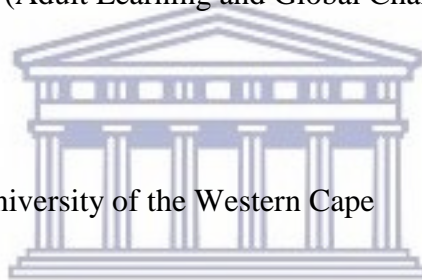


External communities, integration and student persistence among distance students at a
university in Southern Africa

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Research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Masters Degree in
Education (Adult Learning and Global Change)



University of the Western Cape

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WESTERN CAPE

May 2018

Word count: 28932 (without appendices)

Key words

Student persistence

Social integration

Academic integration

External communities

Goals and commitments

Distance education

Higher education

Namibia and Southern Africa



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Abstract

Student persistence is a thorn area which did not receive much publication in Namibia and South Africa. Many research focused on why students fail to persist in higher education opposed to why they succeed. This research paper mainly investigated the relationships between external communities, social and academic integration and student persistence among distance students. I used Tinto's theory of student persistence at institutions of higher learning as my theoretical approach. The study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. I collected data by interviewing senior distance students at a certain public university in Southern Africa.

The findings of this research revealed that the majority of students are self-driven which gave an impression that self -motivation and intentions of participants contribute significantly to student persistence. Indications are that informal peer group support contributes considerably to student persistence. The overall outcomes suggest that support from family members and employers positively influence students' academic progress and success. This study generally suggests that there is a positive relationship between external communities and student persistence opposed to what many scholars suggested.



Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank the Almighty God, who gave me the strength and who has protected me throughout this study.

This study has been completed with significant support from different individuals.

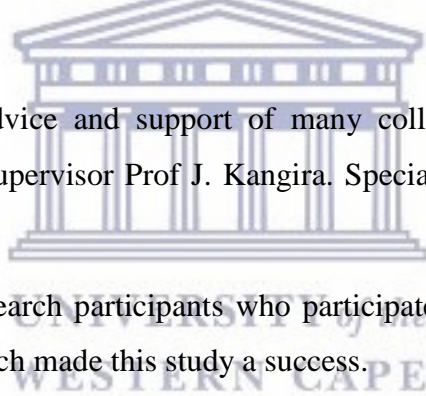
I would like to give special gratitude to Professor Zelda Groener, for having been a supportive supervisor who encouraged me to work harder in this study.

I want to thank my fellow students in the MALGC 15 cohort for the encouragement, motivation and assistance that we rendered to each other throughout our study period.

I am very grateful to the entire Niitembu family and my friends who encouraged me to study and complete this research. My special thanks goes to my husband, Mr Paulus Nehemia who has been very understanding and supportive, and carried out some family responsibilities alone when I was conducting this research and when I had to take trips to the University of the Western Cape several times.

I gratefully acknowledge the advice and support of many colleagues and friends at my workplace, including my work supervisor Prof J. Kangira. Special thanks to Dr N. Mlambo for editing this research paper.

I am deeply obligated to the research participants who participated voluntarily in my study and provided interesting data which made this study a success.



Declaration

I declare that this research paper is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Adult Learning and Global Change at the Institute for Post-School Studies, University of the Western Cape. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any university. All the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Martha Megumbo Niitembu-Nehemia

Signed: 

May 2018

Glossary of terms

DE	Distance Education
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
NDP4	National Development Plan 4
HPP	Harambee Prosperity Plan
HE	Higher Education



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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

This section introduces my study. It seeks to explain my interest in student persistence, integration and commitment in Higher Education. It elaborates on the research background and context, and outlines the research questions of this study.

Background and context

Distance education and/or Open Distance Learning (ODL) has become the preferred mode of study for many students in Namibia, Southern Africa and worldwide (Ramanujam, 2002; Keegan, 1996). Many students opt for distance education for personal and professional reasons. There is ample evidence regarding the popularity and effectiveness of ODL in providing people with quality and accessible higher education (Holmberg, 2003; Geduld, 2013). However, challenges such as high dropout and stop-out are experienced at many universities worldwide. Murangi (1997) researched student dropout in continuing education in Namibia and the study revealed that dropout is more common with older students who are working and have families. The findings of Murangi (1997) further indicate that “the large numbers of student dropped out of the program do so because of some personal reasons” (p. 61). ODL is especially popular among working professionals who choose to upgrade their qualifications while working. However, issues of low student persistence are common at many distance education universities/centres in Southern Africa.

In broader terms, higher education is not addressed directly in the current Namibian development agendas. The Namibian government recently released the Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP), which is a state action plan valid from 2016-2020 drawn up by the National Planning Commission (NPC). This is a current document which highlights all state plans towards prosperity for all (NPC, 2016). HPP does not include higher education specifically, but rather takes a step to promote Vocational Education and Training in the country. The other national document is the National Development Plan 4 (NDP4), which was launched by the former president, Hifikepunye Pohamba, in 2012. NDP4 focused on education in general, especially primary and secondary education. In NDP4, the state raised concerns about high investments in education while the standards and outcomes were of poor quality (NPC, 2012). It further highlighted the issue of limited access to education but student retention and

persistence are not addressed at all (NPC, 2012). This seemingly shows that national leaders do not recognise the importance of this concept in Namibia.

In my view, access would be meaningless if course completion is not attained. This is proof that student persistence is a relatively new concept in Namibia, which is worth researching in order for it to receive government and other stakeholders' attention. Furthermore, there is no evidence of research conducted in Namibia, which focuses on student persistence and integration in higher education. Some scholars have investigated student drop out, which is usually a main concern for university management. Although the graduation rates are still below 30% at the university in the study, there is no evidence of steps taken to improve persistence and student success.

Rationale

I have observed that the persistence rate is very low among distance students at a university in Namibia, and as an academic, I want to find out how persistence rates can be increased. According to the University of Namibia's statistics (UNAM) 2017, 3094 students enrolled through the centre for external studies in 2013, and due to the unavailability of the 2012 statistics, I assume that an almost similar number enrolled in the previous year, but only 624 students graduated in 2012. In 2015, the distance mode of study had 27.3% of the total number of students enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Namibia (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2016). The unavailability of the dropout rates in Namibian HEIs made it difficult to link enrolment, dropout and completion to student persistence. The 10-year general summary of statistics (2003-2012) indicates that the completion rates declined drastically in 2008 and in 2012 (UNAM, 2017). It can be a case that situational barriers undermine students' persistence but it is also worth noting that completion rates do not automatically indicate persistence, they could also include failure. As a student support coordinator, I usually give academic counselling to distance students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences to prevent drop out and to motivate students to be persistent despite the many challenges they face. Dropout is a permanent withdrawal from university studies or leaving without completion of the study. Murangi (1997) defines dropout as a "term refer[ring] to those students enrolling for a course and discontinuing before completing the entire course" (p. 7). Some students drop out or stop out of programmes when they are left with a few modules to complete their studies. Tinto (1993) refers to stop out as a "temporary

leaving or departure of students from the University” (p. 129) which is instigated by some circumstances but such students return later to complete their studies when those circumstances are resolved. That is one of the concerns that prompted me to investigate the barriers that undermine students’ persistence to complete programmes. As a former distance student, I have observed fellow students drop out or stop out of higher education in the past due to family and work commitments.

The purpose of this research is to find ways to contribute to the understanding of the factors that influence student persistence. For many adults, “participation in learning activities is a matter of choice that has to be fitted into work, family and community responsibilities and other interests and obligations” (MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, 2006, p. 10). Literature widely indicates that student persistence has come to the forefront in higher education strategic planning. In Namibia, public universities take student enrolment rates very seriously during the planning of the academic year and they always set enrolment targets. However, I am not aware of any measures in place for monitoring student persistence and attrition, except the annual statistics provided to faculties.

The study was prompted by my observation of a high rate of student persistence and students’ confidence to complete their studies even beyond the prescribed period of study among distance education students at the university in the study. Most of the students are adults with other commitments such as family, work and community activities. I am also impressed by some students who put their studies on hold but return to re-register and complete the programme.

Research problem

Research shows that in some higher education institutions, the rate of student persistence is low. Previous research on persistence focused more on student characteristics, academic preparedness, financial challenges and motivation (Barnett, 2011; Tinto, 2015). The role and relationship between external communities, integration and student persistence among distance students was not investigated and this is the thorny aspect I investigated. Tinto (2015) proposed several factors that contribute to student persistence and focused on full-time students who lived on campuses. However, for the purposes of my research, in my particular context, external factors to academic communities may undermine adult students’ persistence. Therefore, this study was worth undertaking, to investigate in depth, the complexity of the

issues of distance student persistence and integration in a Namibian context, as a way to identify the challenges and demands brought about by external communities.

Research aims

The aims of the study are:

1. To find out what motivates adult students in distance education to persist with their studies despite many challenges in external communities; and
2. To use the research findings to inform the university and all stakeholders to consider these factors when planning distance academic programmes and to inform new part-time students on how external factors can hinder or enhance their studies.

Research questions

Main research question

What are the relationships between external communities, social and academic integration and student persistence?



Sub-questions

1. What do external communities, social and academic integration contribute to student persistence?
2. How do external communities influence distance students' persistence and departure?
3. How does social and academic integration contribute to student persistence?

Section summary

In this section, I introduced the study to the reader by explaining the rationale and outlining the research question, sub-questions and research aim. The rest of the research paper is arranged as follows:

In Section 2, I give the overview of literature explicitly related to my study, and which conceptually frames this study.

In Section 3, I describe the methodology and design in this study.

In Section 4, I discuss and present the data collected.

In Section 5, I present a summary of the findings and recommendations.



SECTION 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Tinto (1982-2015) developed several theories on student drop out and retention, which he revised several times to include student persistence. In this section, I review academic literature from which I derive Tinto's model of student persistence as my conceptual framework for this study.

I selected particular components of Tinto's model which in my view are relevant and relate to the objectives and research questions of this study. These components are external communities, student persistence, academic integration, social integration, goals and commitment. In this section I review the literature concerning the interconnectedness of these components and their influence on student persistence.



Conceptual framework

I used Tinto's model of student persistence at institutions of higher education and specifically Tinto's revised "model linking classrooms, learning and persistence" (Tinto, 1997, p. 615) as my theoretical approach. Tinto's (1997) model of student persistence proposes important relationships between social, academic integration and persistence. The model of student persistence is intended to address the interconnectedness between social and academic integration, mediated by goal commitments which influence persistence positively (Schreiber, Luescher-Mamashela & Moja, 2014). Tinto (1997) indicates that "critical linkages between involvement in classrooms, student learning and persistence" (pp. 600-601) are not yet explored, and these relationships are important yet difficult to achieve for students who are working and are thus non-residential at campuses. Tinto (1997) emphasises that student persistence is enhanced by collaborative learning settings where social and academic integration is balanced. It is also worth noting that the theory refers mostly to full-time students who meet regularly in classrooms. Since the model consists of multiple elements, I will only focus on some elements, which I think influence and are related to student persistence, namely social integration, academic integration, goal and academic commitments

and external communities (commitments). The decision to choose some elements and not others is guided by the key elements that featured in my research title and research questions and thus became the main focus of my study. In addition, due to the scope of this research, I wanted to do an in-depth study, which is only achievable, if I focus on particular elements rather than using the whole model.

Models of student persistence

Student persistence was briefly introduced in Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure as a "complex view of the longitudinal process of student persistence" (p. 134). In his earlier model of individual departure, Tinto (1993) theorises that "the more students learn, the more likely are they to persist (p. 131). He created a model of student persistence to include "the role of the classroom" (1997, p. 599) and to make sure that "theories of student persistence account more directly for the role of classroom experience in the process of both student learning and persistence" (Tinto, 1997, p. 600). Tinto (1997) argues that most scholars "have not seen it as the centrepiece of their efforts to promote student persistence" (p. 599). Against that background, it is evident that Tinto introduced a "Model linking classrooms, learning and persistence" (Tinto, 1997, p. 615) and not a model for student persistence only. In this study, I refer to Tinto's model linking classrooms, learning and persistence as a model for student persistence due to the absence of a single and precise model which focusses only on student persistence. Although I included Tinto's earlier work and views on student persistence, my study's theoretical framework relied heavily on Tinto's (1997) model of student persistence as the main focus.

The model of student persistence consists of many components which all contribute in different ways to student persistence (Tinto, 1997). These components include "family background, skills and abilities, prior schooling, intentions, goals and institutional commitments, external commitments, academic system, social system, social integration, academic integration, quality of student effort, learning and persistence" (Tinto, 1997, p. 615). All the components are linked to each other and share a special relationship. According to Tinto (1997), the modified model of student persistence "reflects the educational character of university life and suggests important relationships between the educational activity structure of the classroom, student involvement and the quality of student effort" (pp. 614-615). Tinto's model of student persistence is highlighted as "the most cited work on student persistence but

some scholars argue that a lot was left for scholars to estimate” (Milem & Berger, 1997, p. 392).

Tinto (1993) describes the model of student persistence as “a model of educational communities that highlights the critical importance of student engagement or involvement in the learning communities” (p. 132) of the university. This understanding is also supported by Schreiber et al. (2014), that “student persistence and success is centred on the construct of student engagement which has drawn extensively on Tinto’s theory of social and academic integration” (p. vii). Student engagement appears as the central point of the main arguments which underpin the logic of the model of student persistence. Kuh (as cited in Schreiber et al., 2014) defines student engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to the desired outcomes of college” (p. vii). I find student engagement compelling and relevant for my research, due to the fact that it is one of the core components of this model and also because of its applicability to all students in the university regardless of their mode of study. The other important components of this model are student integration and persistence, which inform the main objectives of my study.

At times I find the views and conclusions of Tinto (2015) to be self-contradictory, especially on the matter of what influences student persistence. Tinto (2015) emphasises through the model that both academic and social integration are essential to student persistence, although sometimes he stresses that academic integration outweighs social integration in terms of its influence to student persistence and success. On this point, Tinto (1997) states that “academic involvement does matter more than social involvement” (p. 616). On the contrary, Tinto (1997) adds further that “it is also true that both academic and social involvement influence persistence” (p. 616). At the same time, Tinto (2015) asserts that academic integration has not always been associated with persistence. In my view, Tinto failed to outline explicitly the influence of persistence in institutions of higher education and the concepts are not defined clearly. As a result, the application has been left to the interpretation of scholars. According to some scholars, Tinto’s model holds “paradigmatic status” and “it is difficult to summarize Tinto’s model concisely as it is complex and comprehensive, and has been refined over time” (Barnett, 2011, p. 195).

In relevance to this study, it is likely that Tinto situates student persistence and external communities in the social and academic systems of colleges and universities.

Student persistence

Tinto (1997) views student persistence as a high level of “student involvement in the life of the university, especially its academic life, their engagement both inside and outside the classroom, and acquisition of knowledge and development of skills” (p. 600). Tinto (1997) further stresses that student persistence is influenced by a “collaborative learning setting” (p. 613), learning communities, and “student involvement and the quality of student effort” (p. 615). However, Schreiber et al. (2014) critically stated that “Tinto’s concept of inclusive learning communities is an ideal rather than a practical reality” (p. viii).

Tinto (1997) conceptualises student persistence as a concept which is not fully explored and understood in higher education. Tinto (1997) argues that “we have yet to fully understand the educational character of persistence in higher education” (p. 601). Tinto notes that researchers have not done enough to connect learning and student persistence. Hence, he introduced the student persistence model to close that gap. Tinto (1997) proffers that “the work other researchers have done has yet to be connected to that in the field of student persistence” (p. 601). That being said, the main reason that I decided to investigate student persistence is that I agree with Tinto that student persistence is an area which has not been fully researched yet.

The available literature maintains that while access and entry to higher education is attained in most countries, a large number of students fail to persist throughout their study period (Barnett, 2011). There is lack of a clear definition of student persistence in the literature, though generally, student persistence is linked to the student’s successful incorporation into the university environment and the student’s subsequent success in higher education (Milem & Berger, 1997). According to Schreiber et al. (2014), student persistence is viewed as a “function of integration into the academic and social aspects of the university system, mediated by goal commitments” (p. vi). Tinto linked persistence to learning in almost all of his models, although his views on how the two are related have gradually changed over time.

Tinto’s model was revised and refined several times since the first model was released in 1975. In his earlier model of institutional departure, he suggests that “the more students learn the more likely are they to persist” (Tinto, 1993, p. 131). He explains that student “persistence is conceptually linked to student perceptions of the quality of their learning environments and interaction with faculty about learning issues” (Tinto, 1997, p. 618). Tinto

(1997), however, cautions that while “learning is positively associated with persistence; it is not a case that learning guarantees persistence” (p. 616). I concur with academic scholars’ views that student persistence is shaped by classroom learning, interaction within the institutional environment and general incorporation in the academic and social life of the university (Milem & Berger, 1997; Tinto, 1997). Nevertheless, the focus of this research is on how academic and social integration influence persistence among distance students. In addition, I explore how student persistence is shaped by interactions within the institutional environment and general incorporation in the academic and social life of the university. Classroom learning does not take place regularly for distance students, thus its relationship to student persistence is not the focus in this study.

Several studies using Tinto’s model of student persistence have taken place over the past two decades (Milem & Berger, 1997; Barnett, 2011; Schreiber et al., 2014). Some scholars have criticised Tinto’s model of student persistence; for instance, Milem and Berger (1997) found out that academic integration does not predict persistence. Their findings rather suggest that “social integration may have a more influential role in predicting student persistence” (p. 397). Other scholars generally indicate that Tinto’s model of student persistence is more applicable to full-time students who reside on campus than to distance and adult students with multiple roles in society (Schreiber et al., 2014). While criticisms about the limitations of Tinto’s model are argued by many scholars, Tinto (1997) himself acknowledges that more still needs to be done in the domain of student persistence, and that people should not be despairing if existing models prove insufficient. I fully concur with the critiques outlined earlier, and it is for these reasons that I selectively decided to use Tinto’s model of student persistence as a framework to explore the relationship between academic, social integration and student persistence among distance adult students.

Tinto’s view on motivation for student persistence

Motivation for student persistence is one of the areas that Tinto explored. Tinto (2015) holds the view that students “do not seek to be retained, they seek to persist” (p. 1). Tinto (2015) further emphasises that “without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely” (p. 2). Studies conducted with regards to student persistence outline some factors which motivate students to persist. Tinto’s (2015) study entitled ‘Through the eyes of students’, identifies self-efficacy, sense of belonging and perception of the curriculum as main

motivators for students to persist. Tinto (2015) argues that “students’ belief in their ability to succeed in college is not just an academic issue, but it can also reflect their perception of their ability to manage larger tasks of going to college while trying to manage other responsibilities”, (p. 4) such as family and work duties. There is no doubt that self-efficacy leads to goal attainment and in this case to course completion (Tinto, 2015). According to Tinto (2015), students can have different goals. For instance, some students’ goals are to graduate from a certain university, while others can have a goal of completing their studies at another university. Tinto’s (2015) “model of student motivation and persistence” (p. 3) outlines the goals that lead to motivation and finally to persistence, which are influenced by self-efficacy, sense of belonging and perception of curriculum. Students who believe in themselves and have clear goals can persist even when they encounter social or academic challenges. Tinto (2015) argues further that “a strong sense of self-efficacy cannot be assumed, although many students begin university confident in their ability to succeed” (p. 4). In my experience, this can be true due to the fact that we have seen students enrolling confidently, being firmly committed to their studies in their first year but as time goes on and challenges arise, they start losing their confidence and become less committed. I concur with Tinto (2015) that “believing in one’s ability to successfully complete a particular course of action does not in itself ensure persistence” (p. 5).

Barnett (2011) insists that components of faculty validation and academic integration such as “students known and valued, caring instruction, appreciation for diversity and mentoring” (p. 212) play a major role in students’ intention to persist. This kind of motivation leads to a sense of belonging and strengthening the bond between the faculty and students. Tinto (2015) conceptualises that “students who perceive themselves as belonging are more likely to persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also a willingness to engage others in ways that further persistence” (p. 5). While both Tinto (2015) and Barnett’s (2010) studies were conducted on full-time students, these factors are equally important and applicable to distance students who are likely not to feel the sense of belonging since they study off campus and do not interact with academics on a daily basis. Tinto (2015) alludes further that the “motivation to persist is also influenced by students’ perception of the value or relevance of their studies” (p. 5). Students also persist because of the quality and relevance of the curriculum they are studying.

Barriers to student persistence

Tinto (1997) points out some barriers to student persistence. For instance, he states that “new student attention is focused on the need to make social connections with their student peers; however, as students progress through the first year and towards their degree, their concerns appear to shift towards a greater emphasis on academic issues” (p. 618). In my view, new students put more effort into social integration at the beginning of their studies and only shift their attention to academic integration later on. This is a barrier to student persistence because according to Tinto (1997), “the significant predictors of junior and senior persistence proved to be student involvement in learning activities, students’ views of the quality of teaching and their contact with faculty” (p. 618). Tinto (2014) stresses that “most students commute to campus, some work and many are from low-income backgrounds who do not have the privilege, the time or resources to live on campus” (p. 6). These conditions are challenges which can affect student persistence. Tinto (1993) adds that family responsibilities may sometimes hinder persistence more among females than males. Tinto (2014) also states that “though we aspire to help students, there are many things that affect their success over which we have little control” (p. 7).

Other scholars have identified many barriers to student persistence. Breier (2010) indicates that finance is a major factor which contributes to students’ retention and drop out in developing countries; this is especially relevant to students from the lower social class and previously disadvantaged groups and those living in extreme poverty. Breier (2010) further indicates that “students left before completing a qualification because they were too poor to stay” (p. 657). Murangi’s (1997) study on Namibian students’ drop-out in continuing education reported time and costs as barriers which inhibited adult learners to participate in continuing education at face-to-face centres. Murangi (1997) suggests that students can study through distance programmes but at the same time cautions that “other factors such as distance to campuses/centres, work obligations, transfer at work, transportation, family responsibilities” (which can either be cost or time related) may emerge (p. 77). However, the situation and challenges experienced by students may not be the same, even if they are in the same country or studying at the same institution.

Barriers to distance education student persistence

Tinto's theory of student persistence is designed for full-time students, and in my view, it does not make any direct reference to distance education. However, it is significant to include barriers to distance education students' persistence in my study because I am investigating distance students. Distance education is defined as "the education of those who choose not to attend the schools, colleges and universities of the world but to study at home, or sometimes their workplaces" (Keegan, 1996, p. 34). In the past, distance education in developing countries was hindered by "lack of clarity in policy and institutional goals, inadequate material support and political, as well as lack of human resources" (Ramanujam, 2002, p. 23). The success of distance students is not always easy to achieve due to many challenges associated with this mode of study. In the 21st century, developing countries of Southern Africa, which includes Namibia, are still struggling to raise the standards of education due to lack of sufficient financial resources, human resources and infrastructural facilities (Ramanujam, 2002).

A challenge students face at times is not understanding the academic written language used in study guides and other printed materials. According to Vergie (2013) "many students may have trouble understanding the type of language used in the study material (essentially academic language), sometimes because lecturers do not understand the challenges faced by students" (p. 1554). These kinds of challenges can directly hinder student success and persistence in higher education. Tinto (2015) recommends that only "when institutions understand how student perceptions shape decisions to persist and how their actions influence those perceptions can institutions move to impact those decisions in ways that enhance the likelihood of greater persistence" (p. 11).

Multiple communities in higher education

Since this study is in higher education, it is significant to include views of different multiple communities and sometimes overlapping communities in higher education. Tinto (1997) refers to them as social and academic communities. Tinto (1997) states that "colleges can be seen as consisting not merely of multiple communities, but of overlapping and sometimes

nested academic and social communities, each influencing the other in important ways” (p. 617). While Tinto (1997) focuses on classrooms as communities for youthful students attending a full-time programme, I would like to look at “older students who are immersed in external communities of work, family and friends” (Tinto, 1997, p. 619). Tinto (1997) emphasises the concept of “learning communities” (p. 609) in higher education. For instance, Tinto (1997) theorises that the “learning community enabled students to develop a network of supportive peers that helped students to make the transition to college and integrate them into a community of peers” (p. 609). Learning communities include many smaller communities which eventually become part of wide multiple communities in higher education. According to Tinto (1997) “many students talked of their learning communities as a place to meet new people and make new friendships; a way to make the large university a smaller, more knowable place” (p. 610). Tinto (1997) adds further that learning communities assisted students to pull social and academic concerns together. One of those smaller communities is a community of peers where “student early friendships are formed, some friendships lasted; others faded” (Tinto, 1997, p.609). Tinto also refers to classrooms as communities and emphasises that the “classroom is the crossroads where the social and academic meet” (1997, p. 599).

In his recent study, Tinto (2015) indicates that one advantage of a learning community is that “it employs active learning strategies that require students to learn together, students are not only likely to learn more but also more likely to want to persist” (p. 9). Tinto (1993) elaborates that “the notion of multiple communities, academic and social, provide us a way of understanding the possible ways in which differing students may be able to make the transition to college and become incorporated into the life of the university” (p. 125).

External communities

In the absence of a clear definition of external communities, Tinto (1993) describes external communities as a range of individuals and communities external from the university campus. External communities are defined as events external to the university such as family responsibilities, work commitments, and peer groups (Tinto, 1993; Ross, 2014). Adult students enter the institution with multiple commitments that they need to balance with academic work. Consequently, Tinto (1993) makes it explicit that external actions of students’ family, members of community and national organisations can play a significant role in the

decisions of individuals to persist at institutions of higher learning. In Tinto's revised model of student persistence, external communities are not clearly linked to other components and I assume it is up to the researcher to determine how it affects persistence. Despite the fact that the point on external communities is left independently in the model, Tinto (1993) stresses that "persistence depends on the centrality of that community in the system of the college" (p. 123). This means that the location where external communities are placed in the institutional centre plays a major role. In my view, external communities are not directly linked to higher educational institutions, but they can influence persistence or institutional departure. Significant external forces may pull a person away from the institution's system and conversely also be sufficient to keep the person within the broader system of the university (Tinto, 1993).

According to Tinto (1993), in most cases external commitments are seen as interfering or hindering students' goals, intentions and institutional commitments throughout the study period. He further cautions that "participation in external communities may entail accepting a range of external commitments that may counter, rather than support, participation in college communities" (p. 127). Tinto further argues that students with other responsibilities such as working students and those with families are less likely to complete their studies than full-time students. Tinto's (2015) recent study (Through the eyes of students) on student motivation and persistence emphasises that "students have to want to persist and expand the effort to do so even when faced with the challenges they sometimes encounter" (p. 2). This situation exists especially in urban settings and among working students, where full-time participation in the social and intellectual activities of the institution is not possible (Tinto, 1993).

External communities in this research are considered as central to student persistence and linked to adult distance students' studies because of the multiple roles they are responsible for in their communities. Conversely, Tinto (1993) argues that when individual students participate in communities' external to higher education (e.g. family, work and community), events in those communities may also shape persistence in college (Tinto, 1993). External support is critical to continued persistence. For example, Tinto believes external support is more instrumental to married and older students with families because it enables them to withstand the difficulties and demands of academic life. Tinto (1993) states that "not all external influences are negative in character, in some cases, external communities may aid student persistence" (p. 127). Work requirements and expectations can also reinforce

persistence when an adult student is required to complete the programme to be permanently employed or to get promoted. This model surprisingly views financial resources as not directly impacting on persistence among students. In relevance to this study, it is likely that Tinto (1993) concludes that external commitments ‘affect’ or in some cases ‘support’ student goals and institutional commitments, which consequently leads to persistence or departure from colleges and universities. There is a notion which Tinto (1993) refers to as “temporary departure” (p. 129) which I will refer to as stop-out in this study. According to Tinto (1993), “changes in family or financial circumstances may be sufficiently great to force the individual to depart at least until those circumstances are resolved” (p. 129).

In a study conducted at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Breier (2010) emphasises the need to consider the issue of finance in relation to multiple social, political and economic contextual factors that affect but also go beyond the individual. In my context of study adult students encounter multiple social responsibilities in their current life which will be referred to as the external communities in this study. Some of these responsibilities are: work commitments, family, home and children, learning disability, financial problems and lack of support from family members or employers (Breier, 2010). Tinto (1993) describes students in this context as those who spend much of their days away from campus and attend to a range of demands on their time and energies and “doing college in addition to a host of other things” (p. 126). The model extensively emphasised the role of intra-institutional experience and one can conclude that it was mainly introduced to cater for on-campus/full-time students, but at the same time it covered (though narrowly) the role of external impacts (external communities). Tinto’s (1993) model leaves open the possibility that events in communities external to higher education may shape what occurs within the narrower confines of the institution.

It is common knowledge that in Southern African countries, distance students generally live away from campus and that they have multiple responsibilities which can hinder their academic success. Tinto’s recent model of student motivation and persistence suggests that students differ on what motivates them to attend college. Some students may find motivation in intrinsic benefits such as learning, affiliation, and development, while others may be motivated by extrinsic benefits such as careers, income and further education (Tinto, 2015).

Tinto’s work was criticized widely by other scholars, like Breier (2010), who states that “Tinto’s arguments put more emphasis on ‘the individual’ and neglect external factors

including social, political and economic forces” (p. 658). The latter (external factors) is the notion I liked to investigate and challenge in this research.

External communities and integration

Tinto (1993) points out that:

Multiple communities (which include external communities), academic and social provide us a way of understanding the possible ways in which different students may be able to make the transition to universities and become integrated into the life of the university. (p. 125).

The author stresses that institutional communities are nested in an external environment which comprises of external communities with their own set of values and behaviours (Tinto, 1993). Early integration, for instance in first year of study is recommended as a positive sign for persistence. However, Tinto (1993) warns that early membership or integration does not guarantee persistence, and it is possible that social and intellectual growth which takes place in students’ lives throughout the study period can cause changes and subsequently affect student persistence.

The model of student persistence indicates “that there is a relationship between student effort, the extent of student learning” (Tinto, 1997, p. 600) and persistence, and this is more important for distance students because involvement in studies is not their only priority and thus, it may be difficult to achieve. Tinto (1997) indicates that:

The more students are involved, academically and socially, in shared learning experiences that link them as learners with their peers, the more likely they are to become more involved in their own learning and invest the time and energy needed to learn. (p. 615).

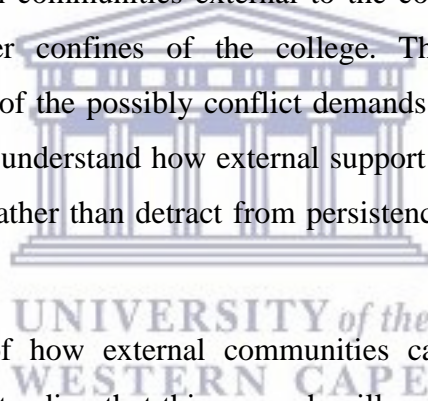
This is just one dimension of how external communities can be related to integration. I believe that the quality of student effort and learning can be enhanced directly or indirectly by external communities, for instance when employers give working students leave or grant them time to concentrate on academic activities, these motivate them to learn. Although the revised model of student persistence suggests a strong relationship between classroom, student effort, learning and persistence, in this research the classroom will not be the main focus. My study will use learning in general (i.e. not limited to a classroom) as a way to

accommodate distance students who don't regularly meet in classrooms. Tinto (1997) argues that classrooms do not play a role in student persistence. Tinto theorises that what motivates students to persist depends on the individual student and that it can come from social involvement, academic involvement, external communities or other aspects.

External communities and student persistence

The model of student persistence does not emphasise that student decisions to persist are affected by their external responsibilities. However, Tinto highlights that many adult students who enrol at universities have additional duties such as taking care of families and work commitments. Tinto (1993) stresses further that:

By nesting the college within the larger external community, the model leaves open the possibility that events in communities external to the college may shape what occurs within the narrower confines of the college. The model provides a mechanism for the analysis of the possibly conflict demands of college, work, and family. It also enables us to understand how external support from families, friends and employers may assist, rather than detract from persistence in college (pp. 126-127).



That is the core relationship of how external communities can play a role in student persistence and that is the understanding that this research will carry. I designed this study to examine the connection between external communities, integration and student persistence among distance students at the university. I wanted to explore the extent to which external communities influence adult distance student's persistence in higher education. Tinto (2014) warns that there are many things that affect student success, such as personal lives and economic resources. Tinto (2014) maintains that "the unavoidable fact is that though institutions and academics aspire to assist students; there are many things that affect their success over which institutions have little control" (p. 7). Here, in my view, Tinto (2014) refers to external communities as some of the things which may affect student success.

Goals and commitments

Tinto's (1997) model of student persistence does not make clear reference to goals and commitments although they appear in the model. Thus, discussions on goals and commitments in this subheading are drawn from Tinto's earlier model of institutional departure. Tinto (1993) argues that the relationship between individual goals and commitments influences both the decision for persistence and departure and the form it takes. For instance, "weak goals and institutional commitments can lead to student departure while low goal commitment may result in the total withdrawal from all forms of higher education participation" (Tinto, 1993, p. 130). Similar to other elements discussed, the author posits that when both individual and institutional goals are strong and commitments are high, it is likely for students to persist and succeed. Tinto (1993) argues further that persistence may follow if students' goals and commitments outweigh the cost of isolation in the social system of the university. I concur with the argument that "student success does not arise by chance" (Tinto, 2014, p. 21). I believe that individual and institutional goals play a major role in student success.

The social and academic interactions between the student and the external communities take place within the context of the student's world experiences. All of these experiences affect the student's commitment to the institution and ultimately the decision to persist and complete academic studies. These experiences include family backgrounds, the country's political and economic backgrounds, such as apartheid and poverty in the Namibian and South African context. Schreiber et al. (2014) allude that in the South African context, "many students come from families in which they are the first generation to participate in higher education" (p. vii), and thus it can be a challenge to align personal, social and academic goals with the influence of external communities. Goals can also be influenced by personal preferences of where students want to graduate. For instance, some students can make it a goal to graduate from a certain institution as Milem and Berger (1997) state that "some students will have stronger levels of commitment to graduating from a particular institution than others" (p. 390).

Integration

Academic integration

Academic integration is one of the primary components of Tinto's model of student persistence. This concept was inherited from Tinto's (1993) "longitudinal model of departure from higher education" (p. 112). In his earlier model, Tinto (1993) emphasises that "student involvement in the academic life of the university is an important mechanism through which

student effort is engaged” (p. 131). It is clearly evident that Tinto (1997) views academic integration as one of the key components of the modified “model which linked classrooms, learning and persistence” (p. 615). In the model of student persistence, he argues that students’ “contact with the faculty inside and outside the classroom serves directly to shape learning and persistence” (Tinto, 1997, p. 617). The difference between the two models is that academic integration was not linked to student persistence in the longitudinal model. Tinto’s thinking changed gradually to focus on student persistence towards the end of 20th century. In Tinto’s model of student persistence, he suggests that academic integration is directly linked to the quality of student effort and learning (Tinto, 1997). Tinto (1997) states that there is an “important relationship between the educational activity structure of the classroom, student involvement, and the quality of student effort” (p. 615). Tinto (1997) “modified a theory of student persistence to link classrooms to effort and persistence” (p. 616). Some scholars reveal that Tinto hypothesised that academic integration is the most important to student persistence (Barnett, 2011).

Academic systems focus “on the interactions that take place during formal education opportunities. Typically, these interactions are between the faculty, staff and students that occur in the classroom and laboratories” of the university (Tinto, 1982, 1993, p. 106). The model predicts that positive interactive experiences which further intellectual integration in the university are likely to motivate students to persist until the programme is completed. According to Ross (2014), Tinto suggests that student engagement should be facilitated by faculty members and academics, and this usually happens in a classroom, which is a way to promote academic integration, which in turn leads to the development of communities of learning. Similarly, Barnett (2011) argues that “Tinto’s conception of academic integration consists of a sense of membership in the classroom along with an ability to attain academic success” (p. 195). It is evident that classroom activities and engagement plays a significant role in Tinto’s description of academic integration. Though classroom engagement is very limited in the distance education context, students can keep a strong contact with lecturers and receive comprehensive feedback from lecturers to increase the quality of learning which in turn contributes to persistence and success. Thus, Tinto (1997) suggests that early academic involvement can be more important to adult students “who are immersed in external communities of work, as well as family and friends” (p. 619) because it can shape their “ability to cope with the academic demands” (p. 619).

I find it relevant to use the same definition in this study although the concept of ‘classroom engagement’ is limited as far as distance education is concerned. In this research, academic integration focuses mainly on formal peer groups’ interaction among students and their interaction with faculty members in and outside classrooms.

However, Tinto (1993) cautions that “contact with faculty and staff does not, in itself, ensure congruence” (p. 117). In addition, in the integration model, Tinto (1993) suggests that if students are not academically integrated (participate in sport, attend public lectures, be in the library, use the writing centres etc.) they are likely to depart prematurely. Milem and Berger (1997) state critically that “previous empirical tests of Tinto’s model failed to include direct measures of academic and social integration” (p. 392).

Social integration

The concept ‘social integration’ is inherited from Tinto’s (1993) theory of individual departure. In the literature on the theory of student persistence, much reference is made to both social and academic integration. In my view, it is challenging to discuss social integration separately from academic integration. In my understanding, social integration is related to student social life in academic institutions, including “educational activities which enables students to bridge the academic-social divide so that they are able to make friends and learn at the same time” (Tinto, 1997, p. 615).

Some scholars propose that many factors may influence persistence, including social integration (Tinto, 1993; Barnett, 2011). Barnett (2011) defines “social integration as the extent and quality of integrations that students have with the college’s social system” (p. 195). “Social systems focus on the daily lives, personal needs and social activities of the students within the educational setting. The sets of interactions among students, faculty, and staff take place largely outside of the formal academic setting” (Tinto, 1993, p. 106). While Tinto’s (1997) model focuses on the social integration of full-time/residential students in a higher institution who meet in classrooms and socialise during student activities, I still find it suitable and applicable to use in distance education settings. Tinto (1993) states that “events which occur elsewhere in the student’s life may play an important role in determining what transpires within the college” (p. 109). Tinto (1993, 1997) theorises that social integration influences a student’s commitment to the school and to the goal of graduating. Although some sources consider social integration to be less important as a predictor of persistence compared to academic experiences (Barnett, 2011), I believe that each element has a direct impact on

students' decisions to persist. For instance, strong social integration continually shapes students' intentions and commitments to the study, which leads to persistence. Tinto's (1993) model argues that "the lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure" (p. 115). Tinto (1993) stresses further that "though the presence of interaction does not by itself guarantee persistence, the absence of interaction almost always enhances the likelihood of departure" (p. 117).

Overall, Tinto (1993) hypothesises that greater social and academic integration leads to strong goals and commitments which can outweigh external impacts and aid student persistence. Conversely, weak social and academic integration in higher education can lead to weak goals and commitments, and students are likely to depart for other pursuits.

The interconnectedness of academic and social integration

It is worth noting that institutions of higher learning consist of multiple and overlapping communities. Tinto (1997) acknowledges that "Colleges are nested in academic and social communities, each influencing the other in important ways" (p. 617). Academic and social integration are connected, hence, sometimes it is difficult to describe one of the two aspects without linking it to the other. Tinto (1997) modifies the earlier version of the model where social and academic integration appeared as "two separate boxes, mask[ing] the fuller relationship between these two spheres of activities" (p. 619). According to Tinto (1997), the modified model should present a "more accurate representation", where "academic and social systems appear as two nested spheres, where the academic occurs within the broader social system that pervades the campus" (p. 619). Social and academic integration are the core / primary components of Tinto's model and they are interrelated. Tinto (1993) argues that "the impact of individual attributes cannot be understood without reference to the social and intellectual context within which individuals find themselves" (p. 113).

Tinto (1997) stresses that academic integration "occurs within the broader social system of the university, and social and academic student life are interwoven" (p. 619). He argues further that both social and intellectual integration are essential to the education of maturing individuals, and more beneficial than a presence of one aspect only (Tinto, 1993). However, Tinto emphasises that "although for most, if not all institutions, academic involvement does

matter more than social involvement and it is also true that both academic and social integration influence persistence” (1997, p. 616).

The social and academic interactions between the student and the external communities take place within the context of the student’s world experiences. All of these experiences affect the student’s commitment to the institution and ultimately the decision to persist until completion. Subsequently, Tinto (1997) suggests that the richer the integration between the social and academic systems with the student’s life experiences, the greater the likelihood that the student will continue and complete his or her studies. Tinto’s revised model of student attrition indicates that there is a strong link between integration into the academic and social aspects of the university system and persistence. On the contrary, the poor integration of the student within the institutional systems or negative experiences can reduce students’ commitment to persist (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto’s social and academic integration is criticised for generalising across the range of different student categories. For instance, critics argue that “social and academic integration do not act as reliable indicators for persistence rates among distance learning students, mature students and returning students” (Schreiber et al, 2014, p. vi). Some scholars criticised that although Tinto’s model provides a conceptual tool for social and academic integration, he fails to include direct measures of those interactions. Instead, researchers had to estimate the direct path between initial commitments to social and academic integration (Milem & Berger, 1997). I found Tinto’s model vague in that he does not clearly articulate how researchers should use it, and thus many scholars interpret it in different ways. However, despite these challenges, there are some important aspects of the theory that provide insights and illumination into social and academic integration, hence in this study, Tinto’s theory will be used as a guiding tool and a framework for understanding the relationship between interaction, student persistence and external communities in higher education.

Formal and informal peer group interaction among distance students

According to the available literature, the “establishment of friendship with peers, development of mentors and connections to faculty members, have been identified as important factors for student integration” (Swail, as cited in Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011, p. 5). Group interaction is different and sometimes difficult in distance education because students are not

obliged to join or form learning groups in order to study (Keegan, 1996). However, due to new technology, the trends have changed and we have seen distance students forming study groups through WhatsApp groups and in this way they interact directly with their lecturers. Universities are also promoting student engagement by insisting on regular communications with students through emails, notices on student portals and other student support platforms.

Vacation school is a term used by Namibian universities to refer to contact sessions for distance students. Vacation schools take place for a period of one week every semester. Vacation schools are one of the academic platforms which are widely used in Southern African universities to provide distance tutors and students an opportunity to meet and discuss subject matter content. Geduld (2013) argues that it is important for students to experience the human connection with lecturers to feel that they belong and that they are valuable. The vacation school is an important element of ODL because that is the only time when students meet with tutors face-to-face.

A study conducted by North West University in South Africa on contact class attendance revealed that “regardless of low vacation school attendance, most students performed above average” (Van Zyl & Spamer, 2013, p. 245), and evidence from elsewhere in the world shows that attendance of vacation schools is a vital component of distance learning student success.



Section summary

In this section I presented an overview of how Tinto's theory and other scholars' views of student persistence conceptually frame this study. I showed the strengths and weaknesses of Tinto's theory. I looked at the interconnectedness between different concepts such as social and academic integration, external communities and student persistence.

SECTION 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The aim of my study is to investigate the role of external communities, integration and student persistence among distance students. Through that aim, I researched participants' perception of the relationship between external communities, integration and student persistence in higher education. For this research I adopt a qualitative interpretive research approach.

In this section I begin with providing a brief overview of the research site, followed by a discussion for selecting the qualitative research approach. Discussions in this section include the selection of participants, research method and data collection techniques. I also provide a brief overview of the data analysis strategies, namely the coding and thematic analysis. Finally, I conclude the section by highlighting issues of ethical concern.

Research site

My research was conducted at a university in Southern Africa.

The challenges experienced at this university include low graduation rates of distance students as students 'drop out' and 'stop out'. However, the majority of students persist with their studies despite the barriers that exist.

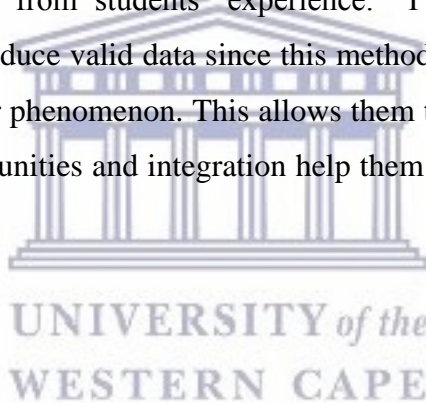
Research approach

I conducted qualitative research using the interpretivist perspective as my aim is to understand the phenomena of student persistence from "the participants' point of view" (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2011, p. 64). Nieuwenhuis (2014) emphasises that the ultimate aim of interpretivist research is to provide insight into the way in which a group of people makes sense of their situation or the phenomena their encounter. According to Creswell (2014),

Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the

participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particular to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (p. 32).

I specifically employed an interpretive approach, which is informed by phenomenology. Creswell (2014) argues that phenomenology is a “design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 42). According to Van der Mescht (2004), “the most distinguishing feature of empirical phenomenology is the fact that it focuses on the meaning that human beings make of their experience” (p. 2). Similarly, Bryman (2012) states that a “phenomenologist views human behaviour as a product of how people interpret the world” (p. 30). This is in line with this study as I intend to explore the contribution that external communities/factors play in student persistence from students' point of view. My intention is to research student persistence and the influences of external communities on social and academic integration from students' experience. I believe that by engaging students as participants, I can produce valid data since this method allows them to share their lived experience of this particular phenomenon. This allows them to communicate and reflect on ways in which external communities and integration help them to persist with their higher education studies.



Data collection methods

Semi-structured interview

I collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews, using an interview guide as my research instrument. All interviews were conducted in English. A semi-structured interview is defined as a shared conversation in which the interviewer asks the participant predetermined questions or “follow[s] a script to a certain extent” (Bryman, 2012, p. 471) and at the same time allows for the probing and clarification of answers. This type of interview is based on a set of topics to be discussed in depth (Maree, 2014; Babbie, 2016). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to probe for clarifications as Nieuwenhuis (2010) emphasises that “as a researcher you must be attentive to the responses of your participant so that you can identify new emerging lines of inquiry that are directly related to the phenomenon being studied” (p. 87). Bryman (2012) also argues that some of the advantages of the semi-structured interview is that it has the “capacity to provide insights into how research participants view the world and allow a room to pursue topics of interest” (p. 471). Scholars highlight further that semi-

structured interviews are flexible, allow specific issues to be addressed and provide in-depth information (Babbie, 2016). However, it can be the worst interview type when the interviewer is not fully familiar with the questions to be asked and “it is easy to get side-tracked by trivial aspects that are not related to the study” (Maree, 2014, p. 87). I chose the semi-structured interview to extract the information and insights from students, among other things, about the ways that they persist with higher education studies despite challenges; the role of external communities in their persistence; the value they place on studying through the distance mode; and how they balance work, family and study. From the onset, I believed that this type of interview would provide me with the flexibility to probe and follow new insights from participants, follow the set questions and to maintain focus on those questions.

Research instrument

I used an interview guide (Appendix A) because De Vos et al. (2011) advise that it could assist me to choose appropriate words and present questions in a logical order. An interview guide is one of the popular research instruments used in qualitative studies. Some scholars reveal that in an interview guide approach, topics are selected in advance but the researcher has the overall flexibility in the conduct of the interview. For instance, he/she can decide the sequence and wording of the questions during the interview (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Bryman, 2012).

An interview guide had some advantages for the participants that I chose because similar wordings were used to maintain consistency from interviewee to interviewee (Bryman, 2012) and it helped to keep me focused yet it was flexible during the interviews.

Research participants and selection

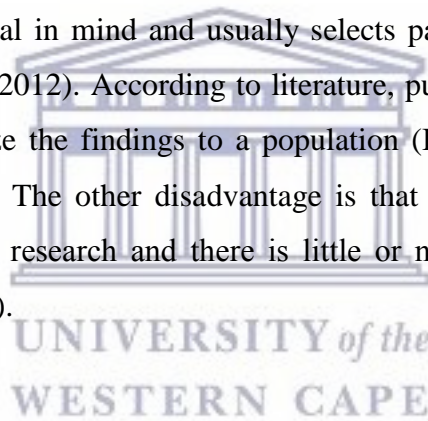
Sample description

I selected 20 participants who are adult students registered for the Diploma in HIV/AIDS Education and Management, which is a two 2 year undergraduate distance programme offered in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. The study included only senior students who have been registered in the programme for more than one year. At the time of the study they were working, had families/children and some participated in community activities (sport, social, cultural or political events). These were the participants who in my view had

experienced persistence and/or stop out during their studies and were thus well-placed to provide the required information for the study.

Sampling strategies

Sampling is a major element in research and it plays a role of providing guidelines as to what categories of people (or whatever the unit of analysis is) need to be the focus of attention and therefore sampled (Bryman, 2012). Using purposive sampling, I selected 20 students who were registered for the Diploma in HIV/AIDS Education and Management as research participants. Purposive sampling is defined as “a type of nonprobability sampling in which the units to be observed are selected on the basis of the researcher’s judgement” (Babbie, 2016, p. 187). Similarly, Bryman (2012) explains that the main idea in purposive sampling is to sample participants in a strategic way and questions should give an indication of what units need to be sampled. The main strength of purposive sampling is that the researcher picks participants with the research goal in mind and usually selects participants because of their relevance to the study (Bryman, 2012). According to literature, purposive sampling does not allow the researcher to generalize the findings to a population (Bryman, 2012), which is a weakness of this sampling type. The other disadvantage is that the sample is likely to be “established at the outset of the research and there is little or no addition as the research proceeds” (Bryman, 2012, p. 418).



Data reduction strategies

After transcribing my interviews, I started coding by reading through the initial set of transcripts just to familiarise myself with data before I considered taking notes. I planned to do that even before the end of the data collection period. Bryman (2012) advises beginning the transcription at a relatively early stage when data collection involves recorded interviews. I applied open coding with the intention of reading and re-reading passages, seeking to identify the key concepts contained within the interview transcripts (Babbie, 2013). Coding also assisted with the identification of unexpected issues that arose during data collection. Creswell (2014) proffers that “the traditional approach in the social sciences is to allow the codes to emerge during data analysis” (p. 248). I refined the codes and notes as the data analysis process progressed further. Coding was followed by thematic analysis, which allowed for the in-depth analysis of the data and connecting it to the existing theory.

I analysed the data through deductive data analysis by identifying themes and subthemes so as “to reach the best possible understanding and to identify multiple realities potentially present in the data” (Maree & Westhuizen, 2014, p. 37). Bryman (2012) defines a theme as a “category identified by the analyst through his/her data that relates to his/her research focus and builds on codes identified in transcripts or field notes” (p. 580). It is a well-known fact that when doing thematic analysis of qualitative data, the researcher should think about how to organize and manage themes and data. According to Bryman (2008), with regards to his search for information on how thematic analysis emerged, “one general strategy for conducting a thematic analysis of qualitative data is provided by Framework, an approach that has been developed in UK” (p. 554). Ritchie, Spencer and O’Connor (2003) share that the “thematic framework is used to classify and organise data according to key themes, concepts and emergent categories” (p. 220). In my view, thematic analysis and thematic framework are similar concepts which share the same idea. That being said, in this study, themes were identified from repetitions, transitions, similarities and differences, theory-related concepts as well as missing data (Ryan & Bernard, as cited in Bryman, 2012). More importantly, the criteria for selecting themes were guided by my research questions and the existing theories and models of student persistence. The key relationship between coding and thematic analysis is that codes and notes written during the coding period can be refined into themes and subthemes at the analysis level. Coding backed the identification of themes and subthemes. As a researcher, I went beyond data descriptions and theme identification as I had to “form complex theme connections” (Creswell, 2014, p. 249) in this study.

Limitation of the study

The data from this research are limited to one university which was included in the study and the results therefore cannot be generalized to all Southern African universities. Scholars’ stress that one of the major criticisms of the interpretivist research approach which is used in this study, is the failure of the approach to generalize its findings beyond the situation studied (Nieuwenhuis, 2014).

The study is limited in that it did not include students registered at the university campuses countrywide, hence their specific experiences were excluded. Due to the required time for

completing this research paper and lack of financial resources for travelling, only students from the university's main campus participated in this study.

Research ethics considerations

Ethical issues are broad and they cover almost all aspects of the research. However, Bryman (2012) singles out that the most critical concern lies with the ethical issues that arise in relationships between researchers and research participants in the course of an investigation. In this sub-section, I discuss the ethical issues with an emphasis on the effect of research on participants.

Creswell (2014) emphasises that “gaining entry to a research site and the ethical issues that might arise are elements of the researcher’s role” (p. 237). It was my responsibility to take into account the effect of research on my research site and participants; for this reason, I submitted a letter requesting permission to conduct the research study to the university (Appendix B). All documents such as an ethical clearance, research proposal and interview schedule accompanied my application as per the institutional ethical guidelines. The university’s research committee granted me the permission to interview students and to engage it as the research site.

Maintaining participants’ privacy, anonymity and confidentiality is critical in social research. Thus, participants were provided with an information letter (Appendix C) explaining the aim of the research and their voluntary participation in the study. They were also presented with a consent form which they completed prior to the interviews. The consent form is attached to my research paper (Appendix D). In this study, I assured the participants’ anonymity by protecting their identity and making use of pseudonyms in all publications related to this research. Bryman (2012) warns that “the use of pseudonyms may not eliminate entirely the possibility of identification” (p. 136). That being said, it is often difficult to completely protect the identities of participants in qualitative research.

The information that participants shared was treated with utmost confidentiality. Babbie (2016) proffers that “the information respondents give must at least be kept confidential” (p. 63). Although I collected demographic information, participants were assured that such information would only be used to draw participants’ profiles and some details such as names of work places would not be disclosed in public. Bryman (2012) emphasises that the issue of

harm to participants also “means that identities and records of individuals should be maintained as confidential and that care needs to be taken when findings are being published to assure that individuals are not identified or identifiable” (p. 136).

I will store the research data for five years on a private computer which is secured with a password. For back up, I will store the same data on a hard drive which will be locked in a safe. I will personally delete all computer files related to the research after 5 years.

Although I am considered as an insider in this research, I maintained the highest standards of honesty and integrity at all times and did this research according to internationally acceptable ethical norms and values. Babbie (2013) warns that “your own characteristics can affect what you see and how you interpret it” (p. 331). I avoided research dishonesty of any kind. I also made a clear introduction of myself and clarified the purpose of my study as explained in Appendix C and how the information would be used. I also assured the research participants that this research conformed to ethical values and my position as a staff member of the university would not interfere in any way.

In addition, I did not misuse my position for personal gain. I conducted my responsibilities in an independent manner, free from bias and undue influence. Babbie (2013) stresses that “as a researcher, you must rely on your own understanding of the situation and your own judgement. In making your decision, however, you must be guided by both methodology and ethical considerations” (p. 329). I conducted the interviews at places which were comfortable for the participants, both inside and outside of the university campus. Participants were given the freedom to choose the place of the interview and I did not influence their choices.

Creswell (2014) warns that “when researchers collect data at their own workplace, they hold the responsibility for showing how the data will not be compromised and how such information will not place the participants (or the researchers) at risk” (p. 237). I have an obligation to report research findings accurately and transparently to the public domain and I should not allow my relationship with participants to influence research.

I protected the identity of the institution by writing my article under the title ‘External communities, integration and student persistence among distance students at a university in Southern Africa’.

In this section, I deliberated on the research approaches and techniques used in this study. Ethical issues are also addressed. In the next section I present my data-analysis.

SECTION 4

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

In this section I present and analyse the data collected for this study.

I collected data for this study by interviewing students. I transcribed the interviews, and started coding by reading through the initial set of transcripts just to familiarise myself with the data. I did that even before the end of the data collection period. Through coding, I created an index of key words which were repeated several times by the interviewees. Those key words became part of the subthemes in this section while the main themes were derived from the conceptual framework and related literature. I was guided by Creswell (2014) who argues that in qualitative research data analysis, the process begins inductively, “while deductive thinking also plays an important role as the analysis moves forward” (p. 234).

The rich and in-depth data collected were analysed, which created an interesting story of how adult distance students persist with their studies and also the challenges they experienced.

The main research question is “What are the relationships between external communities, social and academic integration and student persistence?” with the following sub-questions: “What do external communities, social and academic integration contribute to student persistence?”, “How do external communities influence distance students’ persistence and departure?” and “How does social and academic integration contribute to student persistence?”

The data is discussed and analysed under the following broad themes:

- Student intentions, commitments and student persistence
- Student goals, commitments and persistence
- External communities and student persistence
- Formal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence
- Informal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence
- Student persistence and intent to persist
- Emerging challenges to student persistence

I have developed some subthemes under each wide theme in order to make the data more coherent.

Participants' profiles

Amy is 24 years old. She completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management in 2016 with the same University. She is a single mother of a 6 month old baby and she is unemployed.

Brenda is a 47-year-old single mother of 5 children. She also completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management and she has been a student at this university for 4 years. Brenda is a health assistant at the Ministry of Health and Social Services. She has been working practically with HIV/AIDS patients for many years.

Susan is a 44-year-old married woman. She is a mother of 2 children and this is her fifth year in this programme. She is working as an administrative clerk at a private company in Windhoek. She enrolled in this programme through the mature age admission.

Peter is a 26-year-old male student. He is single and has no dependents. He is currently working on a contract as a finance officer at a University Business School.

Anna is 27 years old; she is single but is planning to be married soon. Her highest qualification is Grade 12. She stopped out of her studies for 5 years because she left Namibia and lived abroad for that period of time. She is working for a local company.

Lucy is 24 years old; she is a single woman with no dependents. She completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management at the same university. She is working at a guest house and that is where she lives.

Debby is 33 years old. She is a soldier working in the Namibian Defence Force. She completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management in 2015. She is also single with no dependents. Debby lives alone in a rented shack in the informal settlement.

Sara is a 35-year-old married woman with 6 dependents, which is a combination of her own and step-children. She also completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management before she enrolled in this programme. She is a manager at a local store where she works shifts sometimes.

Maria is a 48-year-old married woman and a mother of 6 children. She completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management and this is her fourth year at this university. She is working at the Ministry of Health and Social Services as an equipment attendant.

Alvina is a single mother of 5 kids and she is almost 50 years old. She is a cleaner at the biggest referral state hospital in Windhoek. She lives with her mother, an alcoholic uncle and 3 nieces, so in total she has 9 dependents. She completed Grade 12 in 1994 but never enrolled in any higher education institution until 2015. She is the main breadwinner in her family and their house is close to some noisy neighbourhoods and it is also situated in a busy street in Katutura.

Helen is a 37-year-old married woman and a mother of 4 children. She completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management in 2015. Helen started to work in a health related position as a volunteer before she managed to get a contract position she currently holds a position at a public clinic as a health assistant. Her dream is also to be employed permanently by the Ministry of Health once she graduates.

Nangula is 25-year-old single lady with 2 dependents. She first enrolled in this programme in 2015. She completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management. She is unemployed and lives with her sister.

Sophie is 32 years old. She is single and has 2 dependents. She completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management before she enrolled in the Diploma in HIV/AIDS Management. She is working as a waitress at a country club.

Erkkie is a young single male student. He is 25 years old and has no dependents. Like many other students, Erkkie completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management too. He is self-employed, and is running his own printing shop at his rented flat.

Emily is a 29-year-old mother of one. She is married and lives with her family. Emily is a soldier in the Namibian Defence Force where she is working at a military hospital as a counsellor. Her main duty is to counsel other soldiers affected and infected by HIV/AIDS. She completed a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling and Management in 2013. She registered for the programme under study in 2015 but stopped out in 2016 for private reasons. She decided to re-register in 2017.

Ndapanda is a 27-year-old single woman. She is a registered nurse with an Honours Degree in Nursing. Ndapanda graduated from the same institution 3 years ago. She is currently working in the Ministry of Health and Social Services and she is stationed at a local clinic as an HIV/AIDS nurse.

Stella is 26 years old, and she single and unemployed. She has been a coach for a down-syndrome child since 2012. She has a Certificate in Tourism and Hospitality Operations from a private institution. She first enrolled in this programme in 2016.

Student intentions, commitments and student persistence

In this theme, I discussed student intentions and commitments as emerging from the data. Students enrolled in this programme for different reasons and they made a commitment to persist and achieve their goals. In other words, student persistence is supported by their goals, dreams and intentions. The theme began with different student intentions which motivated them to study, namely intentions for pursuing academic studies, intentions to find a better job and earning good salaries and intentions to become role models. Although Tinto (1997) used the term goals extensively compared to ‘intentions’ in his model of student persistence, I opted to use ‘intentions’ to capture the essence of students’ reasons for studying. Tinto (1997) also used both intentions and goals and commitment in his model of student persistence, although the latter appeared prominently in the model. Barnett (2011) also used the term “intent to persist” (p. 197) in her conceptual framework and findings. In addition, student intentions of what they want to be after their studies were also discussed, for instance, intentions to carry out social responsibility.

My study found out that there is a solid relationship between student intentions and persistence. Participants’ broader understanding of the significance of studying and their specific intentions made meaningful influences to their persistence.

Student intentions and persistence

Pursuing academic study

Participants’ reasons for studying at this particular university vary. The university’s public picture and its reputation contributed to their decisions for enrolling. This confirms the statement by Milem and Berger (1997) that “some students will have stronger levels of commitment to graduating from a particular institution” (p. 390). This rejects Tinto’s (2015) prediction that “not all students intend to complete their degree at the institution in which they first enrol” (p. 2). Some participants regarded this university as the first recognised and

legitimate institution of higher learning in Namibia and they had much respect for it. This was evident in the following responses:

This is the first university to be recognised after Namibia got independence and thus, this was my first choice of studying. Life is expensive now and in future it will be difficult to get even a cleaning job without a qualification (Helen, interview, September 20, 2017).

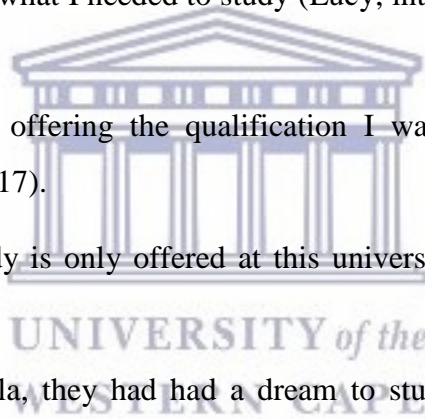
This is the only place which offers distance courses of this nature and it is more recognised than others (Anna, interview, September 05, 2017).

I am interested in getting a diploma as an evidence of what I do and this university is known as the top one which provides quality education (Emily, interview, September 22, 2017).

The only place which offers what I needed to study (Lucy, interview, September 07, 2017).

This is the only university offering the qualification I was interested in (Sara, interview, September, 08, 2017).

The course I wanted to study is only offered at this university in Namibia (Amy, interview, August 30, 2017)



According to Alvina and Nangula, they had had a dream to study and graduate from this university for a long time:

It was my dream to go and study one day at this university (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017)

This is a great institution and I always wanted to get a qualification from this university (Nangula, Interview, September 20, 2017).

Participants who are in the late 40s explained that they had no access to higher education in the 1990s when they completed Grade 12; thus, they wanted to study now and fulfil their dreams of entering the careers of their choice. Maria and Alvina made references to the previous lack of access to higher education as follows:

I am studying to improve my knowledge because in the past we had no opportunity to study after Grade 10 or 12 (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I always wanted to study at institutions of higher learning when I completed Grade 12 in 1994, but I didn't get clear information on how to go about it (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I want to gain more knowledge (Debby, Interview, September 07, 2017)

Greener pastures (permanent jobs, promotions and better salaries)

Most of the participants indicated that they were studying because they wanted to get good jobs and live better lives. In my view it is normal for people to have multiple reasons as to why they decided to study, especially if they are older students. Furthermore, it is common knowledge that educated people are likely to earn good salaries when they are employed and they can change jobs easily, especially in Namibia. In my literature search, I did not come across many researchers who looked at the outcome of studies as an intention for students to study. All researchers I found looked at what motivates students to study at an institution of higher learning. For instance, Tinto (1997) maintains that “sufficiently high commitment to the goal of university completion may lead to a person to stick it out until degree completion” (p. 130). This simply implies that the students’ goals of getting permanent jobs, promotions and better salaries can be regarded as high commitments which are pushing them to study and persist until diploma completion. Tinto (2015) refers to greener pastures as “perceived extrinsic benefits of the university” (p. 3) and he adds that “students may differ in their motivations to attend university” (p. 3).

Amy and Nangula are young, single and unemployed. While their parents are responsible for paying their study fees and taking care of their children, they wish to study hard, graduate and find jobs. According to Nangula, she would like to use her new qualification to apply for a job.

My first priority once I graduate is to apply and get a job to take care of my child because last year I decided to stop working and I have to only look for job once I complete my studies (Nangula, Interview, September 20, 2017).

Once I graduate I want to find a job and be able to support my 6 month baby (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

This a short program which takes two years to complete. I decided to enrol so that once I graduate I can try to find a job (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Brenda, Maria and Alvina insisted confidently that they wanted to continue working in the Ministry of Health and Social Services, but they wanted promotions or better positions which would come with a better salary.

We were three employees at that time. We started to complain about the low salaries and one social worker advised us to study and get qualifications if we really want better salaries. My two colleagues resigned and went to study full-time, and they both completed their studies in 2016, one is now a social worker and the other is a nurse. I was not ready to leave my work because I am a single parent, but upon completion of my studies I needed a better position and a good salary. When I started my work my salary was N\$1200, that is before I enrolled and graduated with a Certificate in HIV/AIDS Education and Management (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

It is not easy to financially take care of a large family... We complement my little salary with my mother's old age state grant only. My main motivation to study is to successfully complete and get a better position at the hospital where I am currently working as a cleaner (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I also want to open my own counselling consultancy if I fail to get a government job (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I want my employer to give me a position of a Counsellor in the ministry after my studies (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

However, while some participants are willing to keep their current jobs, others have different plans. Lucy, Sophie, Sara and Debby revealed that they were not satisfied with their current job and their intentions were to complete this programme and look for another job. This was evident in the following responses:

Once I graduate I will use my new qualification to look for a better job and resign my current job because I am not enjoying it - my intention is to work in a health related environment (Debby, Interview, September 07, 2017).

I don't want to be working here in the future, and every time I think that I am here, I try to push through and say I need to get out from this zone where I am (Lucy, Interview, September 07, 2017).

I will look for a better job in relation to my qualification, I will not sit at home and do nothing (Sophie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

I want to practice what I have studied...I am obviously going to quit my current job because it is not in line with my career, I am just doing it because I need money to support my family (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

I want to get a better and permanent job one day (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

Some participants felt that it could be very tough in Namibia to find decent work without any diploma or a degree as every person has got a Grade 12 certificate. It is not easy to find a job or even live a better life affording the basic necessities such as shelter, food etc. This response from Anna confirmed her ambition and how this qualification would open new doors in her life:

This qualification will assist to open doors for my future and it will be a stepping stone for bigger challenges and greener pastures such as a good job (Anna, Interview, September 05, 2017).

Almost all participants highlighted that life could be very difficult if you did not have a qualification. In their experiences, they had seen uneducated people suffering and some of the participants themselves had suffered in the past. Thus, they decided to study and persist to get a qualification and live a better life. Some participants had the following to say:

I am studying because I want to get a better job and a better salary (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017)

When you only have grade 12, you are nothing... You need to have a diploma for you to have a better life in future (Susan, Interview, September 01, 2017).

It is very difficult to find a job without any tertiary education, I decided to study so that I can find a job somewhere for self-sustaining and to assist my family (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Education is important and in this country you need to have a qualification to get a proper decent job because life is not guaranteed (Lucy, Interview, September 07, 2017).

I like studying to upgrade my mind and my life (Emily, Interview, September 22, 2017).

Carrying out a social responsibility

All participants were enrolled in one programme, namely a Diploma in HIV/AIDS Management and Counselling. This is a unique programme where students learn how they should treat people with HIV/AIDS, and how to do counselling for the infected and affected people. From the interviews it emerged that most participants felt that they had a social responsibility to save the nation from further infection and to widen the awareness of how HIV/AIDS could be prevented in the country. I also learned that they were respectful and selfless people who really understood the importance of this programme and this was one core reason why they persisted despite challenges.

Tinto did not explicitly discuss the curriculum as a reason for student persistence; instead he focused on academic integration and the role of the classroom in student persistence. According to Tessema, Ready and Yu (as cited in Tinto, 2015, p. 5), “among a number of issues that shape persistence, students’ perceptions of the quality of curriculum and its relevance to matters that concern them” stand out. Similarly in this study, participants strongly indicated that their interest in the HIV/AIDS counselling field was high and in their view counselling was a calling. In this particular case, the relevance of the curriculum contributes significantly to student persistence. For instance, Amy stated that at her home village, people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS have limited knowledge on how they could take care of themselves and how they should treat others in the community. She described her intention of this programme as to learn how to fight stigma and discrimination, and provide support to the infected and affected members of her community:

Once I complete this qualification I will share the knowledge with people in my area on how they can take care of themselves. I will also motivate them to share the information with others, especially on how to prevent further infections (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

Likewise, Anna, Lucy, Debby and Nangula expressed similar views:

My intention is to help other people - helping the next person in the society to survive this disease – I have a compassion and love for people (Anna, interview, September 05, 2017).

I would like to become a counsellor and assist people infected by HIV/AIDS in the future (Lucy, Interview, September 07, 2017).

My ambition is to assist fellow Namibians in the society to be aware of HIV/AIDS (Debby, Interview, September 07, 2017).

I personally like listening to other people's problems and assisting them (Nangula, Interview, September 20, 2017).

While some participants were motivated by the love of taking care of fellow Namibians affected by this virus, Helen and Susan revealed that they were studying for themselves to be able to assist infected family members:

My own mother was diagnosed with HIV in 1999; so being the eldest child I decided to enrol in this program to equip myself with the right information to be able to assist my mother to live and cope with this manageable chronic disease (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

My sister was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and this was a shock and a new thing in my family... I therefore want to know how to take care of her and other people in that situation (Susan, Interview, September 01, 2017).

Brenda, Ndapanda, Emily and Helen were already working as counsellors, nurses or health assistants at clinics and hospitals. They revealed that they were interested in learning the theoretical components of HIV/AIDS and improving their practices at the workplace and in society:

Since I have more experience on HIV/AIDS, I want to help the patients better and be able to advise my colleagues on how to approach and deal with patients (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

I have a passion for counselling..., I started as a home-based care provider and we were volunteers by then. I really feel good when patients leave my desk with smiling faces; it motivates me to continue counselling more people (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

I enrolled in this program to learn about the theoretical components of HIV/AIDS. I am already a qualified nurse with a degree, but to assist the HIV/AIDS patients

successfully, I decided to enrol in this diploma (Ndapanda, Interview, September 22, 2017).

I assessed the situation at the military base where I am working. Many people are going through a lot of problems in their lives and they need counselling. I like counselling people in general and I don't only counsel soldiers but even ordinary people in our society, so I need to learn more and be an expert in counselling (Emily, Interview, September 22, 2017).

Counselling is a broad concept and participants were involved in different kinds of counselling. For instance, Maria shared that she used to do marriage counselling in her church giving general advice to newly married couples as well as any member of her community who approached her seeking advice and counselling. At the time of our interview, she was busy organising a funeral for a 23 year old woman who had died due to HIV/AIDS related illnesses. Maria shared a touching story of how the young woman with no proper advice stopped her HIV/AIDS treatment and eventually got sick and passed on. The following is Maria's story in brief:

A young woman came to me, she said that she had a problem and needed my assistance. She revealed that she was HIV positive and had stopped the medication for more than 3 months. She became so emotional and we hugged for maybe 2 minutes, and her story really touched my heart. I counselled and advised her to go to a hospital. I was grateful that she followed my advice – unfortunately it was too late, and she passed on last week. Based on our conversation, I realised that she was one of those people who didn't get the right information and advice about this disease from the beginning. She stopped the medication and continued having unprotected sex and consuming alcohol – she lived irresponsibly (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I observed that Maria was one of the students who was studying to save the nation. The course of study fitted her personality and she was enjoying both her studies and her duty in the community. She was determined to get a degree in HIV/AIDS Counselling or in Social Work.

On a different note, Alvina indicated that she had observed how HIV/AIDS patients had been treated by nurses in the hospital and she was not happy with the services that patients received:

As a cleaner at the hospital, I have seen how our people are suffering. Some are not going for HIV tests, only when they become sick and come to hospital, when doctors run the test, and give them their results...they cannot cope and accept their results, they always feel as if they are dying tomorrow or in 24 hours. I want to counsel them and tell them that life still goes on, and being HIV/AIDS positive is not the end of life if you follow the procedures. Secondly, some counsellors are not explaining things clearly such as the window period (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

Almost all participants in this study were really studying with a common purpose to assist people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Their social responsibilities outweighed other intentions such as new jobs, better salaries and promotions, which also featured constantly in this study.

Becoming role models

On the other hand, Erkkie and Sara indicated that they were studying to be role models to their family members.

I wanted to have a certificate or a diploma so that as a future parent, I can motivate my children to study and I can be their role model (Erkkie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

As a mother of 4 young children..., I want to set a good example and be a role model to them so that they will look up to me and say if mom did it, why not us? (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

Student goals, commitments and persistence

In this theme, I present and discuss student views with regards to goals and commitments and how these commitments relate to student persistence. Participants described how their study schedules were squeezed into their busy lives. According to Tinto (1993), there is an interplay between multiple goals and commitments that arise from the located communities and the individual's goals and commitments which eventually shape students' educational goals and commitments. The data described how students expanded their efforts to study and the power

of self-motivation. Tinto (2015) alludes that “without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely” (p. 2). Based on the data, I am in agreement with Tinto’s statement, because in this particular case, student effort to study, supported by self and peer-motivation has proven to contribute significantly to persistence.

Time efficiency and student persistence

In this study, distance students described how they applied time management in order to succeed in their studies. Almost all participants shared that they reserved a specific time in a day or a week to do their academic activities. This was evidence of commitment and time efficiency which contributed significantly to their academic success and eventually to persistence. I partially agree with the comment that “most students who do not live on campus work full-time, are older and have family obligations, time on campus is limited”, yet I disagree that “their engagement is constrained by forces external to the campus” (Tinto, 2014, p. 9) because they can study off campus and make their own arrangements as data from this study has shown.

Sophie is committed and doing everything possible to succeed. She explained that although there was no internet access in the house she shared with her sister and two children, she always made a plan to submit her academic work on time:

When it is time to submit assignments online or when I need to use internet, I always go to my friend who lives in one of the luxury suburbs where internet is available to complete and submit my assignments. I sometimes put in a leave to work on my study (Sophie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Furthermore, some participants worked out strategies of how and where to study, depending on their circumstances and environments. Their plans are outlined in the following responses:

My plan is that Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays are the days I study and complete school related activities (Erkkie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

I study in the mornings at the national library before I go to work in the afternoons because I work shifts. It is not conducive to study at home, I always get tempted to do other things such as watching TV or sleeping (Sophie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

I study during weekends, because like now, I work and most of the time I feel tired after work hours (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017)

I study at any time I get – at home. I mostly study midnight when my children are sleeping or while they are at school because I work shifts (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

I make time to study at work and I go to the campus regularly and study in the library (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I study together with my kids at home. Because we are many in the house, one group studies in the kitchen and the other one in the sitting room. But you find that other people want to watch TV sometimes... it is a challenge. We start around 6 o'clock until 9 o'clock every day. Visitors disturb also and the neighbours drink alcohol and make noise. In the past, I used to stay for two hours extra at work to study and later I started going to the campus...there are nice seats outside there to study (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

However, Lucy explained that she did not have a strategy:

I don't have a study strategy... I work on last minute stuff. The only time I really get to prepare is during examination. I try to give myself time by putting in study leave (Lucy, Interview, September 07, 2017).

In addition, participants who were employed shared that they used any time available, even at workplaces, to study.

According to Helen, she always arrived early at work and studied there:

My daughter attends high school in town, and since we stay in an informal settlement, we are forced to commute using municipality buses early in the morning so that she arrives at school on time. Now I am lucky, I also arrive two hours earlier at work and I have decided to use that time to study (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

Students created strategies in order to succeed and this confirms Tinto's words that "student success does not arise by chance" (Tinto, 2014, p. 21). This implies that planning and commitment leads to success.

Self-motivation, peer motivation and student persistence

From the data, it emerged that students study differently and were inspired by multiple factors to study. Some participants studied together with their children; while for others, like Brenda and Sara, they preferred to go to the university campus to concentrate and study together with other students in the library. Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda's (1993) findings suggest that encouragement from friends and family exert an influence in the socialisation and academic experience of the students.

Nangula and Helen expressed that they were motivated by various people to firstly enrol at the university and to persist with their studies.

Nangula was inspired by a story of a man who was just a cleaner but decided to enrol with the Namibian College for Open Learning to complete his formal education and eventually continue to a diploma and today he has a decent job.

If that old man managed to study and become someone in life, why not me?
(Nangula, Interview, September 20, 2017).

I was inspired to study by my aunt who graduated with a degree at the age of 52
(Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

While students are inspired by people in their communities to study and persist, Helen and Alvina shared that their personal and academic background forced them to study:

We are only two in my family who managed to go into tertiary education or beyond Matric. Therefore I want to be a role model to my siblings, my children and the entire society (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

I had no opportunity to study in 1994 when I completed Matric; by then our parents had no understanding that education was important even to girls (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

However, there are lots of youth in Namibia who never attempted to continue studying after they failed Grade 10 or 12. From the responses, it was evident that participants understood the importance of education and a tertiary qualification. Thus, they persisted and they were confident that they would successfully complete their studies. This line of thinking is rare in general Namibian society where the majority of people want to live a good life yet they are not interested in furthering their studies.

It emerged that distance students are self-motivated, which arises from their good performance and their personality. This confirms that there is a strong link between learning, student effort and persistence. Tinto argues that “there appears to be an important relationship between learning and persistence that arises from the interplay of involvement and the quality of student effort” (as cited in Milen & Berger, 1997, p. 387). For instance, Maria, Stella, Nangula and Peter were strongly self-motivated to study and persist.

I don't believe in failing and I have my community at heart (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I am committed to my study and I am self-disciplined; I always make sure that I submit my assignments on time (Stella, Interview, September 29, 2017).

I want to become a professional and give my son a good education and provide him with basic needs (Nangula, Interview, September 20, 2017).

I am self-motivated because I want to complete the course and graduate, in fact I want my qualification for me to see what else I can do in life (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017)

These are some of the feelings that participants shared and what they stressed was, what forced them to study was to avoid embarrassment in general society. In addition, family and community members had certain expectations of students. Parents expected their sons and daughters to successfully complete their studies and graduate, while the general community expected them to graduate, find better jobs or even educate and share knowledge with fellow citizens.

Some participants stated that they had a fear of failing and repeating modules, which could prolong their years at the university and reduce their chances to achieve their goals.

For instance, Erkkie, Sophie and Ndapanda revealed that they were motivated by their performance in this programme. Good performance became a motivation which also developed into a goal for completing a course on time and with good results. This is in agreement with Tinto (2015), who argues that “events during university can influence student goals and motivation and goals may vary in both character and intensity” (p. 2).

I am really doing well with my studies; I passed all my modules in the first semester just the same as I did in the Certificate for HIV/AIDS Counselling which I

completed in 2014. To share my background with you... I first registered in a Certificate in Accounting and Auditing when I came to the university, but I failed all accounting related subjects and only passed English and Computer studies. Based on that experience, I really feel good that I am doing well in this course (Erkkie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

I passed all my modules with good marks in the first year, and I am really hoping that if I continue studying harder, I will complete the whole program this year (Ndapanda, Interview, September 22, 2017).

My performance is promising...I know of other students who are really struggling and doing bad, but I am grateful that I am progressing well (Stella, Interview, September 27, 2017).

The data portrayed social support as also important to student persistence. Tinto (2015) states that social support arises from the shared social activities within the group, community” (p. 7). According to Debby and Amy, they were motivated and felt supported by their friends:

A friend of mine was studying and she motivated me to apply and enrol in this program (Debby, Interview, September 07, 2017).

My friend said nothing is difficult in life, as long as you commit yourself to it and ask for assistance when needed (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

My cousin did the same course and she gave me study materials and availed herself to assist me whenever I needed help (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

Paying for university fees, reaping the benefits and student persistence

Tinto’s theory of student persistence was criticised for its relative lack of emphasis on financial considerations as important aspects for the continued persistence of some students (Breier, 2010). My study also identified university fees as burdens which positively forced students to persist. Data suggest that financial commitment is one of the main motivations to persist because students do not want to waste the money spent on their university fees and other study related costs. A study conducted in the UK, which in my view captures the true essence of financial burdens even in developing countries such as Namibia, suggests that “many students cope with poverty, high levels of debt and significant burdens of paid work to

successfully complete their courses of study” (Breier, 2010, p. 659). According to the participants, higher education was costly and therefore they needed to succeed and fulfil the purpose of studying and make sure that their money was well spent.

Amy, Nangula and Lucy indicated that their parents were paying for their studies and they did not want to waste their money.

I cannot afford to fail or even repeat a year, I am unemployed and my parents invested a lot of money on my studies (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

Similarly, Lucy alluded that her mother was more concerned with her academic progress and she requested to see her progress reports regularly:

My mother is concerned with my studies and I cannot fail to submit tasks or not write examinations as that will disappoint her. At the same time, I don't want to waste the money that we paid for the course (Lucy, Interview, September 07, 2017).

Many participants highlighted that they paid course fees every year and it was not right to waste money. Anna, Ndapanda and Sara had this to say:

Even when I feel tired and have no energy to submit assignments, the fact that I paid for the course forces me to submit and make sure that I get admission to write examinations (Ndapanda, Interview, September 22, 2017).

When the due date for assignment submission is closer, I always think of the money I paid for the course (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

Knowing that I have come this far, I cannot give up on my study, and money is also involved you know...(Anna, interview, September 05, 2017).

Considering Namibia's challenging economic status at this point in time, people want to make sure that their money is well spent. Another reason why students enrolled in the programme under study and considered the financial resources spent on tuition fees as important, is that it is very difficult to find funding for undergraduate diplomas in Namibia. Scholarships and study loans are more available for degree programmes compared to the diploma programmes. I am thus in agreement with scholars who emphasise that “some students persist and achieve their qualifications despite financial hardships” (Breier, 2010, p. 659).

External communities and student persistence

Under this theme, I discuss how external communities such as family responsibilities, work commitments, and community responsibilities play a role in student persistence. It is a fact that distance students are immersed in multiple responsibilities, thus this theme looked at specific tasks students were expected to perform and the negative and positive impacts those tasks had on their success. Tinto (2014) stresses that “there are many things that affect student success: personal lives, economic resources etc.” (p. 7). I also discussed the improvements they made to make sure that external communities contributed to student persistence.

The data indicated that there is a relationship between external communities and student persistence. Although there were a few cases of lack of support from external communities, the overall data revealed that a positive and strong relationship outweighed the negative relationship. Data pointed out that the family members provided support by doing house chores and attending to other responsibilities while participants were studying. Secondly, employers also provided significant support by allowing participants to complete academic tasks at work, giving them time off during working time or allowing them to use the employers’ facilities such as computers and the internet. This support occurred regularly, which served as evidence that external communities contribute significantly to student persistence.

The data showed that young participants were not affected by family responsibilities to a higher extent but they were also involved in community activities, for example, church activities.

Family responsibilities, support and student persistence

All participants stated strongly that they received huge support from family members. Most of them described how family members attended to house chores while they were busy studying. Mature students indicated that they had many family responsibilities compared to young students. I argued in my conceptual framework that Tinto’s (1993) model of student persistence “provides a mechanism for the analysis of the possibly conflicting of demands of college, work, and family. It also enables us to understand how external support from families, friends and employers may assist, rather than detract from persistence in college” (pp. 126-127). The support from families still made it possible for adult students to attend to

multiple tasks including academic activities. Based on the data presented in the following sub-themes, I concluded that when students receive huge support from family members, they are likely to persist.

Family responsibilities and support

Family tasks such as cooking, cleaning the houses and taking care of babies emerged as the prominent tasks which family members assisted with, especially for female participants. However, when students were under pressure to submit assignments, they relied heavily on their family members such as their own children, housemates and spouses to assist with house chores. Those arrangements are contrary to Tinto's (1993) prediction that in most cases external commitments such as family responsibilities are seen as interfering or hindering students' goals, intentions and institutional commitments throughout the study period. The following are some of the responses from the participants:

My children assist with cooking while I am busy with assignments (Susan, Interview, September 01, 2017).

My cousin usually takes care of my 5 month baby while I am busy completing and submitting my assignments (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

My kids are big, the youngest is 14 years..., they understand the situation that I am studying and we share house responsibilities (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

When I am really busy with studies my kids cook and clean the house while my husband assists to deliver things to town or other suburbs on my behalf (Susan, Interview, September 01, 2017).

My mother is working in an HIV/AIDS clinic and she assists me with the subject content and assignments when I need help. She is real helpful (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017).

My husband assists with typing my assignments when I finish with the drafts (Sara, Interview, September 20, 2017).

While participants' responsibilities varied, surprisingly few participants especially those who were employed mentioned that extended families expected financial and social support from

them. This showed that they were not really expected to carry out many duties like house chores by their extended family members because they lived far from them. Ndapanda described her financial roles as follows:

I send money every month to my parents and grandparents at the northern part of the country (Ndapanda, Interview, September 22, 2017).

In addition, Maria and Emily stressed that they were responsible for organising events such as weddings and funerals in their families.

I am very trusted by my in-laws in terms of organising events in the family, they wait for me to do shopping lists, buy food, and even be the Master of ceremony at our family events (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

My responsibility towards extended family members is to give financial support, organise events such as weddings and other parties and do shopping for them (Emily, Interview, September 22, 2017).

Lack of family support

Tinto (1993) believes that external support is more instrumental to married and older students with families because it enables them to withstand the difficulties and demands of academic life. However, there were a few participants who did not get support from family members with regards to family responsibilities. Brenda shared her experiences as follows:

My son is stubborn, he knows how to cook and clean but he does not want to do it...I always come home and cook after work. I become so exhausted and cannot study afterwards (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Brenda further alluded that for her to concentrate on studies, she usually went to the university campus to do academic work because at home once people saw that she took her books and wanted to concentrate, they would give her more house tasks to do.

There are times I slept in the library studying or working on my assignments because there are lots of kids at home and the whole environment is not conducive for studying (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

The study findings suggest that students with mature children and spouses received more assistance and support from their family members than single students and students with young children.

Challenges in terms of family support

Family duties emerged as one of the challenges to student persistence. Tinto (1993) explains that “any person participating in external communities may entail accepting a range of external commitments that may counter rather than support participation in universities” (p. 127). The following are some of the issues participants pointed out:

My older daughter was pregnant and she went on labour a day before my examination. As a single mother, I accompanied her to the hospital and I eventually missed my examination. This means that now I have one module behind (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

My mother used to make and sell traditional dresses and her clients come anytime and they disturb me when I am busy studying (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

The time I can study at home is when my kids are sleeping, midnight (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

I cannot study at home, the children make noise... (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Such challenges cannot be controlled by the institution or academics and this is in agreement with the argument of Tinto (2014) that “the unavoidable fact is that though we aspire to help all our students, there are many things that affect their success over which we have little control” (p. 7).

In addition, Peter, one of the respondents spent time out of town with his father. Those weekends away interfered with his studies but when he came back he tried hard to catch up. He indicated that he was willing to reduce those family tasks but at the same time he had to obey his parents’ rules and carry out family responsibilities.

Sometimes my father calls me to accompany him when driving to the farm to check on livestock and those days are wasted... (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Reducing family commitments

Tinto’s (1997; 2015) theory of student persistence did not discuss the reduction of external commitments and that is one of Tinto’s weaknesses. Breier (2010) argues that “Tinto’s

arguments put more emphasis on ‘the individual’ and it neglects external factors including social, political and economic forces” (p. 53).

Time management played a major role in my persistence because my intention is to see myself rise and be successful in life. I stopped attending funerals and weddings because almost every weekend there is a funeral. I only attend events of close family members now (Susan, Interview, September 01, 2017).

Peter highlighted that even though he is a young man, he did not allow external factors such as watching soccer, playing games, partying and socialising with friends or siblings hinder his studies:

I am focused... and since my parents and siblings live in another town, I have enough time to study during weekends and after working hours (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Support from employers and student persistence

The data suggested that employers’ support is crucial and it aids with students’ persistence. This is in support with Tinto’s (1997) argument that external support whether found in the family, on the job, or in one’s local peer group may be critical to continued persistence.

It appeared that Anna was the only participant who was allowed to do work related tasks at home.

I have so much to do at work, sometimes there are due dates to meet, so sometimes I take work home (Anna, Interview, September 05, 2017).

However, all other employed participants indicated that they were not allowed to take any work related tasks home due to the nature of their job. That gave them sufficient time to work on their academic activities after work or over weekends. Emily and Helen explained this point as follows:

I work with patients’ confidential information and therefore I am not allowed to take any work related tasks home (Emily, Interview, September 01, 2017).

Work stays at work, being a counsellor, we are not allowed to take work related information out of the clinic...it is a very confidential information (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

Despite the fact that work stayed at work, employed participants still found it challenging to complete study tasks at home or over weekends. Evidence revealed that several participants still required more time to finish assignments, especially when assignments were due. Susan, Ndapanda, Helen and Emily indicated that they had kind supervisors who sometimes allowed them to work on their academic tasks during working hours. The support from employers and supervisors makes a significant contribution to students' academic success and it is critical to student persistence. According to the literature, the student persistence model can "enable us to understand how external support from employers may assist, rather than detract from persistence" (Tinto, 1993, p. 127).

I am lucky to be working with a very understanding team, usually my sister in charge gives me time to submit or finalise assignments (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

My supervisor sometimes allows me to work half day and go home to finalise my assignments (Ndapanda, Interview, September 22, 2017).

My boss understands my situation... We are not allowed to study at work but my boss allows me to search for information during the lunch hour (Susan, Interview, September 01, 2017).

I used to ask for permission from my immediate commander to work on my studies at work, but I also assess the situation first, if there is too much work that day, I know I cannot make such a request. I usually get like 3 hours off (Emily, Interview, September 22, 2017).

Apart from support, employment in general took up much of people's time, and Sara noted the challenge to balance her work and studies:

I feel like quitting my job, although I need money to pay my tuition fees and support my family, I still think work is taking up most of my time (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

Work colleagues were a source of motivation to some participants, and Brenda shared her ambitions as follows:

I am motivated by the fact that my other two former colleagues completed their degrees; I also feel that I will successfully complete this program if I work harder (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Community responsibilities and student persistence

Community activities are common among mature and distance students. According to the data, many participants were either involved in community activities or they were involved before they started studying. Based on the theory that many responsibilities can hinder persistence, some participants indicated that they stopped taking part in community activities or they reduced their involvement in order to focus their attention on their studies and in that way they could have sufficient time to study. There is no particular reference to community commitments in the literature. However, Tinto (1993) argues broadly that external communities have their own social and normative structures which may counter and affect student persistence. This study suggests that too many community responsibilities affected student commitment to studies, but when these responsibilities were manageable and occurred at a minimal extent, these made no effect to student persistence. In addition, the data did not indicate any direct support that participants received from community members with regards to their studies.

Many participants stated that they had some community duties such as church responsibilities, voluntary work and other health related activities. Some students indicated that their community tasks were well planned and they did not interfere with their studies. This is evident in the following responses:

I used to do health promotion in the community such as taking babies weight, assisting people with TB in the location and referring them to hospitals when needed, but I realised that it takes up my time which I need to spend on my studies and I stopped it in 2015 (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

I teach an adult literacy class at Goreangab settlement two days per week. This task is well planned and it does not interfere with my studies (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017).

I have church activities, where I am supposed to go to church three times a week, but I don't always go there due to my studies (Anna, Interview, September 05, 2017).

In my neighbourhood, people know that I give counselling, especially to the lady next to my house who is HIV positive and I give her advice regularly, especially when she misses her medication. I am also in the church choir for the ladies where we practice twice in a week and sing during church services (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

I assist people in my location with whatever I can...right now my neighbour's father passed away and I gave them my car to use when busy organising the funeral. I am trusted in my community. Secondly, I also have a church responsibility of offering marriage counselling classes to those who want to get married... I enjoy those responsibilities a lot. I even trained other people in my church to give marriage counselling (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I visit homes in my area where orphans and vulnerable children are staying to encourage them to continue attending school despite the challenges they face. I usual do that at Oshikoto region where I am from, during holidays (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

I am a choir leader at the military base, I go together with other members of the choir to perform at events even out of town. Last week we were performing in Walvis Bay (Emily, Interview, September 22, 2017).

According to several participants, they had many challenges brought about by external communities which affected their academic tasks. This is confirmation of what Tinto (2015) states in his model on student motivation and persistence that “students have to want to persist and expand the effort to do so even when faced with the challenges they sometimes encounter” (p. 2). According to Anna, she was willing to reduce the time she spent at church and the time she spent preparing for her wedding:

I would like to reduce some activities..., this year it is really hectic for me; the stress is high... work, study, church and preparing my wedding. May be I can cut a bit from work and wedding planning. I wish I can go to place, away from home...where I can concentrate on my study, may be in a library. Sometimes I even forget that I

have assignments due and when I remember, I have to rush and I want to finish the course this year (Anna, Interview, September 01, 2017).

Similarly, Lucy had this to say:

I want to reduce on the time I spend on church activities. We go to church like four days a week and it is really taking up most of my time that I can use to study (Lucy, Interview, September 07, 2017).

A few participants made certain improvements to reduce their community services and responsibilities. For instance, Brenda completely stopped the voluntary community work she used to do before she enrolled in this programme to create enough time to concentrate on her studies and for her to succeed:

I realised that I had too much pressure from my community work, and thus I stopped. I was required to write reports about my community work and I didn't want to lie (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

A few participants highlighted that they did not have community commitments because these could easily interfere with their studies. They were doing well with their academic tasks so far and they would like to continue doing exactly the same until they had completed their studies.

I don't have any community responsibilities and I don't have lots of friends to go out with (Debby, Interview, September 07, 2017).

Formal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence

In my conceptual framework, I argued that student persistence is shaped by interactions within the institutional environment and the general incorporation in the academic and social life of the university.

Formal peer group interaction is not evident in my data and the role these interactions play in student persistence cannot be measured. In this theme, I analysed data on the role of the vacation school as part of academic integration and its link to student persistence. Students are expected to interact with lecturers and other students during these sessions. According to Ross (2014), Tinto (1997) suggests that student engagement should be facilitated by faculty

members and academics, usually in a classroom environment to promote academic integration, which in turn leads to the development of communities of learning.

Vacation schools and student persistence

Data revealed that formal group interaction did not really take place among distance students and the university had not created enough platforms for formal interactions except for vacation school sessions. This was the only formal platform where students met with tutors face-to-face for about four days every semester at the university under study. Tinto (2015) warned that when universities are “providing access without support, this is not an opportunity” (p. 6), and adds further that universities are obligated to provide the support needed to translate the opportunity to access and to provide success. The main purpose of the tutor-student interaction is to prepare students for the examination and to provide clear guidance as to how students should complete the set assignments. This study suggests that vacation school interaction influences persistence to a limited extent because it is not compulsory for all students and it is not supplemented with other forms of formal integrations. My study also found that students who missed vacation schools also persist. This partially supports Tinto’s arguments that academic integration plays a huge role in student persistence. Furthermore, Barnett (2011) also supports Tinto by stating that “faculty-student interactions influences academic integration and that academic integration influences students’ intent to persist” (p. 215). However, Barnett (2011) does not indicate to what extent does academic integration influence students’ intention to persist.

According to most participants, they attended vacation schools every semester and they interacted with lecturers and fellow students in a formal environment. According to Brenda and Alvina, they had never missed any vacation school; they would be late for classes sometimes but they had never been absent. They further stressed that attendance as well as face-to-face interactions with lecturers and fellow students contributed significantly to their success:

Face to face interaction is very important because as distance students, most of the time we study as individuals – just reading books... During those sessions we share experiences and ask for help from other students and lecturers where we don’t understand (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

I always attend vacation schools because this is the only time we meet with lecturers and get a clue of what will be covered in the examination (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017)

On the other hand, a few participants experienced challenges in terms of attending vacation schools. Since distance students are immersed with external commitments, some experience some personal crises which prevent them from attending vacation schools.

Susan and Sophie stated that they missed one vacation school each due to work commitments:

I am working for a private company and I could not leave my job for those 3-5 days to attend classes (Susan, Interview, September 01, 2017).

Most of my colleagues were on leave and when I applied to get off days, my application was rejected because we were very few at work and the hospitality industry is always busy (Sophie, Interview, September 20, 2017).

Unforeseeable circumstances prevented one participant from attending the vacation school. The following is Anna's experience:

I got sick after the first day of the vacation school and I did not attend the last two days (Anna, Interview, September 05, 2017).

Alvina was not satisfied with the way one lecturer presented a lecture during the August 2017 vacation school. She expressed that although this lecturer gave them classes for two days, which was unusual, they did not learn satisfactorily:

That lecturer was too fast and she does not explain things in simple terms for us to understand, we are mature students, you know (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

Poor lecturer presentation and attendance discouraged Amy from attending all vacation school sessions:

Sometimes I don't attend vacation schools because lecturers don't always attend...and some of them don't use the whole three hours as indicated in the timetable (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017)

Based on that data, it was evident that academic integration occurred to a lesser extent and thus it made a minimal contribution to student persistence. This is in agreement with those who criticised Tinto by arguing that “social and academic integration do not act as reliable indicators for persistence rates among non-traditional students such as distance learning students and mature students” (Schreiber et al, 2014, p. vi). Although data indicated that participants who failed to attend the vacation school still persisted, in their views, strong academic integration could be used as a tool to enhance student persistence. Tinto (1997) states that “the more students are involved academically in shared experiences that link them as learners with their peers, the more likely they are to become involved in their own learning and invest the time and energy needed to learn” (p. 615).

Lack of formal peer group interaction

As I argued earlier, classroom engagement and formal peer group interaction is very limited in the distance education context. Consequently, scholars proffer that “social and academic integration do not act as reliable indicators for persistence rates among distance learning students, mature students and returning students” (Schreiber et al, 2014, p. vi). All the participants indicated that the course did not require them to engage with each other formally. They explained that since they were studying through the distance mode, their programme did not require them to work in groups for assessment purposes.

All our assignments are individual tasks (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

We do all our assignments as individuals, no group work. (Sophie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

However, a few participants suggested that the university should introduce weekend classes or additional tutorials to engage with peers and lecturers in a formal setting. Additional tutorials can also increase students’ persistence. Tinto (2014) holds the view that “students often need academic support as they are engaged in their studies, support that goes beyond the capacity of first year seminars, for that reason universities should employ a range of academic support programmes for such as learning centres, tutorials and study halls” (p. 15).

We need more vacation schools or weekend classes for the tutors to teach us the subject content; vacation school hours are not enough (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

It is very difficult to communicate with tutors as some don't pick up their phones, so if possible weekend classes should be introduced so that we meet face to face with tutors regularly (Erkkie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Informal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence

Tinto's study on 'Classrooms as Communities' found out that "participation in a collaborative or shared learning group enables students to develop a network of support – a small supportive community of peers that helps bond students to the broader social community of the university" (Tinto, 1997, p. 613).

Tinto (2014) advocates for the "use of network analysis and the role of networks affiliations in student persistence" by stating that "students form networks of affiliation that bind them to other people and in turn to the university" (p. 13). The use of WhatsApp groups can be regarded as a network for this particular group of students. WhatsApp groups emerged as the main informal peer groups that students formed among themselves. According to most participants, members participated actively and they assisted each other by answering questions posted in the group, sharing study materials and important information about the course. This showed that informal peer group interaction occurred to a large extent and it influenced student persistence. Tinto (1997) stresses that "the more students are involved academically and socially in shared learning experiences that link them as learners with their peers, the more likely they are to become more involved in their own learning and investing the time and energy needed to learn" (p. 615).

Several participants indicated that they had other peer groups with friends who were doing the same programme. These peer groups appeared to be very few, and in some cases these did not last long. The data further suggested that those other peer groups may have influenced to student persistence minimally.

Moreover, most participants indicated that they were part of some informal study groups which they formed themselves to discuss issues and share ideas as students:

We formed our own WhatsApp groups with other students during vacation schools (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

We created a WhatsApp group. Some students live in remote areas, thus, we share information through WhatsApp especially if there are tests to be written, examination timetable or other urgent matters like make up tests for those who failed... we use that group to inform each other (Sophie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Everyday people post in our WhatsApp group..., it is active and strictly for study related things only. Some people started posting funny things and we stopped them. I believe this informal group contributes to my success because sometimes I make use of it to ask for help when I don't understand some topics and when I go in examination rooms, I still remember those chats (Sophie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Likewise, Amy explained the significance of being in a WhatsApp group and she shared her experiences as follows:

When we discuss some content with other students in a WhatsApp group, I hardly forget it. I had a module which I didn't understand very well...other students explained and assisted me to get a better understanding, and I really appreciate that because now my performance has improved (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

In addition, Erkkie explained that he was actually a member of three different WhatsApp groups.

I enrolled for 2nd year modules this year and now I was added to their WhatsApp group again and I am still in the Certificate group although I completed my certificate already. These groups are meant for us students to assist each other, and there are very useful (Erkkie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Sophie, Helen and Maria shared that there were approximately 40 students in a WhatsApp group, and this included students from the regional centres.

While some students praised the role of group work in their success, others stressed that it did not play any role at all. According to Anna, she did not belong to any formal or informal

group of students and she preferred to do her assignments and examination preparations on her own based on a bad WhatsApp experience she had. This is what she had to say:

I was recently added to a WhatsApp group, but when I got sick and missed some vacation days, I requested for notes, but I didn't receive any help, some members commented on my post but they did not send any notes or share what the lecturer had said in class. I ended up not knowing what was done in class (Anna, Interview, September 05, 2017).

Anna was disappointed and somehow concluded that this informal social media group was of no help and that it could not play any role to her success.

Likewise, Peter shared that he was not part of any group and so far, he was fine studying alone. Helen explained that there was a time that she was in a study group with other four students. This was not a social media group, but they used to meet at their houses over weekends to study but later she realised that other group members wanted to misuse that platform for other discussions and purposes. She eventually stopped and moved out of the group.

However, she was now part of a WhatsApp group which she joined a few months ago after she bought a smart phone. She was really satisfied with the assistance they gave each other through that WhatsApp group.

All participants emphasised that in general, group work was needed to enhance student interaction and to boost their confidence. This was because when they worked as individuals, sometimes they lost the morale to persist and they eventually drop out or stop out. Group work can play a vital role in distance students' lives even if it is not a course requirement, and according to Peter:

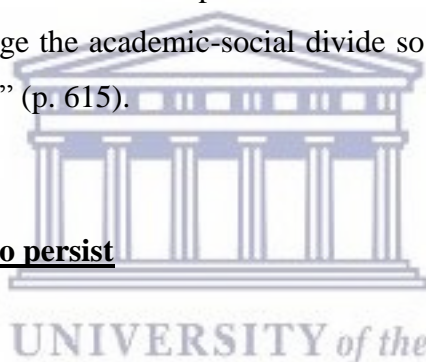
When you are in a team it is better and many brains are better than one brain (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017).

I found out that mature students (above 40 years) preferred to work in groups, more than younger students. While social media groups emerged as the main type of groups that students formed, Brenda interestingly shared that she did not own a smart phone which would allow

her to be in a WhatsApp group but she still met with other students to discuss the assignments or prepare for examinations. According to Brenda, four other students and herself met in recreation parks or on campus:

I am not on social media groups because I don't have a smart phone, but I am in a peer group with other students. We are 5 students and we meet in recreational parks in town to work on our assignments and to prepare for the examination (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Based on the data, social integration did occur and it contributed significantly to student persistence. It contributed in the sense that many participants found the informal groups very motivating, informative and it boosted their confidence to continue studying. The informal peer groups were used as a social platform to reduce loneliness among students, to make them feel a sense of belonging to the community of learning and thus it enhanced the quality of their efforts. Tinto (1997) argues that “students put more effort into that form of educational activity that enables them to bridge the academic-social divide so that they are able to make friends and learn at the same time” (p. 615).



Student persistence and intent to persist

This study investigated the relationship between student persistence in the current programme and the intent to persist. The data suggested that there was a strong relationship between students' persistence in the current programme and their intention to persist in the future. Most participants highlighted the fact that they had successfully managed to complete their first year of study, which gave them the confidence that if they continued to persist, they would succeed and graduate. Tinto (2015) emphasises that we should understand “persistence as a form of motivation that is shaped by student behaviours” (p. 10) perceptions of their experiences, which adds another dimension to our understanding of the complex process of persistence and course completion. Some students in my study indicated that since others had graduated in the past, it meant that they could also work hard and successfully complete their studies.

Most of the participants stressed that they were willing to continue studying after they had successfully completed their current programme. Social work, Industrial Psychology, and

degrees in Nursing or Education were some of the programmes they were interested in. However, those that were working and had many dependents, like Brenda, expressed their concerns that those programmes were just offered on the full-time mode and they were not ready to resign from their jobs. Although some participants were really interested in following HIV/AIDS Counselling to the degree level, they realised that their dreams might not materialise soon because the university under study did not offer such a degree as yet. If they opted to join another institution in Namibia, they might be required to do it on a full-time mode for a duration of four years. Some participants shared that they wanted to study further even if programmes, such as Geo-Information or Environmental Health, were not related to their current programme.

Family motivation and career guidance surfaced in some participants who felt that sometimes it was very important to follow the same career as their spouses or parents.

According to Susan, she would like to join the teaching profession soon after she completed this programme because her spouse is a teacher, and she is inspired by the work related benefits teachers in Namibia get, such as three annual holidays.

I want to do a teaching program, because my husband is a teacher and I always want to go with him on holidays... I also like working with children (Susan, Interview, September, 01, 2017).

Likewise, Peter said that he would like to join health related careers in the future because his mother is working in HIV/AIDS clinic

I want to enter somewhere in the field of health... My mother inspired me to follow the same career and I believe that health passion is in my family blood (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017)

What was common for all the participants was that they were willing to continue studying different programmes after the completion of this diploma. Students had great self-efficacy, which according to Tinto (2015) influences how a person addresses goals, tasks and challenges. He adds that “a strong sense of self-efficacy promotes goal attainment” (p. 4). The participants were confident of reaching greater heights in terms of education. Although the majority of participants are adults, married and carry multiple responsibilities, it is evident that they were willing and eager to study and achieve their academic goals.

Stepping stones for higher qualifications

According to Tinto (1993), as students progress towards their diploma, “their concerns appear to shift towards a greater emphasis on academic issues” (p. 125). Similarly in this study, since the participants were about to complete their current study, they were thinking of programmes they would like to study next.

Most of the students who participated in this study were those who got admission through the Mature Age system (Recognition of Prior Learning) because they did not meet the general university entry requirements for a diploma. Nangula, Erkkie, Peter, Amy and Emily wanted to enrol in degree programmes but they did not meet the entry requirements for degree programmes. A Diploma in HIV/AIDS Management and Counselling is one of the entry qualifications at the University in this study. It is on NQF level 5, which is sometimes difficult to use for job applications, especially for the youth who have no work experience. Students who participated in this study were aware of that challenge. However, some participants were just insecure to live without any qualification because they believed that people with qualifications were living better lives. Sara and Sophie had this to share:

Life becomes expensive and there is nothing you can do without a qualification with your name to able to help yourself (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

If you are not studying, you cannot get what you want. If you don't have a talent like to become a business person, then it is always logical to get a qualification and look for job (Sophie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Emily, Nangula, Amy and Peter voiced their challenges in a bid to enter the degree programmes and how they were planning to use this diploma as a stepping stone to get admissions in higher qualifications:

My Grade 12 points are low, therefore this is my foundation for the future..., I want to reach a degree level (Emily, Interview, September 22, 2017).

Since my Grade 12 results are not good, I decided to enrol in this diploma first so that I can study for a degree in Psychology or social work in the near future, instead of trying to upgrade my 12 results (Nangula, Interview, September 20, 2017).

I am planning to further my studies in the field of Social work or Psychology (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

I definitely want to continue studying towards the Bachelor's Degree in HIV/AIDS Management but since it is not yet offered at this institution, I have a second choice of enrolling for the degree in Geo-Information Technology at another HE institution here in Windhoek (Peter, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Some fields of studies appeared constantly in participants' responses. For example the fields of Psychology and Social work seemed to be the most preferred fields of study, hence, Amy and Nangula had this to say:

I am planning to go further my studies... to do a degree in Clinical Psychology or Social Work (Amy, Interview, August 30, 2017).

I am planning to apply for a degree in Psychology or Education and become a Life Skills teacher or a Students Counsellor (Nangula, Interview, September 20, 2017).

Others such as Alvina, Maria, and Helen would like to join the nursing profession and they were planning to use this Diploma in HIV/AIDS Counselling to get admission in nursing programmes at the same institution:

I want to reach my dream of studying for a nursing diploma and become a nurse. I know a lot about nursing but I don't have a qualification... my plan is to use this qualification to get admission in the nursing diploma (Alvina, Interview, September 14, 2017).

My aim is to continue studying until I reach the Masters' degree level... (Maria, Interview, September 14, 2017).

I did not have science subjects in Grade 12, thus I decided to study subjects such as Biology and Mathematics on distance and did another course online. My plan is to put all those qualifications together to get an admission in a nursing program, this university must have mercy on me. My passion is to become a nurse one day... that is my dream (Helen, Interview, September 20, 2017).

Almost all participants alluded that higher education qualifications were very important nowadays because it was very difficult to secure a good job without any tertiary qualification. They also stressed that they were studying to be able to provide for their families. It was also logical for participants to think of enrolling in nursing, social work and psychology

programmes because those are the fields which relate to this programme and they more or less have similar content.

It was very interesting that despite the challenges such as lack of formal study groups, family and work commitments, these students were willing to persist and study to the next level. Ndapanda was the only participant with an Honours degree in Nursing. Her future plans are to study for a Masters' degree and a PhD.

I am still young..., and my goal is to be one of the well educated women in Namibia. I am confident that I will get a PhD in my lifetime (Ndapanda, Interview, September 22, 2017).

Emerging challenges to student persistence

Lack of conducive study environment

Although scholars stress that learning takes place in classrooms (Tinto, 1993, 2015), that is not the case for distance learning. Tinto (2015) emphasises the role of the classroom in most of his publications; for instance, he states that “though learning can take place in a variety of places outside the classroom, the classroom learning is central to student learning” (Tinto, 2014, p. 17). Lack of a conducive study environment was one of the core challenges students complained about during the interviews.

Alvina, Brenda, Helen and others expressed their concerns with regards to lack of a conducive learning environment:

I prefer to go to campus and study in the library...sometimes I slept in the university especially during examination times (Brenda, Interview, August 31, 2017).

Social media

Young participants expressed that they were addicted to social media platforms and they spent many hours chatting online. Erkkie described this challenge as follows:

I wish I can reduce the time I spend on social media, but that is the platform I use to market and promote my small 'printing shop' business and chat with clients (Erkkie, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Similarly, Lucy and Ndapanda also alluded to the fact that although they are single and do not have children to look after or many family and community responsibilities, and as a result they spent many hours on social media after work:

I chat a lot... and I am always on my phone googling stuff like fashion, hair etc. and that is really a barrier for my studies and I am planning not to make use of my smart phone during examinations so that i can concentrate on my studies or I give myself a specific time to be on my phone (Lucy, Interview, September 07, 2017).

I spend a lot of time online...especially on social media. It is addictive (Ndapanda, Interview, September 22, 2017).

Reasons for stop-out and change of programs

A few participants indicated that they had stopped out of their studies in the past and had returned to complete. Emily, Sara and Anna were returning students who stopped out of their studies for personal reasons. My data supports Murangi's (1997) findings that large numbers of students that drop out of the programmes do so because of some personal reasons rather than reasons based on the institution or tutors. The following were their key reasons for stopping out:

I did not register in 2016 due to health related problems, but I am feeling better now and I decided to re-register to complete the program (Emily, Interview, September 22, 2017).

I had a very demanding work back then, and eventually I gave up on my studies. But my mother motivated me to come back and complete the program (Anna, Interview, September 05, 2017).

I started with this program in 2011, but due to other commitments such as having young children, a husband and work, it was difficult to cope with the studies... and I therefore stopped out (Sara, Interview, September 08, 2017).

According to Susan, she first enrolled for a diploma in Business Administration, but later quit and joined the present programme.

I realised that Business Administration is not for me, and then I stopped for two years before I enrolled in this programme (Susan, Interview, September 01, 2017).

The general picture that emerged from the data suggested that adult students were self-motivated and they had different intentions which forced them to persist despite the challenges they faced. Family and employers' support also contributed significantly to students' academic success, contradicting the literature suggestions that they hinder student persistence. Many participants made provisions to reduce their community responsibilities in order to accommodate their studies and others were still willing to make further changes to strengthen their persistence and complete their studies on time.



SECTION 5

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this section I discuss the main findings of my research through the lens of Tinto's theory of student persistence. I also present my recommendations and theoretical insights of the findings.

In this research, I investigated the following research problem: The role of external communities, integration and student persistence among distance students, which was an issue that had not been investigated in Namibia before. For the purposes of my research in my particular context, it was worth investigating if external factors to academic communities may undermine adult students' persistence. The research problem was investigated in depth and the complexity of the issue of distance student persistence and integration in a Namibian context was established. The challenges and demands brought by external communities were identified and discussed.

This study had two objectives: firstly, to find out what motivates adult students in distance education to persist with their studies despite the many challenges in external communities and secondly, to use the research findings to inform the university and all stakeholders to consider these factors when planning distance academic programmes and to inform new part-time students on how external factors can hinder or enhance their studies. Through those objectives, I needed to find out the specific facts that motivate adult students to persist and successfully complete their studies. At the same time I was eager to identify the challenges they faced throughout their study journey so that I could suggest clear recommendations to the stakeholders. As an academic, I wanted to be informed about the issues associated with student persistence and external communities among distance students so as to draw the relationship between these two concepts.

I investigated the following research question:

- What are the relationships between external communities, social and academic integration and student persistence?

I also investigated the following sub-questions:

- What do external communities, social and academic integration contribute to student persistence?

- How do external communities influence distance students' persistence and departure?
- How does social and academic integration contribute to student persistence?

These questions guided me in my study.

I used some elements of Tinto's theory of student persistence as my model in investigating if there is a relationship between the external communities, social and academic integration and student persistence. The key elements were external communities, social and academic integration as well as student persistence. My findings indicated that there is a definite relationship between external communities, academic integration and student persistence among adult distance students.

I conducted a qualitative research using the interpretive approach as I wanted to explore the relationship between external communities, social and academic integration and student persistence as framed and experienced by the participants.

The study employed purposive sampling which allowed me to pick 20 adult, senior students who have been in the programme for more than one year. These were the suitable students who have experienced persistence. I collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews and I used an interview guide. The semi-structured interview approach allowed me to probe for clarity and generate rich and in-depth data.

The data were analysed using a thematic analysis.

The data gave me a clear picture of how different components of Tinto's theory of student persistence are interconnected and how they enhance student persistence. The research question and sub-questions were answered although the concept of academic integration was not widely explored compared to other components.

Findings

- The majority of adult students were self-driven, which gave the impression that self-motivation and the intentions of participants contributed significantly to student persistence.
- Family support to adult students emerged as the primary influence to student persistence.

- Employers supported adult students by allowing them to complete assignments and other academic tasks during work time and to use company facilities.
- Informal peer group support contributed considerably to student persistence.
- The university was only providing support to adult students through the vacation school and there was no other evidence of academic integration.
- Many adult students lived in environments which were not conducive to study; however, they utilised all sorts of opportunities available to study and succeed.
- A few adult students had dropped out previously due to various problems but they returned to complete the programme.
- The uncertainty of the future and the desire for decent jobs and salaries influenced adult students' intentions to study.
- Long term goals such as studying for degrees in the future motivated adult students to persist.

Unanticipated findings

There were some surprising findings which emerged from my study, and some of these outcomes did not appear in Tinto's model of student persistence.

- a) Young students who were mostly unemployed were pre-occupied with social media and the internet, which took up most of the time they could use to study.
- b) Although dependent, these young students were not engaged in family responsibilities.
- c) The surprising finding was that almost all students were motivated to persist in the social responsibility to protect the nation from further HIV/AIDS infections and to provide proper counselling (the nature of the programme).

New theoretical insights and perspectives

Using a deductive approach as reflected by Bryman (2012), my study came up with new theoretical insights which contributed to existing theories of student persistence. The data recognised a significant relationship between external communities and student persistence, while the component of academic integration was less covered in the study. This is contrary to Tinto's (1997) theory of student persistence which strongly emphasises that academic and classroom engagement lead to academic success.

The data revealed that student persistence was made possible by collective efforts and support from different entities such as students themselves, employers, families and the university. Although Tinto presents different views with regards to the effect of external communities on student persistence, in this study, I would like to make reference to the positive effects he strongly emphasised. Tinto (1993) states that when students participate in events external to higher education (e.g. family, work and community), events in those communities may shape persistence in university. In addition, in his recent study, Tinto (2015) emphasises again that students have to want to persist and expand their effort to do so even when faced with challenges.

What stood out for me as interesting was the fact that some employers went out of their way to avail their staff members' time and facilities to do assignments and to complete academic tasks during working hours.

The data in my study confirmed that external support from families, friends and employers promote student persistence rather than undermine their persistence.

The majority of adult students confirmed my theoretical assumptions that informal peer group interactions enhanced and boosted student confidence when studying through the distance mode. Participants emphasised that working as individuals could decrease their morale and lead to drop out.

The limited data on academic integration was not surprising due to the fact that this study focused on distance students; what was unexpected was the fact that the absence of significant academic involvement did not undermine student persistence or drop out as suggested in Tinto's (1997) integration model.

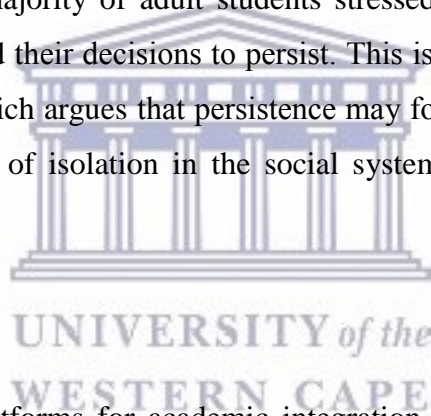
The findings revealed that adult students carried different views with regards to the effectiveness of informal peer group interaction. The majority were satisfied and positively supported the use of informal groups - both online and offline groups. However, there were a few participants who preferred to work as individuals.

The minority of adult students challenged my assumption that financial obligations of paying university fees did not directly impact on persistence among students.

Each adult student experienced persistence differently; the majority of married and employed adult students made many sacrifices and they created strategies in order to persist, while the young and unemployed adult students had time available to study.

The data in my study confirmed the interconnectedness between external communities, social and academic integration and student persistence. Furthermore, the data addressed a gap in literature which puts more emphasis on academic integration as the main drive for student persistence and undermines the role of external communities. My study supports the findings of other scholars who argue that academic integration does not predict persistence, but rather it influences persistence (Milem & Berger, 1997; Barnett, 2011). My study found out that external communities and student intentions were likely to be the main forces/influences behind adult student persistence.

Findings in this study revealed the extent to which participants portrayed personal goals and commitments to succeed. The majority of adult students stressed that individual goals and personal commitments influenced their decisions to persist. This is in agreement with Tinto's theory of student persistence, which argues that persistence may follow if students' goals and commitments outweigh the cost of isolation in the social system of the university (Tinto, 1993).



The recommendations

The university should create platforms for academic integration to take place between the staff and students, which is likely to increase student persistence.

- Proper adult student orientation is needed especially by distance students to sensitise and prepare them for the academic journey as some of these adult students have been out of school for more than 10 years. These sessions could be used as platforms for academics and students to meet and plan how adult students can study and manage their external communities such as family and work commitments while studying.
- As several adult students indicated that informal peer group interactions can contribute to student persistence, such interactions should be increased and facilitated by university administration and academic staff.
- As several adult students have stopped out previously, at risk adult students should be identified and they should be provided with academic counselling to stop potential drop outs.

Conclusion/summary

In my conceptual framework I relied on Tinto's model of student persistence and I argued that external communities can negatively or positively influence student persistence. My research findings confirmed that assumption. The data suggests that external communities hugely promote and encourage student persistence. While there are many factors which promote student persistence, for instance better jobs, pursuing knowledge, becoming role models, and carrying out the social responsibility of saving the nation from HIV/AIDS, there are other factors which undermine persistence. For instance, the addiction to social media, family and community responsibilities and work commitments. If these factors are not well addressed they can put student persistence at risk and possibly lead to drop outs. This study found out that adult females who have families and work on a full-time basis struggle to get enough time to study and complete their academic work. A few of these participants dropped their community tasks and they are willing to stop working so that they could focus on their studies. A few participants stopped out of their studies in the past due to multiple external communities such as family responsibilities and work commitments.

On the other hand, the study found out that external communities such as family support, the willingness to reach greater heights in terms of further studies and future greener pastures were among the key reasons which motivated students to persist.

Although literature maintains that while access and entry to higher education is attained in most countries and that a large number of students fail to persist throughout their study period (Barnett, 2011), this study found out that students actually persisted and that they intended to persist. This is evidenced in the participants' profiles which indicated that most students completed a one year certificate before they enrolled in the diploma and they were willing to continue studying up to the degree level. The findings confirms Tinto's (1993) statement that "the more students learn, the more likely they are to persist" (p. 131).

Tinto's (2015) study (Through the eyes of students) on student motivation and persistence emphasises that "students have to want to persist and expand the effort to do so even when faced with the challenges they sometimes encounter" (p. 2). The data confirmed the fact that self-motivation and confidence are great tools which drive student persistence, in addition to family and friends' inspirations.

In this study I used intent to persist for the purpose of asking ‘adult students’ expressions of their intent to continue their studies (Barnett, 2011) at the same or different institutions once they completed the programme. It was surprising that despite the challenges that adult students experienced in terms of external communities and poor academic integration, all adult students indicated that they would like to continue studying and most of them wanted to continue studying at the same institution. The institution’s reputation emerged as an important factor to the participants, as to where they studied and graduated from. This is in contrast to Tinto’s (2015) argument that the students’ interest is to complete a programme without regard to the institution at which it is earned.

Furthermore, my study found out that most adult students were really committed to their studies even when they were faced with challenges and lived in environments that were not conducive for studying. Thus, I concur with Tinto (2015) who states that students’ belief in their ability to succeed also reflects their ability to manage the larger tasks of going to university while trying to manage other responsibilities.

My study has proven that Tinto’s theory of student persistence remains relevant although it has changed over time and it is not applicable to all contexts. The results of this study emphasised that external communities play a major role in older students’ lives where work commitments and family responsibilities pose major threats to student persistence. It can be seen throughout this study that many adult students received considerable support from family members and employers, which significantly contributed to their academic success.

Finally, I hope that readers, especially those in higher education settings would recognise the importance of student persistence as raised in this research paper. Although this is a small study, I hope that it adds to the emergent body of knowledge on the importance of student persistence and success in higher education studies in Southern Africa.

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Profile

- 1. Name and Surname: -----
- 2. Gender: -----
- 3. Age: -----
- 4. Marital Status: -----
- 5. Number of Dependents: -----
- 6. Source of income: Employed unemployed self-employed
- 7. Occupation: -----
- 8. Designation: -----

Qualifications

- 9. Highest school or post-school qualification: -----

Student profile

- 10. Year of first registration in current program: -----
- 11. Period of de-registration or stop out: -----

Student intentions, commitments and student persistence

- 12. Why did you decide to study at this university and what are the most important reasons for studying?
- 13. Why did you choose to study this programme and what do you find particularly attractive about this academic programme?
- 14. What difference will the completion of this programme make in your life and how you hope to use your new qualification?
- 15. As a part-time student, how have you organised yourself in order to complete your studies successfully?
- 16. What would you describe as your motivation to succeed and reach academic goals?
- 17. What is the most important incentive that drives you to complete your assignments when you are tired, and you have to meet a deadline?

External communities and student persistence

- 18. If are you employed and have to do ‘job-related’ tasks at home, describe some of these tasks??
- 19. When you are under pressure to submit assignments, whom do you call on to assist you? E.g. Colleagues, immediate family members, extended family, members of your community?
- 20. What kind of responsibilities would they assist with?
- 21. What kind of responsibilities do you have towards your immediate family members and your extended family?

22. What kind of responsibilities do you have towards your community?
23. What other kinds of responsibilities interfere with your studies and how can you reduce these?

Formal peer group interaction, integration, and student persistence

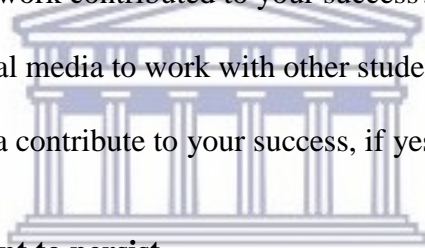
24. Does your course require you to work in groups with students in your class? If so, what kind of groups are these?
25. Do you enjoy working with other students in a group and does this group work contribute significantly to your success?
26. Has this group work made a critical difference between succeeding and failing? if so, share an experience
27. Have you ever missed classes because of a personal crisis, and were helped by students in your group to 'catch up' with your academic work?
28. Does your participation in a group give you a sense of belonging at this university?

Informal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence

29. Do you meet informally with other students to work on assignments or projects?
30. How often do you work together and what kinds of tasks do you work on most often?
31. In which ways has this group work contributed to your success?
32. Do you ever make use of social media to work with other students on assignments or projects?
33. Do these kinds of social media contribute to your success, if yes, why you think that this is the case?

Student persistence and intent to persist

34. What gives you the most confidence that you will complete your studies successfully?
35. Would you like to continue studying after completing this programme? If yes, what would you like to study?



UNIVERSITY of the

WESTERN CAPE

Letter requesting permission to conduct research

Appendix B

Director
Centre for Research and Publications

Dear Director

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I am currently registered for the Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change a student at the University of the Western Cape. As a requirement for the completion of this degree, I am required to conduct a small research study.

I am also a lecturer and a Coordinator for distance programs in Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at University of Namibia. I would like to focus my research study on 'External communities, integration and student persistence among distance students at your University. I hereby request permission to conduct this research study. 'External communities' in this study refer to factors in the external environment related to family responsibilities, work commitments, and community responsibilities that affect students' successful completion of their studies.

I hope that the research findings will inform the university about factors that contribute to student persistence, and inform new students on ways in which external communities can hinder or enhance their studies.

If you grant permission, I would like to interview 30 students who are enrolled in the Diploma in HIV/AIDS Management and Counselling. I will conduct semi-structured interviews, using an Interview Guide. The interview will last for about 1 hour. I will provide participants will a Letter which provides information about the research study. I will also provide a 'Participant Consent Form' which they will be requested to sign before the interview. All information about participants will be regarded as confidential. If I include any part of the interview in the publication, I will not disclose personal information about participants.

I hope this request meets your approval.

Yours Sincerely

Martha Megumbo Niitembu-Nehemia

Academic supervisor: Prof. Zelda Groener
Email address: zgroener@uwc.ac.za
Telephone number: 021 9592801

Dear Participant

INFORMATION LETTER AND KIND REQUEST FOR AN INTERVIEW

My name is Martha Niitembu-Nehemia, I am currently enrolled in a Masters degree in Adult Learning and Global Change at the University of the Western Cape. I am also a lecturer in Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Namibia.

As a requirement for the completion of this programme, I must conduct a research study. My study focuses on 'External communities, integration and student persistence among distance students at the University in Southern Africa. 'External communities' in this study refer to factors in the external environment related to family responsibilities, work commitments, and community responsibilities that affect students' successful completion of their studies.

I hope that the research findings will inform the university about factors that contribute to student persistence, and inform new students on ways in which external communities can hinder or enhance their studies.

As you are a distance education student, I would like to request an interview with you. If you agree, I will arrange an interview at a time convenient for you. The interview will last for 1 hour. I also request your permission to record the interview with an electronic recording device. I will provide you with a 'Participant Consent Form' and request that you sign it before I conduct the interview.

If you experience any discomfort during the interview, and you are required to seek counselling, I shall assist you in this regard. As your participation is voluntary, you may withdraw from the interview at any stage.

I will treat the information that you share with the strictest confidentiality. If I publish any part of the interview conversation, I will protect your identity by not disclosing your personal information.

If you have any questions about the research you may conduct me:

Student: Ms Martha Niitembu-Nehemia
Contact number: +264 811283875 / +264 (0) 61 206 3667
Email: mniitembu@unam.na

If you wish to contact my academic supervisor, her contact details are as follows:

Supervisor: Professor Zelda Groener

Email: zgroener@uwc.ac.za

Telephone: (021) 9592801

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Appendix D

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to an interview. By signing this form you give consent for your participation in the research study.

By signing this consent form, you agree that,

- You have read and understood the ‘Information Letter’
- You have read and understood the ‘Participant Consent Form’
- You consent to be interviewed by the researcher
- You are aware that the interview will last for 1 hour
- You agree that the interview can be recorded with an electronic recording device
- You understand that your words may be quoted and used in publications, reports and in webpages but your name and other personal information will not be disclosed
- You understand that you can withdraw from the research study at any time and no questions will be asked

Please sign this form and return it to the researcher.

Name of Participant: -----

Participant Signature: -----

Place of interview: -----

Date of interview: -----

Researcher Signature: -----

