutions have been living in very poor conditions and

this has often hindered their ability to succeed (DHET, 2011). In this study students indicated that the importance of having accommodation cannot be underestimated because it could be very unsettling especially for first year students. One student mentioned that she had to move three times and was still very unhappy. Another one alluded to residence policies for allocation especially for new students who come from different and distant provinces of the country.

The student housing report recommended the need to improve access to university accommodation for poor working class and rural students and all new first contact students. This is where support networks are established because residence culture is very important for socializing students into the campus environment. Also recommended is the regulation of and monitoring of private accommodation to avoid exploitation of students. Emphasis on adequate funding for accommodation and meals with the NSFAS allocation for students is critical (DHET 2011).

Participants had to navigate their ways and learn as they went along, however the orientation programme, even though it was short, helped them link up with other new students and created connections. This provided them with opportunities to network with others, sharing experiences and they soon learned from one another. As stated by Ravjee et al (2010) civic engagement among students may be a catalyst for more integrated solutions to counter the isolation many students experience especially during the first year at university. This of course is dependent on the right attitudes of university staff especially towards students from poor backgrounds. The best way to achieve good relations with people is through a positive outlook, looking for the best and nurturing that 'best' into its fullest expression. Student engagement and strengthened systemic conditions within the institution assist students to smoothly adjust to an academic environment for better student success.

The participants recognize that there is a difference between high school and tertiary learning such as the shift from a regimented and structured environment to the freedom and independence encountered at the university. The provision of mentoring programmes especially at first year assisted them, and peer mentorship, which is Faculty based, is highly recommended. Essack (2010) suggests that developing and implementing a model that may translate equity of access into equity of outcomes requires creating receptive, non-alienating environments where students are oriented and inducted, to facilitate transition from secondary school and to enable successful navigation of integration into higher education systems. Implementing a monitoring and early alert system that identifies students who are encountering

academic and other difficulties will allow or prompt interventions. To enable this, higher education institutions require adequate numbers of appropriate human resource cadres. These include peer mentors, student counselors, academic staff skilled with the ability to deliver learner-centered teaching and learning programs, equipped with knowledge, skills and attitudes to provide holistic student care and development (Essack, 2010.p26). Tinto proposes a combined approach to transition or orientation programs that introduce students to university life in an atmosphere of fun and support causing no stress and anxiety and that recognizes the role of high schools, family and peers (Tinto, 1987).

While the focus of this study is on what works, i.e. possibility-focused paradigm, it would be a grave mistake not to direct attention to what hurdles students who were interviewed encountered. Such an account is important regardless of the fact that the students interviewed have been successful irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds; a factor deficit conceptions have deemed a critical element in explaining “at risk” students’ lack of success. Furthermore, an omission of this account undoubtedly makes invisible the reality that sponsorship alone is not enough, particularly given the nuances laden in the student background. For example, there are tensions around issues of English language command and its differential relationship to (dis)advantage in academic spaces and the rewards or non rewards of that posits varying degrees of what constitutes success. For this reason the next section will provide student reflection of difficulties experienced by some students even though they succeed.

Another major factor students reflected on, a factor that makes their learning difficult, was studying in a second or third language. Poor English proficiency made engagement with academic work more difficult and compromised their performance. This clearly posed difficulties where students came from families who do not have educational capital or resources that would enable them to integrate easily. One participant felt strongly about the language issue because, even outside the class they were forced to communicate in English where friends and peers were speaking a different vernacular language than what they knew. In fact, according to Cross & Mahomed (2010), the use of English represents a barrier to conceptual access, where a student struggles to conceptualise what is being delivered in a lecture which can be de-motivating given the difficulties they encounter in expressing themselves. In some instances, students get very little sympathy from staff members regarding language difficulties, especially white lecturers who fail to understand given their social space and identities. Black students feel undermined from an academic perspective and as a result are deliberately

compromised from succeeding. Students narrative reflection on language-related challenges provide a basis upon which to infer that material resources (such as funding, learning resources, accommodation and transport etc) made available to students to facilitate access into higher education institutions only account for the physical aspect of what is meant by access.

Availability of facilities such as the writing center, counseling services, sufficient space to access computers on campus and at the residences is seen as critical. Participation in student activities, societies and organizations must be made compulsory for first year students according to one participant. This helps broaden the minds of students and develop some social and leadership skills to become well-rounded and productive citizens. It also allows the student to form sound relationships with staff and peers. Tierney (1993) refers to a notion of communities of difference, which is a range of campus organisations, forums and social groups through which students find space for mutual engagement, joint enterprise, construction and expression of group identities. There has been a shift from traditional predominance of student affiliation based on political organisations to a preference for social, cultural, academic and religious organisations. These student organisations have a potential to become effective communities of practice and such groups focus on intellectual and academic engagement (Wegner, 1999; Tierney 1993). Student academic associations for example, have an important role to play as agencies for learning, skills development and academic citizenship. Student organisations serve different purposes such as spaces for identity formation, intellectual engagement, imagination, spiritual healing and affirmation of power.

CHE, (2010:30) identified student related aspects affecting success as including students not being academically strong enough as well as issues of student prior learning and language skills among other factors. Boughey (2012) however argues that what is more useful is the complex analyses of challenges that students experience, which locates them in context. The theory of pedagogic distance for example provides descriptive and explanatory power for discussion of academic difficulties that students face within universities. It also clarifies the multifaceted nature of these challenges related to pedagogy, privileged knowledge, language and large classes. These dimensions characterize the relationship between the lecturer and the student and to a larger extent contribute to success or failure depending on how they are mediated by both the student and the lecturer. Boughey (2012) believes that successful mediation by the student leads to successful epistemological access. These relationships are developed through the academic development and student support which have been in existence since the late 1980s. This was at a time when the formerly white institutions in South Africa began to change,

a change exemplified by their admission of black students. A wider range of school experiences and levels of preparedness for the degree courses became a reality. The challenge of under-preparedness continues however, to have its roots in the relative lack of change in the country's unequal schooling system.

Given these challenges, academic development and teaching and learning centers engage students in various ways. These include supporting academics in professional development and curriculum development, e-learning and teaching activities. Students are supported through academic activities, counselling and work integrated learning (Kilfoil, 2012). It is therefore argued that comprehensive institutional, academic and social support and mediation should complement the emphasis placed on individual efforts which are rooted in performance strategies in an almost unproblematic way. Better communication and more implementation of policy, as well as clearly articulated academic expectations at the university, faculty and course levels would benefit all students, while specific support should be provided to new students, particularly English second-language students, who have graduated from disadvantaged schools and communities with limited resources. This therefore calls for an integrated broader pragmatic and institution-wide support strategy which requires leadership and institutional pragmatism tied to the mission of the institution with allocation of resources (Cross & Mahomed, 2010).

#### **6.4 It Takes a Village to Raise a Child:**

Student attainment is a collective responsibility and therefore, institutional preparedness requires an institution wide range of coordinated and coherent structural mechanism to be able to offer holistic support and development to students. The nature and quality of first year student experiences in class, with faculty and peers are better predictors of educational outcome than pre-university characteristics (Gerken & Volkwein, 2000). Added to the above is an institutional environment that is perceived by students to be inclusive and affirming. Also, expectations for performance are clearly communicated and set at a reasonably high level (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, et al, 2005; Pascarella, 2001). Knowing and understanding student expectations is important for faculty and support personnel to employ instructional approaches that will help students become intentional learners. Institutions design policies and practices to effectively address students' learning needs (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). Student persistence and success are related to the extent to which students interact with supportive adults both inside and outside class (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Kuh 2003). For instance, first generation

students who reported positive interaction with Faculty and other staff members, it is believed, are more likely to succeed academically and are more content with their academic experience.

This was evident in this study where students appreciated the open-door policy of lecturers and could approach them freely and regularly about any concerns and challenges they had. This included not only academic challenges but psycho-social problems as well. While on the surface an open-door policy may seem like a mere gesture, its ramifications are far-reaching, particularly in fostering a sense of belonging. Most importantly and strongly connected to my view, it can activate agency if the open door is more than a signifier. The notion of agency in the dominant discourse presupposes that students know what options are available to them. In the case of first generation students this is not always the case. Students' ability to effectively exercise their agency may be limited by what they know or do not know about their challenging circumstances. In summary, this is to say an open door policy represents an opportunity deliberately structured to enable students to effectively exercise their agency, making obvious how intricately connected structure and agency are.

The need to infuse adjustment issues with curricula so that life skills taught are directly connected to academic experiences has proved to be successful in some contexts. Out of class contact appear to positively shape students' perceptions of the campus environment and seem to influence educational aspirations while interaction with peers enhance overall academic development, knowledge acquisition, problem solving skills and self-esteem (Kuh, 1995). Participants of this study felt that choosing friends who have the same goals to remain focused was important and helps to avoid peer pressure. A large part of the impact of university is determined by the extent and content of one's interaction with major agents of socialization on campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). In fact, according to Astin (1993) peers are the only most potent source of influence affecting every aspect of development.

Involvement in co-curricular activities and relationships with peers is always the best way to facilitate adjustment to higher education environment, enabling relatedness and belonging. One participant in the study stated that having someone who affirms you and advises that things will be ok is very empowering. Schneider & Davidowitz (2012) described a life skill development programme designed to support adjustment of students in science foundation programme. This programme showed that addressing psychological challenges such as coping with stress and managing workload directly using small groups' methodologies is fruitful when integrated into student academic lives.

Mentoring is a valuable support mechanism and reduces the feelings of alienation. The mentoring program in residences, during registration and orientation time was found to be very effective in assisting students settle-in speedily on campus. It is a student buddy programme where a new student is shown by a senior student the ropes of university life and has become a common feature within universities. These can be in faculties or residence based mentoring activities that are facilitated by university employed students under the work-study programme.

The aspiration to attend university should be firmly on the radar screen of potential higher education participants while they are still at school. Universities are therefore to be encouraged to develop strong two-way relationships with schools and families of students from poor communities, identifying early during the formative years of schooling students with academic potential and work with them. Some of the participants in this study were encouraged by their teachers, community and church members to seek assistance from universities for further studies. Another participant was encouraged by a science teacher who gave him an idea what career path he could choose as a scientist.

## **6.5 Bottom Line of the Study**

There is much work to be done to improve the access, persistence and graduation rates of students from poor communities. Understanding of social class as a lack of opportunities and how that affects educational experiences and outcomes is critical in improving those experiences and outcomes. Such understanding is important to higher education researchers and practitioners because higher education attainment is a critical component of a nation's opportunity structure. Theories such as the Bourdieuan theory and Critical Race theory have been used to explain inequitable access to, experiences in outcomes of higher education need to be well explored.

When the primary attention is the focus of how wrong things are, recognition of the powerful examples of what works to offer seeds of hope for improvement is lost. Every student deserves a champion therefore understanding relationships and connectedness need to be encouraged, starting with the lecturers themselves. Deficit thinking perpetuates inequalities, therefore there is a need to accentuate strength-based outlooks, meeting students where they are and accompanying them forward to where they need to be. Learner-centered institutions develop students to own their own learning power. They use realistic learning contexts, encouraging them to engage in multiple perspectives and building on prior learning and experience. These

correlate with Vygotskian theory and African traditional practices which emphasize learning through the support of more capable others not necessarily the teacher. Education theorists for the past decades have constantly posited that meaningful learning requires active student learning. The students in the Law Faculty appreciated the use of post graduate students as tutors who could relate to some of the challenges students encountered and were able to advise and affirm students based on their own recent experiences. Experience, whether good or bad, makes the best teacher.

In promoting positive human development, it is important to understand the best and most positive experiences. Rewiring the current way of thinking is needed to see diverse students for who they are and the resources they bring with them into the process of learning. To be able to plan around them, they need to be listened to and being open to possibilities, extending the confines of who can access higher education if inequalities are to be addressed. Added to the internal resources are external assets such as family and community support, essential in increasing efforts of student success especially in influencing student attitudes and behaviors.

Tinto and Pusser (2006) refer to policies that have had a great impact on improving post-secondary student success these include teacher and faculty development and direct outreach programs to populations that have traditionally been excluded. Based on the findings of this study **full funding or aid** to financially needy students is paramount so that they are able to focus on their studies without worrying about other educational needs such as books, accommodation and meals. Partnerships across many players and stakeholders to address student success are crucial as policies and programs do not operate in isolation. It is necessary to take into consideration the characteristics of schools, families, students and their communities.

Van Zyl (2011) believes that when demands of labor need to broaden access to higher education are considered, it is not a question of whether students can be expected to succeed. It is rather, how Higher Education institutions can empower them to manage the demands of higher education in order to succeed. It is important though to note that both the student and the institution contribute to student success (Subotzky and Prinsloo, 2011). Both predictable and uncertain conditions affect the student and the institution, recognising the responsibilities of the student and the institution to act as situated agents with specific capital and habitus during the course of the student walk, including sharing of information, choice, admission, learning activities, graduation and citizenship or employment. At each student walk, there are practices

and modalities that work in various domains in order to arrive at a transformed student. Also, an institutional identity and attributes that will ensure a better fit between the student and the institution at the specific point in the students' journey.

According to Clifton, strengths development begins with individuals recognizing and psychologically owning their talents (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). Added to that, individuals must recognize the value derived from performing activities congruent with their talents. The participants in this study knew how good they were in their various fields of study and were determined to go to university with the aim of breaking the poverty cycles in their families and communities. They made conscious efforts to seek out opportunities to exercise their talents and share information about their gifts with family, friends and fellow students. In order to complete the strength building process, the institution adds relevant knowledge and skills to talents. In this way, the focus is on what is right with the student. Strength development involves identification of talents and integration of identified talents into an individual's self-view and behavior change (Clifton & Hater 2003).

The conceptualization and application of resilience concepts and protective factors in education are still new in South Africa especially with the legacy of the oppressive regime we are still attempting to address at all levels. Nevertheless, a finding from examples of application of resilience, which Pym (2013) refers to as value-add to the educational process, are encouraging. For example, Pym's study (2013) on the academic development programme at UCT has shown significant outcomes where a number of students in the programme increased from 74 in 2001 to 950 in 2012 and the improved pass rate of 42% in 2001 to 76% in 2011. Pym posits that creating a value-added experience is about drawing on students as a resource in teaching and learning process and a way of working collectively and reflectively to shift both the teaching practice and the student's level of engagement and reflection. This therefore transforms both the teaching and learning approach while addressing the range of strengths and challenges that students bring to higher education.

The major shift in this programme was the creation of mainstream attention to all students during the transition period, focusing on provision of academic skills while promoting special connectedness to addressing the structural issues and practices that needed transformation. Other examples used elsewhere for resilience based approaches to learning include four distinct elements designed to promote learning and thriving. These are; first, participation which is authentic active engagement with knowledge content, students and learning processes that are

focused on the moment. Secondly, observation and noting experiences, and, thirdly, reflection and interpreting experience. Furthermore, it also means transformation which involves awareness of responsibility for an act or process of change (Brown, D'Emidio-Caston & Bernard, 2001).

### **6.5.1 Development of a Model: Interpretive Framework**

Students often come with multiple forms of identities shaped by gender, social class, race and ethnicity that affect their educational interactions. It is important to relook at how institutional contexts impact student activities through policies, procedures and practices. Yosso (2005) for example has criticized Bourdieu's work as deterministic as it privileges the cultural capital possessed by the elite groups over that of other groups. Instead, Yosso highlights the strength of critical race theory, rooted in the civil rights movement which provides insights into educational experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education. The issue of race tends to be under-authorized in educational research yet inequitable educational experiences and outcomes are logical and predictable results of racialised societies (Ladson-Billing et.al 1995).

This study suggests the development of a holistic model which will call upon student strengths in a meaningful way to give students a sense that they can be co-creators of their individual and the nation's future. The focus is on student validation and empowerment which encourages self-belief and strategies with clear objectives and expectations that lead to success. Student resilience in this study is evidenced by their individual aspirations and being motivated by the funding opportunity to succeed. They utilized their time constructively and as a reward, persisted to be able to complete their studies in the requisite time. Such lived experiences of diverse students need to be recognized, embraced and documented in order to overcome the existing power imbalances.

Deficit thinking is usually so ingrained in many educators and administrators that it persists and is perpetuated unknowingly in actions and words that transpire in institutions on a daily basis. It is therefore necessary to deliberately commit to challenging the practices and beliefs that marginalize students from poor communities. As Valencia (1997) purports, deficit thinking practices and beliefs have been embedded in academic structures since time immemorial. This requires moral courage of transformative leadership (Shield, 2010) to eradicate negative and preconceived notions of student abilities and eliminate deficit thinking.

Positive relationships are necessary where students experience support from family and community members, and on arrival at the institution are seen as capable learners who have thrived thus far. People have more confidence and become comfortable to journey to the future when they are invited to start with what they already have-igniting the spark. The paradigm shift requires changes at personal levels for all involved and the language used creates people's realities and the realities of those they serve. Usually, positive change occurs in the context of authentic relationships and effective change is collaborative, inclusive and participatory.

At an institutional level a strength based approach is signified by an institutional habitus that is inclusive and accepting of difference, celebrating diversity. Students from diverse backgrounds find great acceptance and respect when seen as coming to add value in an institution. Some participants in this study alluded to the institutional vibe that was welcoming and by the time they went to their different faculties they had made connections during the orientation programme.

There are various programmes, starting with the orientation programme for all first-year students. Participants of this study appreciated the orientation period though they felt it was short and at that time of their experience they were very new and found it difficult to absorb all the information. Others felt that it could continue throughout the year at Faculty level as experienced by some and was even more beneficial as they got to know their Faculty staff and peers closely. Calling on students' strengths is raising the bar by believing in them and setting high expectations simply because you believe they can, and therefore igniting an existing spark because people who have passion for success think beyond limitations often imposed by others, this is discussed next.

#### **6.5.2 The Art of Igniting a Spark: Nurturing Student Development.**

Learning and teaching is accorded a high status and seen as the core business of the institution. However, what is important is that it should be recognized that learning and teaching happen in all corners of an institution and as such collaborative work with a focus on the student development is paramount. Vital to that is to note that there is seriousness in providing equitable opportunities for success to all students and a need to avoid the deficit conceptualization of students. According to Tinto (2012) student access without support financially, academically and socially is not an opportunity. Institutions have an obligation to provide, to the best of their

ability, the support needed to translate opportunity that access provides for success. While classroom experience is central to student success where student engage with their peers and faculty staff in learning activities, strategies to promote success do not end within the classroom. The improvement of success rates of students does not arise by chance; Tinto states that there must be good intentions, structured policies and actions that coordinate the work and programmes across the institution with allocated resources.

When students are admitted to an institution there usually is a contract that is obligatory between the institution and the student to a chain of actions. The student's part is to utilize the opportunity given that many do not have, and take their studies seriously by exerting the effort needed to complete their studies. The institution, on the other side, takes an obligation to translate the potential access it provides into a meaningful opportunity to support students in a conducive environment to successfully complete their studies. Much as there are many things that affect students' success such as personal lives and economic resources, there is a huge impact based on what their university experiences are across all levels.

The significance of these relationships was explicit in what participants shared as examples that had the capacity to ignite a spark of possibility. When students recognised that staff believed in them and cared about the outcomes of their studies they gained confidence and motivation. The students from the Health Sciences felt that staff treated them with respect and had an open-door policy where they could be approached on any problem and in instances where they could not be helped they were referred to appropriate units in the institution like the writing center or counseling department. The institution wide nurturing approach to student learning and development is the igniting force and needs strengthening to ensure that it is implemented across the board. Students who experience caring relationships feel the connection to the institution and are motivated to learn which leads to positive outcomes.

The student achievement awards at UWC for example are organised by the Student Development and Support and are designed to recognize excellence in academic and co-curricular activities. The strategy builds on achievements and responds to on-going challenges. This is done in a conducive enabling environment for students where a strong academic programme is enhanced through interventions outside the formal classroom, adding a valuable dimension to student's holistic development. A review of accommodation and social facilities in consultation with students ensures, that the student needs are met and are built around various residence life programmes.

The success of the co-curriculum activities is central to graduates developing the attributes that will enable them pursue their careers with confidence and play a meaningful role in society. One of the student participants in the study suggested that it should be compulsory for first year students to be involved in at least one student organisation or society of choice as a matter of policy. This suggests that the unique inherent strengths of each individual are valued and each student brings knowledge that is respected and that programmes build on internal assets that students already have. By meeting the needs of educationally diverse student's requirements, the institution creates platforms that provide engagement with a range of academic skills and personal interventions. Consequently, that provides creative linguistic and cultural space for expression throughout the student journey to graduation. These call for some structural and systemic changes across the institution creating environments that nurture success. Gale (2011) shed light on a new approach to widening participation agenda and equity in Australian universities by shifting focus from negative connotations often attached to marginalized groups to deliberate underscoring of wealth and cultural capacities that such groups bring to higher education environment. Very basic to this is how teachers' high expectations can have a positive dramatic effect on students just by resolving to emphasise positive possibilities much more.

## **6.6 Conclusion and Implications for Future Research**

How do we then address this opportunity gap?

Deficit thinking has not been helpful but often detrimental in the sense that if you hear negative feedback all the time you begin to believe in the perceived short-comings and at times internalize them. I therefore suggest that it is important for diverse students from poor backgrounds to know about the academic experiences of their peers who have successfully completed their programmes under strenuous conditions. In this way, they can learn to believe in themselves, their judgments, feelings, experiences and possibilities of overcoming the educational barriers. Research such as this study that focuses on the strengths and is asset-oriented (Yosso, 2005) is appropriate to add clarity about how students interact with their environments that influence how they navigate challenges to ultimately complete their studies against all odds. To achieve the goal of completing a degree, students utilize an assortment of

resources such as opportunity, assurance and reassurance of resources. For example, participants in this study identified various programmatic resources that they perceived as helpful to reaching their goals. Analysis of data reveals that most critical programmatic resources influencing the sponsored undergraduate students' attainment were relationship opportunities, financial assurance and reassurance of safe space.

Relationships and opportunity to resources were the chances that built nurturing, supportive and trusting relationships with peers, mentors, Faculty and administrative staff. The financial assurance resources were identified as guaranteed financial assistance through various types of scholarships and bursaries. Furthermore, there was reassurance of a safe space because on arrival on campus there was a welcoming inclusive environment where students trusted their general selves and were free to be themselves. The alternative approach, like what the study has done, is to look at working from the students' experiences moving forward, and the development of teachers and administrative staff as strategic to improving academic achievement of diverse students. The key influence for students from poor communities' achievements is changing the perception and interaction between the teachers, students and their communities (Bishop et al.,2003).

At another level this model could be similar or built on what has been designed by Jansen & Blank (2014) on how to fix schools even though this was based on high schools. Every learning institution requires leadership that exerts discipline and love and resourceful teachers who inspire and serve as role models, engaging parents while offering learners life examples where needed. High expectations must be set in all spheres of academic and co-curricular activities, rewarding excellence. The expectations are for both the teacher and the learner and the leadership is visible with constant reflective systems by staff themselves and learners being in a position to evaluate the processes. This affords everybody to implement, reflect and improve, to therefore enrich the culture of an institution.

Research shows that an effort to improve student retention and success, especially as the student population is diverse, requires commitment on the part of the institution. This empirical research suggests that relationships that are positive are at the heart of student success. Institutions must be willing to examine their internal structures of power and representation including the spheres of governance, curricula and pedagogy. The responsibility for change is therefore put at the feet of the institutions of higher education and not so much on the characteristics of the students. To further understand undergraduate sponsored student retention

and success, further studies are recommended starting with understanding the concept of asset-based thinking. Reflecting on how deficit thinking practices curb opportunities will enable researchers to recognize the power of resilience and strength-based approaches. Also, nurtured-resilience based programs that influence student success in South Africa need further, in-depth studies. This will help deconstruct the practices that stem from deficit thinking and create space for a more democratic education system where achievement gaps no longer exist along cultural and linguistic differences as well as socio-economic disparities.

In this study, participants described their disadvantaged positions as what motivated them to work hard to break the cycle of poverty and disempowering conditions their families were in. This is contrary to what I found in literature where working class and poor students were labeled as having no desire to further higher education. Instead, most participants believed that finding scholarships motivated them. So, there needs to be a clear distinction between lack of interest and limiting circumstances based on class.

This study was conducted in a single institution and the intention is not to make generalization. Financial and time constraints did not permit the inclusion of sponsored students who were not South African citizens. There are a number of students from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) who are sponsored by their governments and are studying at UWC. Undergraduate sponsored students from the SADC could have widened our probe especially because their schooling system is believed to be different from the South African basic education system. The other limitation in the study relates to limited responses from students who represented the university administered type of sponsorship that included all races; White, Indian, Coloured and Black. Some of the students in this category were also staff dependents who if interviewed would have given a rich perspective on performance based on their cultural capital.

It is recommended that comparative studies are conducted with other institutions of Higher Education in South Africa to identify which patterns transcend contextual influences and which are unique to specific institutions. The Ministerial Review Report in South Africa on Funding (2010) made recommendations for free education for students from poor communities. There has also been a call from students in all South African universities for free higher education since 2015. It would be interesting to look into initiatives designed to increase partnerships across many players and stakeholders with a focus on financial accessibility of higher education

which is a critical element of the wider issue of equity of access and outcomes. Furthermore, identifying what works for improved academic performance may be increased moving forward.

There is extensive work that has been done (Cloete, 2009; Soudien, 2010; DHET, 2013; Tinto, 2012) in analysing problems and barriers that contribute to student failure, as well as highlighting unequal distribution of resources and transformation challenges in South Africa which is fundamental. However, it is also equally important and useful to document what translates to practical suggestions and may give prescriptive suggestion as mentioned by students. This study sought to identify and explore the strategies utilized to eliminate deficit thinking. In many instances the problems are clear but there is less evidence on what works and the strength of this case study is the focus on what sponsored students associated with their success. Looking at successful students' experiences and some good practices exhibited by institutions is a recommended step. Processing and developing a way of working collectively and reflectively, to modify both teaching practices and student level of engagement could transform the existing culture. It will also address and recognise the strengths and challenges that students bring in higher education to create a balance. In South Africa, for the working class and rural students, having survived extreme situations of vulnerability, accessing higher education is seen as a route out of impoverished families and communities.

What could further be examined is the relationship between receiving sponsorship and success as noted in this study as positive. Could it be, for example, the fact that students make a conscious effort to apply for funding make them to work even harder to succeed? At another level could it be that students who are confident about their ability to graduate and get good paying jobs are more likely to apply for funding. Furthermore, in the midst of higher education transformation with all the policy changes since 1994, how much of the toxic relationships of the apartheid system which are still prevalent are a hindrance to implementation given all the recommendations by researchers and audit committees of the institutions. Nkomo (2013) sees this perpetuation and lingering of the inherited oppressive ways of doing things as an intergenerational transmission of negative socio-psychological capital. Clearly people tend to carry on with what they have learnt – hence the patterns in results remain the same. There needs to be a mind shift in perceptions of race, culture and relationships in society in order to do away with the inequalities that exist. It is obvious that lowered expectations and assumed incompetence based on socioeconomic status, race and gender are to some extent results of deficit thinking.

Many factors that have a role and impact in student performance and success have been documented. However, there are others that receive little attention but could make a major difference in the likelihood of student success such as creating connections of likeminded educators who focus on strengths and students who succeed against all odds. Cultivating asset-based approaches through recognizing strengths that students bring could be an ingredient for better results in the area of student success in higher education. As Jansen and Blank (2014) suggest, locating the institutional factors that contribute to access and success of previously disadvantaged students researchers might find seeds of hope for renewal and change resulting in better outcomes. It is hoped that this study will encourage researchers to examine the assumptions that have been made about the potential of students, especially from disadvantaged communities. Engaging more in practices that will unleash the potential of students instead of blaming them for societal misfortunes they find themselves in. I suggest that deliberate efforts are made to identify more positives to eliminate the stereotypes and assumptions that are made about students from poor backgrounds.

It is possible from the student perspective that factors underpinning student transition and retention in higher education include sufficient preparation to take the transition to higher education manageably; providing support once students have begun with their studies; a curriculum that is designed and delivered to promote success for all students; formal and informal co-curriculum activities that support students and promote engagement. This includes learning experiences that are coordinated and managed to enhance success (Thomas, 2009). It is not enough to incorporate remedial support within existing teaching programmes, rather diverse student population must be catered for with an emphasis on socio-cultural aspect of teaching and learning to promote social and academic inclusion for all students from diverse backgrounds. This calls for researchers and educators to create more inclusive and less marginalizing academic environments, acknowledging their own prejudices and assumptions that have been made about the potential of students from poor communities.

While this study focused on the performance of undergraduate students at UWC looking at what works for students from poor backgrounds, a comparative study to identify how undergraduate sponsored students perform in other universities nationally is recommended so as to address the equity and social justice obligations in South Africa. UWC was commended by the HEQC, (2007) on its determination and the success with which it has provided access to higher education for the disadvantaged sector of the South African population and thus giving effect to the institution's commitment to social justice. However, the same report indicated that

the composition of staff across population groups does not reflect the demographic profile of the country and that still needs to be addressed. There is also a need to explore the practices of the university and educators, the impact each has on students, most importantly the belief system of those who work with students on a regular basis.

The model recommended here is ideal for future development and dissemination of findings to schools, universities and government so as to advance replication elsewhere. It is expected that looking at what works in the access and success question will raise the bar, hope and renewal in the South African education system. For many students from disadvantaged backgrounds this is an indication that the impossible can be possible. It is also hoped that researchers will engage more in deliberate conversations that will address and implement the findings of inequities in education so that in a few years to come the existing stereotypes and assumptions made about students from disadvantaged backgrounds are done away with. Education still remains the only unqualified socioeconomic right in the South African Constitution and must be prioritized in spite of all other government budgetary commitments.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix A**

#### **Interview Questions**

1. What motivated you to study at UWC? And how did you get your Funding(scholarship)
2. How would you describe the quality of your educational experience at UWC in general?
3. Describe what contributed to success in your studies at first year?
4. What strengths have you identified that assisted you to succeed in your studies? Where did you gain those strengths?
5. What other skills did you learn before you came to tertiary that helped you to be successful?
6. What would you describe as the most challenging experience during your first year at UWC?
7. What did you dislike about your experience at UWC?
8. What student services have been helpful to your academic attainment?
9. Did you have any friends who were unsuccessful at UWC? What do you think contributed to their departure?
10. What kind of support mechanisms would you recommend for student success at UWC?

Thank You for your participation in the interviews. Please contact me if you have any concerns.

### **Appendix B**

#### **LETTER OF PERMISSION TO ACCESS STUDENT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE DATA**

May 2013

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Ms Lulama Ngalo Morrison and I am a doctoral candidate at University of the Western Cape, in the Department of Educational Studies under the supervision of Prof. G. W.Ouma and Dr N. Ravjee.

The topic of my study is 'Factors that influence the academic performance of sponsored students at the University of The Western Cape: A strength based approach. The study seeks to understand sponsored students resiliency as well as factors and practices that influence the academic attainment and success at UWC. The main objective of this study is to identify factors that contribute to student resilience and practices that support and enhance student success. The study will involve sponsored students at UWC who have completed their first-year of studying. The main objective of this study is to identify factors that contribute to student resilience and practices that support and enhance student success. The study will be conducted in an ethical manner and ethical clearance will be sought from the University of the Western Cape, Senate Research Ethics Committee. Participating in the research will be voluntary and all information provided for the study will be kept strictly confidential. Participation will also be anonymous and students will not be identified by the information they provide. Participants will be free to withdraw from participation at any time without explaining the reasons for their withdrawal to the researcher. No participant will be forced to answer any question he or she does not wish to answer. I would like to request your permission to involve the sponsored students who have completed their first year of transition.

Thank you very much for your kind response to this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Contact details, L. Ngalo-Morrison, Phone: 0822022202

## **Appendix C**

### **INFORMATION LETTER FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

May, 2013

Dear Student:

My name is Ms Lulama Ngalo Morrison and I am a doctoral candidate at University of the Western Cape, in the Department of Educational Studies under the supervision of Prof. G. W. Ouma and Dr N. Ravjee.

The topic of my study is ‘Factors that influence the academic performance of sponsored students at the University of Western Cape: A strength based approach. The study seeks to understand sponsored students resiliency as well as factors and practices that maximize the academic attainment and success at UWC. The main objective of this study is to identify factors that contribute to student resilience and practices that support and enhance student success.

You are invited to participate in a research which will be conducted towards doctoral studies (PhD) at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. The participants of the study are sponsored students who have at least completed their first year of study towards their degree. Participation is completely voluntary. Declining to participate will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. The researcher will keep your responses confidential and no information associated with your name will be released publicly.

If at any stage you have queries or concerns regarding your participation in the study please contact the researcher.

Contact details:

Lulu Ngalo-Morrison

Lngalomorrison@gmail.com

Phone 082 202 2202

Participant's Name..... Signature.....

## Appendix D

### PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Research Title:** Factors that influence academic attainment of sponsored students at the University of Western Cape: A Strength based approach.

Researcher: L. Ngalo Morrison

Lngalomorrison@gmail.com

Phone 082 202 2202

I the undersigned student understand this research study, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that I may withdraw my consent and not participate at any time without explanation or loss of benefits or academic standing to which I am otherwise entitled.

I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedure to be used in the study. I willingly agree to participate in the study under the terms described

Name of Participant .....

Signature of Participant.....

Date.....

## Appendix E



OFFICE OF THE DEAN  
DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

13 June 2013

**To Whom It May Concern**

I hereby certify that the Senate Research Committee of the University of the Western Cape has approved the methodology and ethics of the following research project by:  
Ms L Ngalo-Morrison (Education)

Research Project: Factors that influence the academic attainment of sponsored students at the University of the Western Cape: A strength based approach.

Registration no: 13/5/32

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for approval.

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse event and/or termination of the study.

*Ms Patricia Josias  
Research Ethics Committee Officer  
University of the Western Cape*

Private Bag X17, Bellville 7535, South Africa  
T: +27 21 959 2988/2948 . F: +27 21 959 3170  
E: pjosias@uwc.ac.za  
www.uwc.ac.za

A place of quality,  
a place to grow, from hope  
to action through knowledge

## Appendix F



UNIVERSITY of the  
WESTERN CAPE

12 August 2013

Ms L Ngalo-Morrison (Education)

Re Permission to conduct, research

Dear Ms L Ngalo-Morrison (Education)

I hereby give permission to conduct the research *Factors that influence the academic attainment of sponsored students at the University of the Western Cape: A strength based approach* with condition that the ethics in relation to interviews will be adhered to, no student / staff name, number and details be made public in the research.

Yours truly

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'J.J. Cornelissen'.

Prof. J.J. Cornelissen  
Acting Registrar

Bag x17, Bellville 7535, South Africa  
1 000 0000 . F: +27 21 000 0000  
.COM . www.uwc.com

A black graphic element consisting of a triangle that tapers to a point on the left and widens on the right, with a white border.

A place of quality,  
a place to grow, from hope  
to action through knowledge

**STUDENT PROFILE**

Name.....STUDENT ID.....

RACE.....

Home Language.....

Age.....Female/Male.....

Degree .....Faculty .....

High School Attended  
.....

High School Address  
.....

Parent /Guardian Level of Education  
.....

Parent /Guardian Occupation  
.....

Scholarship Name  
.....

Full funding /Part funding  
.....

Contact Details: Cell ..... Email .....

## Appendix H

### Sample Verbatim Data of Participants

Question 2. How would you describe the quality of your educational experience at UWC in general?

|         |  |   |
|---------|--|---|
| CF007   | <p>It's really good the lecturers are really interactive and there isn't this barrier between lecturers and student. You can feel free to ask questions if you don't understand anything, you go and speak to lecturers. Also, there were no barrier where you are just a student, so, you do get to go to them and ask them questions and stuff like to an extent that even if you have problems at home you can speak to them about that. They'll give you counseling or maybe advice you to go see a counselor on campus. I mean, also what I wanted to tell you is that they they keep it structured, but lectures ensure that we have the practical side of things which they incorporate into class activities. So it's not only the lectures that we are experiencing, for example, they they give us 10 minutes breaks and in between they let us experience what it's like to be in an actual occupational therapy setting. I wouldn't say that'll not go out there and be completely inexperienced, I would know what to expect or have an idea of what is expected of me.</p> <p>Q: so you been assisted to apply what you learn<br/>R: yes yes</p> | <p>Good lecturers that are engaging</p> <p>Open to consultation</p> <p>Sensitivity to socio-emotional and personal issues referral to counselling services where necessary</p> <p>Structured and practical experience</p> <p>Hands on experience.</p> <p>Know what to expect in a real work situation</p> |
| N/CF002 | <p>R: good very good very good yeah very good educational experience I don't know how to</p>   | <p>Expectation met.</p>   |

|       |  |   |
|-------|--|---|
|       | <p>describe it because I didn't expect anything less very good lecturers most of them. I mean our lecturers rotated between the different varsities UCT and US and our law faculty is growing I mean we have some of the best lecturers so and also our faculty is known, I think if am correct I stand to be corrected, we have the biggest law faculty in the country possibly in the continent I stand to be corrected</p> <p>.... UWC's law faculty is the best in the continent apparently a number of constitutional writers studied here.</p> <p>Q: ok excellent! I wasn't aware that there is a rotation of lecturers between UWC, US and UCT</p> <p>R: yeah, I don't know if it applies to all faculties because some of them just lecture one course so I know. I think one of our lectures who lecture here also lectures at uct so when it comes to standard of education we can't say we are taught differently. we get pretty much the same stuff.</p> | <p>Very competitive with other universities in the province, best lecturers</p> <p>Best faculty possibly in the continent</p> <p>Lecturer rotation in all Western Cape universities</p> <p>Good standard of education</p> |
| NF009 | <p>oh so far yeah I have experienced a lot of good quality education at UWC. I can see that ok what am doing is all that I wanted and then they are mostly focusing on what I want in petroleum geology</p> <p>Q: ok... your faculty is what?</p> <p>R: Faculty of Natural Science and I feel the program is really quite good ..... yeah it's really quite good.</p>  | <p>Programme is the best focus is on what I expected</p>  |
| CF001 | <p>R: it's actually amazing (laugh) like it's definitely got everything and high quality education and everything is top notch as far as I can tell you and</p>  | <p>Quality education top notch.</p>   |

|        |  |  |
|--------|--|--|
|        | <p>also the results do prove that 50% of the all dentist that qualify every year come from our faculty, so it's really..... it's a very good program..... yeah</p> <p>Q: what would you say in the program itself helps the students to succeed?</p> <p>R:uhm I think it is dependent on also the students perseverance, like I do believe it's what you put in that you get out but also the supervisors are quite helpful and caring. For example,if you have a problem you can go and talk to the lecturers. In my case, as well as parents I think they also support me even though they are far. if I have a problem sometimes and at any time much as they are from Durban they'll try and help me out in any way they can.</p> <p>Q: so that support helps, both from your faculty as well as from home R: yea definitely Q: ok</p> | <p>50% of dentists nationally come from UWC</p> <p>Student perseverance<br/>students take responsibility<br/>Support from supervisors<br/>Family support</p>     |
| NM0011 | <p>UWC ....most people because it is a historically disadvantaged institution, most people undermine the quality of education but if you were to compare UCT and UWC's faculty of law UCT 's faculty of law is not as powerful as UWC because when people compare they do not take into consideration what the pass rate of the faculty is but just look at the institution in general. At UWC in our faculty imodules are structured such that when you are in year one they teach you the introduction and concepts.....then at second level you are familiar with technical terms and third year you are clear about everything, that is why the pass rate is good because they prepare you at each level as you progress.</p>  | <p>Wrong historical perceptions of the institution.</p> <p>Powerful with a higher pass rate .</p> <p>Structured programme<br/>Support provided at all levels</p> |

|        |   |   |
|--------|---|---|
| CF005  | I always had the best lecturers and tutors who were dedicated to my education and training. I also had various advanced facilities at my disposal which aided me in preparing for class, tests and assignments. I feel that a combination of these factors resulted in me having a good quality of education. In a rating scale of ten I would give it 8/10.  | Best lecturers and tutors<br>Good educational facilities<br><br>Rated 8 in the scale of 10  |
| CM004  | UWC offers quality education, however there is too much focus on theory. There is lack of practical education, for example CPUT students doing business studies are provided an opportunity to do an internship with companies. This internship forms part of student course work. At UWC we are also not exposed to acquire excel skills not enough practical examples were offered on the course that relate to applying different excel formulas that are used in the corporate environment. | Practical experience is lacking though theory is good<br><br>Need for experiential work through internship<br><br>Lack of exposure on technical skill                       |
| NM0012 | The science faculty at UWC is rated amongst the highest in the country even though it is a fairly young university as compared to others especially in the Western Cape. When you look at even its research output it shows that it offers good quality education which I benefitted a lot from but also I wanted to change my life and was determined to work hard and succeed and my friends also motivated me.   | Highly rated even though fairly new compared to other universities in the province.<br><br>Research output good<br><br>Self determination to improve condition, resiliency. |
| CF007  | I won't lie when I was still in graded 12 UWC was not my first choice to study I wanted to go to  | Ambition of studying at UCT   |

|       |  |   |
|-------|--|---|
|       | <p>UCT very bad, so I felt like a failure when I got here because I had not achieved that aspiration. However when I got here I thought it would be breezy going through everything. UWC has thought me a lot, firstly it teaches you patience yeah and the classes are very well structured. There are somethings at first year when you actually attend those classes you think how are these things related to the degree that I want. Amazingly, now as I go along when I reflect on those experiences I see what contribution they have made to my studies and to being a better person that they've moulded me to be. They have thought me how to write how to think critically and so the experience that I have had so far has been very good in the respect that it has moulded me as a person and I've grown up Basically there is a lot of pressure there's a lot of pressure to do well from the family and also from myself so I've never failed a module I've always I've never written a rewrite or anything like that so I've always kept that pressure on myself to always do well and so the lecturers encourage you to do well. They show you examples of people who have done well and have gone very far in life so that has been my inspiration and I feel that the academic experience that I've I had so far has been very awesome</p> <p>Q: very awesome huh I love that thank you haha</p> | <p>UWC comparable</p> <p>Learnt some values such as patience</p> <p>Student centered approach</p> <p>Moulded academic outlook, critical thinker</p> <p>Have developed High expectation of self and by family</p> <p>Encouragement from lecturers</p> <p>Role models and social mobility</p> <p>Awesome experience</p> |
| NM003 | <p>I always say that I am a proud student of UWC and there are ups and downs but to me UWC is a world class institution. The quality of education</p>  | <p>Feeling of belonging</p> <p>World class institution</p>  |

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
|  | <p>that we get is of such a class that you can walk into any office or you can walk into any setting uhm and the knowledge, the information and the skills that you got form UWC you'll be able to implement. If you look at the background of UWC, it is only 50 years old and if you look at institution like US and UWC whose existence is much as or almost twice the age that UWC is, yet UWC is competing on the same level as they do. So according to me, at UWC the level of education and the level of skills that we get here is on the same level as all the other institutions and I also think that what we need to take into account is that UWC was first known as a black and colored university but despite that we are competing at international level. if I look at the research output publications and ratings I think UWC is 8 or 9 on the list of the top universities in Africa. So, I really think the level of education here UWC is of such a quality that you can walk into any office as I said and any space and represent UWC well.</p> | <p>Quality education engaging and competitive</p> <p>Fairly young as compared to others provincially</p> <p>Historical background but very resilient amongst the top in the world in research</p> |
|--|--|---|