

# **FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

A mini thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology, in the Department of Psychology, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.



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## ABSTRACT

During Apartheid, South African education policies were largely based on a system of racial segregation, resulting in unequal educational opportunities between black and white students. Current education policies centred on Access and Equity have been ratified to address the education issues of the past. However, there still remains a concern about the poor performance and consequently, the high drop out rate, particularly amongst black South African university students. The findings of various studies have shown that the factors that contribute to poor academic performance range from inadequate pre-university schooling and financial issues to poor language proficiency, inadequate social support and insufficient social integration. The present study employed a qualitative approach to explore first-year students' perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance. Tinto's Student Integration Model provided the conceptual basis for the conduction of the study. Three focus groups were used to collect the data which were analysed according to thematic analysis procedures. The main finding of the study was that academic and social experiences were intrinsically linked in the first year of study. Moreover, the findings indicate that friends, belonging to non-academic organisations and lecturer-student interaction (as three indicators of social integration) influenced first-year students' academic performance. South African contextual factors such as socio-economic status and language were found to be a potential hindrance to good academic performance. The implications of these findings are discussed.

## DECLARATION

I herewith declare that this thesis 'First-year students' perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance' is my own original work. Other work cited in this thesis has been fully referenced. This thesis has not been submitted, in full or part, for the award of any other degree.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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



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*My deepest and most sincere gratitude is due to my Creator who has provided me with the ability to complete this work. All the good herein is entirely due to the Almighty, my Cherisher and Sustainer.*

*“All praise is due to the Lord of All of the Worlds”*

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The present chapter provides the contextual background to the study. It comprises a discussion of the history of higher education in South Africa as well as the current higher education system, with some of its successes and challenges. Particular emphasis is placed on the challenge of university drop out and its implications on the development of the South African economy. A short overview of some of the contributing factors to the problem of drop out is provided. One factor that has been found to significantly contribute to high drop out rates at university level has been the lack of social integration. Many international studies, particularly conducted in Western countries such as the USA and Australia have looked at social integration and its effects. Compared to international studies, there appears to be far less research on social integration and its effects on university students within the South African context, drawing attention to the necessity of the current study. The current study aims to examine the perceived influence of social integration on academic performance so as to enhance our understanding of the first-year experience. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the thesis.

### 1.2 BACKGROUND

The higher education system in South Africa has been significantly influenced by the periods of colonialism and Apartheid. Following is a presentation of the three historical periods, pre-Apartheid, Apartheid and post-Apartheid, with emphasis on education during these periods.

#### 1.2.1 South African higher education before Apartheid (- 1948)

In current literature, focus has been placed on the education system under Apartheid rule. However, before the Apartheid political period, the Dutch and British colonial periods formed a crucial part of the general history of South Africa. Research and scholarship on education during these colonial periods are very limited. There are however some known facts about South African education before 1948. The Dutch settlers arrived in the Cape

in 1652 and established the first school for slave children only 6 years later, in 1658 (SAHO, 2008). This was followed by the opening of the first separate school for colonist children in 1663, one of the earliest indications of separate education for European and non-European children. Although, as McKerron (1934) pointed out, this school was attended by mostly European children and some slave and Hottentot children as well, and that the complete separation of European and non-European children was only enacted in the twentieth century. For almost two hundred years, only basic primary education was provided in South Africa until 1829 when the South African College for boys, the first higher education institute in South Africa, opened (Lulat, 2005; McKerron, 1934). The South African College focused largely on secondary school education and from 1900 onwards devoted itself to higher education. In 1918, this institute officially became the University of Cape Town (UCT) (UCT, 2009), an institute that catered for students of European descent.

The first formal school in South Africa admitted mostly European and few coloured<sup>1</sup> slave students. Despite that Natives made up the largest proportion of the population,<sup>2</sup> the question of educating Natives were only considered in the second quarter of the nineteenth century (McKerron, 1934). The famous Lovedale Institute opened in 1841 and admitted eleven Native pupils. The suggestion to establish a college of higher education for Natives was put forth by James Stewart of the Lovedale Institute in 1878 (Pityana, 1993). Although these suggestions may have stemmed from the idea that Native people could and should be educated, these ideas may also have suggested the norm and acceptance of a racially divided education system. The first higher education institution for Natives, known as the South African Native College (McKerron, 1934), was established in 1916 at Forte Hare (Lulat, 2005) and in 1969 officially became a university in its own right, the University of Forte Hare.

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<sup>1</sup> Coloureds referred to people of mixed descent (De Villiers, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> According to McKerron (1934), the census of 1921 showed that the Europeans represented only 21.9% of the total population of the Union (of South Africa) compared to the “Natives” who made up 67.8% of the population. The term “native” referred to a person who was a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa, otherwise known as a black person (De Villiers, 1971).

Lulat (2005) in writing about the history of higher education in South Africa, emphasized the words spoken by J.H. Hofmeyer<sup>3</sup> at the 1937 graduation ceremony of the South African Native College: “And that being so it, it does seem to follow that the scope and content of education should not in present circumstances be the same for the African as for the European” (Hofmeyer, 1938, p. 150). Hofmeyer (1938) further emphasized that the inequality between blacks and whites should be accounted for in the development of education policies. Even though the Apartheid government formally took charge only in 1948, the education system was clearly laden with a white supremacy ideology before then.

### **1.2.2 Higher Education during Apartheid (1948 – 1994)**

Apartheid, a term that referred to the separation of race groups<sup>4</sup>, was simply an extension of European colonialism. Lulat (2005) states that racial segregation has always been part of South Africa’s history, from the day that Dutch settlers first arrived. The Apartheid government officially came into power in 1948 and this power ended with the inaugural election in 1994. Prior to 1994, the South African education system was governed by policies and laws that was meant to perpetuate the power of the white minority (Bunting, 2006).

Some of the laws within the higher education sector during Apartheid were the Bantu<sup>5</sup> Education Act and the 1959 Extension of University Education Act (Lulat, 2005). The Bantu Education Act (Act 47 of 1953) established a Bantu Education Department in the Department of Native Affairs with the purpose of, as Hendrik Verwoerd (the minister of Native Affairs at the time) explained, providing Bantus with an education that would uphold their subservient positions in society (Zungu, 1977). The Extension of University Education Act was ratified to maintain the segregation of higher education through the establishment of specific tertiary institutions to serve particular race groups. Lulat (2005)

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<sup>3</sup> J.H. Hofmeyer was the minister of education at the time (Lulat, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> White, coloured, Indian and black will in this document refer to the race groups classified under the Population Registration Act of 1950. It should be noted that these terms, not preferred by the researcher, will be used for clarification and distinction.

<sup>5</sup> Bantu is a derogatory term that was used to refer to black or “native” people in South Africa (Zungu, 1977).

highlights that universities were basically allocated to one of three categories; 1) universities for blacks in the cities, 2) universities for blacks in the homelands and 3) universities for whites. During Apartheid, institutions such as University of Cape Town, University of Witwatersrand, University of Stellenbosch and University of Pretoria, to name a few, were legally declared higher education institutions for white people only, while institutions such as the University of Fort Hare, University of the North, University of Zululand and University of Venda were categorized as black homeland institutions (Lulat, 2005). The University of the Western Cape, established in 1969 was an institute for coloureds and the University of Durban-Westville, established in 1977, was an institution established for Indians and urban blacks (Bunting, 2006 ).

The passing of both the Bantu Education Act as well as the Extension of University Education Act ensured that black students were limited in terms of education (Karlsson, 2004; Khuzwayo, 2005; Zungu, 1977). Apartheid policies governed everything from access to education to the quality of education that was received (Fiske & Ladd, 2004), resulting in the differential education of blacks and whites, with blacks receiving a poorer quality of education than their white counterparts (Asmal & James, 2001; Lulat, 2005). Another key legislation in terms of higher education was the Universities Amendment Act No. 83 of 1983, allowing black students to attend 'white' institutions only if they were granted permission by these institutions. Even so, black students did not have the same opportunities as white students and were restricted in terms of class instruction, residence and even social or organisational activities (Lulat, 2005). Lulat (2005) further mentions that the higher education system was one of racially determined inequality that favoured white institutions in terms of enrollment, budgetary allocation, physical resources, services, teachers, students and curricula.

By 1985, 19 higher education institutions were reserved for the minority of students in South Africa (whites) compared to only six for the majority of students (blacks) (Bunting, 2006), another example of inequality in higher education. It is clear that Apartheid had far reaching effects on the higher education system in South Africa. Moreover, Apartheid had devastating effects on the educational outcomes of black students. For instance, as

Lulat (2005) stated, differential funding in favour of white institutions and against black institutions have led to qualitative differences between race groups in terms of academic success. This of course resulted in the differences between black and white students in terms of their employability. The education of white students left them with greater levels of skill and expertise and this meant that they held higher paying jobs. However, it should be noted that race groups were categorized along the lines of educational privileges, with whites being placed at the top, followed by coloureds and then Indians. So while coloureds did not receive the same privileges as whites in this country, they were more advantaged than Indians and blacks. Furthermore, there were differences within race groups. These differences were based on social class, where for instance; the middle class had more educational privileges than the working class. This was clear across all race groups. However, education still resulted in a vicious cycle where the majority of black people remained poor and was not a means of getting them out of dire circumstances.

The political nature of the South African education system, from the colonial period up until the end of Apartheid, largely influenced the current system of education. While it is known that this system has long term, destructive effects on the education of black students in South Africa, we cannot assume that white students were not affected. The racial fragmentation of society brought about serious challenges for the current education system. One such challenge is the racial integration of students at university. Walker (2005) in her analysis of race narratives of black and white South African university students, found that racial separation still very much impacts on the lives of students in South Africa, “What is clear is that all of these students’ lives are marked, whether acknowledged or not, by race, by racialized subjectivities, and by a past of racial separateness” (p. 53).

### **1.2.3 The Current Higher Education System in South Africa (1994 – current)**

Apartheid has had such negative impacts on the current South African higher education system, necessitating the need for rigorous and effective policies to address the challenges brought about by it. In light of addressing these challenges, the post-Apartheid South African higher education system has achieved many a success, including the

endorsement of transformation policies, a new higher education landscape (with the merging of universities and technikons), increased black student enrollment, internationalization and quality education (Badat, 2005; Jansen, 2004). Policies that speak to the need for equity and equality in higher education were introduced, pointing to transformation.

Another mark of transformation within the higher education sector in South Africa is the principle of 'education as a human right' embedded in post-1994 education policies. With principles of democracy, diversity, 'education as a basic human right' and equality in place, it can easily be assumed that the South African higher education system is achieving its aim of completely transforming a system based on racial segregation and inequality to one that ensures accessibility, fairness and equality for all. However, the South African education system is still faced with a multitude of challenges, in terms of policy development, curriculum and skills development and more importantly educational outputs such as an increase in the number of black graduates able to enter the labour market in South Africa. The effect of these educational challenges is probably clearest observed in the employment sector.

Research shows that there exists a definite relationship between education and the productivity of a society as employment is directly dependent on education (Moleke, 2005; Rao & bt Jani, 2008). In agreement, Banerjee, Galiani, Levinsohn, McLaren and Woolard (2007) put forth, "Indeed, it takes a completed university degree to mostly escape unemployment in South Africa" (p. 13). Moleke (2005) further points to the labour market's demand on higher education for highly skilled, professional workers. This has certainly been a goal of Higher Education South Africa (HESA) (2008) who, in their address to parliament, noted that HESA is regarded as "instrumental in the momentous task of building a new South African society that is well-positioned to respond to national needs by producing graduates with appropriate high level skills to meet the needs of a transforming society and a growing economy" (p. 1). Nonetheless racial segregation, prominent in higher education during Apartheid, has resulted in current racial inequalities in the employment sector in South Africa (Moleke, 2005).

Education has wide ranging effects on the process of transformation in the social, political and ever important, economic spheres of South Africa. Still, the insufficient number of students graduating from university poses obvious threats to economic prosperity in South Africa.

University drop out is considered to be a huge phenomenon both globally and nationally. According to a report by Macfarlane (2006), the [former] Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor stated that almost 50% of undergraduates in South Africa do not complete their degree and only 30% obtain their qualifications within a five year period. In South Africa, the number of black graduates has steadily increased, yet there still remains concern about high drop out rates among this demographic group (Fiske & Ladd, 2004). Attrition<sup>6</sup> has been relatively understudied in the South African context, however, very relevant findings have emerged from national studies conducted, highlighting the factors that impact on high failure rates and the decision to drop out.

The first year of university is a very challenging time for students (Beder, 1997; McInnis, 2003). These challenges are further emphasized by students' lack of preparation for their first year of university, resulting in higher risk for dropping out. In order to successfully deal with the challenges of first year, students are required to implement certain social and academic skills that they should have learnt prior to university. Bitzer and Troskie-De Bruin (2004) point out that students from advantaged backgrounds who are equipped with the talent and skills associated with this privilege, will survive at university, while students without the necessary skills (presumably from disadvantaged backgrounds) will eventually terminate their studies and do something else. Research illustrates that students, particularly from previously disadvantaged contexts, may not be adequately prepared for the challenges they face at university (Carrim & Shalem, 1999; Van der Berg, 2002). Herman (1995) further questions the fairness of the South African school system, particularly Matric results as a means of predicting university readiness, especially in light of the inequality in schooling that stems from Apartheid.

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<sup>6</sup> Attrition is defined as the gradual process of dropping out of a course or prematurely terminating a course prior to completion. The term attrition is used interchangeably with the term drop out

Additionally, the financial problems common among students from disadvantaged backgrounds is another factor contributing to the increase in drop out rates. The Student Pathways Studies conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council found that 70% of students who dropped out from seven universities were from low income families of which black Africans made up the majority (Macgregor, 2007). It is clear that the interaction between various factors such as the lack of preparation for university, inequality within the schooling system, financial problems and the lack of appropriate social and academic skills have a great impact on student attrition rates.

In terms of social skills, various factors have been identified as contributors to success in the first year. One such factor that was found to impact on students' premature departure or drop out from university and that has been the focus of a large number of studies internationally, is the level of social integration at the institution (Astin, 1991; Berger & Milem, 1999; Terenzini, Lorang & Pascarella, 1981; Tinto, 1975; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Social integration is defined as peer-interaction, non-academic interaction with staff, and belonging to social organisations on campus (Tinto, 1975, 1993). A study conducted in South Africa by Fraser and Killen (2005) found that support by peer groups could be considered a factor that positively contributes to success. Racial integration could be another dimension of social integration, particularly within the local context. The process of social integration is particularly important for first-year students, for whom the adjustment to university may be very demanding (Dalziel & Peat, 1998). According to Peel (2000), the inability to effectively deal with the challenge of integrating into the system often leads to isolation, which could very well lead to the decision to drop out.

Despite that many studies have looked at social integration at universities internationally, particularly in developed contexts such as the USA and Australia, this area of research is very limited within the South African context.

### 1.3 RATIONALE

The National Plan for Higher Education<sup>7</sup> states that South Africa's 15% graduate rate is one of the lowest in the world (Letseka & Maile, 2008). This has dire effects on the productivity and economic development of South Africa (Kraak & Koen, 2005; UNISA, 2006) and is particularly worrying in light of the current global and national economic crises. Various factors have been found to influence drop out, including but not limited to, poverty, poor academic performance and a lack of social integration. While, a number of studies have looked at the role of poverty and poor academic performance on students overall success at university, very little research has been conducted on the role of social integration and social processes. Moreover, studies that investigated the link between social integration and academic performance (as a measure of success) are very limited. This is interesting especially since academic performance has been identified as a significant contributor to retention and graduation (Boulter, 2002) and is considered to be the strongest indicator of whether a student is coping with academic demands.

One way to understand any social phenomenon is to consider the point of view of those directly involved. In doing so, the researcher can gain perspectives from within the context and perspectives of those experiencing the phenomenon (Kelly, 1999). It is imperative that researchers begin to look at reasons for attrition and ways to increase retention rates as this has obvious implications for the development of the country. And this is best achieved through students' perception surveys. According to Fraser and Killen (2005), it is necessary for students to reflect on their perceptions of university in order to increase their chances of success. The present study will indeed be one of the first of its kind in South Africa and will contribute to literature on factors that influence drop out and failure among university students. More specifically, in a country such as South Africa, with its history of Apartheid, studies on students' social integration at their institute of learning and how this impacts on their success will add to knowledge of social and academic development, which may inform intervention programmes to decrease high

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<sup>7</sup> The National Plan for Higher Education was a document introduced in 2001 under the authority of Minister Kader Asmal, South African education minister at the time. The aim of this document was to provide a framework for realizing the vision of transformation in higher education as outlined in Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997).

attrition rates. According to the National Plan for Higher Education, it is important to take into account the South African context when trying to understand and address the issue of retention and drop out, and necessary for South African universities to re-examine factors determining the academic success of students (Fraser & Killen, 2005).

#### **1.4 AIM and OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The primary aim of the study is to explore first-year students' perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance. The following objectives were set out to meet the aim of the study:

1. To determine students' understanding of social integration at university.
2. To explore students' perceptions of their academic performance.
3. To determine whether students' perceive social integration to influence academic performance.

#### **1.5 OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS**

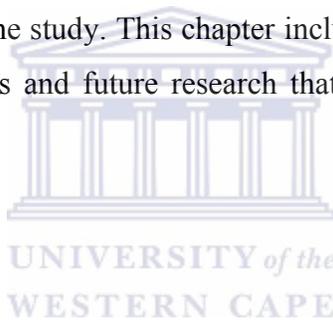
**Chapter 1** provides the background and contextualizes the present study. The chapter section outlines the past and present state of higher education in South Africa, with special emphasis on the role of Apartheid. Attrition or drop out has been identified as a problem in South Africa and certain factors which contribute to this problem is elaborated on. One important factor, social integration is discussed, leading to the rationale of the study, the main aim and specific objectives. The chapter concludes with this overview of the thesis.

**Chapter 2** focuses on literature relevant to the study. Many international studies have been conducted in the same or similar areas and those most relevant to the study have been reviewed. A limited amount of research has been conducted in South Africa, many of which are included in this chapter. The researcher has also identified and provides a brief overview of all related theoretical approaches to the study. One theoretical approach is highlighted as the basis from which this study is conducted, and a detailed description of the theory is given. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

**Chapter 3** looks at the methods employed for the conduction of the study and includes the research design, participants in the study, the data collection tool, procedure followed for the collection of data, data analysis, trustworthiness and credibility, ethical considerations and reflexivity.

**Chapter 4** presents the key findings of the study. These findings are presented under the 4 major thematic categories: ‘General perceptions of the first-year at university’, ‘Social perceptions among first-year students’, ‘Perceptions of academia among first-year students’ and ‘Linking social integration to academic performance’.

**Chapter 5** includes a summary of these findings which will be discussed in relation to previously conducted studies as well as relevant theories, in particular the theoretical model that forms the basis of the study. This chapter includes the limitations of the study together with recommendations and future research that stems from the present study, and concluding remarks.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter documents current literature in the area of social integration and academic performance. The chapter commences with theoretical explanations of academic performance, followed by a detailed description of the theoretical model employed as the basis for the present study, Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model. The Student Integration Model avers that social and academic integration are the two main conditions for student retention. Social integration is defined as the level of involvement that a student has with the social system of university, and involves informal peer interaction, semi-formal interaction with staff and faculty and involvement in organisational and extra-curricula activities (Tinto, 1975). Academic integration is defined as the level of involvement with the academic system of university, and is most notably characterized by a student's academic performance (Tinto, 1975). Despite that social integration and academic integration are the two main institutional conditions under which retention or attrition (drop out) decisions are made, scholarship on the relationship between social integration and academic performance (the key characteristic of academic integration) is limited.

A number of national and international studies have examined factors that impact on academic performance (Coutinho, 2007; Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Malefo 2000; Nonis & Hudson, 2006; Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009; Van der Walt & Pickworth, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007) and have concluded that both social and academic factors contribute to academic performance among college and university students. This chapter includes a presentation of these studies. Furthermore this chapter also presents research that has examined the relationship between social integration as conceptualized by Tinto (1975) and academic performance.

## 2.2 THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Research on the determinants of academic performance may contribute to the development of empirically sound intervention programmes that address the problem of academic failure among first-year students. Empirical research however, necessitates a thorough understanding of theories relevant to the research topic. Following is an overview of some of the theories most relevant to the present study.

### 2.2.1 Theoretical explanations of academic Performance

Various theoretical foundations have sought to explain academic performance among university students. Some theories explain the role of motivation, while others explain the role of personality and social factors in predicting academic performance. These theoretical explanations of academic performance are documented below.

- ***Motivation Theories***

Student motivation plays a vital role in the academic performance of students (Geiger & Cooper, 1995). The Motivational Systems Theory, proposed by Martin Ford was reported to be a valid predictor of academic performance among college students (Campbell, 2007). From a Motivational Systems Theory perspective, the interaction between a motivated, skilled and biologically capable person and his or her supportive environment will result in academic achievement and competence.

Geiger and Cooper (1995) tested the Expectancy Theory and Needs Theory in predicting academic performance. Vroom developed the Expectancy Theory in 1964 (Geiger & Cooper, 1995), which is based on the premise that motivation is a combination of the perceived attractiveness of future outcomes and the likelihood that one's actions will lead to this outcome (Geiger & Cooper, 1995). In terms of academic performance, Geiger and Cooper (1995) posit that academic effort will depend on how students perceive the benefits of academic performance and that their effort will lead to higher performance. In testing the Expectancy Theory and the Needs Theory, Geiger and Cooper (1995) found the valence model of the Expectancy Theory to be a better predictor of academic performance than the Needs Theory.

- ***Personality Theories***

A number of studies have looked at the role of personality factors in predicting academic performance (Cornard, 2006; Komarraju & Karau, 2005; Nofle & Robins, 2007; O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007; Poropat, 2009). Cornard (2006) highlighted that personality measures may be promising in predicting academic performance and may be particularly useful in selection processes. The Big Five Personality Factors, *Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism* (Digman, 1990) has been the focus of a number of studies. Gosling, Rentfrow and Swann (2003) describes the Big Five Theory as “a hierarchical model of personality traits with five broad factors... Each bipolar factor summarizes several more specific facets... The Big-Five framework suggests that most individual differences in human personality can be classified into five broad empirically derived domains” (p. 506). O'Connor and Paunonen (2007) in their meta-analytic review of personality factors as predictors of post-secondary academic performance, consistently found that Conscientiousness was a strong predictor of academic performance, Openness to experience was sometimes positively correlated to academic performance and Extraversion was sometimes negatively correlated to academic performance.



- ***Social Cognitive and Learning Theories***

Bandura in 1977 proposed the Social Learning Theory. According to this theory, people learn through observing others' behaviour and imitate and model them.

Bandura (Multon, Brown & Lent, 1991) also defined self efficacy as the belief in ones ability to achieve a goal. In a meta-analytic review of the effects of self efficacy on academic performance, self efficacy beliefs were shown to positively and significantly relate to academic performance.

Zimmerman (1989) put forth that self regulated leaning can improve a student's learning and achievement. Zimmerman (1989) described students as self-regulated in that they are active in their own learning through meta-cognition, motivation and their own behaviour.

Zimmerman (1989) also stated that students initiate their own learning efforts and are not reliant on educators or peers.

- ***Retention for non-traditional students in South Africa***

The aforementioned theories were not necessarily developed with the South African student in mind. Hence, Jama, Mapasela and Beylefeld (2008) have proposed a holistic explanation for successful academic performance and consequently retention among non-traditional students in the South African context. Non-traditional students refer to black students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This theoretical explanation was also presented as a response to the limitation of Tinto's theory for the South African context. The retention theory for non-traditional students proposes that students progress through five cycles.

The first cycle that the student has to progress through is the *Pre-entry cycle*. Here progression is influenced by family background, school background, language and finance, factors that may negatively impact on academic performance even before learners begin with university education. Progression through this stage means that they have performed successfully in school despite the negative effects of the previously mentioned factors, resulting in the ability to enter university.

The second cycle is the *Initial entry cycle*. This cycle entails entry into the academic and social spheres of university. This cycle includes progression through the academic environment, accommodation, orientation, language difficulties and financial problems and leads to academic and social integration at university. Again the mastery of these factors and challenges in this initial entry cycle results in good academic performance and ultimately retention. The skills used to overcome these challenges will assist with progression through the third cycle

In the third cycle, *Teaching and learning experiences*, the real involvement with higher learning takes place. Students have to familiarize themselves with an academic system completely different to that of school, a system that includes a more demanding

workload, different teaching styles and interaction with lecturers. Here language and finances can again influence progression through this cycle, particularly if these issues were not dealt with in the previous cycle. The problems in this cycle can lead to demotivation, poor self-esteem, lack of confidence and as a result, poor academic performance. Successfully moving through this cycle will ensure entry into the fourth cycle.

The fourth cycle is *Ongoing social and academic integration*. It is during this cycle that students start focusing their areas of study, to become more specialized. They acquire their roles as professionals. Despite that students are moving toward the end of their studies, they are often still faced with financial problems. They are also expected to apply all that they have learned thus far. Students can overcome some of these challenges through peer support and good role models in their specific professional fields. Alternatively, these problems may lead to poor academic performance.

Evidently, various theories attempt to explain academic performance. While, there has also been some consideration of reciprocal effects between academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1998), there is no theoretical framework or model that adequately explains these reciprocal effects. Stage (1989) pointed out this theoretical limitation of Tinto's original theory of student integration. Tinto (1998) in his revised theory of student integration recognized the importance of social integration to academic performance, stating that "each form of integration can be a vehicle for integration in the other" - that is the two forms of integration are reciprocal" (Tinto, 1998, p. 168).

## 2.2.2 Tinto's Student Integration Model

Tinto's Student Integration Model, developed in 1975, is the most comprehensive and widely used theoretical explanation of the process of attrition or drop out among college student (McCubbin, 2003). In spite of its popularity, Tinto modestly, but perhaps accurately describes his theory as a theoretical model that serves to only partially explain social behaviour (Tinto, 1982). Tinto's theory is largely rooted in Durkheim's theory of suicide. According to Durkheim (1963), suicide is the result of insufficient integration into the social system or society. In the same way, Tinto (1975) conceives of dropping out as the result of insufficient integration into the academic and social university systems. At the core of this conception are the constructs of social integration and academic integration into the institution (Terenzini, Lorang & Pascarella, 1981). In his theoretical model, Tinto understands the process of attrition as a series of socio-psychological interactions between students' pre-university individual characteristics and their university environment characteristics (Terenzini, Lorang & Pascarella, 1981).

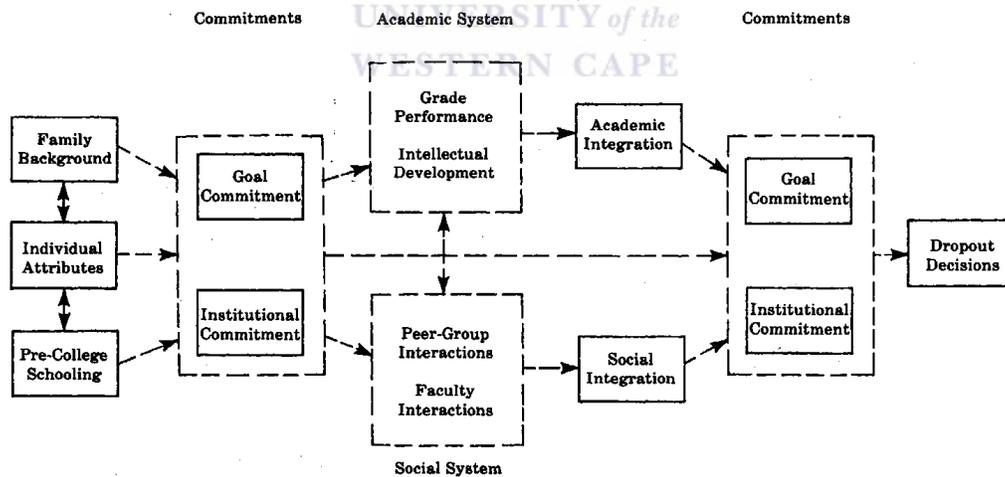


Figure 1: A conceptual schema for drop out<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> From 'Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research' by Tinto (1975), Review of Educational Research, 45(1), p. 95.

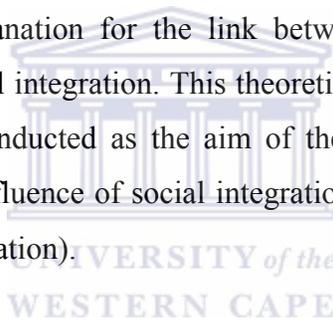
Students' family background characteristics (e.g. social status, values, parental education and family expectations), their individual characteristics (e.g. sex, age, race, educational ability) and their pre-college/university experiences (e.g. high school performance,) all interact.

- This interactive process influences the student's goal commitment (how motivated students are to achieving their career goal) and his/her institutional commitment (how prepared students are to fit into the university environment).
- These commitments in turn, play a role in the individual's integration into the academic and social systems of the institution. Through this process of integration into the academic and social spheres of university, goals and commitments change. At this stage, the level of social integration (e.g. peer group interaction, faculty and staff interaction and organisational involvement) and academic integration (measured in terms of grade performance and intellectual development during university years) influence the decision to drop out due to changed goals and commitments.
- Insufficient academic and social integration are the two main conditions under which drop out occurs.
- In summary, drop out is a process of interaction between individual characteristics and the social and academic systems of the institution. During this process, the student's experiences with these social and academic systems constantly changes the student's goal and commitments to the institution, resulting in persistence or drop out.

The main theoretical constructs, academic integration and social integration, were introduced in Tinto's original model of student departure as separate constructs (Stage, 1989). Tinto (1975) has pointed to some sort of relationship between the two, "...one would expect a reciprocal functional relationship between the two modes of integration

such that excessive emphasis on integration in one domain would, at some point detract from one's integration into the other domain" (p. 92); however this relationship was not fully examined. Stage (1989) attempted to address this limitation in her study on the reciprocal effects of social integration and academic integration. The findings of this study indicate differing reciprocal effects for males and females. For males, social integration had a negative but insignificant effect on academic integration while for females social integration was a positive predictor of academic integration. Thus, the more socially integrated a female student was, the more likely she was to achieve academically. Stage (1989) recommended that further research be carried out on the relationship between academic and social integration.

Many studies have aimed to build on Tinto's work; yet very few, if any, have attempted to develop a theoretical explanation for the link between its two central constructs, academic integration and social integration. This theoretical gap serves as the basis from which the present study is conducted as the aim of the study is to explore first year student's perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance (as an indicator of academic integration).



### **2.3 SOUTH AFRICAN RESEARCH**

Empirical research on the social determinants of academic success in South Africa is limited (Petersen *et al.* 2009). A few key research undertakings have examined the factors that predict academic performance among South African students. These studies have pointed to a range of factors that predict, influence and impact on academic performance, including individual background characteristics, personality factors, system related factors, and institutional and environmental factors. The following section provides an overview of South African studies that have sought to understand the causes of academic success.

The South African higher education system has a mammoth task of addressing the inequalities of the past as this has a definite impact on the present performance of students within the higher education sector. Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) have included

in their report some of the factors that affect student performance in higher education. They report that these factors are twofold: those beyond the control of the South African higher education sector and those within the control of the sector. Factors beyond the sector's control include the inefficient schooling system that was heavily based on equality during Apartheid. For instance, the 2003 Senior Certificate results show that only 5.2% of black students gained an endorsement making them eligible for university entry. Scott *et al.* (2007) have pointed to socio-economic conditions as another factor beyond the sector's control. Petersen, *et al.* (2007) argue that financial difficulties (resulting in employment responsibilities), may be one factors impacting on the academic success of disadvantaged students. Scott *et al.* support this argument, acknowledging the necessity of examining the relationship between student funding and academic performance, as this may contribute to the effective use of resources. Poor school quality has also been attributed to poor academic performance of disadvantaged students (Petersen *et al.*). The main focus at high school is to produce good Matric results. However, passing Matric well is not a good enough predictor of a student's ability to deal with the academic workload at university, especially since secondary school often does not provide students with the language proficiency needed at university (Jama *et al.* 2008).

In contrast to these studies, Malefo (2000) in her study on psycho-social factors that predict the academic performance of African women at a predominantly white university reported that no significant relationship was found between students' academic performance and their socio-economic status (measured in terms of parents' educational status and occupation). Malefo (2000) did however find age to be a good predictor of academic performance and alluded to the fact that older people, due to their ability to cope with stress, may perform better than younger people at university. A range of affective factors such as motivation, anxiety about personal or financial issues, or alienation from the institution may also impact on academic performance (Scott *et al.* 2007). It is recommended that further research be conducted on the role of affective factors and academic performance in influencing voluntary drop out.

Blitzer and Troskie-De Bruin (2004) conducted a perception based study investigating the effects of factors related to prior schooling on students' persistence at university. A key finding of this study is that school students have unrealistic expectations of university and they often underestimate the amount of time to be allocated to self study. Furthermore, it is shown that students who performed poorly at school tended to be over-optimistic about their university academic performance levels. Based on these findings, Blitzer and Troskie-De Bruin (2004) recommended that school leavers be prepared to have more realistic expectations of university so as to improve retention rates. This suggestion speaks to the necessity of preparation before university entry. It has been noted that South African students may not be adequately prepared for university (Petersen *et al.* 2009; Scott *et al.* 2007), especially in light of past educational inequality. The concern that students lack adequate preparation has resulted in the establishment of The Academic Support Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand, with the aim of providing additional support for underprepared first-year students (Haiden, n.d.).

In a study on the effects of adjustment on academic performance among disadvantaged students in South Africa, Petersen *et al.* (2009) concluded that academic performance was significantly predicted by adjustment, extrinsic motivation and academic overload. They demonstrated that students, who engaged in academic activities mostly to achieve extrinsic rewards such as good grades and those who perceived their academic workload to be very demanding, performed poorly. Alternatively, those who were well adjusted and felt a sense of belonging to the university tended to perform better academically. Interestingly, they found that social adjustment did not have a significant effect on academic performance. This is in contrast to studies that have found positive effects between social adjustment and academic performance. This inconsistency in the research has led to Petersen *et al.* recommending further research on the effects of social involvement factors on academic success.

The results of two empirical studies conducted at two South African universities point out that both students and lecturers agreed that learner characteristics such as hard work, self-motivation, independent learning, exam preparation and wise choice in study course,

contribute to success (Fraser & Killen, 2005). Students, more than lecturers identified dedication to a career goal as an important factor in student success. Furthermore, they found that distance students identified big workload and lecturers' unrealistic high expectations as factors that lead to failure, while good exam preparation was considered a success factor.

A study conducted by Van der Walt and Pickworth (2007) on the relationship between personality and academic performance found that students who are conscientious, emotionally stable, socially adept, self disciplined, practical and relaxed (rather than anxious) were more likely to be successful in the University of Pretoria's veterinary science programme. Similarly, Louria (2004) highlights that personality factors such as abstract and verbal reasoning, anxiety levels and extraversion together with study habits and attitudes are influential in the academic success of students pursuing a National Higher Diploma in EMC (Emergency Medical Care) (Louria, 2004).

## **2.4 INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP ON FACTORS INFLUENCING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

Various international studies have been conducted on the factors that predict academic performance among college and university student. A number of factors such as personality, environmental and psycho-social factors have been identified as predictors of academic performance and achievement. After an extensive review, an overview of these studies is provided to gain a broader understanding of academic performance at tertiary educational level.

### **2.4.1 Demographic and Individual Factors**

A number of studies examined the effects of demographic factors such as race, social class and gender in relation to academic performance at university. Walton and Cohen (2007) conducted an experimental study on the effects of race, perceived sense of belonging or social fit and achievement and concluded that perceived certainty about belonging and having friends was associated with increased academic achievement. In other words, if a student felt that he or she would have friends at campus, their sense of

belonging and potential increased. It is noteworthy that this was the case for black students (minority) and not for white students. In a study on the cross racial perceptions of cultural climate on campus, the findings shows that African Americans reported more racial-ethnic conflict and unequal treatment by staff, faculty and teaching assistants than their white counterparts. White students signified less racial-ethnic tension and perceived a more racially respectful campus environment (Ancis, Sedlacek & Mohr, 2000).

A study conducted in Norway found that students coming from a social class closest to cultural capital (e.g. those closest to the academic culture and who come from a line of academics in the family) tended to perform better than those who were first generation university students (Hansen & Mastekaasa, 2006). Baker (2003) in her study on the role of intrinsic, extrinsic and amotivational orientations on adjustment, stress, wellbeing and academic performance found gender and entry qualification to be significant predictors of academic performance.

Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005) reported that motivation to attend college for personal and career reasons (personal interest, intellectual curiosity and the reward of a good job) was predictive of college outcomes. On the other hand, family expectation motivation was not a strong predictor of college outcomes. Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan and Majeski (2004) found emotional intelligence to be a strong predictor of academic performance for first-year students, improving the transition from high school to university. While many studies have found that increased self-esteem positively influenced academic performance, an experimental study conducted by Forsyth, Lawrence, Burnette and Baumeister (2007) showed that increased levels of self-esteem actually led to poorer academic results.

#### **2.4.2 Academic Factors**

In a study comparing academic, application and social factors in predicting academic performance on a medical course, Lumb and Vail (2004) found that pre-college grades was a significant predictor of academic performance in this course, while non-academic activities were associated with poor performance. Furthermore, they found that mature

students performed very well, male and minority students performed very poorly and socio-economic status and school attended had no effect on academic performance. However, Lizzio, Wilson and Simons (2002) found that students' perceptions of their learning outcomes (workload, teaching, etc.) were a stronger predictor of learning outcomes at university than their pre-university performance (school achievement).

A number of studies have looked at the role of academic self-efficacy in academic performance. For instance, Gore (2006) points out that, academic self-efficacy beliefs predict college outcomes but this depends on when and how efficacy beliefs are measured. In their study on university students' academic performance, Fenollar, Román and Cuestas (2007) found that achievement goals and self-efficacy play indirect roles in academic performance. They provide support for the mediating role of study strategies and mastery goals.

Stoever (2001) in his dissertation reported that academic factors such as the GPA and SAT scores were the best predictors of college academic success and that adjustment to educational demands were predictive of academic performance. In addition to GPA and SAT scores, high school class rank was also shown to be a predictor of college academic performance and those students who were ranked highly at school proved to be better adjusted to the educational demands of college. Furthermore, this study concluded that perceived social support has been shown to be predictive of academic performance. In a report by Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004) for ACT (American College Testing programme), the most significant academic predictors of academic performance is high school grade point average (HSGPA) and ACT (a measure considered the most widely accepted college entrance exam).

According to, Coutinho (2007) students with mastery goals, defined by Elliot and Dweck (1985, cited in Coutinho, 2007) as goals that orient students to learning and mastering content, are more likely to do well academically than students with performance goals (goals that focus students on performing better than others).

Nonis and Hudson (2006) found that time spent studying and time spent working had no significant effect on academic performance and that instead, non ability factors such as motivation and studying time significantly interact with ability to influence academic performance.

### **2.4.3 Psycho-social Factors**

The ability to do well at university is often determined by students' pre-conceived ideas of what university entails and their expectations of the university system. Various studies have examined how students' expectations prior to university impacts on their university experiences and outcomes. A study conducted by the University of Adelaide (2006) found that a large majority of the sample of students expected access to teaching staff and tutors. Similarly, Lam and Kwan (1999) conducted a study on Hong Kong students' university expectations and found that student's expectations vary and include, among others, the expectation that university will enable them to obtain a qualification for future benefits such as a job; that university will allow for intellectual development and general competence development; and that the university experience will result in personal development and maturity. This study found that certain factors such as heavy workload, rigid curriculum, lack of interaction with fellow staff and students as a result of large classes, lack of inadequate resources and personal problems hampered the satisfactory meeting of these expectations.

Moreover, a number of studies have examined the effects of expectations on adjustment to university. Jackson, Pancer, Pratt and Hunsberger (2006), indicated that students with positive expectations and who were prepared (those who foresaw possible difficulties and challenges and thought of ways to deal with these challenges) were likely to adjust better. Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt and Alisat (2000) has shown that for first-year students, university is often much harder than expected, with these students having to adjust to being independent adults and coping with a very different environment to that of school. University often means living away from home, doing things for oneself and leaving behind support structures, having to develop new friendships and adjusting to a different academic environment. High levels of stress before university were related to poor

adjustment in the first year while relatively low stress levels were associated with good adjustment (Pancer *et al.* 2000). These studies point to the existence of a relationship between expectation and adjustment. However, Smith and Wertlieb (2006) found a discrepancy between students' expectations and their actual first year experiences. This study further showed the absence of a statistically significant relationship between expectations, experiences and adjustment, and that academic and social expectations were not statistically significant predictors of first-year academic achievement. In accordance with these findings, Weissberg, Owen, Jenkins and Harburg (2003) indicate that students who started at college with unrealistic academic and inflated grade expectations were found to be less successful than those with realistic and more accurate grade expectations.

More and more higher education institutions are concerned about the general well-being of students in their first year at university and studies are conducted to understand what sort of intervention is necessary. More importantly students' level of adjustment may be directly related to their academic achievement in their first year. First-year students tend to display higher levels of anxiety in their first year of university compared to pre-university years, an indication that university is a stressful time for students (Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley & Audin, 2006). The challenges and difficulties present in the first year have been recognized as having implications on the adjustment of students into university. It is important to deal with these problems, for a number of reasons. One of the more obvious reasons for taking the first-year experience of students seriously is the likelihood of drop out in the first year of study, which has major financial consequences on the individual, family and society at large (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1996; Fischer, 2007).

A number of factors have been found to contribute to the adjustment of university students and their overall performance. A study conducted among Canadian students looked at the role that parents play in this transitional stage and found that mutual reciprocity and discussions with parents are directly linked to adjustment to university. It was found that a positive relationship exists between authoritative parenting styles and adapting to university (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Similarly, Hickman, Bartholomae and

McKenry (2000) found that authoritative parenting styles positively related to students' academic adjustment and that self-esteem predicted social, personal-emotional, institutional, academic and overall adjustment of traditional college freshman. While, Wintre and Sugar (2000) also found parental relationship to be a predictor of adjustment, personality traits predicted more of the variance in adjustment. Baker (2003) found that first year social problem solving appraisal – the ability to deal with day to day problems – had beneficial effects on psychosocial adjustment to university, perceived stress levels, motivation levels and academic performance in the second year of study.

Psycho-social factors such as peer and parental support, work, extramural activities, religion and spirituality and a 'gap year' prior to university, were found to significantly contribute to student university performance. Other social factors that also impacts on academic performance are family background characteristics such as financial status.

Dennis *et al.* (2005) conducted research on the role of motivation, parental support and peer support in academic performance among first generation minority students. They found that lack of peer support was a negative predictor of college adjustment and academic performance (GPR) (Dennis *et al.*). Confirming the researchers' hypothesis, the perceived lack of family and peer support, more than available support was predictive of college outcomes. There was a significant correlation between family resources needed and college GPA (Dennis *et al.*). Cole, Matheson and Anisman (2007) examined the moderating role of ethnic identity and social support on well being and academic performance and found that social support from friends and fewer unsupportive relations predicted greater success among ethnic minority students. And while both Caucasians and ethnic students benefited from academic support, this was less readily available for ethnic students.

For first-year students, social interaction and forming social ties are so important that students sometimes resort to destructive behaviours such as heavy drinking and attending house parties to form social networks. This notion has led to the start of the Links programme at the University of Wisconsin, which focuses on mentoring students and

helping them form social ties without having to drink and party (Santovec, 2004). The programme focuses on encouraging students to participate in small groups to speak about college life.

Taylor (2008) looked at the link between spirituality and academic performance, where a spirituality index measured frequency of attendance at religious worship; frequency of discussions about religion with others from different faith traditions; the presence and strength of the connection between God and morality; and the presence and strength of the view that entry into the legal profession is a divine calling. It was found that strong spirituality was negatively correlated with academic performance. On the other hand, Mooney (2005) focused on religion at some of the most elite colleges in America and one of the most significant findings of this study was that students who participated in some religious activity at least once a week, reported higher grades than those who did not take part. These students also spent longer hours studying and were generally more satisfied with college. Similarly, Abar, Carter and Winsler (2009) looked at the relations between religiosity, maternal parenting and academic self regulation and achievement among African American students at a parochial college and found that there is a positive correlation between student religiosity and academic achievement.

Birch and Miller (2007) in their study found that factors such as pre-university academic achievement, age and location most significantly contribute to a student's decision to defer tertiary education. Deferring university education is not necessarily something negative, as it was found that students who took time off before they commenced with university education tended to perform better academically than those who commenced with university education immediately after secondary school.

Work and engagement in extra-mural activities was found to significantly impact on academic performance. The findings of a study conducted by Dundes and Marx (2006) indicate that students who work an average of 10 -19 hours per week performed better than those who worked fewer hours and those who did not work at all. These authors suggest that this may be due to the balancing of time between college and work, resulting

in discipline not seen in other students. Previously conducted studies have looked at the role of sports on academic performance and achievement. For instance, Troutman and Dufur (2007) looked at the role of high school sports on college achievement among female students and found that women who had participated in interscholastic sporting activities have a bigger challenge in terms of graduating from college than their male counterparts. An interesting doctoral study found that aerobic activity plays a significant role in the academic performance of women (Brennan, 2005). One of the findings of this study was that women who engaged in aerobic activity felt more positive about their academic activities.

## **2.5 SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

Social integration has been conceptualized as the integration of a student into the social system of the college and includes informal peer interaction, semi-formal interaction with faculty and staff members and involvement in extra-curricula activities and interaction with (Tinto, 1975). Tinto's model of student integration has been widely used in explaining college students drop out, with a focus on a lack of social integration and academic integration as the result of drop out. It has been argued that these studies have seized to examine the relationship between social integration and academic integration (Mannan, 2007; Stage, 1989). Mannan (2007) has attempted to test the validity of Tinto's theory in assessing the compensatory relationship between academic integration and social integration. The findings of the study demonstrated a strong negative relationship between academic and social integration.

The findings of a study on the influence of social integration and research activity and prestige among scientific researchers show that scientists who are more integrated in their teams perform better than less integrated scientists. However more integrated scientists are not necessarily more prestigious than less integrated scientists (Rey-Rocha, Garzón-García & Martín-Sempere, 2007).

### **2.5.1 Peer interaction**

Amenkhienan and Kogan (2004) conducted a study on engineering students' perceptions of academic activities and support services. She found that three primary factors impacted on academic performance. These include: individual effort and involvement, peer interaction and faculty contact. In this study, peer interaction was defined as students' relationships with other students and the perceived impacts this had on academic performance. The findings show that peer interaction influenced academic performance in particular ways, including the shared experience and the fact that peers could speak to each other about the work as well as through the participation in study groups, where work difficulties could be discussed and students could receive multiple perspectives on a problem. Other studies also concluded that peer interaction was crucial to overall academic and social performance and development (Astin, 1993; Carrell, Fullerton & West, 2008; Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005; Kang, 2006).

### **2.5.2 Faculty and staff interaction**

The effect of a student's interaction with staff and faculty members should not be underestimated. Amenkhienan and Kogan (2004) found that teaching styles had a tremendous role to play in students' performance. They reported that students preferred interactive teaching through group work and teachers who presented work in an interesting and stimulating way. Furthermore, it was reported that students found teachers' office hours or consultation times useful as this allowed them to clarify issues on an individual basis. Students also felt that this allowed the one-on-one time with teachers who further encouraged students.

Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2006) found that students who reported that they received academic and non-academic support from faculty and staff were more likely than other students at other institutions to report greater gains in academic performance. Furthermore, students who were more academically engaged and who felt that their institution emphasized spending significant amounts of time on academic activities also reported advantages in academic competence. It is evident from this study that the institution plays a significant role in the academic performance of students.

### **2.5.3 Extra-mural activities and organisational involvement**

Many students engage in a number of activities (sport and non-sport) at university or college, which could ultimately impact on the success of the students (including, good academic performance, and satisfaction with the institute, good social integration in the college environment and overall well-being. Social activities such as sport clubs could increase students' self-esteem and faith in their abilities. Belch, Gebel and Maas (2001) and Huesman, Brown, Lee, Kellogg and Radcliffe (2009) indicate that the use of campus recreational facilities had a positive effect on academic performance. They found that students who used campus recreational facilities reported higher academic performance.

Baker (2008) found that the extent to which academic performance is affected by involvement in extra-curricula activities are largely dependent on the type and composition of the extra-curricula organisation. For instance, political organisations more than any other organisation, benefited the academic performance of minority students (Baker, 2008). Furthermore, race and gender also play a role in how organisations impact on academic performance. Baker (2008) further showed that athletic involvement only affected the academic performance of Latinas and had no impact on Latinos or black males and females. Indirect effects of social groups and organisations may well be increased confidence and maturity that contribute to improved academic performance (Leppel, 2006). However, as Leppel (2006) puts forth, activities, often largely social in nature, may negatively impact on the academic performance of the student. The social group or network may distract the student, resulting in less time spent on academic activities and coursework.

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

This chapter sought to review all relevant theoretical understandings of academic performance as well as studies that examined the factors that predict academic performance. Various theories such as motivation theories, social learning and cognitive theories, personality theories as well as retention theories have provided some explanation for academic performance. Tinto's Student Integration Model was elaborated on as it provides the theoretical basis for the present studies. The chapter included the

findings of various national and international studies, indicating that demographic and individual factors, academic factors and social factors all play a role in the academic performance of university students. This literature review will serve as a backdrop for a discussion of the findings of the present study.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter focuses on all the methods employed in conducting the present study. The chapter starts with a discussion of the research design of the study, followed by a discussion of the specific data collection method, the participants selected for the study, the data collection tool, and procedures involved in the collection of data including ethical considerations and logistical arrangements. A discussion on the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, methods of data analysis and reflexivity then follows.

#### **3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

It is evident from the discussion in chapter one that studies on social integration and its impact on South African university students are necessary as it will add to existing international scholarship on student educational success. This is especially noteworthy in light of South Africa's history of segregation which may still have an impact on educational outcomes. It has also been noted that a study of social integration may contribute to understanding the problem of academic failure and drop out within the South African context. Consequently, the primary aim of this study was to explore first-year students' perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance. The following objectives have been set out to meet the aim of the study:

1. To determine students' understanding of social integration at university.
2. To explore students' perceptions of their academic performance.
3. To determine whether students' perceive social integration to influence academic performance.

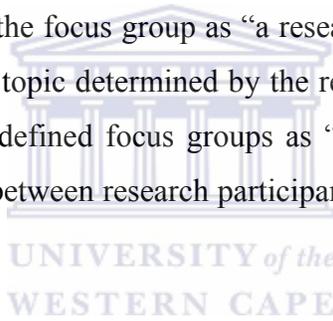
In order to realize these objectives, a qualitative research design has been employed. Babbie and Mouton (2001) posit that qualitative studies may generically refer to research that takes its departure point from insiders' perspectives on social action. Babbie and Mouton (2001) further define qualitative research in terms of the following key characteristics: 1) Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting of social actors,

2) it focuses on the process rather than the outcomes, 3) the actors' perspective is emphasized, 4) the aim is an in-depth understanding of actions and events, 5) it is mainly concerned with understanding the social phenomenon within the context and not generalizing it to the wider population, 6) it is often inductive and 7) the researcher is seen as the main instrument. A quantitative research design has been considered for the conduction of the present study, however, quantitative research methods are used when the researcher is interested in describing a social phenomenon and generalizing the findings of these descriptive studies to the broader population (e.g. survey designs). In addition, emphasis is placed on carrying out the research in a controlled environment (e.g. experiments). These methods of research do not allow for in-depth information to be elicited and for the experiences of participants to be fully explored, within its natural setting. In view of Babbie and Mouton's (2001) definition of qualitative research and the characteristics of quantitative research approaches, the qualitative research approach appears to be the most appropriate for the present study.

The influence of social integration on academic performance, particularly as perceived by first-year university students is a relatively under studied topic in the South African context, compared to the extent of these studies in other countries. A qualitative approach is well suited to explore an under studied topic as in the case of the present study. According to Durrheim (1999), "exploratory studies are used to make preliminary investigations into relatively unknown areas of research. They employ an open, flexible and inductive approach to research [attempting] to look for new insights" (p. 39). Similarly, Powell and Single (1996) put forth that qualitative methods are appropriate when there is a need to understand new issues.

### 3.3 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

For qualitative studies, the data collection should ideally allow for in-depth discussion and rich description of a specific social problem (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). This could be achieved either through individual interviews, ethnographic methods, text analysis, or group interviews. Two types of group interviews have been identified, 1) nominal group interviews and 2) focus groups. Nominal group interviews are interviews with a number of people at the same time using a highly structured technique. The purpose of these types of interviews is to keep personal interaction at a minimal level during the process of new idea generation while maximizing individual contribution of each respondent (Powell & Single, 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Alternatively, focus groups are discussions on a focused topic with emphasis on group interaction (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Morgan, 1996; Powell & Single, 1996). Morgan (1996) defines the focus group as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 130). In the same manner, Kitzinger (1995) has defined focus groups as “a form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between research participants in order to generate data” (p. 299).



Focus groups were the chosen method for data collection as this method allowed the researcher to gain a broad view of first-year students' perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance as well as allowing the researcher to observe group interaction, giving her an idea of the process of social integration within social groups. While the topic could be deeply explored through individual interviews, this method would not have allowed for the observation of interaction and a wide range of experiences and perceptions to surface (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Kelly (1999) describes a focus group as a research interview that is generally conducted with a group of people who share a similar experience. The groups were homogenous in that all participants were in their first year of study, allowing the researcher to explore shared experiences. However, the participants differed in terms of race, ethnicity, course of study, age and gender. The reason for bringing together participants from differing

backgrounds into one group was to observe the interaction between these participants. According to Kitzinger (1995), it can be useful to bring together a diverse group so as to more widely explore different perspectives.

Three or four focus groups consisting of four to 12 participants are accepted as sufficient (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Initially the researcher planned to conduct four groups; however by the third focus group the same information was emerging, that is, saturation point (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996) was reached. Consequently, for the present study three focus groups, consisting of between five and six participants each, were conducted. Focus groups were conducted during the lunch break and lasted approximately one hour. The groups were racially diverse so as to try and gain insight into how students from various racial groups interact.

### **3.4 PARTICIPANTS**

The aim of the study was to explore first-year students' perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance. Students were invited to participate in the study and the selection of participants was based only on one criterion, that they're students registered for their first year of study at the University of the Western Cape. This resulted in an unequal break-down in terms of demographics. What was particularly noteworthy was the break-down in terms of race (See Table 1), a general reflection of the ratio of white students to black students<sup>9</sup> at the University of the Western Cape.

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<sup>9</sup> Here, black includes coloured and Indian students.

**Table 1: Demographic breakdown of participants**

<b>Demographic Category</b>	<b>Sub – category</b>	<b>Total of participants</b>
<b>Age</b>	18 – 23 years	15
	24 – 29 years	1
	> 30 years	1
<b>Gender</b>	Male	5
	Female	12
<b>Race</b>	Black	2
	Coloured	11
	Indian	3
	White	1
<b>Course</b>	Psychology	10
	Geography	4
	Law	3
<b>Belonging to a non-academic course</b>	Yes	11
	No	6

### **3.5 DATA COLLECTION TOOL**

The focus group usually takes the form of a general spontaneous discussion, which is opened with the researcher asking a single question that develops into a conversation. Yet, for the present study, the researcher developed a focus group guide that consisted of topics and questions informed by the aims of the study and by existing literature. Powell and Single (1996, p. 499) asserts that “the focus group employs guided, interactional discussion as a means of generating..... [rich detail]”. More so, the use of a discussion guide was to ensure that all the groups were provided with the same information. According to Krueger and Casey (2000) maintaining consistency across groups allows the researcher to draw comparisons as it is through comparison and contrast that themes and patterns emerge. The discussion guide was made up of a number of questions that related to participants’ experiences as first-year students, their understanding and experiences of social integration, and social factors that play a role in academic performance. In addition, the link between social integration and academic performance and the reasons for drop out, particularly whether social integration related to drop out were also included in the guide (See APPENDIX A).

## **3.6 PROCEDURE**

### **3.6.1 Ethical Considerations**

Approval to conduct the study with first-year students was sought from the Senate Higher Degrees Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Once the research proposal was accepted and permission to conduct the study was granted, participants were informed of the study and invited by word of mouth to participate. A first announcement was made in a first-year lecture hall. Some students agreed to participate and these students informed other first-year students about the study. The researcher e-mailed all students who had volunteered to participate, to further inform them about the purpose, aims and objectives of the study and their participation in the study as well as proposed dates for an initial meeting with participants. This initial meeting took place before the focus groups were conducted as it was important for the researcher to first familiarize herself with the participants. This aim of the initial meeting was to create a certain level of comfort between researcher and participant and between the participants themselves to try and reduce anxiety within the focus group.

### **3.6.2 Logistical arrangements**

A mutual decision was made about the venue, one that allowed for privacy and that all participants were familiar with. The focus groups were conducted at UWC, in the department of Psychology as this was a neutral setting for the students and was also adequately private. One of the characteristics of qualitative research that makes it different to quantitative research is that “[it] is conducted in the natural setting of the social actors” (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 270). Shortly before the commencement of the focus group discussion, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and how they fitted into the research process as participants. They were also made aware of the duration of the data collection process, how information will be used, analysed and presented and who will have access to the information. Participants only participated after written consent (See APPENDIX B) had been given. The researcher highlighted that any information provided by participants would be strictly confidential; that they were not obligated to participate and could leave at any stage. They were also informed that

transcripts would be digitally stored and would be destroyed once the research report was completed.

The researcher facilitated the focus groups and was assisted by a fellow Masters-level student of a different race. A digital voice recording device was used to record the responses of the participants. The responsibility of the research assistant was to manage the digital voice recorder, take written notes (as a back-up in the event that the recording was not clear), as well as make notes on the non-verbal behaviour of participants. The assistant also served to alert the researcher to aspects of the discussion that she may have missed. After each focus group discussion, debriefing sessions were held between the researcher and the research assistant. Participants were anonymous in that the researcher did not address them by their names and identifying information was not included on transcriptions. Once the focus groups were completed, participants were offered something to eat as a small gesture of gratitude for participating in the study.

### **3.7 DATA ANALYSIS**

In South Africa, little is known about the influence of social integration on academic performance among university students. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as “a particularly useful method when you are investigating an under-researched area, or you are working with participants whose views on the topic are not known” (p. 83). For this reason Thematic Analysis was selected as the method of data analysis. Thematic analysis is also one of the more commonly used methods of qualitative data analysis and is widely used in psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis technique is concerned with identifying important themes and patterns that emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The flexibility of thematic analysis allows it to either be related to a theory or epistemology (e.g. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) or it is independent of theory or epistemology and applicable across theoretical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) as well as Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) and a number of others (see e.g. Thomas & Harden, 2008; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) have

identified similar steps in the thematic analysis process. Set out below are the steps that were followed in analyzing the data:<sup>10</sup>

### *Step 1: Familiarization and Immersion*

The nature of the data collection method ensured that analysis already took place during the data collection phase. The process that the focus groups followed was also useful for the researcher to begin to make sense of participants' responses, ideas and opinions (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999), even before the focus group discussions were transcribed. In debriefing with the research assistant, the researcher was able to identify similarities in responses and dominant ideas expressed by participants. Furthermore, the transcription of the data and rechecking of these transcriptions further aided the researcher in becoming familiar with the data.

### *Step 2: Coding the data*

Coding is a system of breaking data into units that are relevant for analysis. These could be words, quotes or sentences. It should be noted that the researcher determined what was analytically relevant based on the common ideas that emerged from the focus groups. According to Neuman (2003), the organizing of data is followed by the coding of data which allows the researcher to engage with the data at a higher level and could lead to possible themes. However, Terre Blanch and Kelly (1999) point out that coding should take place while developing themes, it is a simultaneous process. At this step the researcher carefully looked at the responses from participants and captured the essence of the response and allocated a semantic code to it. This helped to identify similar responses, dominant responses as well as minority responses. The researcher coded every response so as to ensure that all responses were captured and to ensure a fair reflection of all opinions and perceptions expressed.

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<sup>10</sup> The steps in the thematic analysis were based on the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) as well as Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999). It is important to note that the steps set out by these authors' only provided guidelines and these steps were not followed strictly in this order. At times the researcher was required to follow the same step more than once, especially with coding and recoding and setting out themes and then reviewing and changing.

### *Step 3: Identifying tentative themes*

At this stage, all the coded data was grouped together into themes on the basis of some similarity. Broad thematic categories were created in line with the themes that guided the focus group discussions. Sub-themes were created within these broad categories. This approach to coding and creating themes is what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as inductive analysis. Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into pre-existing themes. At this point it should be noted that the researcher was aware that pre-existing ideas drawn from reviewing the literature as well as the ideas that the researcher had after the focus groups may have influenced the researcher's view of relevancy of the themes.

### *Step 4: Reviewing and naming themes*

This stage of the analysis required the researcher to review and finalize the themes. The researcher found that some codes overlapped and decisions needed to be made in terms of where to fit these codes. On other occasions the researcher found that some codes were not significant enough to fit into a theme. The reviewing also required the researcher to name the themes and ensure that all the codes were well fitted under sub-themes and those sub-themes were well fitted under the broader thematic categories. The researcher best tried to name themes that encapsulated the essence of the themes.

### *Step 5: Interpretation of the process*

Once the researcher had finally themed all the data and was satisfied that all the codes were allocated to the correct theme, that sub-themes and major themes were clearly defined and that the themes were representative of what emerged in the discussions, the researcher was able to reflect on and interpret the process. This meant placing the themes in a coherent system and reflecting on the possible researcher bias that may have influenced the thematic analysis process. Bias could have influenced decisions on which codes to fit under which theme, whether a group of codes was a sub theme or a major theme as well as deciding on the order of the themes.

### 3.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS and CREDIBILITY

Trustworthiness is a very important aspect to qualitative research and is similar to the notion of validity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). With more and more emphasis being placed on the relevance of qualitative research in the social sciences, questions are now centred on the quality of qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1990) state that good qualitative research is based on the trustworthiness of the research and uses this to persuade the audience of the worth of the findings. Babbie and Mouton (2001) looked at certain criteria that find a study credible (valid). Some points have also been raised by Morrow (2005) on ways to ensure trustworthiness. These are described below, together with the researcher's incorporation thereof.

- Recognition of subjectivity and reflection on researcher bias and making this known to self and others (Morrow, 2005). Reflexivity deals with reflecting on possible researcher bias stemming from personal experience.
- *Prolonged engagement* (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The researcher is required to stay in the field until saturation is reached. This lends to the *adequacy of data* (Morrow, 2005) or adequate amounts of data. According to Lincoln and Guba (1990), data should be collected up until the point of redundancy. Similarly, Krueger and Casey (2000) state that, while three or four focus groups are regarded as adequate, focus groups should be conducted until saturation point is reached. Initially the researcher proposed to conduct four focus groups, however, by the third focus group, the researcher realized that the same data was emerging and therefore did not conduct any more focus groups.
- *Member checks* (Creswell, 2003). Throughout the focus groups the data was checked with the participants. The researcher regularly checked with participants whether her understanding of their responses were correct.

The researcher's use of a research assistant was helpful in ensuring the credibility of the data. The research assistant made her own notes and these were checked against the transcriptions.

### **3.9 REFLEXIVITY**

Reflexivity is an essential component of any qualitative research project. According to Patton (2002) reflexivity is “a way of emphasizing the importance of self awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one’s perspective” (p. 64). In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2002; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999) and as a researcher, it is important to be aware of one’s own judgment and bias throughout the entire study. Awareness of the researcher’s role throughout the various phases of the study; including the conceptualization phase, the process of data collection, as well as the data analysis stage, is critical to the study. First-year students’ experiences and social support for these students are concerns that are very close to the researcher’s heart. The researcher is also strongly of the belief that students, particularly from previously disadvantaged backgrounds should receive all the assistance available to lead them to successfully obtaining education, as the researcher feels that this is the most important asset to young South Africans.

#### **Researcher Bias**

The researcher’s own experiences as a first-year student as well as her experience with working with first-year students in the Orientation Programme at the University of the Western Cape may have influenced the research process, analysis and results. The researcher is also aware that as a Masters student in the Department of Psychology, she may have influenced the way first-year students responded in that they may have felt intimidated or pressurized to give responses that would impress or please her. It is equally important to note that while the researcher may have been reflective throughout the research process, it cannot be assumed that regular reflection countered any bias that may have emerged.

### **3.10 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER**

This chapter focused on the methods employed in the present study. The study focused on first-year students’ perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance, a relatively new research topic in the South African context. The study followed a qualitative research design and focus groups were the primary method of data

collection. First year student across race, religion, course of study, gender, were invited to participate in the study. Three focus groups were conducted and facilitated by the researcher and a research assistant who compared notes to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. A number of other steps were also taken to ensure this. The data was transcribed and thematic analysis was the method of data analysis. Finally, the researcher maintained ethical practice and reflected on her role throughout the research process.



## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The following chapter presents the key themes that have emerged from the discussion on perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance. The key themes include: ‘the experiences of the first year at university’, ‘the social experiences of first-year students’, ‘the academic experiences of first-year students’ and ‘linking social integration to academic performance’. As far as possible, quotes were selected from each focus group to substantiate the relevance of the theme. It should be noted that this chapter includes only a presentation of the results and that Chapter 5 will be a discussion of these results.

#### 4.2 GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE FIRST YEAR AT UNIVERSITY

Participants’ discussed at great length, their experiences as first-year students at the University of the Western Cape. These experiences were generally compared to their school experiences. Of note, they spoke about their experiences with UWC as an institution as well as their perceptions and expectations prior to university and how these expectations related to their experiences as first-years. The transition from school to university, freedom, parental and family influences, the students’ new roles as responsible and independent adults as well as adjustment and coping strategies as first-year students were discussed in detail.

##### 4.2.1 Experiences with the university institution: ‘Hitting brick walls and unhelpful people’

To open up the discussion, participants were asked to speak about their experiences as first-year students at the University of the Western Cape. Participants in general felt very negative about UWC as an institution. One participant described her experiences of UWC as ‘*We are suffering together*’, ‘*We have clashes*’ and ‘*we just hit brick walls and unhelpful people*’

Another participant highlighted racial discrimination from teaching staff:

*FR 4: ... when we were in that class of Foundation [a foundation course for first-year students similar to a bridging course] our uhm our lecturer Gino would say ya you black people are here because you are stupid. It wasn't a nice thing for... (FG 1)*

These negative feelings were mostly directed towards UWC's administration. A number of participants expressed frustration with the 'admin' system. These frustrations were more pronounced during 'high pressure' times.

*FR 2: I think UWC's awful admin actually makes social integration a lot healthier at this university because we become so frustrated as first-year students who don't know where we need to go and what we need to do...I think you become – disillusioned and there are times for me, I dunno if everyone else has it, where its high pressure (MR 1 agrees) then I find university very frustrating because the beginning of each term you battle to get notes, but..., you like waiting, you got time, you battle to get your hands on everything so that you can structure your your studying and then they hit you all at once. ... (FG 1)*

#### **4.2.2 University as 'not that bad'**

Even though many students felt negative about UWC's administration, the university as a whole was not negatively perceived. Students have certain perceptions about university even before they start at university. These perceptions are formed and influenced by school experiences, parental perceptions, and the media, which in turn shape current university experiences. The following excerpts highlight participants' perceptions and expectations of university.

*MR 1: It's different to my expectations... coming from school I thought it would be more strenuous, hectic. But it's not as bad as I pictured it to be (FG 1)*

*FR3: Different, I am still trying to get used to it...It's not that difficult. (FG 2)*

*FR2: Yes, cos I also experience the same thing. My expectations of university were, it was like its university, it's difficult, it's a lot of studying and I thought. They say it's different to school, but I experienced that there is a lot of support from lecturers and there's arrangements like tutorial arrangements and stuff, so there is a support structure. I thought like, everybody said you are on your own, it's your own learning and you do everything on your own but it's not like that ... (FG 3)*

*FR 3: It was like I'll come here and there will be nobody, I'll be on my own in this big jungle of people and I will find my own way and it wasn't actually that bad like. Like I had this whole thing in my mind that it would be like oh on TV, you are like sitting and things are all like that, it wasn't like that. (FG 3)*

Generally, participants expressed initial feelings of fear and being overwhelmed. Participants indicated that they expected to experience difficulty, an overwhelming workload, social pressures, and feeling lost and alone. Yet, for most of these participants, their experiences of university were not as they expected it to be. They felt that university was much easier than they had anticipated. Some participants indicated an awareness of various support measures in place that helped ease the anxiety.

### **4.2.3 Comparing university to school**

As noted earlier, school experiences play a huge role in shaping the perceptions and attitudes of first-year university students. When asked about their university experiences, a large majority of the participants compared these to their school experiences. While very different from school, participants pointed out that university is not necessarily 'worse' than school and that it is to some extent 'easier' than school was.

*FR 3: It's more relaxed here than at school. They tell you like the, they stress you out with the work but you have a lot of freedom how to plan it out as well as the atmosphere, the people they very relaxed. (FG 1)*

*FR 2: Its pure work, there's no other reason, they give you a scope here, there... this is easier than school. There's no reason not to do well, I'm sorry. They give you a scope; they tell you what questions are coming in. ... (FG 1)*

*FR1: and even the people around you, it's very much different from school. Like school's like a smaller group and you know everybody most of the time, whereas here you have to, everyone's different ... (FG 2)*

From these quotes, it is clear that participants experienced university to be very different to school in terms of academic experiences (e.g. workload, learning styles, and subject choices) and social experiences (e.g. friends, peers, diversity). Despite the heavier workload at university, one participant said that she copes better at university

*FR3: It is different for me, because at school I wasn't I wouldn't say, I wasn't an A student at school, I'm not an A student here as well, but I'm coping better (FG 3)*

Another participant stated “Ya you train your brain to do things a certain way and obviously it's by trial and error...but as you go along you will see it's not all that difficult.” The acquisition of new learning styles and skills (“In Matric it's so, in first year it's completely different so I have to do things completely different” FG 2) could be attributed to the ability to cope well.

Some of the participants pointed out that university students need to be more independent and adult-like, whereas school students are usually dependent on teachers. The transition

from school to university requires a definite shift from being a ‘baby’ to being an independent adult.

*FR 1: It is like a major adjustment from high school where you spoon-fed and you come to university everything’s different you have to be on your own, make your own decisions and nobody has your back, you have to be strong enough (FG 2)*

#### **4.2.4 Crossing over – making the transition from school to university**

Students who were prepared for the shift from school to university generally adjust better than their poorly-prepared counterparts. One participant felt that high school students are adequately prepared for university:

*F: Do you think generally people, high school students who, if they are preparing to go to university, are adequately prepared for university*

*FR 3: Ya, I would say so ya (FG 1)*

However, the transition for some participants was a very overwhelming and scary experience. One participant explained this as “we’ve been thrown in at the deep end, some of us can’t swim”

*MR 1: So I think that quick change, that quick process from there to this freedom from nowhere, not practically, no freedom to practically just random anything free, is a bit scary. (FG 2)*

#### **4.2.5 University as a place of freedom**

Freedom was identified as one aspect that sets university apart from school. Post secondary education institutions are essentially systems that allow students to enjoy more freedom, through its facilities and academic and social structures.

*MR 1: as she said, there is much more freedom ... (FG 1)*

*MR3: They do get carried away yah. They find that here they have a lot of freedom, so they do a lot of things like they don't study, ...There at home their parents were too straight so now they have freedom, they don't do a lot of academic stuff. (FG 2)*

In speaking to participants about their experiences of freedom, there were mixed responses. Some participants felt that freedom was a good thing while others felt that freedom was not such a good thing, especially because it is something that first-year students have to familiarise themselves with. The following excerpt taken from focus group 3, clearly illustrates the mixed feelings participants had about freedom at university.

*F: The freedom that you speak about this um, do you think it's a good thing maybe?*



*FR2: Yes, I think it's a good thing... I didn't like the school arrangement and all that support I mean I I this freedom for me is better, I feel I can perform better, academically I'm doing better than at school in that arrangement so I prefer this I think I can, I'm doing better socially academically than at school . So I dunno, I feel freedom for me is not a downfall, I think it makes me more responsible I think I become, it's just better for me. (FG 3)*

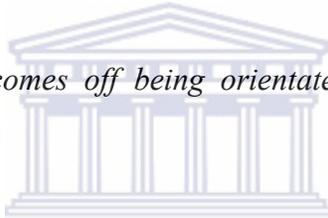
*FR3: To some people it can be a good thing but you get like people like for certain times I would say no it's not a good thing especially for me, especially with ...I still have that but here I'm like no I just got work now so it must be in like, so when I don't feel like typing, I'm not gonna do it so you have that freedom. Knowing you have it you can just let loose and just agh. (FG 3)*

*FR1: Um when like for me the minute I can let loose then I spiral down so that is a bad thing, so if someone's going to leave me to my own devices... (FG 3)*

*F: It's better for you yes. M do you agree, freedom, is it a bad thing for you is it a good thing for you, generally*

*FR5: For me It's a bad thing because it makes me lazy ...I still need that someone to stand behind me and tell me listen do you have homework, or go do your homework, because if I, because if no-one is going to tell me to do it then I'm just not going to do it I'm going to sit in front of that TV whole day and watch TV and watch movies. (FG 3)*

*FR3: I think it just comes off being orientated into twelve years of having someone. (FG 3)*



Generally it appears that students who felt that freedom was a good thing mostly associated freedom with the opportunity to develop optimally, at their own pace. They felt that working in a less restrictive environment actually allowed them to become more responsible and take things seriously, resulting in better performance. On the other hand, those participants who considered freedom to be a bad thing felt that freedom caused them to become lazy and take things for granted. Either way, learning to manage the freedom, was a challenge for all first-year students, especially coming from school where freedom was limited.

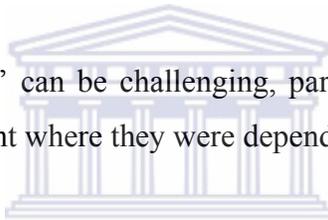
#### **4.2.6 'I'm an adult now and this is my responsibility'- Adulthood and self responsibility**

Participants realise that dealing with the challenges of the first year necessitates maturity and a sense of responsibility. The following quotes clearly depict that participants realise that university forces students to take on an 'adult' role and assume responsibility for all social and academic decisions, illustrated in the following extract:

*FR 3: Really, It shoves you in that role of being an adult even if you not mentally prepared but if you come straight from high school and you still got that mentality 'Stuff will get done for you' and here at varsity you really have to sort, if you don't get up with it, it will get you down... it's very much in your hands here at varsity, like sort out admin, you gotta do it yourself, its not gonna get done for you. You can't blame anybody if something isn't right. (FG 1)*

*FR1: It is like a major adjustment from high school where you spoon-fed and you come to university everything's different you have to be on your own, make your own decisions and nobody has your back, you have to be strong enough... (FG 2)*

This transition into 'adulthood' can be challenging, particularly for young people who come from a school environment where they were dependent on their educators.



*FR4: Yes, I think at varsity you acquire a lot more independent than at school. At school you very dependent on the teacher but at varsity there's no-one to depend on but yourself, the lecturers are there and they can help you but it's up to you. (FG 3)*

In spite of the challenges that the transition from 'child' to 'adult' brings about for first year university students, the sooner students realise that they are to adopt adult-like qualities such as knowing yourself, approaching fellow students and lecturers and taking university seriously, the sooner they are able to work through these challenges.

*FR 3: and I think also you go through a lot of identity changes at school and your maturity level it's not there yet. But you come to a certain point where you know now this is the time where I have to be serious ... (FG 3)*

#### 4.2.7 Family background and influence

One of the most challenging aspects of the first year experience is that students are expected to no longer depend on parents. It seems that as long as students do not have their parents ‘watching over them’, they have no control. Participants mentioned that staying at home with their parents meant that they still receive some sort of support.

*MRI: I came out of Matric last year and then I always had my parents behind me, like now still I’m staying at home. So now still they ask, now and then you doing your work, what’s up. (FG 2)*

*FR 3: I still need that uhm, like uhm okay I’m with my parents, so, at home then I have it, like my parents will still ask me, oh have you got home work or something like that...I still have that but here I’m like no I just got work now so it must be in like, so when I don’t feel like typing, I’m not gonna do it so you have that freedom. (FG 3)*

The family’s role in the academic and social experiences and performance of first-year students cannot be underestimated. For many students, perceptions that shape these experiences are formed by parental attitudes and perceptions of what university will be like.

*FR3 Like my parents would have said like don’t go this way or don’t go that way. Stick to .... And the influences are big..... But I still haven’t... (FG 3)*

First-year students’ academic performance is influenced by family expectations. This is true for students who come from families that place great importance on university education. The following extract is a clear illustration of this:

*FR2: if you come from a family where everybody studies and everybody has good jobs and then you also automatically want that. (FG 2)*

*MR2: I don't think you set your standards according to what you know, I think your family sets your standards for you. (FG 2)*

Statements such as 'Family comes first', 'of course they [family] come first' and 'definitely family' have been expressed by a number of participants in relaying the important role of the family in their success at university. Many students are also still financially dependent on their parents, another motivating factor for students to do well academically.

*MR 2: ...I know of a case where one of my friends, their parents told them for every subject that you fail you pay me back so that keeps him driving, he wants to pass everything, that's motivation for him. Until today he didn't fail anything. (FG 2)*

Some participants felt that family play a tremendous role in success, even more so than friends. The reason for this is that friends come and go but that family is present unconditionally. Moreover, parents are the reason for being at university in the first place.

While some participants felt that family play a more pertinent role in academic success than friends, others were of the opinion that friends and family are equally important. As one participant noted, friends are particularly important in the face of challenges and difficulties within the home environment.

*FR3: I can say that it doesn't go hand in hand but when I didn't have like that home environment it was like something like my father got sick I found out that my father's not well. But I came to campus and my friends helped me, see they helped me study for that few even the few hours that I had left to study. (FG 3)*

#### 4.2.8 Adjustment and Coping Strategies

Adjusting to the ‘overwhelming’ experience of being independent, making decisions and becoming acquainted with other students, staff and structures as well as being self responsible requires effort on the part of the students. Still, participants mentioned that they are able to cope better than they thought they would. For most students the freedom they experience at university as opposed to school makes it better to cope.

When asked about the aspects that positively contributed to adjustment, religious identity, taking time off to mature and to establish clear future goals and aspirations, support from positive friends, learning new coping strategies from others, understanding that adjustment to a new environment is a timely process, and the ability to approach lecturers and ask questions were identified as factors that facilitate the process of adjustment.

*MR2: ...we have foundation of Quran so that ...and I don't wanna be boastful, I don't have any pride, that is our basis and that what keeps us going, to make uh, its easier for us to make decisions...(FG 2)*

*F: Okay. Can I ask then what contributes to your being able to adjust to university?*

*FR3: My friends. (FG 2)*

*MR2: ... it's like a mountain you climbing but you can take the mountain by climbing or by taking steps you have to crawl first, baby steps. (FG 2)*

*FR3: I think it's also knowing your responsibilities and knowing that this is for my, okay school was also for your future, but this is really for your future, you have to put in here. (FG 3)*

### 4.3 SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS AMONG FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

University is essentially an institution that awards higher degrees to individuals with the aim of producing skilled professionals. So it is assumed that universities are institutions that focus on academic development. However, many students are surprised by the vastness and intricacy of university as a social structure. In exploring first-year students' social experiences at university the three main themes to surface was that of 'diversity and racial integration' at UWC, 'friends, friendships and peer groups' and 'involvement with non-academic organisations.

#### 4.3.1 Diversity and Racial Integration

During Apartheid the University of the Western Cape was an institute reserved for the tertiary education of the non-white population. With a young democracy, it is almost expected that a large proportion of UWC's first year student population would come from schools with limited racial and cultural diversity; schools were the majority of students are from the same racial and cultural backgrounds. So it is not too surprising that first-year students emphasise the novelty of racial diversity and integration at university.

Some participants made reference to the racial diversity and interaction present at university, something which is less common at school.

*FR 3: Because like on high school you would mix but you would still keep to your click but here on varsity it's not like that. (FG 1)*

In contrast, one participant noted that racial integration is still limited, that white students did not integrate well with students from other race groups and that they tended to interact only with other white students.

*FR2: ... In our psych classes I noticed the white, there'll be a handful of white students and they do sit together and if they are not sitting with their friends they'll come sit near me [a white participant] or behind me. (Laughs) I don't know what that's about...So I do think that people do*

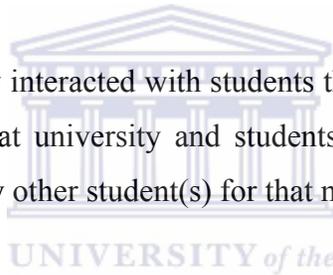
*gravitate towards their own race uhm, I don't know. For me, I for some reason I don't and I don't have any white friends... (FG 1)*

Integration and diversity did not refer to race only. Despite that students at UWC come from various religious backgrounds interaction across these religious lines was enabled through courteous behaviour, as illustrated in the following extract:

*F: But how is it to then to kinda relate to people from other religions (FG 2)*

*MR2: It's the small things, greet them with a smile. It's not about what you know, they remember that. If you inviting to them they will be inviting to you. (FG 2)*

At school students usually only interacted with students their own age, however, age was also not necessarily a barrier at university and students interacted with other students from various age groups, or any other student(s) for that matter.



*FR3: ... actually not the same as school we are actually not faced with that where you are restricted to one age group, you are restricted to a type of. Like at school there's a limit, here there's no limit... Ya, you can be friends with anyone ... (FG 3)*

From the discussion preceding, it seems clear that participants are very aware and in favour of diversity (racial, religious and age), an indication that students are prepared to interact and socialise across demographic lines and a shift towards the tolerance of difference.

#### **4.3.2 Friends, friendships and peer groups**

The following quotes create the idea that friends are very important to the experience of some first-year students.

*FR4: No, it was actually she just approached me in orientation out of nowhere, I didn't know what she was doing until classes started and then she told me no she's doing psychology but I mean you so happy just to have one friend that you don't really care if she is doing a different class... (FG 3)*

*FR2: Like in the beginning I can remember the first day I was all lost and I went to go and look for a friend that was lost as well so that I'm not lost alone. (FG 3)*

This process of starting friendships at university is quite different to peer-group formation at school. Due to the diverse student population, peer groups are formed across demographic 'barriers' as discussed earlier. For some students, certain university structures such as the orientation programme and UWC residences results in a natural formation of friendships.

*MR 1: in my case uhm, My circle of friends were all in my orientation group and that since orientation we just kind of stick together through this whole period till now. So ya, it was through the orientation group (FG 1)*

Some first-year students come with friends from high school and they feel no need to make new friends. For one particular student, not being able to make new friends at university did not have a positive outcome. This may be common, predominantly among first-year students. The ability to approach people and start friendships is very significant in the overall experience of first-year students, as the following quote illustrates.

*FR 3: My friend is kinda like a loner in a way but she like only came to us, like the ones she knew in high school, like of us that she knew in high school and we were also like how can I say, we had, we made other friends as well, so she just like stuck, she didn't make an effort to go out and get to know other people, so I guess its just became to much so she deregistered. (FG 1)*

Underlying these various contexts, in which two (or more) first-year students become friends, is the concept of ‘common grounding’ between them, whether it is a common religion, the same study course or subjects or similar interests.

*MR2: I think that when you have the same interest as a other person you can relate on similar things on your past relations. But uh also a big factor is religion; it's easier to mix with your own religion and from that like branch off. (FG 2)*

*FR1: Yes because if you have a friend that has something in common with you then you can say come friend lets go here. (FG 3)*

*FR2: And we were actually doing the same subjects and stuff and so we found the class together and stuff. It's just the feeling that you don't want to be lost and being lost is something that's not lost in the sense of lost, direction wise, I mean not knowing what's going on, and where this is where that is. (FG 3)*

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Participants have highlighted a number of benefits that friendship brings with it. Students often become friends because they have something in common but more so because there is something to gain from the friendship.

Having friends in the first year makes it easier to adjust and cope with the challenges of university. Friends share the same difficult experiences and through mutual support friends can benefit from each other. The following extract taken from **focus group 1** demonstrates the support that friends provide each other through difficulties:

*FR 2: ...So I think for us, We (laughs) have had a lot of frustrations and that, and we can debrief together instead of going off on a tangent, getting really disillusioned and discouraged, you can debrief and shout violent*

*FR 2: The support is very important because emotions interfere with your studying ...Its, its, its negative emotion and I can't function properly*

Participants also pointed out that friends inspire and motivate each other to work harder and to perform better, particularly if they are studying the same subjects. Friends also provide academic assistance through shared understanding of difficult subject matter.

*FR 3: lets say he , he gets higher than me, he'll like try and motivate you cos now you look sad and that then he will motivate you like 'I'll even help you study to get there'. (FG 1)*

*MR 1: But also if your friends are positive and always keep you from drowning ... they are going to pick you up. Because they also want you to achieve the way they achieve. (FG 2)*

*FR3: Like with me and here we study together and sometimes when I don't know something then she's the one that I can fall on and say come on and help me with this and it's always like we push each other, and we push each other ... (FG 3)*

While the participants agreed that friends are highly influential in the lives of first-year students and can positively influence and be of benefit to each other, participants also pointed out that friends can negatively influence each other.

*MR 1: But I maintain that friends are a big issue, they have a big effect on your life on campus. If you stay with positive people you are going to be positive if you stay with negative people you are going to be negative. (FG 2)*

### 4.3.3 Non-academic organisations and groups

Joining non-academic and sports groups is another very important social component of university for many first-year students. As one participant put forth:

*MR 1: (laughs) probably if I didn't do that [Performing Arts] I wouldn't also be studying. (FG 1)*

Some participants belonged to non-academic groups and various reasons have been given for participating in these groups. Some participants participated for fun and to relax from studying, while others joined because it was relevant to what they studied.

*MR 1: Ya its just fun and then it's back to normal again. When you there you in that moment. So that's all. (FG 1)*

*MR2: It puts your mind at rest man...Because you can't just... you going to get an anxiety attack if you just... (FG 2)*

*FR2: No, but I find that academically they are, the other members of the group, it is what similar or relevant to what I'm studying so it does um fit into cos I mean it is something that. It's like community work and stuff, which I am I'm studying psychology so it is relevant so I think academically and they are helpful. I mean I'm in it for that. (FG 3)*

Some participants agreed that belonging to non-academic groups influenced academic performance in that the more there is to do, the more organised one is. Having a 'full plate' almost forces students to manage their study-time better and therefore perform better.

*FR 2: I think, I think it does. But when he said non-academic, I belong to non-academic off campus but I find that the more that I do off campus, the more that I do in my life, the better my time management and the more*

*studying I actually get done cos I can, spend a helluva long time just thinking about something and not actually doing it. When I hit the ground running and I'm doing one thing after the other, I tend to be more organised and get more done. (FG 2)*

*MR2: One of our teachers told us your brain is like a muscle, the more you use it the stronger it becomes. (FG 2)*

#### **4.4 PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIA AMONG FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS**

In speaking to participants about their academic experiences at university, negative and positive academic experiences were relayed. Participants discussed study groups, focus and goal commitment, factors that contribute to academic performance, reasons for poor performance, the student-lecturer relationship and the differences between traditional and non-traditional students in terms of their academic experiences.

##### **4.4.1 Study Groups**

The academic aspects of university are quite different to school academic experiences. Teaching methods, subject matter, learning styles and more importantly examination procedures are very unfamiliar to first-year students. First-year students tend to become extremely anxious about their first university exam as there is the perception that it is very different to school exams and therefore very difficult. Hence it is natural for these students to form study groups and study partnerships so as to deal with these and other academic challenges.

*FR 3: Well I would think so because usually when it's nearing a psych exam. I don't really belong to a study group but when I'm studying in the library, everyone else is also writing. Or someone will just come and sit next to you or near you and then you end up studying with him. (FG 1)*

Participants formed study groups even when they were not doing the same course or subject. The reason for this is that the key function of the group is for group members to motivate and support each other not so much sharing understandings of difficult subject content.

*FR 2: ... she's my main study buddy and she's not doing a B Psych, some of our subject are similar but we help each other with subjects that we don't have...But even the ones we don't have, we would support each other on those too in terms of getting research and that and then we form bigger groups for specific subjects. (FG 1)*

*FR 3: and we even have this thing where we go to each others classes so that we not sitting free and you not gonna bunk with us .so if we two are free and you have class, we will go with you, just so that you are there. (FG 3)*

Other benefits of the study group is that it is essentially social in nature, making learning easier and it largely contributes to improved academic performance of first-year students.

*FR 1: For me its more engaging, it's more social, it's more relaxing than sitting there with a book that can't talk to you. You know what I'm saying. So you remember it better because you remember the person's voice. You remember certain stuff like a joke about the thing so you remember it better for me. (FG 1)*

Despite its many benefits (motivation, improved performance and easier learning), the study group does not work for all. Some participants prefer working on their own. As one participant indicated, study groups are a form of distraction for her.

*FR5: I'm like that I can work much better without like studying I study, like how can I say I can't study with people because then I'm going to end up talking. I need to sit alone and study...so I need to just be alone. (FG 3)*

#### 4.4.2 Focus and Goal Commitment

While social activities are more attractive than hard work, especially for first-year students, there is the sense that being successful at university requires more focus and goal commitment from first-year students. Being focused also prevents students from being negatively influenced as “it’s easy to fall into that trap”.

*MR 1: I was just gonna say people who are focused and that wont actually go to the barn. It wont be actually for them so ya you wont actually get that factor arising where someone will go, you know, cos I think when they do go in there its easy to fall in to that trap of, I really enjoy this. (FG 1)*

#### 4.4.3 Factors contributing to academic performance

When participants were asked to elaborate on factors that contribute to academic performance at university, a multitude of responses came forth.

Evident from the quote to follow, freedom at university gives rise to a loss of motivation to participate and do well in academic activities at university. Therefore it is essential for students, even before they start studying at university, to have the ‘drive’ to perform well. Low academic drive together with social pressures and freedom at university appears to be a bad combination.

*FR3: Ok, I don’t know how to speak about this person now, uhm there was like a lot of freedom on campus when we started orientation week and when we started getting into the swing of things, there was that freedom and there just wasn’t that academic feel to do anything. Like they were sure what they were going to study but that was it, there wasn’t like a drive to do more than that. (FG 1)*

*F: And that drive comes even before you enter university?*

*FR3: Ya (FG 1)*

In contrast, for other students the freedom at university results in better academic performance. One participant noted that freedom was better for her and led to her being responsible and therefore she performs socially and academically better than she did at school. Furthermore, participants felt that the freedom of choice of subjects also resulted in better academic performance as this meant that students were registered for subjects of interest and not subjects they were 'forced' to do.

*FR2: I didn't like the school arrangement and all that support I mean I I this freedom for me is better, I feel I can perform better, academically I'm doing better than at school in that arrangement so I prefer this I think I can, I'm doing better socially academically than at school. So I dunno, I feel freedom for me is not a downfall, I think it makes me more responsible I think I become, it's just better for me. (FG 3)*

Commitment also plays an important role in the academic lives of first-year students. However, social components, such as friends seem to play an even bigger role.

*MR 1: think the social part actually plays more than the commitment because If my, if I'm friends with him and he says he wants to go study now, just to be in that whole social thing I will go study because he's studying now. (FG 1)*

We have also learnt from earlier responses that friend-circles function as study groups too and as noted in the quote below, students belonging to study groups are likely to perform better.

*MR 1: If the group is a study group as mentioned they would go sit in the library rather than go to the Barn. That group will probably perform much better than the other group. (FG 1)*

Like friends, there are other people that play an important part in first-year students' academic performance, including family members, parents, teachers from school and more importantly, older student who could share their experiences and understanding with current first-year students.

*F: And other than friends and family because that is the obvious two support structures, what else would you say contributes to low performance or high performance , other than your family and friends.*

*MR 1: So that can be anyone, a close uncle, a close outside friend, a close teacher. (FG 1)*

*MR 1: and people who have been through the same things..., experienced people.*

Although different, participants compared university academic experiences with academic experiences at school. One important point raised by participants was the aspect of past education and pre-university schooling. Participants perceived the quality of school education, as well as the subjects taken at school to contribute to academic performance at university.

*FR 3: I would say resources and their schooling as well. Like Primary school and like high school. The quality of their education... (FG 1)*

*FR 2: ... it's better because we get to choose our subjects what we wanna do so there is a natural interest and want to do well. Like at school. I mean it's like boring subjects. (FG 3)*

Financial factors have also been said to contribute to academic performance of first-year students. Financial motivation such as the fact that parents expect their children to pass because they (parents) are paying for their studies or even the fact that some students are liable to pay for their own fees results in students working harder to pass.

*MR2: It depends on your situation, different people have a different situation, I know of a case where one of my friends, their parents told them for every subject that you fail you pay me back so that keeps him driving, he wants to pass everything, that's motivation for him. Until today he didn't fail anything. (FG 2)*

*MR1: So, I think that plays whereas his friend, the one who works for his own money, the one who pays for his own studies, that drive alone, that value, like this is the money I bled for. (FG 2)*

Similarly, contextual factors such as language and home environment were regarded as contributing factors to academic performance. At UWC, the medium of instruction is English. However, a large proportion of first-year students do not have English as a first language. This creates difficulty in engaging with learning material and understanding the subject content which potentially fosters poor academic performance among first-year students. Language as a barrier was very well explained by a Xhosa speaking first-year student.

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*FR 4: some some of the students that are here, actually you'll see that most of our reses, they are filled up by people who are coming uhm from different backgrounds. Some they are coming from Eastern Cape, some they are coming from Northern. And Uhm the schools there are not like her in Cape Town, or like in the western Cape, they are still underdeveloped and uhm I remember that when I was doing my ...from sub A till till Standard 7, I was taught in Xhosa and I wasn't exposed to English. And the first time I uhm uhm, I went to coloured school when I was in standard 8 and it was it was difficult for me to even say I'm hungry in English because I didn't know what they were saying cos I was like ok I do not know and uhm I tell you that in standard 8 I did, I knew that ok fine I've got the brain. I'm I'm Ill normally ace things but not this, this is a total new different thing. I had 40s 50s. I failed so poorly. (FG 1)*

*FR 4: It is a problem, it is a problem because I've got another uh uh. There is a friend of mine that stays with me at res ne and she can't speak uhm English. For her it is difficult. You can see that she wants to to know but then she doesn't know how to speak even with other people that are around her. It's so difficult cos some of them they do not even understand Xhosa. Some they do not even understand Sotho so you have to communicate with uh, with using English but then they... There's that barrier. (FG 4)*

Furthermore, a disruptive home environment could possibly lead to failure at university. This is illustrated in the following example:

*FR3: Ya I know because I had a major uprootment about three months ago and then my studies took a dip because then there was something else to focus on for a while so then I put all my focus into that, and I think that influence you also .Like I said now I disappointed myself recently but it was because of my home, because that really. (FG 3)*

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#### **4.4.4 Poor academic performance**

There was mixed responses from participants regarding academic performance at university. Some participants were of the opinion that good academic performance is not difficult to achieve. Personal motivation and academic structures, such as exam policies and assessment procedures make it easy to pass. The fact that students are given an exam scope as one participant highlighted makes it almost impossible to perform poorly.

*FR 2: And there's no reason not to, they give you a scope. They didn't give you a scope at school. (All laughs). I'm like amazed. (FG 1)*

*F: Do you think it is easier to fail at university?*

*FR1: No ...It depends on the individual, if you focussed and you know where you want to be and you study hard enough, okay there's like personally in the course that I'm doing there's so many things that contribute to your final mark that's diffi... its stupid if you fail (FG 2)*

*F: it's dependent on what you studying.*

*FR 2: with us like if you fail one test badly then you fail, then they put you on a fail for the whole semester. (FG 2)*

Because exam policies were not the same across faculties, it was easier to fail in some departments than in others. Failure at university was also attributed to the fact that students 'don't study', 'their emotions [particularly as first-year students] get in the way' and lecturer that 'will never compromise with you'.

#### **4.4.5 Relationship with lecturer**

The communication between university students and their lecturers is key to a good first year experience. Students are surprised by how different their interaction with lecturers are, compared to school. Participants had mixed feelings about the student-lecturer relationship and communication process.

*MR 1: (laughs) certain lecturers, uhm, I get along really well with and others I uh don't for various reasons. (FG 1)*

Some student had positive experiences with their lecturers, stating that lecturers are friendly, approachable and easy to get along with and others reported negative experiences. While it is generally assumed that university students are treated as adults, participants agreed that there are 'definite [power] dynamics'.

*FR 2: There are definite dynamics ... there's a definite sense of, ya it's a hierarchy system... It's just a big power trip. And you feel a bit helpless and powerless in that situation. (FG 1)*

The following extract (FG 1) illustrates that experiencing a positive relationship with lecturers and being able to communicate with them, ensures a positive learning and academic experience for first-year students.

*MRI: Ya, Uhm, my LCS uh lecturer well he's my tutor as well, so I think that plays a big part but we on a, and my English tutor, we on a very friendly basis. And ya so*

*F: And that definitely contributes to the way you deal with information that you get, coursework, everything*

*MR 1: Ya. Cos I will I will ask him like without really thinking u know, "is he gonna think I'm silly now for asking this" this whatever so I will just bring up a question and say no sir, I don't understand and then he will answer me, and, in terms maybe that I will understand better. When it's with someone that more on a professional level, and not really friendship basis. You know, you don't really wanna ask the person.*

Despite the positive outcomes of being able to converse with lecturers, many first-year students find that it is very difficult for them to communicate with lecturers. A few participants felt that the communication process between students and lecturer is dependent on the student's personality.

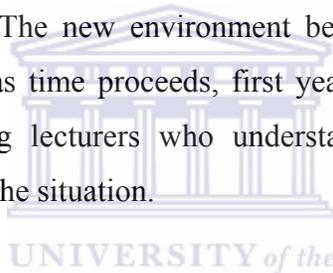
*MRI: I agree because I have friends within my group of friends who have serious issues speaking to lecturers and stuff. You know like certain people, I would base it down to introvert and extroverted people. (FG 2)*

However, participants were also of the opinion that lecturers' personality and nature was as important in the communication process.

*FR1: It depends on the lecturer himself. If the lecturer is approachable himself. I mean, if he is just the type of lecturer who just does not engage with the students in the class and stuff or if it is someone you are afraid of maybe some of the lecturers are very... (FG 2)*

One participant highlighted that basically lecturers have one of two personality types, where lecturers are either friendly and understanding or intimidating and 'bossy'.

The interaction between university students and lecturers is very different to the student-teacher interaction at school. The new environment becomes quite overwhelming for first-year students. However, as time proceeds, first year student acquire skills to deal with these challenges. Having lecturers who understand the anxiety that first-year students experience, improves the situation.



*FR4: As a student I think for me at first it was a little scary to first go to a lecturer because at school the teacher knows you by name but at varsity the lecturer doesn't even know you because you one out of 120 or 200 students so at first it's a little scary you don't know how to approach this person because this is a lecturer, its not a teacher. it's a highly educated person how do you approach the person is what you saying, is it the right thing to say is it appropriate for you to say this or that so I think at first it's a little scary. I think most lecturers sort of understand that you are scared especially maybe if it's their first time seeing you in their office. But I think not for me anymore, now it's not that scary. (FG 3)*

Being able to speak to lecturers within and out of the academic context is not difficult; greeting a lecturer only requires courtesy as one student put forth. Often students are not

really able to bond with lecturers, either due to big classes or because university courses are presented over short periods making it difficult to form strong connections.

#### 4.4.6 Traditional versus Non-traditional students: Perceptions of ‘The gap year’

Essentially students who start at university or college immediately after completing high school are regarded as traditional students<sup>11</sup> while those who did not immediately enter university after completing high school are referred to as non-traditional students and they are naturally older students when they start at university. Generally it is assumed that older students are better equipped to deal with the academic and social challenges of university. There was a mixed response from participants in terms of their perceptions of taking time off before entering university. On one hand, participants felt that the experiences of non-traditional students or students who took a gap year, allows for the development of ‘focus’, ‘maturity’ and clear goals, resulting in better academic and social performance during the first year.

*MR 1: I think she's [older participant] much more focused than I am and I think its more of responsibility and experience in life and realising what is important in life and what is not. For me what is important now is still the social aspect more than academic and that. (FG 1)*

*FR 4: And I think the other thing, when you come when you not coming from high school you've got that thing of ok fine I'm, I know what I'm her for. You actually you after your, the the career and you have like, you do not have a short term goal ... (FG 1)*

*FR2: I took a break year. So uhm like knowing that, I wanted to know where I really wanted to be and where I really wanted to study like and really where I wanted to be I had to find myself first, almost ... Yes, the gap year made me come here and from the beginning I was focused already.*

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<sup>11</sup> In South Africa traditional students are usually aged between 17 and 19 years of age.

*Because, Yah I did grow up in that year and you know what you coming here for. (FG 3)*

On the other hand some participants considered time off between school and university to have negative consequences (“*I was worried about a gap year sort of interrupting*”; “*the minute I just leave something I’m not going to do it*”). It was also noted that some parents do not encourage their children to take time off. Taking time off is seen as time wasting and defeats the purpose of successfully completing secondary school.

*FR 1: for my mother them it’s like you can’t just go and work, you can’t just come from school and then sit at home ... Yes, because it’s then why go to school or why do anything. (FG 3)*

Because older students ‘don’t care about being socially accepted’, it is assumed that they are more driven and focused on doing well academically as opposed to younger more traditional students. This is not always the case, since the same challenges are presented to all first-year students despite age or whether or not they took time off before entering university. Being focused and motivated depends on a student’s social ‘clique’ and not necessarily age. Even traditional students, who have made clear career and study decisions in Matric can be as focused and goal committed as non-traditional students.

An older participant stated that ‘*even mature students*’ have the same difficulties and challenges such as exams and power dynamics with tutors as their younger counter parts:

*FR 2: we’ve got a high pressured time coming now the next, the next couple of weeks.....especially as first-year students; it’s our first end of year exams. You don’t have support, especially, even mature students. I haven’t really written exams for twenty years. I did in June and now I’m gonna write (laughs). (FG 1)*

## 4.5 LINKING SOCIAL INTEGRATION TO ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The first year of university is made up of a series of social and academic events that are both equally important to the student. Tinto (1975) theorized that both academic and social integration has to be present to ensure that a student does not drop out. However, Tinto's (1975) model of student integration was developed on the basis of the experiences of western students. The experiences of South African students may be different to that of students from developed contexts. Against this backdrop, an important question arose: Are Social Integration and Academic Performance associated. Participants engaged in a discussion on the influence of social integration on academic performance in the first year of university. For participants to share their opinions, understanding and experiences of the influence of social integration on academic performance, it was necessary to start the discussion with their definitions and understanding of social integration at university.

### 4.5.1 Definitions and understanding of Social Integration

Social integration in Tinto's original theory of student integration (Tinto, 1975) was conceptualized as the level of involvement that a student has with the social system of university. Social integration involves informal peer interaction, semi-formal interaction with staff and faculty and involvement in organisational and extra-curricula activities (Tinto, 1975). Similarly, participants in the study generally defined social integration as engagement with the social environment, with specific reference to peers, older people and social or non-academic structures at university. Participants understood social integration as *'the way you apply yourself in your social environment'*, *'how you fit into your environment'* and *'how quick you interact with other people and peers and also people older than you'*. The following extracts illustrate how participants in the present study defined social integration:

*F: What is your understanding of social integration? How does it happen?  
What is it, how is it defined? ...*

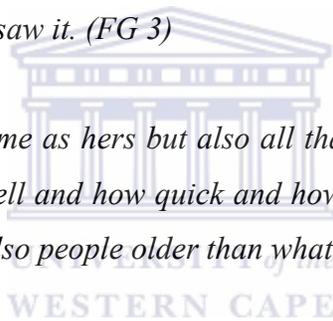
*FR3: I think that basically it's the same like she said, but also it's your ability to interact with different people socially like being able to actually speak openly ... (FG 3)*

*FR5: I think it's like they said, fitting in and adapting to campus life (FG 3)*

*MR1: To me, I would assume that it refers to like social integration, almost like the way you evolve from your schooling to your campus life. ... So integration perhaps refers to the fact that, the way you go about that. (FG 2)*

*FR4: Just the way you apply yourself in your new social environment, I think that's the way I saw it. (FG 3)*

*FR3: Basically the same as hers but also all that she said about being on your own and how well and how quick and how you interact with other people and peers and also people older than what you are. (FG 3)*



Racial integration was included in one participant's understanding of social integration.

*FR 2: Ok I think well the social integration. I'm not sure what integration is, I still see a lot of race groups sticking to their own groups... (FG 1)*

This is very relevant to the South African context, especially considering South Africa's racial history. What stands out for first-year students is the level of diversity at university and so it is likely that social integration at South African universities will involve inter-racial interaction.

#### 4.5.2 General perceptions - 'Link or no Link'?

Most participants agreed that in some way social integration impacts on academic performance.

*FR1: There is a link obviously because if you not going to fit in and you not going to be able to, you going to be shy to ask her for help, you gonna be shy to ask other people for help you going to feel hopeless, you gonna feel frustrated you going to say oh I can't do this and then you gonna wanna give up and then your studies go down the drain so I think there is a direct link. (FG 3)*

Social integration could have either a positive impact or a negative impact on the academic performance of first-year students.

*FR 1: ya I think it uhm ya social integration plays a big role because ya you can be focused, but on the other hand you wanna laugh, you wanna have friends as well, you know what I'm saying, its, you still wanna have that social part so it does play a big role and it does affect your work. (FG 1)*

*FR 3: Like Uh, outcome like academically, where it's good or bad. The social integration DOES (emphasis) play a part. (FG 1)*

*FR 2: But I don't think it's healthy to have the one without the other. (Agrees all) (FG 2)*

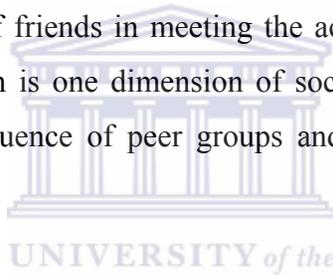
*MR2: I believe it goes hand in hand. I think it's an equal footing plus/minus because if you have just the social buzz right then ... ok no, no no, if you just have the academic buzz then you missing the social thing I doubt that... I speak, this is just an assumption on my part. People who just have the social thing are missing the academic part. (FG 2)*

Even though participants highlighted that social integration can negatively impact on a student's academic performance, it is important to bear in mind that social integration itself is not perceived to be a negative concept and is as important as academic integration. However, students should have a healthy level of social integration. The ability to balance between social integration and academic integration results in positive academic outcomes.

#### **4.5.3 The impact of friends, non-academic organisations and lecturers on academic performance**

##### ***The impact of peer interactions***

Many students noted the importance of friends in their academic experiences. First-year students rely on the support of friends in meeting the academic demands of university. Since informal peer interaction is one dimension of social integration (Tinto, 1975), it was fitting to explore the influence of peer groups and friends in first-year students' academic performance.



Most participants felt that friends positively influence academic performance.

*MR2: You said about hardworking people, I think in a circle of friends you socialise with a certain type of people they rub off on you and you take good things from them... (FG 2)*

*FR4: ya I think there is a link your friends are they are your support system here at varsity they push you and I think once you realise that you have friends and that they good influences on you it helps you to perform better academically, I think you become a lot more confident in yourself. (FG 3)*

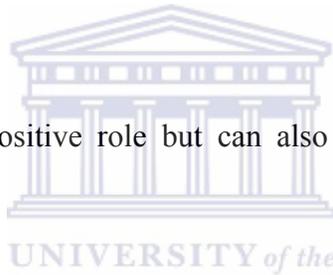
*FR4: I think recently we just I think when second semester just started in our friends we started pushing one another. It's like no, there's no way you can get that mark you gonna go to class now you ... (FG 3)*

Participants pointed out that first-year students usually selected as their friends, students who were studying the same subjects resulting in social groups that function as study groups as well. Essentially a study group combines the social and academic aspects of university further emphasising the link between social integration and academic performance.

*MR: But ya I uh, I was (laughs) I would agree with that uhm, my group of friends are usually, are generally the people I study with, the people I interact with daily, ...(FG 2)*

*MR 1: ...if I'm friends with him and he says he wants to go study now, just to be in that whole social thing I will go study because he's studying now. (FG 1)*

Friends do not only play a positive role but can also negatively influence academic performance.



*FR2: yes so you know you can rely on, you must really you must know because there are friends that can maybe influence you but then that the people you must stay away from. (FG 3)*

*FR3: It does, I think like he said there's a balance between everything in terms of, how can I say, your friends are there to help you or your friends are there just to mess you up or, it can go either way. (FG 2)*

Participants agreed that social integration influences academic performance, particularly in terms of the connection between friend and academic performance. A large majority of participants felt that friends played a positive role, while few others felt that friends could also negatively influence your performance.

### ***The impact of non-academic organisations***

Another dimension of social integration is students' involvement and interaction with the non-academic part of university, such as sports clubs, social organisations and non-academic societies. In discussing with participants the types of non-academic organisations they belonged to and the benefits of belonging, various responses came forth.

First-year students are impressed by the number and variety of social organisations at university. As one participant alluded to, students may have been attracted to a particular institution because of the social clubs available to them.

*F: Ok but like, say for instance that you, you didn't, you don't belong to this group. Do you find there more time to focus on studies and that kind of thing?*

*MR 1: (laughs) probably if I didn't do that I wouldn't also be studying. (FG 1)*

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One of the most important benefits of non-academic organisations is the positive effects it has on academic performance. These may be direct or indirect effects. One example of how non-academic groups indirectly affects academic performance is that students who belong to these organisations have more to do as they ought to focus on their involvement in the extra-mural activities as well as their academic activities. By having more to do, students are forced to manage their time better allowing them to balance between social activities and academic activities. Better time management results in students allocating time to studying.

*FR 2: I think, I think it does. But, when he said non-academic, I belong to non-academic off campus but I find that the more that I do off campus, the more that I do in my life, the better my time management and the more studying I actually get done cos I can spend a helluva long time just thinking about something and not actually doing it. When I hit the ground*

*running and I'm doing one thing after the other, I tend to be more organised and get more done. (FG 1)*

Another academic benefit of belonging to non-academic organisations is that it is considered to be a form of stress relief. It is in fact not healthy for students to be only academically focused, as the following excerpt portrays.

*MR2: I believe it goes hand in hand. I think it's an equal footing plus/minus because if you have just the social buzz right then ... ok no, no no, if you just have the academic buzz then you missing the social thing I doubt that... I speak, this is just an assumption on my part. People who just have the social thing are missing the academic part.... You know, so you have that time to study and you have that time to break as well. Otherwise you'll go insane. So you must... (FG 2)*

Students also join groups on campus that are related to their field of study, either through allowing them to practically implement what they learn about or through interaction with fellow students who are doing the same course and can therefore assist with academic difficulties. The following quote exemplifies this more direct link between non-academic organisations and academic performance.

*FR2: No, but I find that academically they are, the other members of the group, it is what similar or relevant to what I'm studying so it does um fit into cos I mean it is something that. It's like community work and stuff, which I am I'm studying psychology so it is relevant so I think academically and they are helpful. I mean I'm in it for that. (FG 3)*

### ***The impact of lecturer-student interaction***

According to Tinto's conceptualisation of social integration, informal communication with faculty and staff members was considered to be important aspects of a student's overall social experience and more specifically social integration at university (Tinto, 1975). Despite that this communication is difficult, some participants pointed out that it is necessary to be able to socially communicate with lecturers as this results in students feeling more comfortable with lecturers. This level of comfort with lecturers allows students to approach lecturers to ask questions related to the course. This is an example of the indirect positive effects of students-lecturer interaction on academic performance. The following extract clearly demonstrates this point.

*MR1: Ya, Uhm, my LCS uh lecturer well he's my tutor as well, so I think that plays a big part but we on a, and my English tutor, we on a very friendly basis. And ya so. (FG 1)*

*F: And that definitely contributes to the way you deal with information that you get, coursework, everything*

*MR 1: Ya. Cos I will I will ask him like without really thinking u know, "is he gonna think I'm silly now for asking this" this whatever so I will just bring up a question and say no sir, I don't understand and then he will answer me, and, in terms maybe that I will understand better. When it's with someone that more on a professional level, and not really friendship basis. You know, you don't really wanna ask the person. (FG 1)*

#### **4.5.4 Drop out**

A healthy level of social integration, as I've come to understand, is necessary for good academic performance and ultimately success. Naturally then, failure at university may be the result of an imbalance between social and academic activities. This may lead to drop out. According to Tinto's (1975) model of student integration, social integration as well as academic integration has to be in place to prevent pre-mature drop out. A

discussion on the reasons for drop out evoked mixed responses from the participants in the study. Some participants felt that students' over-involvement in social activities at university leads to a loss of goal commitment and focus and ultimately results in dropping out of university.

*F: Ok, and then also like uhm in terms of like your first year right, students that drop out for instance. What do you think would be factors that contribute to a student dropping out in their first year? Do you know of anybody that has dropped out?*

*MR 2: ...the fact that they party every night and they don't really study. So the, again the social there negatively impact. Ya and like the perception they're grown up now (laughs) they party and study, they don't just study. So it again it relates to that, coming why you coming to campus, focus and that kind of thing. (FG 1)*

In contrast, as one participant noted, the inability to interact socially and make friends with fellow students led to one student dropping out.

*FR 3: My friend is kinda like a loner in a way but she like only came to us, like the one she knew in high school, like of us that she knew in high school and we were also like how can I say, we had, we made other friends as well, so she just like stuck, she didn't make an effort to go out and get to know other people, so I guess its just became to much so she deregistered. (FG 1)*

Other reasons given for student drop out were contextual factors such as language barriers and financial problems and loss of interest stemming from un-informed career decisions.

*MR 2: I know which is the language barrier which she talked about... (FG 1)*

*FR 4: and the other thing is money. Some people drop out because they do not have money to pay for their study. So you cannot really study. Sometimes NSFAS say ok fine they give you that money or maybe they just say ok fine they gonna pay for your studies, we are not gonna give money for food and uhm, and for res. And you even struggle with the moneys for registration. How are you going to study? (FG 1)*

*MRI: Ok ya then he did drop out. He left because he found interest somewhere else. That's all... (FG 2)*

#### **4.6 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER**

University experiences are very different to school experiences and first-year students are overwhelmed by the new experiences and the difficulties and challenges that accompany these. To add to these challenges, South African contextual factors play an important part in the way university is experienced. However, participants felt that while it was challenging, through support from friends and others such as family, parents, past students, positive relations with lecturers, sharing experiences and difficulties within a study group context, the challenges of first year could be surpassed. There was also a strong emphasis on individual attributes such as goal commitment and being focussed as indispensable to their success as first-year students. From this discussion, it appears that there is a strong social influence in the academic experiences of first-year students – whether this is through interaction with friends who serve as study partners and group members or being able to communicate with lecturers in general in spite of a ‘power hierarchy’. This chapter presented the main finding that emerged from the discussions that were held with first-year students regarding their perceptions about the influence of social integration on academic performance. It appears that the two are intrinsically linked. A summary of the main findings presented in the following chapter will lead into a discussion; the main findings will be discussed in the context of national and international scholarship and theory.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The present chapter provides a summary of the main findings of the study.<sup>12</sup> Following the summary is a discussion of these themes in relation to the theoretical model and national and international scholarship. This chapter then concludes with limitations of the study as well as recommendations in terms of future research and implementation strategies to deal with some of the concerns highlighted by the research participants.

#### **5.2 SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS**

The primary aim of the study was to explore first-year students' perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance. The main findings to emerge from the focus group discussions are presented under the following 4 major thematic categories: 'General perceptions of the first year at university'; 'Social perceptions among first-year students', 'Perceptions of academia among first-year students' and 'Linking social integration to academic performance'. Essentially, the findings of the present study show that first-year students perceive social integration to influence academic performance.

##### **5.2.1 General perceptions of the first year at university**

In discussing perceptions and experiences of the first year at the University of the Western Cape, participants spoke about their experiences with the institution, university in general, how university compared to school, the transition from school to university, freedom at university, maturity and responsibility at university, and how family and the home environment influences the first-year experience.

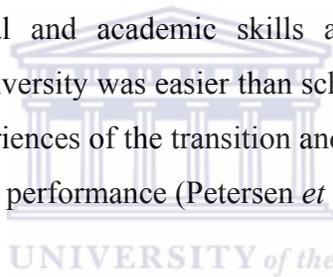
Most participants felt very negative about UWC as an institution. They related negative experiences with the administration system in particular. Ironically, during exam periods

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<sup>12</sup> Chapter 4 provides a detailed discussion of the main findings of the study. The findings are presented in terms of key emergent themes and these are presented under broader thematic categories.

when the administrative system was expected to function most efficiently, participants were most frustrated. One participant relayed her experience of racial discrimination from her lecturer. This, however, was not a general perception or experience.

Despite the overwhelming feeling of pessimism about UWC's administration system, participants felt different about the university experience as a whole. They felt more optimistic. Participants' expectations of university were that it would be difficult, an overwhelming workload, a socially pressured environment, and they would experience loneliness. Almost all participants agreed that university was easier than they expected it to be. First-year students' expectations are based on their school experiences. This was quite obvious as most participants, when asked to speak about their university experiences, compared these to school. Despite that university entails a heavier workload, the acquisition of new social and academic skills and independence as students, participants still agreed that university was easier than school. It was important to discuss students' perceptions and experiences of the transition and adjustment since adjustment is intrinsically linked to academic performance (Petersen *et al.* 2009).



School and university are two very different educational institutions; yet, there is the general assumption that schooling background has an impact on university outcomes (Herman, 1995; Scott *et al.* 2007; Tinto, 1975). School students' preparation for university was not deeply explored, though one participant did mention that high school students are adequately prepared for university. Even so, many students were overwhelmed by the quick transition that they were required to make and the new experiences of freedom.

The freedom at university is one of the first observations that new students make. The perceptions of freedom at university are dichotomous in that freedom was perceived to be either 'good' or 'bad'. Freedom was positively regarded because it allowed students to select subjects of interest to them. A less restrictive environment also ensures optimal learning at the student's own pace and forces the student to be more responsible, resulting in good academic performance. On the other hand, participants who regarded freedom to

be negative said that freedom makes them lose control and they become lazy and less serious about their academic performance. Whether good or bad, learning to manage freedom is a challenge for all first-year students.

The challenges of university are best dealt with when students assume responsibility for themselves and when they behave maturely. Participants realized that the university system treats students as adults. Students are expected to deal with challenges and sort out problems on their own, whether these are social, academic or system related problems. Students are often not prepared at school for situations that will require of them to take responsibility. In spite of the difficulty of 'suddenly' become a self responsible adult, participants were aware that making this change will ensure that academic challenges are met.

Participants also acknowledged the immense role that the family and the home environment play in the university experiences of first-year students. For students who come from homes where there was parental control, it is quite taxing to have to fend for themselves and manage the freedom that university offers. The family plays a huge role in influencing students' perceptions and expectations of university. Furthermore, participant highlighted parental influence in academic performance. They noted that some students work hard to meet parental expectations, and parents paying for university education expects their children to pass. This is often the only motivation for performing well. Participants expressed that students coming from troubled home environments tend to perform poorly. In these instances friends play a supportive role.

Certain factors were found to positively contribute to adjustment and coping at university. These factors include university freedom (especially for students who thrive in a non restrictive environment), religious identity, support from friends, university support structures such as tutorials and having clear career goals. Students who took a gap year or time off before starting at university had the opportunity to develop and refine their goal commitments and are therefore likely to perform better than younger students who come

directly from school. As time passes, students discover the structures in place to facilitate adjustment.

### **5.2.2 Social perceptions among first-year students**

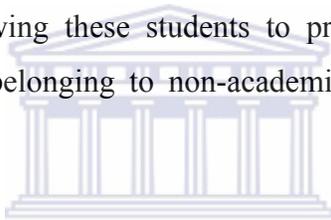
Diversity and racial integration are somewhat unfamiliar to first-year students, as many students come from schools where the student population is not very diverse and racial integration is not common. One participant noted that racial integration is limited at university, especially among white students. Students also observed the diversity of the student population at UWC in terms of religion and age. Even though diversity and racial integration was something new to these participants, they were quite positive about diversity and welcomed the opportunity to interact with different people. Diversity at university enables friendships and peer groups to form across race, age, religion and other demographic variables.

The most significant social aspect of university is the development of friendships and peer groups. Participants agreed that it is necessary to have friends. Of all the challenges that they are faced with, students first approach the challenge of forming new social bonds. It was not a general view, but one participant did mention that the inability to make friends resulted in the de-registration of one student and that making friends and meeting new people required effort on the part of any first-year student. The ability to approach also helped the process of making friends. Friendships are generally but not exclusively formed on the basis of common subjects. At UWC specifically, the orientation programme for first-year students enable new students to meet and befriend other new students.

Participants claimed that there are a number of benefits to having friends at university. These include that friends share and debrief about negative experiences with each other and therefore more aptly deal with academic and social challenges at university; friends, through mutual support, are able to adjust and cope with the first year of university; friends are sources of motivation to work hard and perform well academically and more

specifically friends directly assist with academic difficulties (e.g. course work, exam preparation, etc.).

In some instances friendships are formed on the basis of common interests, through involvement with non-academic organisations. In fact, non-academic organisations are such an important aspect of the university experience, and many students are attracted to study at university by non-academic activities offered at university. Participants have provided various reasons why students become involved in non-academic organisations, which include: fun, relaxing the mind, belonging to a non-academic organisation forces students to manage their study time well, and more importantly, interest in the non-academic organisation stems from their academic interest and coursework. For instance, students who study psychology may become involved in organisations that participate in community development allowing these students to practically implement theoretical understandings. In this way, belonging to non-academic organisations afford students academic benefits.



### **5.2.3 Perceptions of academia among first-year students**

Participants were of the opinion that academic difficulties move students to join study groups. Study groups naturally form when students are preparing for their first official university examination, which participants perceive to be quite different to school exams and therefore anxiety provoking. It was noted that study groups are usually formed on the basis of common course, where all members of the group are enrolled for the same course. In cases where study group members are not studying the same course, the key function of the group is to provide motivation and support to the group members. It appears that the main benefit of the group is to reduce the pressure and make learning easier through engagement and interactive discussion, where students are able to remember and understand difficult subject content, contributing positively to academic performance. Some participants viewed study groups to be too much of a social activity and therefore a distraction. In general, study groups epitomize the connection between social and academic activities.

While study groups were perceived to positively contribute to academic experiences, there was also the view that academic success relies on individual characteristics such as focus and goal commitment. Being focused allows students to complete their studies in minimum time. Moreover, in light of the social pressures at university particularly for first-year students, being focused prevents students from falling into ‘social traps’ and being deterred from reaching their goals. Participants were of the opinion that freedom at university can discourage students from working hard and doing well academically. Therefore, it is essential to have the ‘drive’ to perform well even before starting at university.

Participants held that various social factors contribute to academic performance in the first year at university. Social factors that were identified as contributing to first-year students’ academic performance, included friends and peer groups, support from family members and older students who could share their experiences with first-year students. Contextual factors were also noted as very influential in the academic performance of first-year students. Pre-university education quality, financial factors (if parents were paying or students were paying their own university fees, this motivated them to perform well), home environment (a disruptive home environment results in the inability to study) and language. Language was important to note since many first-year students do not speak English as a mother tongue, making it difficult for them to engage with the learning material. This has a direct effect on academic performance in the first year, leading students to perform poorly. Institutional factors also play a part in the overall performance of first-year students. Assessment policies vary across faculties and so it is easier to fail in some departments than in others. Personal traits that result in poor academic performance are laziness, lack of motivation, and emotional challenges that are common among first-year students.

Difficult lecturers are also likely to lead to poor academic performance. The interaction between students and lecturers is an integral element of the overall academic experience. According to most participants, the lecturers’ personality determines whether or not students will approach a lecturer within or out of an academic context. If a lecturer

appears to be friendly and approachable, a student will feel comfortable enough to ask the lecturer for help or even to greet a lecturer. Even though university students are treated as adults, participants agreed that there still exists a power hierarchy and some lectures abuse their positions of authority. Some lecturers are intimidating and unwilling to compromise. In the case of difficult lecturers, students have to develop the courage to approach these lecturers. Generally, lecturers who understand the challenges for first-year students help students deal with their challenges. Big classes and short duration courses make it difficult to bond with lecturers.

It is commonly understood that first-year students are students who come directly from school. This is true in most cases, however many first-year students took time off after school, before commencing with university (older non-traditional students). Participants' perceptions regarding non-traditional students varied. On one hand, taking time off was positively perceived as the time off allows students to develop clear career goals and maturity resulting in improved academic performance in the first year. Socializing was also less of a priority for older student and this gave them more time to focus on studying. In contrast, time off was negatively perceived as this led to laziness and loss of focus. Despite the varied view of traditional and non-traditional students, one older participant mentioned that the academic challenges (e.g. examinations and the administrative system) in the first year are the same for all first-year students, despite age and experience.

#### **5.2.4 Linking social integration to academic performance**

Social integration was generally defined as the student's adaptation to and interaction with the social environment, including social interaction with different people. Racial integration was included in the definition of social integration. Participants were in agreement that social integration either negatively or positively influence academic performance; that a healthy level of social integration is beneficial to first-year students. Tinto (1975) defines social integration as the level of involvement that a student has with the social system of university, and involves informal peer interaction, semi-formal

interaction with staff and faculty and involvement in organisational and extra-curricula activities. These three dimensions of social integration were specifically explored.

### ***Peer group Interaction***

Participants believe that peer groups and friends positively contribute to the academic performance of first-year students in that they provide support in academically demanding situations, they motivate each other to work hard and to improve academic performance and they assist each other with the work. This is further accentuated when friends act as study partners or when peer groups operate as study groups too. The study group epitomizes the influence of social integration on academic performance. Participants agreed that friends sometimes play a negative role by dissuading them from studying.

### ***Non-academic organisation involvement***

Non-academic organisation involvement, another dimension of social integration is mostly beneficial to first-year students. Belonging to non-academic organisations gives students time to relax, forces students to manage their study time better, and compliments academic courses. Often non-academic organisations provide students with skills that compliment what they learn and afford them the opportunity to practically implement theoretical course work.

### ***Lecturer-student interaction***

An approachable and friendly lecturer allows students to feel comfortable enough to approach lecturers for help, while intimidating lecturers turn students away. The inability to communicate with lecturers results in the fear of asking questions and potentially poor academic performance.

A healthy level of social integration implies a balance between the social and academic activities at university. More specifically participants highlighted the need for social skills to deal with academic challenges. Failure to balance between the social and academic parts of university may eventually lead to poor performance which can

ultimately lead to the decision to drop out. Not having the support of friends or over involvement in social activities may lead to drop out. Other factors that participants identified as contributing to the decision to drop out include individual factors such as lack of commitment, contextual factors such as language and finances and inadequate preparation at school.

### **5.3 DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS**

Participants expressed frustrations and negative feelings about UWC as an institution, claiming that they did not receive sufficient administrative assistance, especially during periods of intense academic pressure. This has important implications for the academic experience at university, particularly because a lack of institutional support affects academic performance. Reason *et al.* (2006) found that students who reported that they received academic and non-academic support from faculty and staff were more likely than other students at other institutions to report greater gains in academic performance. In addition, lack of institutional support may affect students institutional commitment; their preparedness to fit into the university environment eventually leading to poor performance and drop out (Tinto, 1975). Harrison (2006) found that negative experiences at university were likely to lead to withdrawal from the institution.

Despite these negative perceptions of UWC, participants felt positive about university in general. Many students who expected university to be very difficult and challenging found that it was in fact easier than expected, easier than school. The negative expectations held prior to university were not met by the actual university experience. These findings are in accordance with the findings of Smith and Wertlieb (2006) who found a discrepancy between students' expectations and their actual first-year experience. For these participants who had expected the worst, university turned out to be quite a positive experience. Weissberg *et al.* (2003) has shown that students with unrealistic expectations and inflated grade expectations are less successful. In other words, students who expect university to be easy are likely to perform poorer than those who expect difficulties and challenges. The expectation of difficulties such as heavy workload and difficult subject matter entails that students prepare for these difficulties and think of

ways to deal with these. Whether negative or positive, expectations are usually shaped by pre-university educational experiences.

According to Tinto, (1975), pre-university schooling interacts with other background characteristics to influence how well students are committed to their future goals and committed to the institution. One participant agreed that school adequately prepares students for university, but most students felt very overwhelmed by the transition from school to university, and even had initial fears about university. Fear and anxiety may have been the consequences of incorrect information or insufficient social and academic preparation for university. Jama *et al.* (2008) and Scott *et al.* (2007) have found the schooling system to insufficiently prepare students for university. Furthermore, Blitzer and Troskie-De Bruin (2004) have recommended that school leavers be prepared to have more realistic expectations of university.

Participants cited quality of schooling as influential in academic performance at university. The question of the adequacy of schooling in relation to university has recently sparked debate. Blaine (2009) reported the plan for most of the 23 universities in South Africa to use a new standardized test to test the academic skills that matriculants have acquired through the new National Senior Certificate (NCS). Questions have been asked about whether South African university students are able to read and write (Boughey, 2009) causing further heated debates. While university performance relies a great deal on the school quality and the school system's task of preparing school leavers for university (Boughey, 2009), it should be noted that school and university are two distinct education systems.<sup>13</sup>

The first observation participants made about university was the aspect of freedom at university, typifying for them the immense differences between school and university. Participants perceived freedom to be a two sided variable, where it was considered to be

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<sup>13</sup> These sentiments are shared by the 2009 South African government administration who thought it necessary to move from one national education system that governed both basic and higher education, to two education departments; The Department of Basic Education and The Department of Higher Education and Training (The President of the Republic of South Africa, 2009).

either constructive or destructive. Freedom at university was considered a good thing in that students are free to choose subjects of interest. A student who is genuinely interested in a particular course is likely to pass the course since interest results in sustainability of good performance (Harackiewicz, Durik, Barron Linnenbrink-Garcia & Tauer, 2008). Freedom was also considered to be positive in that it allowed students to work at a comfortable pace, without feeling pressured.

Freedom was also associated with negative outcomes such as students' loss of control, the freedom for students to do what they wanted to and not what they were required to, and laziness. This implies that freedom causes an imbalance between social and academic involvement and poor time management. Tinto (1975) noted that "excessive emphasis on integration in one domain would at some point detract from one's integration into the other domain" (p. 92). Freedom is clearly something new for first-year students. It may well be the case that students are overwhelmed by this new found freedom resulting in poor decision making and ultimately poor academic performance. It cannot be assumed that students are aware of the challenges that university freedom may bring, more specifically, that first-year students know how to deal with the freedom. So whether the consequences of freedom are good or bad, managing freedom is a challenge to all first-year students.

It is important for these challenges to be dealt with and one way for university students to begin doing this, is through the awareness that they are to behave responsibly. According to Pancer *et al.* (2000), university is especially hard for first-year students, because they are required to adjust to being independent adults. While participants acknowledged this difficulty, they were also aware that assuming self-responsibility and maturity ultimately resulted in success at university and that it is essential to overcome the difficulty of adjusting to adulthood. Even though there was an awareness of the need to be responsible, this awareness does not necessarily mean that students know how to transform from being dependant learners at school with low levels of emotional maturity to self responsible adults at university. This is especially likely considering inadequate

preparation at school, as schools often do not provide students with the career, social and emotional skills to succeed at university.

When students are still struggling to develop into mature and responsible students, they rely on other sources for support to help them adjust to the challenges of university. Most participants agreed that family play a pertinent role in adjusting to the first year of university. Moreover, family expectations and financial support motivate students to work hard and perform well. Some participants agreed that students worked hard and performed well as this was in accordance with family norms and expectation and because parents paid university fees. These findings support Tinto's (1975) hypothesis that family background, including parental education, parental values, and family expectations are influential in goal and institutional commitment which in turn influences social and academic integration. Other participants had different perceptions, stating that those students who are responsible for paying their own university fees, presumably those from poor families, are motivated to work even harder than those whose parents pay their university fees. These findings confirmed that of Dennis *et al.* (2005) who reported a significant correlation between family resources needed and college GPA.

Not only are families a sources of financial support, they also provide emotional and academic support, particularly families who have a history of university education. Hansen and Mastekaasa (2006) indicated that students from a social class closest to (academic) cultural capital (e.g. those coming from families with a line of academics in the family) tended to perform better than those who were first generation university students. This is rarely the case for the majority of UWC's student population, who, due to our political history, are still considered 'previously disadvantaged'.<sup>14</sup> These students are commonly first generation students who cannot rely on family for academic support. Hence, friends more than family are relied on for their academic support.

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<sup>14</sup> During Apartheid the University of the Western Cape was a higher education institution that catered for blacks and coloured. In South Africa, 15 years into democracy, race is still strongly tied to social class.

Many participants agreed that friends are a fundamental part of the first year at university and forming new friendships is the first challenge that students approach. Based on participants' positive perceptions of diversity and racial integration at university, friendships are likely to develop across demographic lines. However, one participant indicated the unwillingness of white students to interact with other race groups. This may be as a result of whites being the minority at UWC. It may take a long time to get even race numbers at universities in South Africa and unless that has happened, stating reasons of racial dissonance when few students seem unwilling to mix is somewhat of a premature judgment. None the less, the welcoming of interracial interaction leads one to assume that the present generation of students is willing to tolerate students from other race groups, seemingly a step in the right direction for young South Africans. It is refreshing to know that participants in the present study felt this way in spite of recent events of racial tension and discrimination at other higher education institutions in South Africa.

Prior to university, students hold certain perceptions of university academia. There is the belief that the workload will be unmanageable, exams will be difficult and it will be hard to perform well. Soon after starting at university, students discover that it is not all that difficult. There are structures in place that make it possible to do well and achieve good grades. One such structure is the study group. Most participants agreed that belonging to a study group was beneficial as it allowed learning to take place in a more engaging environment. Discussing difficult course content with other members of the group, leads to improved understanding. Study groups are perceived to augment academic performance.

However, good performance does not only rely on group membership and interaction. Certain individual characteristics are perceived to improve academic performance. Participants agreed that commitment and focus are vital characteristics in academic performance on the whole. Focus and determination further deter students from being negatively influenced by peers. Some participants even went as far as saying that individual traits more than study groups encouraged good academic performance. This

finding compliments Zimmerman's (1989) self-regulated learning hypothesis. According to Zimmerman (1989) students' learning and achievement can be improved when they are active in their own learning, initiate their own learning efforts and do not rely on educators or peers. Furthermore, Tinto (1975) hypothesized that individual attributes interact with family characteristics and pre-university schooling to influence goal commitment.

Unfortunately, for South African students, working individually does not always yield the best academic outcomes. A very important concern that one should be mindful of is the issue of language in South Africa. English is the medium of instruction at most South African higher education institutions, including UWC. This presents various academic challenges to students who do not speak English as a first language. Students are unable to understand the lecturer or even communicate to staff about difficulties. This is a serious concern as it ties in with the question of how successful non-English speaking students will be. English language proficiency has a direct effect on academic performance and so there is a need for these non-English speaking students to engage with other students who are equipped with academic language skills. More importantly, strong connections with fellow students will lead to integration into the university system, whereas students who feel alienated from the university institution are more likely to drop out (Scott *et al.* 2007).

### **The link between social integration and academic performance**

Tinto (1975) defined social integration as the level of involvement that the student has with the social system of university and involves informal peer interaction, semi-formal interaction with staff and involvement in non-academic organisations.

By and large, friends connect on the basis of (a) shared experience(s) and usually this shared experience is that students are enrolled for the same course. The First-year Orientation Programme is an initiative held by UWC during the first two weeks of the academic year to orientate first-year students into their respective academic programmes. The consequence of such an initiative is that first-year students meet fellow first-year

students. Participants acknowledged that this was a good way to meet new people and become friends. This also means that a friend made through the orientation programme is enrolled for the same course.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, participants highlighted that peer groups also function as study groups. Study groups generally worked well as it brought together social characteristics with academic responsibilities. In discussing the role of friends at university, participants have divulged various benefits of friendships and peer groups, including the space to share common experiences and debrief about negative experiences, friends are sources of motivation, and friends assist with academic difficulties. These findings are consistent with that of Amenkhienan and Kogan (2004) who found that peer interactions were particularly beneficial for academic performance in that peers could communicate to each other about shared experiences and coursework related difficulties.

Friends do not only connect through a common course or subject, first-year students meet and connect with friends through randomly approaching them. A number of participants pointed to the random approaching of fellow students as a way to meet friends. In such cases, the main idea of friends is not to assist with course related problems but to act as a support structure, particularly as a source of motivation. The effect of motivation on academic performance has been the focus of numerous studies. Infact, motivation has been the central construct in Motivation Theories in predicting academic performance. Martin Ford proponent of The Motivational Systems argues that the interaction between a motivated, skilled and biologically capable person and his or her supportive environment will result in academic achievement and competence (Campbell, 2007). Similarly, Petersen *et al.* (2008) found intrinsic motivation to significantly predict academic performance among South African university students. The anxiety and difficulties present in the first year of study can result in decreased motivation, and so when intrinsic motivation is low, friends are especially important as a source of extrinsic motivation.

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<sup>15</sup> During orientation week, the orientation group is made up of all students enrolled for the same course. The facilitator of the group is usually a senior student who is also enrolled for that particular course.

The academic value of non-academic organisations and extra-curricular activities at university has been discussed with the participants. It seems that these non-academic facilities at university are what attract some participants to university. This brings about potential problems as it alludes to the fact that students are more concerned with social activities than academic activities. In speaking to participants about this possibility, they disagreed, stating that non-academic involvement mostly promoted good academic performance. One reason for this was that these non-academic activities allowed them to relax, reducing anxiety levels. Huesman *et al.* (2009) conducted a similar study on the effect of extra-curricular activities on academic performance and found that the use of campus recreational facilities positively correlated with good academic performance. In contrast, Leppel (2006) posits that social activities may negatively impact on academic performance as these activities may distract students, resulting in less time spent on academic activities.

Participants also drew attention to the fact that non-academic involvement forces students to manage their study time better. This finding is compatible with that of Dundes and Marx (2006) who found work and extra-mural activities to significantly impact on academic performance. They (Dundes & Marx, 2006) reasoned that students who worked between 10 and 19 hours per week tended to perform better those who did not work while studying, because balancing between work and college resulted in discipline not seen in others (who were not working). Participants laid emphasis on the ability to balance between social and academic activities, noting that non-academic organisations could only be of benefit if equal time was spent on each. The ability to balance between social and academic activities also depends on the seriousness and goal commitment of the student.

Finally, as the third dimension of Tinto's (1975) conceptualization of social integration, lecturer-student interaction was discussed. Participants felt that communication with their lecturers largely depended on the personality of the lecturer. An open, approachable lecturer makes students more comfortable, leading to improved communication and performance while intimidating lecturers instilled in students fear, leading to poor

academic performance. Again, lack of preparation at school means that students are not equipped with the social and communication skills that will enable them to perform well at university. Even though, as one student acknowledged, it is important to speak to lecturers and not to be overwhelmed by the ‘power hierarchy’, students find it challenging to engage with their lecturers. In attempting to understand lecturer-student communication, one should bear in mind that most of UWC’s student population comes from cultural backgrounds that limit informal interaction with older people or people in positions of authority.

Students who find it easier to communicate with lecturers are usually older students or students who come from schools where learners were provided with communication skills. In addition, language constraints place further strain and anxiety on students’ communication with their lecturers or staff. It is generally the case that lecturers present their work in a high level of academic English, making it difficult for students to understand and further discouraging them from approaching lecturers. UWC, like many other institutions, have sought to deal with the challenges of student communication, through availing lecturers for consultation. There is the hope that students will see lecturer consultation times as opportunities to approach lecturers in private.

#### **5.4 CONCLUSION**

The first year of university is an overwhelming combination of social and academic experiences. In speaking to participants about their perceptions of the first year, one comes to understand that the social and academic parts of university are naturally linked. Friends, involvement in non-academic organisations and communication with lecturers impact on the academic performance of first-year students. The findings of the present study show that first-year students perceive social integration to influence academic performance. The extent to which social integration influences academic performance and how social integration influences academic performance, whether positive or negative is mediated by individual characteristics.

These findings have an important contribution to make in holistically understanding first-year students' experiences and may further educational development in so far as it provides insight into the factors that contribute to academic performance. It should not be taken for granted that the social sphere and the academic sphere of university are disparate. The present study begins to show the importance of realizing the association between social integration and academic integration.

The findings of the present study have confirmed aspects of Tinto's (1975) model of student integration and have been pointed out throughout the discussion, leading the researcher to concede to the partial relevancy of the model for the South African context. However, while the reciprocal effects of social integration on academic integration has been alluded to, the original theory shows no direct link between social integration and academic performance. This study adds theoretical value to Tinto's (1975) model of student integration by showing how that the two main constructs in the original theory (social integration and academic integration) are indeed linked. Not only does social integration and academic integration have to be present to ensure goal commitment, but the presence of social integration may imply the presence of academic integration. Further investigation of the link between social integration and academic integration is strongly recommended.

## **5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is imperative that universities in South Africa, and the University of the Western Cape, in particular, take on the responsibility of continuing to advance student development. The UWC has attempted to improve the first-year experience through strategies such as the Orientation Programme and various foundation courses. Based on salient themes and the conclusions drawn from the present study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The First Year Orientation Programme should extend from a two week programme to a more long-term programme (year long). In this way, benefits of the Orientation Programme, such as opportunities to meet people and form study groups, share experiences of the first year and deal with academic matters, are

available throughout the academic year. Currently the Student Counselling Centre at UWC offers a mentorship programme where first-year students ('mentees') are matched up with mentors. This however is one-on-one interaction. The new proposed structure of the Orientation Programme will combine social group interaction with good academic outputs. Further benefits of this new structured Orientation Programme are: Peer facilitators (who are usually senior students) can provide academic assistance to first-year students; various challenges such as time management, balancing between social and academic activities and confidence to deal with lecturers, can be contended with.

2. Non-academic organisations add to the academic experiences of first year student. For this reason, more first-year students should participate in non-academic activities, especially those activities that have a direct effect on academic courses. Non-academic organisations should improve their marketing strategies. Alternatively, non-academic activities (debates, competitions and tournaments) should be incorporated into academic courses. An example of this could be informal seminars, discussions, debates, or conferences for students.
3. Because lecturer-student interaction also impacts on academic performance, especially in the first year, there needs to be an improvement in the way lecturers interact with students. This could be dealt with in the suggested year long orientation programme. Furthermore, first-year students are to be informed of the procedures to follow in the event of poor lecturer-student communication.
4. UWC should strengthen its academic policies. Firstly, foundation courses should make the acquisition of academic language skills and competencies its main focus so as to add more value to the first-year experience. Secondly, academic assessment policies should be standardized across departments and faculties.
5. Social structures are important for an overall positive experience of the first year. In light of this, it is recommended that the Academic Support office and the

Student Development office work closely together. A joint initiative could be to collaborate with schools to adequately prepare school learners for university.

## **5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

1. The present study relied on focus group discussions as its only source of data. Focus groups are generally used to elicit a group discussion on a focused topic. The limitation of using focus groups is that the results cannot be generalized to the broader population.
2. Participants volunteered to participate in the study. The limitation of volunteering is that it is a particular type of student who volunteers; one who is more forthcoming with information and who performs well academically. It would have been interesting to include in the study, participants who performed poorly as this would have perhaps provided a different perspective and rich discussion.
3. The focus groups took place in the second semester of the first year. The limitation of this was that first-year students were being asked to speak about their first year at university. It would have been more meaningful to speak to second year student about their first year as they would have provided a more holistic idea of the first-year experience.

## **5.7 FUTURE RESEARCH**

1. It is suggested that the key themes to emerge from the present study be further explored quantitatively enabling the findings to be generalized and allowing for the development of indicators of academic performance. It would be interesting to study the extent to which social factors influence academic performance, and which factors best predict academic performance, as an extension of the present study.

2. The findings were not compared across demographic lines as this was not the research aim. However, cross-race, age or even gender comparisons could provide for useful findings.



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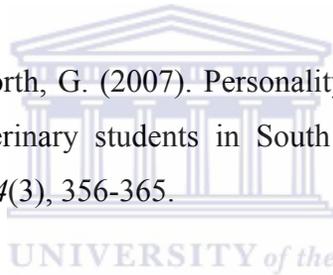
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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: Invitation to participate in a study: Information Sheet

I, Aziza Moos, a Masters student in the Department of Psychology at the University of the Western Cape, am conducting a study titled *Perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance amongst a sample of first-year students at the University of the Western Cape*. The aim of the study is to explore your perceptions of social integration and its influence on academic performance. This is an invitation for you to participate in the study. I wish to conduct focus group discussions where a group of students will share ideas and views on the topic. In this way I may be able to elicit information considered to be significant in determining the influence of social integration on academic performance as discussed by first-year students. It would be greatly appreciated if you would consider this opportunity to be a participant in the focus group discussions.

If you are interested in participating or require further information on the study, please contact:

Aziza Moos (Principal Researcher)

Contact Details: 084 550 3404

Email: [2326797@uwc.ac.za](mailto:2326797@uwc.ac.za)

*Thank you for considering participation in the study*

## APPENDIX B: Consent Form

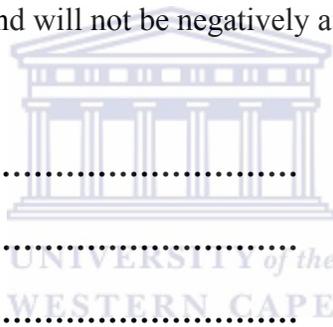
Title of the Study: **Perceptions of the influence of social integration on academic performance among first-year students at the University of the Western Cape**

The study has been described to me in a language I understand. I freely and voluntarily agree to participate. All my questions about the study have been answered. I also understand that I will remain anonymous and that I may withdraw from the study at any stage without giving a reason and will not be negatively affected by doing so.

**Name of Participant:** .....

**Signature of Participant:** .....

**Date:** .....



Should you have any questions related to the study or you wish to report any problems, please contact the study coordinator

**Name of Study Coordinator:** Aziza Moos

University of the Western Cape

Private Bag X17 , Bellville 7535

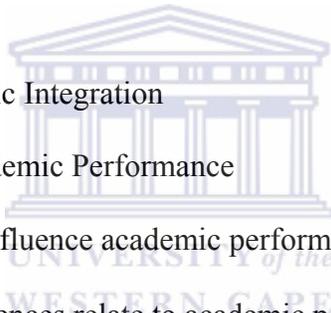
**Contact Number:** 084 550 3404

**E-mail:** 2326797@uwc.ac.za

## APPENDIX C: Focus Group Discussion Guide

The following themes and questions will guide the discussion.

- Describe your experiences of your first semester/year of university
- Elaborate on social experiences at university.
- What is your understanding of social integration (Defining Social Integration)
- Describe the process of Social Integration
  - In general
  - At UWC
- Understanding Academic Integration
  - Describing Academic Performance
  - Which factors influence academic performance.
- How does Social experiences relate to academic performance
- Does social integration influence academic performance



## **APPENDIX D: Transcription Conventions**

FG – Focus Group

FR – Female respondent

MR – Male respondent

F - Facilitator

... - part of the text has been omitted

[text] – explanatory text

