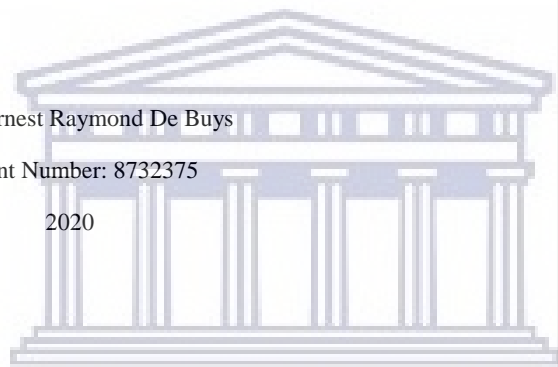# Student persistence among foreign students

At a faith-based Higher Education Institution in the Western Cape

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Abstract

The notion of student persistence is one that remains a topic for lifelong learning. Many scholars pursue an understanding of this phenomenon yet it remains an unsaturated subject for further studies. Furthermore, many countries embrace international students in their universities and colleges for various reasons. South Africa is no different. The intake of international students at this particular institution of interest is mainly faith-based; many of these students are associated with the same faith or have some religious background. Combining the two phenomena (persistence and international studentship) seems an area that could open doors to new knowledge. So I ask the question: "Do foreign students persist more consistently than local students/nationals? And if so, why?" This then formed the basis for my key question in this study: "What are the relationships between social integration and student persistence?"

Tinto's studies on student persistence over an extended period of time (1982 – 2006) surfaced as an appropriate conceptual framework. I found that it presented me with a guide that proved more than useful. It led me through a process that culminated in intriguing outcomes and provided insight into theories around matters pertaining to classroom practice and 'passages' leading to persistence. I used his theories as a measurement to test my research and to ultimately produce notable findings. In the process I found that student integration, both social and academic, does play an important role in persistence. I further noted that faculty validation and in particular pre-entry factors, which include familial support, served as major driving forces behind the persistence of many international students.

My research took the form of a qualitative approach since I intended to arrive at a constructivist perspective. The interview guide used as my research tool served as a useful method to gather data and provided the necessary information to draw inductive conclusions. The international students interviewed during data collection were extremely forthcoming about their challenges and fears, but responded well to the questions posed. All 16 cited faculty and family support as relevant influences toward their desires to persist. The acquired new knowledge includes the shifting of a focus towards student participation in their own persistence.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with much appreciation and great joy that I script these words of acknowledgement. The journey I embarked upon since the very beginning of this process is one that I will always look back on with much gratitude…gratitude towards all those who made it possible for me to arrive at this final destination. Many indeed are those who aided me to this point, and all of them deserve recognition.

First and foremost I pay tribute to God Almighty who carried me when I was not able to sustain myself through the challenging times. It is only by His grace that this paper and its completion were possible. I give Him all the praise!

My family always step up to cheer me along when things get tough and challenges arise. With this project it was no different. Thank you very much for your continued encouragement and support. Special mention should be made of my wife and best friend, Heidi, who plays a pivotal role in my life. Without your motivation and unwavering support I would not have been able to do this. You are my rock!

To my peers and fellow students at the university who rallied to support each other and who served to keep each other's spirits up when it was down. It was wonderful to get to know you, and to walk this road with you.
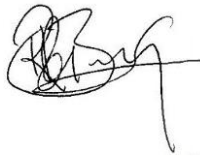
And then there is our supervisor, Professor Zelda Groener. Thank you for not having given up on me. There were many times you could have, but you did not. Your 'validation' served as a true reflection of what Tinto promulgates for student persistence. I succeeded because you were there. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master in Adult Education and Global Change at the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education, 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.

Romeo Ernest Raymond De Buys

Signed:

November 2020

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Section 6

SECTION 1: Introduction

1.1 Context and background

As a member of a religious congregation, I had a sense that students enrolled at a faith-based higher education institution, henceforth referred to as 'Winter College', may experience challenges in relation to persistence in their studies. The White Paper on Education (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013) raises concerns about high levels of student attrition. Statistics in the White Paper show that student attrition is indeed a national concern that requires further investigation if the problem is to be addressed. The White Paper indicates that universities had a 74% success rate in 2011 which 'resulted in a graduation rate of 15%' (p. 32). Hill, Baxen, Craig and Namakula (2012) stated in their study that 'trends confirm that efforts to create a just and democratic education system by removing barriers to "meaningful access and participation" for all citizens are incomplete' (p. 240). Given the needs of the country for a more skilled and educated workforce, it becomes imperative to understand the causes of student attrition, and to determine what can be done to assist students to persist in the face of challenges and obstacles.

The high rate of attrition or dropout shows that not enough progress has been made in addressing the problem of meaningful access to learning and participation. Hill et al. (2012) confirm this supposition, as does the White Paper referred to above.

My study is influenced by the policy objectives as summarised in the White Paper (DHET, 2013), which states that 'it is not by accident that the remaining disparities of wealth, educational access and attainment, health status and access to opportunities are still largely based on race and gender' (p. 4). This statement indicates that pre-entry factors are likely to play an important role in any student's ability to gain access to institutions of higher learning. The White Paper makes the point that these pre-entry factors may be associated with race and gender. While this point is worth recognising, it is not the focus of this paper, which is more interested in the particular issues surrounding educational access which either curtail or enhance persistence in the face of adversity. The observation in the White Paper (DHET, 2013) that 'the achievement of greater social justice is closely dependent on equitable access by all sections of the population to quality education' (p. 5) is well supported and recorded. But what is of particular interest in the study is the next statement in the same White Paper (DHET, 2013), which states: 'For the education and training

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system, this indicates a need to expand access to post-school opportunities, far beyond what is currently available, while simultaneously ensuring that the quality of our entire post-school system improves' (p. 5). The matter of access is firmly addressed in this study while the matter of quality is also highlighted. The quality of primary and high school education could possibly be a strong indicator of post-school success rates, and shed light on how the post-school system may be improved to prevent high dropout rates among students.

The concerns raised in the 2011 DHET White Paper show that there is still much to be understood in terms of the deeper reasons that students drop out of institutions of higher education and the factors that might enhance persistence in the higher education phase.

The White Paper states that in 2013 a total of 446 596 students enrolled at higher learning institutions in South Africa, among whom only 180 823 graduated (DHET, 2013). In observing how students struggle to persist in their studies, my attention was drawn to a particular institution, Winter College, where students experienced all sorts of difficulties that might prevent their completion of studies. It became clear to me that this college was not the only one where students struggled, and students at other higher learning institutions experienced similar difficulties and similar attrition rates. I felt that this was an issue which needed research.

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) provides context for my research. According to Dr B.E Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education and Training in 2013, 'the aim of this White Paper is to outline a framework that defines the Department's focus and priorities, and that enables it to shape its strategies and plans for the future' (DHET, 2013, p. vii). The quotation indicates that there are issues that need to be dealt with and that an understanding of such issues would affect its plans. Insight provided in the White Paper has assisted in the formulating of this research paper, which is based partly on relevant, structured information as presented by the South African National Education Department.

1.2 Rationale
The rationale for this study is the need to produce new knowledge about how international students integrate into their universities or colleges of choice and the factors which contribute to their

persistence with studies. This is done with the goal of enabling policy makers and college authorities to improve the conditions that make persistence possible.

1.3 Objectives

The objective of this study is to assist both institutions and students in their efforts to design and respond to study programmes in ways that enhance the likelihood of successful completion. I have endeavoured to learn from international students who persist in their studies and to gain an understanding of their experiences, so that these experiences can inform others, both those who design programmes and those who enrol in them. The overall goal and objective is that environments may be created that are conducive to student persistence.

1.4 Research problem

Previous research on the topic reveals that there is a low rate of persistence in many higher education institutions. What remains to be clarified is how social and other factors influence academic integration, and how these factors can lead to a decision to depart or to persist. Several factors contribute to student attrition rates, but it is unknown what exactly these factors are and how they may affect one another. The study investigates the problem of student attrition and draws conclusions, but the conclusions do not, in themselves, provide solutions to the problem. There is a need for more research into the hurdles faced by, particularly, foreign students in order to arrive closer to a point where institutions and students understand their obstacles and display more suitable behavioural patterns which may assist to eradicate the problem.

1.5 Research aims

The aims of this research study are to

- investigate factors which contribute to student persistence and which may cause student attrition in higher education institutions;
- develop new theoretical insights about student persistence in higher education.

1.5 Research questions

The main research question is:

What are the relationships between student intentions, institutional commitments, social integration, academic integration and student persistence?

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The sub-questions are:

- How do institutional commitments and academic integration influence student persistence?
- How do student intentions and social integration influence student persistence?
- What are the relationships between institutional commitments, academic integration and student persistence?

1.6 Overview of the study

In Section 2, I present the contextual framework selected for this study. I found that Vincent Tinto's (1997) theories lay an appropriate foundation for my research. I discuss his theories and various interpretations of his work, reflecting on how researchers such as Barnett (2010), Boeren, Nicaise and Baert (2010), Comings (2007) and MacKeracher, Suart and Potter (2006) have interpreted his ideas. I also provide an understanding of the concepts relevant to this study; persistence, integration, social integration, academic integration and student intentions.

In Section 3, I discuss the research design and methodology applied in this research. My main reference is the work of Bryman (2012), while I also refer to insights from Babbie (2010) and Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (1999). I explain why I took a qualitative and inductive approach in the study. I also provide clarity regarding my research site, approach, data collection methods, research instrument, sampling strategies, participants, data reduction strategies and coding methods. Lastly, I consider the ethical aspects of this study.

In Section 4, I present the data collected during interviews and analyse it, reflecting on the experiences of the participants and providing insight into how international students integrate into student life, and whether in fact they integrate at all. I discuss the challenges experienced by these students and the role of integration in enhancing persistence. Emphasis is placed on issues that affect dropping out, peer group integration, individual intention to persist, institutional commitments to the students, and students' relationships with faculty members. I thus lay a foundation for a presentation of the findings in the following section.

In section 5, I draw conclusions, discussing what the findings show with regard to the persistence of international students at this faith-based higher education institution. I categorise the factors

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that cause them to persist and suggest how their experiences may be used to help other students to persist in their studies. I further use their experiences to measure the extent of their persistence and to answer the research questions regarding the role of the students themselves, the role of the institution, and the relationships between institutional commitment, academic integration and student persistence. I reveal that the institution plays a significant role in the eventual persistence of its students.

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SECTION 2: Conceptual framework

2.1 Introduction

In this section, I present the conceptual framework of this study. I selected Vincent Tinto's (1997) theory of student persistence as the foundation of my conceptual framework and focus on specific aspects thereof. More specifically, I draw from his concept of student integration, for which there are two focus points: academic integration and social integration. Tinto (1997) reflects upon the classroom and its pivotal role in the life of a student. His revised model of integration (Tinto, 1997) serves as the main schematic reference for this paper (see Appendix E). In a discussion about the relationship between social and academic integration, Tinto (1997) says that 'the classroom is the crossroads where the social and the academic meet' (p. 599). This asserts the notion of a distinct association between social and academic integration when it comes to the life of the student, an association that is established in the classroom. In this context, the classroom should not be viewed as confined to a space and time but as the academic platform where learning takes place. With this in mind, I determined to use Tinto's 1997 model linking classrooms, learning and persistence as theoretical framework for this research.

2.2 Goals and commitments

While I draw primarily from Tinto's 1997 model, I also found valuable background information in his earlier model. Tinto (1993) asserts that specific goals and commitments developed by students over the course of their studies lead to persistence. These goals essentially motivate the intentions of students. Note that Tinto (1993) refers to intentions as 'plans' (p. 115). Tinto outlines two levels of intention in his 1993 model; 'entry level goals and commitments' and 'post integration goals and commitments' (p. 114). The following statement conveys Tinto's 1993 conception of intentions, goals and commitments.

> Intentions or goals specify both the level and type of education and occupation desired by the individual. Commitments indicate the degree to which individuals are committed both to the attainment of those goals (goals and commitments) and to the institution into which they gain entry (institutional commitment) … Along with external commitments, they help establish the initial conditions for subsequent interactions between the individual and other members of the institution. (p. 115).

It is well understood that students enter into a study programme with an initial set of intentions, or a plan. It is possible that these intentions either evolve or are altered during the course of study,

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but clear intentions remain in the latter period of the student's study life. This student intention is driven by internal and external factors which may include family, friends and relationships with faculty members. Tinto (1993) specifically suggests that, in some cases, external commitments have an altering effect on the student's intention.

> External commitments are seen as altering the person's intentions (plans) and goals and institutional commitments at entry and throughout the college career. And they do so in a manner that is largely (but not entirely) independent of the internal world of the institution (p. 115).

Tinto (1993) makes it clear that his reference to goals and commitments from the earliest stages of a student's study are based on the desired outcome, which is to complete the intended study programme successfully. Bearing this in mind, we turn to how Barnett (2011) applied Tinto's theories.

Barnett (2011) assessed student persistence by researching student intentions, among other factors. She linked these to Tinto's theories on the influence of integration on persistence. She asked participants to respond to one statement, recording the extent to which they agreed or disagreed. Her statement referred to the intention of the participants to 'return to the college for the fall 2006 semester' (Barnett, 2011, p. 200). She found that students who felt more academically integrated indicated higher levels of intention to return (Barnett, 2011). Her findings provide sufficient evidence to suggest that the relationship between integration and persistence in studies is an area that should be further investigated.

Barnett (2011) identified the relationship between 'faculty validation', academic integration and intent to persist, and drew the following conclusion: 'Higher levels of faculty validation modestly predicted increases in student's intent to persist' (p. 213).

The work of Barnett (2011) presents an ideal example of how Tinto's (1993) model is used to assess persistence. As revealed in the discussion above, she establishes connections between aspects of student life that affect their long-term commitment and persistence, showing how aspects of Tinto's (1993) model lead to the outcome of persistence (Barnett, 2011). What is clear from her findings is that student intention is critical for this outcome.

Tinto (1993) clearly recognises that goals and commitments are required for a student to persist. This is why he makes the following statement: 'Persistence may follow if the individual's goals

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and commitments are such as to bear the costs of isolation in the social system of the college' (p. 120). Students enter an institution of learning with certain goals and commitments which may change as they experience student life. Pre-entry goals and commitments are what lead them to apply and eventually register at an institution. It is the affirmation of these goals and commitments during their period of study which motivates them to persist in the face of adversity. Their intention to persist underpins the eventual outcome.

2.3 Institutional experiences (Tinto, 1993)

Institutional experiences are those which students undergo during their periods of studentship at a particular institution of higher learning. Tinto (1993) asserts that there is agreement among scholars such as Bowles and Gintis (1976), Rist (1970) and others, that, as he puts it, 'the institution, in its behaviour and normative manifestations, has as much to do with the failure of students as do the students themselves' (p. 91). Thus the notion is tabled that institutional experiences cannot be separated from the student's decision to depart from or persist with studies.

Included in the discussion regarding the successful integration of students into an institution is the student's experiences as a member of the institution and the process of becoming a member. Barnett (2011) uses the terms 'belonging' and 'being a part of', to define membership. Of this process, Tinto (1993) says:

> Fraternities, sororities, student dormitory associations, student unions, frequent faculty and visiting-scholar lectures, extracurricular programs, and intramural sports, for example, may all serve to provide individuals with opportunities to establish repetitive contact with one another in circumstances which lead to the possibility of incorporation into the life of the college (p. 99).

The integration process plays a significant role and is a critical institutional experience in the life of the student. We can deduce from Tinto's (1993) words above that the student's participation in certain institutional activities determines the his or her integration into the institution, and that a student who participates in these activities is more likely to remain enrolled at the institution until the completion of studies. This summation serves to affirm that the student's institutional experiences influence the ability to persist. Tinto (1993) makes the point that 'colleges are made up of both academic and social systems' (p. 106) and that 'social systems … centre about the daily life … of the various members of the institution, especially the students' (p. 106). He makes it clear that the daily life of students includes interactions which are not necessarily academic

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experiences, and that academic experiences may be significantly impacted by social interactions. Naturally, a combination of these experiences make up the full extent of the institutional experiences of the student.

What brings the above notion into sharp relief are the words of Tinto (1993), who states that 'the absence of strong, enduring social systems comprised of interacting students may pose, as we have previously noted, serious problems for institutions which seek to more fully integrate their students into the life of the institution' (p. 107-108).

Ultimately, in explaining his Longitudinal Model of Departure, Tinto (1993) asserts that

> [t]he model further argues that subsequent experiences within the institution, primarily those arising out of interactions between the individual and other members of the college, student, staff, and faculty, are centrally related to further continuance in that institution. Interactive experiences which further one's social and intellectual integration are seen to enhance the likelihood that the individual will persist (p. 115-116).

This brings us to the understanding that the interaction of the student, whether of a social or of an academic nature, has a significant influence on the ability of the student to become a member of the institution, which ultimately influences the decision to persist or depart. The student who is an active member of the institution and who embraces all aspects of that institution (in other words, one who is entrenched in the institution as a result of institutional experiences) is a likely candidate for persistence. Tinto (1997) affirms this notion with his model which links classrooms, learning and persistence (p. 615).

Tinto (2006) states that two areas are 'ripe for exploration' (p. 7), both of which have a bearing on students and their relationships with their institution. The two areas are 'the effects of classroom practice upon student learning' and 'the impact of institutional investment in faculty and staff development programs' (Tinto, 2006, p. 7). Both areas have a distinct relationship with persistence. On the matter of classroom practice, Tinto (2006) says, 'Here the growing body of research on the impact of learning communities on student retention stands out as having provided solid evidence of practices that enhance student retention' (p. 7).

His discussion affirms the responsibility that the institution has to put mechanisms in place that positively influence student persistence. One such mechanism that Tinto (2006) identifies is staff development, which he reflects on as follows:

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> Regarding faculty and staff development, it is increasingly clear that faculty actions, especially in the classroom, are critical to institutional efforts to increase student retention, but it is also clear that the faculty of our universities and colleges are, as a matter of practice, the only faculty from kindergarten through universities who are literally not trained to teach their students' (p. 7).

Staff development is but one area that needs to be researched in order to ascertain the extent to which it may influence student persistence and its counterpart, the dropout rate. The statement does more than expose a potential weaknesses in the university and college system; it highlights the need for institutions to counteract negative institutional experiences which may lead to departure as opposed to persistence. Thus we have to acknowledge the importance of institutional experiences in all forms in the life of the student.

2.4 Personal normative integration

Tinto (1997) interprets academic and social integration as the student's involvement in university activities, and describes integration as 'emerging from student involvement with faculty and student peers in the communities of the classrooms' (p. 617). Tinto (1997) places this concept under the heading 'personal/normative integration' in his model (p. 615). According to Karp, Hughes and O'Gara (2008), integration is 'having a sense of belonging on campus' (p. 7). They further assert that their 'findings support Tinto's theory that integration is related to persistence' (p. 7). From this one may deduce that Tinto's interpretation of integration is much the same; it is a sense of belonging at an institution, also referred to as 'membership'. In other words, a student is integrated once he or she feels comfortable and a part of that college.

2.4.1 Social integration

The social systems in higher education institutions need to be understood in order to fully grasp the concept of social integration. In Tinto's introduction to his (1997) model, he explains social systems in the following manner:

> The social system of the college centres about the daily life and personal needs of the various members of the institution, especially the students. It is made up of those recurring sets of interactions among students, faculty and staff that take place largely outside the formal academic domain of the college (Tinto, 1993, p. 106).

Social integration refers specifically to the ability of the student to integrate into the daily operations of the institution by engaging in social activities (Tinto, 1993). He therefore asserts that

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there is a clear connection between social integration and persistence, and draws attention to the two college systems (social and academic) mentioned above.

When Tinto (1993) presented his Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure, his focus was essentially on student departure. There is a need to bear in mind Tinto's (2006) observation that the reasons why students leave cannot be interpreted as 'a reflection of why students persist' (p. 6). However, it would be fair to state that much could be learned regarding student persistence through the study and interrogation of the model referred to above. Barnett (2011) provided a good example to prove this statement when she addressed the matter of why students leave. Thus, in my attempt to achieve the objectives of this paper, I explore Tinto's (1997) theory of student persistence by referring to his insights on social integration in relation to Barnett's (2011) comments on how Tinto (1993) defines integration.

Barnett (2011) defines integration as 'a sense of competent membership' (p. 200). She defines competence as 'a sense of possessing the knowledge and skills needed for success in the college environment', and membership as 'a sense of belonging or being a part of the college community' (Barnett, 2011, p. 200). It is precisely this matter which comes under scrutiny here as I evaluate social integration and its relationship with academic integration.

In his article 'Classrooms as Communities', Tinto (1997) sheds further light on the notion of student involvement and how it leads to integration. He emphasises student involvement and the quality of student effort as ultimately affecting student persistence. He suggests that 'student social involvement in the educational life of the college' (p. 615) has some influence on the effort of the student and eventual persistence.

Tinto's Longitudinal Model (1993) yields an understanding of what impacts students and why they depart from higher institutions prematurely. Conversely, the model may also provide an understanding of how institutions of higher learning can work towards effective programmes of retention for students, an aspect upon which Tinto's 1997 model placed great emphasis.

Tinto (1982), furthermore makes the following statement in his article, 'Limits of Theory and Practice in Student Attrition':

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> Referring to my own model of dropout [20] as a case in point, what we took to be self-evident in its development has apparently proven not to be; namely, that the model was developed to explain certain, not all, modes or facets of dropout behaviour that may occur in particular types of higher education settings (p. 688).

Tinto (1993) acknowledges the particular focus of the model which covers only certain aspects of dropout behaviour. It therefore becomes clear that aspects of concern relating to student persistence are not addressed in his 1993 model. Tinto (1993) indicates that many available models seek to explain why students leave or drop out from colleges. He states that most are not 'effective in explaining departure nor particularly well suited to the needs of institutional officials who seek to retain more students on campus' (Tinto, 1993, p. 84). While recognising the shortfalls in these models, he states that they nevertheless contain concepts that prove useful in studies such as this. Some of the shortfalls may have given greater context for the development of his later 1997 model of the elements that enhance student persistence.

2.4.2 Academic integration

Tinto (1997) asserts that 'classroom experience shapes student persistence' (p. 614). This notion originates in Tinto's (1993) observations that academic integration relates to the student's 'sense of membership in the classroom' (Barnett, 2010, p. 195), bearing in mind that integration is linked to the student's sense of belonging.

I draw attention to what Tinto (1993) says about the academic system, and then to its ability to serve as a vehicle for integration. He asserts that 'the academic concerns itself almost entirely with the formal education of students. Its activities centre about the classrooms and laboratories of the institution and involve various faculty and staff whose primary responsibility is the education of students' (Tinto, 1993, p. 106).

In her article, 'Validation Experiences and Persistence among Community College Students', Barnett (2010) asserts that 'Tinto's (1993) conception of academic integration … consists of a sense of membership in the classroom along with an ability to attain academic success' (p. 195). Barnett (2010) noted Tinto's hypothesis that 'academic integration was more important to student persistence' (p. 196). Barnett (2010) specifically explores the academic system's influence on students and their intentions to succeed based on their classroom and faculty interaction. She explains that her study focusses on Rendon's (1994, 2002) 'validation construct', describing it as

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Commented [JM1]: Which is …?

a notion similar to faculty validation or staff interaction, which possibly forecasts the integration of students on an academic level and their intention to persist with studies until completion (Barnett, 2010). Barnett reflects quite extensively on the aspect of faculty validation, an important element of academic integration which I, too, considered in my investigation. Explaining her interest in this aspect, she states that 'an additional purpose of this research is to contribute to an understanding of faculty's role in student persistence decisions, an area that has been largely understudied' (Barnett, 2010, p. 197).

Faculty validation is a concept which Tinto (1993) referred to as a form of faculty-student interaction. He reflects upon the student's contact and interactions with the faculty and staff and suggests that these interactions affect how students feel about the institution's interest in them (Tinto, 1993). He asserts that this particular relationship and/or contact influences the growth of the individual's 'commitment to the institution' which ultimately leads to a decision regarding persistence or departure (Tinto, 1993, p. 117).

In concluding her study, Barnett (2010) stated that 'higher levels of faculty validation modestly predicted increases in students' intent to persist' (p. 213). She cited the following summation as one of five contributions her study makes to new theory: 'It provided empirical support for Rendon's (1994, 2002) proposition that validation influences student persistence in college' (Barnett, 2010, p. 214).

With Tinto's (1993) context of academic integration as backdrop, I now return to Tinto's (1997) 'Classrooms as Communities' study. In this discourse he reflects on ways in which classroom experience shapes student persistence Tinto (1997) makes specific reference to the relationships between factors that lead to student integration. He asserts that his research 'suggests important relationships … between the educational activities, structure of the classroom, student involvement, and the quality of student involvement' (p. 614 – 615). He also draws into this discourse the relationship 'between quality of student effort, learning, and persistence' (Tinto, 1997, p. 615), making it clear that personal qualities are among the many aspects of academic integration that affect the individual student's eventual academic outcome.

Tinto (1997) emphasises the importance of academic integration, stating that 'the absence of academic involvement typically leads to academic failure and thus forced departure' (p. 616).

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Although Tinto (1997) makes it clear that there is a distinct and unavoidable connection between social and academic integration, a student cannot persist in studies if academic integration has not been attained.

2.4.3 Social and academic integration

Tinto (1997) asserts that social, out-of-class connections or affiliations help to secure the academic involvement of students. This is a notion that was first mentioned by Tinto (1982) in his early model, when he clarified that 'it sought to focus attention upon the impact the institution itself has, in both formal and informal manifestations, upon the dropout behaviours of its own students' (Tinto, 1982, p. 688).

Tinto (1982) argued that there was ever-increasing evidence that integration on both the intellectual and social levels significantly impact the eventual decision regarding whether or not to drop out. He claimed that academic and social integration were critical factors in the context of attrition and persistence. Tinto (1982) suggested that the more time students spend with other students and lecturers, the greater the likelihood of their completion of studies (Tinto, 1982).

Regarding the disengagement of different groups of students, Tinto (1982) states that there is a need for information around group-specific disengagements (Tinto, 1982). While he does not mention international students in this particular statement, I propose that this group of students should be included in the discussion, since, from my field work, I discovered that international students fit this mould and that many of Tinto's (1982) statements apply to them. Tinto's (1982) statement is relevant in this regard: 'It is apparent that effective programs are those that are able to integrate individuals into the mainstream of the academic and social life of the institution in which those programs are housed' (p. 692).

The programmes, therefore, must be part of those mechanisms which the institution designs to enhance integration among all groups of students. Tinto (1982) further concluded that 'integration as an essential element in educational persistence seems to apply equally well to individuals and to programs that serves the individual' (p. 692).

Identifiable factors impact integration. Tinto (1993) categorises these factors as either social or academic in nature. Social integration factors include faculty validation and involvement in extra-curricular activities, while academic integration factors include student intentions and classroom

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interactions. The components already identified include faculty validation and student intentions which motivate the student to persist. This highlights the extent to which social and academic integration are 'mutually interdependent and reciprocal' as Tinto (1993, p. 119) states.

Tinto (1997) declared that there is a distinct relationship between social and academic integration. He explains that social activities create avenues for establishing associations that produce opportunities for the student's involvement on an academic level (Tinto, 1997), thus establishing the link between social and academic engagements. He further asserts that students tend to make an effort to become involved in the kind of academic activities that allow them the opportunity to forge new friendships, and that the social integration process makes it easier for them to overcome the separation between the academic and social systems (Tinto, 1997). From these observations, one may deduce that the process of learning can be pleasant and meaningful to the student.

Tinto (2006) asserted that 'academic and social integration' matters, but that this aspect 'does not tell practitioners what they should do to achieve academic and/or social integration in their particular settings' (Tinto, 2006, p. 6). Thus, if the goal of student persistence is to be achieved, it is necessary for institutions to recognise the link between academic and social integration and devise methods to draw them together.

This study affirms Tinto's (1997) theory that student persistence is strongly influenced by the relationship between academic and social integration. Naturally various specific determining factors shape the nature of integration. These factors include faculty validation and student intention, both of which motivate the student to persist.

In another of his articles, Tinto (1997) points to the relationship between social and academic integration regarding 'classrooms as communities'. He finds that, where the social and academic worlds meet and the gap is closed, 'collaborative learning' (Tinto, 1997, p. 613) occurs, fulfilling needs on both the academic and social levels for new students.

Tinto (1997) points to the centrality of the classroom as the site of much integration, stating that 'if academic and social involvement or integration is to occur, it must occur in the classroom' (p. 599). The centrality of the classroom as the place for much integration is due to its role as a 'learning community' which, in Tinto's words (1997) 'help[s] students to draw these two worlds together,' (Tinto, 1997, p. 610). This debate is well summarised in the following statement:

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First, it is evident 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 communities of the college while also engaging them more fully in the academic life of the institution (Tinto, 1997, p. 613).

Tinto (1997) thus affirms the importance of a sense of community, fostered largely in the classroom. Classrooms bring students with the same goals and aspirations together, and it is in this locus that opportunities are created for students to mix and associate with each other. Interacting socially enables students to learn what they have in common with others, and in many ways draws students together as a community. Tinto (1997) asserts that student involvement influences the individual student's engagement with learning and that this takes place on both a social and academic level. He identifies some of the critical factors of integration which lead to student persistence, stating

> [t]he 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 (Tinto, 1997, p. 615).

Tinto (1997) sheds more light on the concept of student involvement by emphasising the quality of student involvement which may ultimately lead to student persistence. He suggests that 'student social involvement in the educational life of the college' has some influence on the effort of the student and eventual persistence (Tinto, 1997, p. 615). In other words, the more socially integrated the student is, the more likely he/she is to persist. The assertion by Tinto (1997) here is that 'students who are both academically and socially integrated are more likely to persist' (p. 615). Academic and social involvement, a notion which translates into integration, is thus strongly promoted as predictors of persistence.

2.5 Student efforts and educational outcomes

Tinto did not begin his assertions regarding student effort with his 1997 model. Examining his earlier studies provided helpful insight for this research. An important insight yielded by his 1993 model is that the personal attitude and determination of the student plays a critical role in determining student persistence.

Tinto (1993) states that 'however framed, all these views of departure share a common theme, namely that retention and departure are primarily the reflection of individual actions' (Tinto, 1993, p. 85). This indirect summation about student effort highlights the importance of the student's role

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in persistence. One may well ask of the individual student, 'What are you doing to ensure persistence?' When looking at student involvement from the point of view of the student's own effort, one concludes that some activity from the student is required for persistence, completion and success.

Tinto (1993) makes an emphatic link between involvement and student effort and between effort and the desired educational outcome of the student.

> The critical association for us is the apparent relationship on one hand between involvement and quality of student effort and on the other hand between learning and persistence. Regarding the former, it is increasingly clear that student involvement in the life of the college, especially academic life, is an important mechanism through which student effort is engaged (Tinto, 1993, p. 131).

Educational outcome refers to the desired result of the educational process, which is that learning takes place. Tinto (1993, p.131) asserts the following regarding the outcome of learning and the role of student effort: 'Involvement, especially academic involvement, seems to generate heightened student effort. That effort, in turn, leads to enhanced learning.' If the student is not sufficiently integrated into institutional systems, this may negatively influence learning, simply because the effort of the student will diminish. Thus, it has to be understood that learning is the culmination of the student's efforts. On the other hand, the system should be geared toward motivating the student to put effort into their learning.

Tinto (1997) makes an emphatic statement about student effort, referring to what the student is prepared to do in order to persist. This 'effort' is distinctly linked to social affiliations and academic involvement (Tinto, 1997, p. 615). Both 'affiliation' and 'involvement' denote a sense of connectedness. Thus, the more effort the student puts in, the more the student will feel connected to others and to the institution. Tinto (1997) further states

> [b]oth forms of involvement lead to enhanced quality of effort. 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).

The quality of student effort that the model alludes to is therefore that component which connects the social with the academic life of the student and reveals the potential to strengthen persistence. The above statement identifies an association between fellow students and their ability to learn as

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a cohort. Tinto (1997) asserts that 'increased effort leads to enhanced learning' (p. 615). Here again, we are made aware of how peer interaction motivates students to learn.

Both student effort and the learning of the student may be enhanced by the notion of normative integration (Tinto, 1997). Normative integration may be understood as the manner in which informal activities cause students to integrate. Student effort is a significant component of Tinto's (1997) framework, which explains the heightened persistence potential of a student. Student effort therefore forms part of my research. Effort includes the time the student spends on tasks such as studying and learning. Students show this effort in their behavioural patterns. Tinto's (1997) statement regarding the student's involvement and its relationship to enhanced learning is apt: 'The more students are involved … the more likely they are to become more involved in their own learning and invest the time and energy needed to learn.' (Tinto, 1997, p. 615). International students at Winter College spent significant numbers of hours studying. They were motivated to enhance their learning through the effort which they were prepared to put into their college experience. I will refer to this notion in my data analysis to further explain the inclusion of student effort in this study.

2.6 Psychological factors

It is also necessary to recognise that there are 'psychological models of educational persistence' which have a bearing on student persistence. About these psychological models, Tinto (1993) says that 'until recently, most attempts to explain student departure have relied heavily upon psychological models of educational persistence' (p. 84). These, he says, 'have tended to emphasise the impact of individual abilities and dispositions upon student departure' (Tinto, 1993, p. 84). In this particular discourse, Tinto (1993, p. 84) cites Summerskill (1962) and Marks (1967) on individual ability and also mentions Heilbrun (1965), Rose and Elton (1966), Rossmann and Kirk (1970), Waterman and Waterman (1972), all of whom emphasise the role of personality in persistence.

I also considered work done by Boeren, Nicaise and Baert (2010) on the topic and refer to their work in my findings. Their research appears to support the experiences of some of the students interviewed in this study. Many of the participants in this study were affected by similar psychological factors to those discussed in the work of the above authors. Boeren et al. (2010) explore the psychological aspect of students as a factor in their successful participation in academic

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activities. They refer to Keller (1987) and others with regard to the concept of 'motivation' and the 'psychological dimension' (Boeren et al. 2010, p. 49). Boeren et al. (2010) state that 'in addition to socio-economic and cultural factors, psychological characteristics of the adult also have an impact on participation' (p. 49). Boeren et al. (2010) bring an interesting notion into the discussion, referring to Keller with regard to the student's personal attitude to learning.

> Keller (1987) indicated that a positive attitude to learning, recognition of the relevance of the learning activity for one's own life, confidence in one's own abilities, and an experience of satisfaction are indispensable for launching successful participation in educational activities (p. 49-50).

An argument is therefore established for the role of the individual's psychological makeup on the decision regarding whether to engage in participation or to disengage. Boeren et al. (2010) note three psychological aspects as influential to the adult learner; motivation, attitude and confidence. They conclude that negative learning experiences among some adult learners can cause them to have 'little faith in themselves' (p. 50), which could be perceived as a psychological barrier to persistence.

Darkenwald and Merriam (as cited in Larson & Milana, 2006) posited their Psychosocial Interaction Model, which considers the social factors in the life experience of the student. According to this model, self and family are specifically connected to the development of the person as growth occurs; moreover, they are influential factors in the academic life of the person (Larson & Milana, 2006). Larson and Milana (2006) noted the fact that Darkenwald and Merriam built on a previous model by Cross (1981). They mention that Cross (1981) developed the chain-of-response model, which aimed to explain reasons for participation in adult learning by some, while others choose not to participate (Larson & Milana, 2006). Larson and Milana (2006) further underline the following observation as stated by Rubenson (2006):

> Common for Cross as well as Darkenwald and Merriam's models is the importance they give to the more psychological aspects in relation to participation in adult education and training, and their tendency to forget to include the influence of the individual's life history for his or hers participation in adult education and training (p. 2).

MacKeracher, Stuart and Potter (2006) cite Cross (1981) when they state that 'the factors that create barriers to adult learning' may be classified into three categories; 'situational, institutional and dispositional' (p. 4). MacKeracher et al. (2006) mention that Potter and Alderman later added

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a fourth set of factors, namely, academic factors. These factors all affect the behaviour of adult learning participants. Dispositional factors (MacKeracher et al, 2006) are those psychosocial factors such as 'self-confidence, attitudes about the benefits of learning, attitude about self that may adversely affect learning' and 'prior negative experiences in learning activities' (MacKeracher et al., 2006, p. 5).

Tinto (1993) asserts that 'research of the psychological type has sought to distinguish stayers and leavers in terms of personality that help account for their differing responses to supposedly similar educational circumstances' (Tinto, 1993, p. 85). Tinto (1993) thus gives clear recognition to the fact that the psychology of adult learners must be taken into consideration when considering whether they become 'leavers' or 'stayers'. There is also some inference here regarding the influence of personality and psychosocial background on the ability of the student to maintain his or her intentions and to persist despite situational and institutional barriers.

Tinto (1993) suggests that the psychological models 'have tended to emphasise the impact of individual abilities and dispositions upon student departure' (Tinto, 1993, p. 84). Later on, Tinto (1997) refers to 'quality student effort' leading to 'persistence' (p. 615). I therefore assert that the student's effort and individual abilities are complementary aspects of his or her persistence. The two terms may well overlap in meaning and, in the context of overcoming barriers, may be considered as closely related dispositional factors. I thus submit that personal psychological factors could fit into Tinto's model under 'quality of student effort'. As part of my data analysis, I discuss the individual student's quality of effort and the psychological motivation behind their determination to persist.

Considering all of the above, the intention of this paper is to explore and develop an understanding regarding the relationship between persistence and various known components and conditions, as well as possible new ones.

2.7 Persistence

Persistence is discussed in Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure (Tinto, 1993),

which forms a broad foundation for his (1997) model, linking classrooms, learning and persistence. My discussion on persistence draws from the content of both these models.

There are several definitions of student persistence. According to Tinto's (1997) model, persistence is the outcome students arrive at after a comprehensive process influenced by 'pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments (T1), institutional experiences, personal/normative integration, student effort, educational outcomes and goals and commitments (T2)' (Tinto, 1997, p. 615). The schematic of this model is presented as Appendix E at the end of this paper.

Other scholars' definitions of student persistence are also relevant to my discussion. From the onset, one needs to understand the impact of persistence and who the role-players are in the context of student persistence. Barnett (2010) provided an understanding in the statement below.

> Low persistence rates are of concern to students who are not able to meet their educational or career goals and to institutions monitoring their student's performance and their own. Persistence is also of concern to society at large because college-educated citizens contribute in multiple ways to the social good and are less likely to engage in harmful behaviors (p. 193).

Persistence should not be confused with completion. Students who persist are merely in a process leading towards completion. Comings (2007) places persistence in this context when he says 'persistence is a continuous learning process that lasts until an adult student meets his or her educational goals, and persistence could start through self-study before the first episode of participation in a programme' (p. 24).

Tinto (2000) reinforces his model, stating that 'students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning' (Tinto, 2000). His (2003) comment provides deeper understanding of the role of successful learning in student retention.

> Learning has always been the key to student retention. Students who learn are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate their students are successful in retaining their students. Again, involvement seems to be the key. Students who are actively involved in learning, that is who spend more time on task especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay (p. 3)

There is a notable difference between retention and persistence. Comings (2007) makes this distinction clear.

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> The term retention defines this phenomenon from a programme's point of view; the programme wants to retain its students. Comings and colleagues (1999) preferred the term persistence because it defines this phenomenon from the point of view of the students who persist in learning – inside and outside of a programme – until they have achieved their goals (p. 24).

Furthermore, according to Comings (2007), persistence 'ends when the student decides to stop learning' (p. 24). Tinto focusses on the student's experience and point of view, creating a platform for examining and evaluating the behaviour and personal choices of the participants in their adult education journey. Tinto's (1993) Theory of Institutional Departure presented me with a contextually appropriate framework for my particular investigation. While according to Tinto's (1993) model, persistence ends with student departure, the model has much to say about student persistence during studies. He has this to say regarding his model:

> In its full form our model of Student Institutional Departure sees the process of persistence as being marked over time by different stages in the passage of students from past forms of association to new forms of membership in the social and intellectual communities of college (Tinto, 1993, p. 135).

The 'process of student persistence' which Tinto (1993) referred to in this statement is of particular interest in my study since it leads directly to answering the following question: 'What can we learn from students who persist in their studies and how can this knowledge help to create environments that are more conducive to student persistence?' His model further maps out a route to follow in order to arrive at a suitable conclusion in the context of my study (Tinto, 1993). His 'passage' includes pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and goals and commitments that are formed as a result of institutional experiences. It is the interplay of these factors that lead the student to an eventual outcome of a decision to depart or to persist.

Tinto (2003) lists conditions which he says promote persistence; expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning. In earlier work conducted in the Seattle Central Community College, Tinto (1997) also found five variables which serve as significant predictors of persistence, namely 'participation in CSP (Coordinated Studies Programs at Seattle Central Community College), college grade point average, hours studied per week, perceptions of faculty, and the factor score on involvement with other students' (p. 608).

Commented [JM4]: Explain what this is.

In 2003 he provided a more complete explanation regarding what constitutes the vital element of support for students:

Students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social, and personal support. Most students, especially those in their first year of college, require some form of support. Some may require academic assistance, while others may need social or personal support. Support may be provided in structured forms such as in summer bridge programs, mentor programs, and student clubs or it may arise in the everyday workings of the institution such as in student contact with faculty and staff advisor. Whatever its form, support needs to be readily available and connected to other parts of student collegiate experience, not separated from it (Tinto, 2003, p. 3)

Thus deliberate institutional supports play a critical role in nurturing persistence and, by their absence, will almost inevitably weaken persistence.

In Limits of Theory and Practice in Student Attrition, Tinto (1982) highlighted the role of the institution and faculty in the process of student retention. In his study, Tinto (1982) asserted that the more effort institutions put into the educational courses they offer, the greater the chances are that they will retain their students. He added that education should not be experienced as schooling in isolation. Retention is thus partly a result of the effort of the institution to retain their students, while persistence may be seen as the effort of the student to remain in a study programme and ultimately to complete it (Tinto, 1982).

Comings (2007) sheds light on this phenomenon, as mentioned earlier. There are notably very specific actions an institution can take in order to promote or ensure student persistence. These include such aspects as faculty validation. Faculty validation could be in the form of encouraging remarks to students or social interaction with them. Thus a student's persistence is influenced by how the institution perceives and enacts its role in the life of the student. Comings's (2007) reference to persistence involves two parts: 'intensity' and 'duration'. He describes 'intensity' as 'the hours of instruction per month' and 'duration' as 'the months of engagement in instruction' (p. 24). In his summation, he notes that 'adult education often refers to persistence as retention' and states that persistence may be measured 'by recording participation in formal classes or tutoring sessions' (Comings, 2007, p. 24).

Comings's (2007) model offers insight into the factors that cause students to persist in their studies. His model is relevant to this study, since the aim was to interview students during their course of study and find out what motivated them to persist.

Barnett (2010) and others followed a similar thought process to Comings in their research. Barnett mentions at least two factors which influence persistence among students; the student's 'sense of integration' and 'student faculty interaction' (p. 194). These concepts also appear in Tinto's (1993) theory on student persistence. Barnett (2010) proposes that students who are validated have greater potential to complete their programmes of study. Furthermore, Barnett (2010) used Tinto's (1993) theories when she built her conceptual framework for her 2010 study. She recognised the aspect of persistence that Tinto (1993) refers to as 'competent membership' (Barnett, 2010, p. 200). An interesting conclusion drawn by Barnett (2010) is that 'faculty validation and academic integration each significantly predicted intent to persist' (Barnett, 2010, p. 211).

Clearly, many conditions, both under the domain of the institution and under the domain of the individual student, influence students to persist or to depart from a course of study. My research is intended to investigate aspects of persistence and to arrive at findings regarding factors which motivate students to persist. Since there is a major concern around student dropout rates among institutions of higher learning in our country, I find it necessary to determine what specifically influences students to persist in the face of adversity. Tinto (1997) stated that:

> We have too long overlooked the essentially educational and developmental character of persistence as it occurs in most college settings. There is a rich line of enquiry of the linkage between learning and persistence that yet has to be pursued (p. 619).

2.7.1 The relationship between persistence and financial resources

Since the impact of finances on the student's ability to persist is critical, it is necessary to briefly discuss the relationship between persistence and financial resources. Breier (2010) used Tinto's (1993) model to highlight aspects which she considered to be influential in the student's journey of persistence, and includes finances. Breier (2010) emphasises Tinto's (1993) 'longitudinal process of interactions between an individual … and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution (Breier, 2010, p. 658). Breier (2010) specifically looks at Tinto's (1993) reference to 'attributes', 'skills', 'financial resources', 'prior education' and 'dispositions' (p. 658). Breier (2010), however, critiques Tinto by stating the following:

> Of greater concern ... is Tinto's relative lack of emphasis on financial reasons for drop out. Tinto (1993) asserts that 'financial considerations' are 'important to the continued persistence of some students, most notably those from working-class disadvantaged backgrounds' but 'tend to be of secondary importance to the decision of most of the students' (p. 659).

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As highlighted by Breier (2010) in her study, it is clear that there are differences in context and social background between Tinto's subjects and hers, since he researched in a financially sound environment. I consider financial background of the subjects to be relevant in my study since financial considerations are of far greater relevance in a country still experiencing high levels of poverty and inequality. Many students experience financial hardship, including international students who come to South African specifically to attain a qualification. The students at Winter College originate from many poorer African countries such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Angola. Many are self-supporting and in need of financial assistance. Breier (2010) raises the following point around this discourse:

> Critiques of Tinto's views on finances, suggest that the issue is more important and more complex than he suggests, very context- (country-) specific and affected by national and institutional budgets for student support and perceived as well as actual experiences of financial hardships among students (p. 659).

Breier (2010) uses Tinto (1993) to analyse her data, confirming Tinto's perception that finances can influence persistence, though he (Tinto) does not lay particular emphasis on it. She did not agree with Tinto's approach in this regard. Her findings included that 'finances are felt most strongly by the lower socio-economic groups; that they influence choice of institution; that sudden unexpected demands can lead to premature departure; and that work study programmes can help poor students' (Breier, 2010, p. 669).

Breier (2010) therefore identifies a lack of emphasis on financial hardship as a limitation in Tinto's model. This limitation is revealed in the relative unimportance he ascribes to financial considerations under a 1982 article under the heading 'The Role of Finances in Student Disengagement'.

> Although there undoubtedly are many students for whom finances are central to continue …, for most students the question of financial costs occurs within the broader context of costs generally and the character of their educational experiences within a specific institution in particular (Tinto, 1982, p. 690).

Tinto (1982) thus recognised that finances do play a role in early departure but he viewed it as only the 'final straw' and not as the main reason that a student might abandon studies. In his argument, Tinto (1982) suggests that while finances may be cited as a reason for dropout by some

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students, it is more often the case that this aspect is only the end result and not the origin of their eventual decision.

2.7.2 Persistence, 'dropout' and policy design

A brief overview of the concept of 'dropout' is necessary at this stage since it is frequently referenced in this study. Dropout could be perceived as the opposing action to persistence. In other words, if a student finds a means to persist in his/her studies for whatever reasons, he or she will not abandon studies and not 'drop out'. In linking the matter of dropout to the discussion on finances and persistence, Tinto (1982) made an interesting observation that 'studies of dropout among specific groups of students, especially among the disadvantaged, may aid in the development of institution and system policies designed and targeted to assist the educational continuance of particular subpopulations within the student body' (p. 692).

However, Tinto (1982) believed that limited options exist for what may be done to reduce student dropout at all levels. He mentions that these levels include educational practices in higher institutions nationally and institutionally (Tinto, 1982). Tinto also acknowledges the reality that dropout rates reflect the advantages and disadvantages of institutional systems, as does persistence (Tinto, 1982).

Tinto (1982) asserts that drop out can also be seen 'as transfer between institutions'. It may also refer to a context where a student withdraws from studies (Tinto, 1982). As that particular discourse is not relevant here, a basic understanding will suffice.

The issue of policy design and the role of the institution in this regard was highlighted by Tinto (1982). He states that institutions have the obligation to seek means to retain their students. He noted that such institutional obligations pose 'policy questions of how institutions can change themselves to reduce attrition' (Tinto, 1982, p. 688). This matter also requires consideration and should be explored so that institutional retention of students may be better understood.

Finally, Tinto (2006) emphatically states that leaving and staying are not reflections of each other. Based on this statement, I suggest that one cannot, and should not, assume that knowledge about a student's reasons for leaving will automatically yield an understanding of why he or she did or did not persist at earlier points during his or her studies.

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2.8 Summary

Tinto's contextual framework as discussed above provides insight into the fact that every aspect of the student's life, from the setting of goals during the period before studies commence to the student's experiences at university, and especially his or her social and academic integration into university life, affect his or her likelihood of persisting with studies. Internal, psychological factors as well as institutional, financial and societal factors all play a role in the student's renewed decision to persist through adversity or eventual decision to abandon studies. All aspects of studentship have the potential to influence the outcome of the student's institutional experience. Furthermore, personal, normative integration was discussed and found to comprise both social and academic aspects. The student's effort consists in what the student is prepared to do to attain success, and is a critical ingredient that helps to determine the educational outcome. However, universities can do a great deal to support student integration, and neither internal psychological factors nor institutional factors should be seen as dominant as a predictor of eventual academic outcome.

SECTION 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction
In this section, I outline my research design and describe my research methodology.

3.2 Research site
My research site was a college which I refer to as 'Winter College' in this paper. Students at this college are enrolled in the following undergraduate programmes: Theology, Psychology, Marketing, Business Administration and Education. Looking into the historical background of the institution, one finds that it was initially established to train ministers (pastors) for service in churches. Approximately 300 students make up the student population at Winter College. Among those registered are many international students who bring a diversity of cultures and languages to the student body. From an outsider point of view, it appears that such diversity is embraced through activities such as cultural days and celebrations. Many students are unable to speak fluent English but acquire language proficiency during the course of their studies. The institution also provides language proficiency training at its language school. There are some shortcomings notable in this institution. This includes the limited programmes of study on offer. Financial support structures for students are lacking and hinders many from doing their higher learning here.

3.3 Research approach
I selected a qualitative approach for various reasons. Bryman (2012) explains the qualitative approach, stating that 'it focusses on words rather than numbers' (p. 380). Note the three distinct features below:

1. 'an inductive view' which depicts the relationship existing between theory and research. The understanding in this view is that research produces theory;
2. 'an epistemological position' (an interpretivist view) which places emphasis on how the social world is understood through studies based on how its participants interpret it.
3. 'an ontological position' (a constructionist view) which suggests that social properties are the end results created by interactions between individuals, instead of phenomena in existence, and disconnected from agents associated with its construction.

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My research, however, differs from Bryman's (2012) context of the qualitative approach since I employed a deductive approach. The deductive theory is most suitable here because this research deduced hypothesis from the data gathered. The inductive strategy links data and theory, a method which is usually associated with qualitative research. With the above clarity I assert that there is a need for words to be emphasised rather than quantification. Bryman (2012) highlights this in his study on Social research strategies (p. 36).

Bryman further asserts the following about the development of qualitative research as the more favoured research design and methodology for studies of a sociological or philosophical nature:

> There was a growing movement championing the use of qualitative research methods. This movement was and is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it made research methods as an area of both teaching and research considerably more interesting, not least because it introduced an element of controversy into the field. The second and related factor was that there was a growing recognition of the significance of philosophical considerations for methodological issues and concerns. In particular, it was being suggested that the scientific method associated with the philosophical position known as positivism was ill-suited to the study of humans and their societies. Instead, advocates of qualitative research argued that an approach is needed that better reflects the uniqueness of humans compared to the subject matter of the sciences (Bryman, 2008, p. 161).

The above statement provides an argument in favour of qualitative research. It certainly highlights why the approach was most suitable for this research, which has both sociological and philosophical elements. It is clearly the ideal research approach to use where an in-depth understanding is sought of participants' lived experiences.

3.4 Data collection methods

I collected my data by conducting semi-structured interviews with selected participants. Using an electronic recording device, all interviews were recorded and written notes were made during interviews in order to ensure accuracy of information. These recorded interviews were transcribed and coded for the purpose of my analysis. Since I adopted the qualitative approach, I turned to Bryman (2012) for guidance on interviewing methods. He describes interviews as a very broad term that can comprise a variety of interviewing styles (Bryman, 2012). According to Bryman (2012), the semi-structured interview consists of a set of questions or topics the researcher wishes to cover. An advantage of the semi-structured interview is that the interviewee has much leeway in terms of his or her responses (Bryman, 2012). He suggests that with less structured interviews,

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'insight into the mind of the interviewee is greater' (Bryman, 2012, p. 471) since the participant has greater liberty to express him or herself and to offer opinions and ideas of significance to the researcher. The semi-structured interview is also much more flexible, allowing the researcher to elaborate on a question, rephrase a question or even do a follow-up on a question, where necessary (Bryman, 2012). This semi-structured interview was the ideal vehicle through which to gain the sort of data I sought, allowing me to answer my main research question and sub-questions. It was also deemed suitable since interviewees are prone to ramble during interviews, which could be seen as an advantage, since additional information given in this way can prove very useful. Rambling can be controlled by the researcher, who retains power over the process and can give a gentle reminder of the actual purpose of the interview where necessary (Bryman, 2012).

3.5 Research instrument

The semi-structured interview guide was an appropriate research instrument for my research since I sought data from participants that was both broad and deep. Furthermore, I was able to structure the interview guide in such a way that the interviewees were able to discuss that which they deemed significant and could then elaborate on it. Critical terms for this study, such as persistence, student intentions and integration, featured prominently in the interview guide. Each sub-section of the interview guide covered a specific area relevant to the main question. This research instrument thus provided the ideal tool for a deductive approach. Bryman (2012) explained that deductive reasoning allows one to represent 'the commonest view of the nature of the relationship between theory and social research' (Bryman, 2012, p. 280), under which this paper is categorised.

When designing the interview guide for my research investigation, I took the guidelines provided by Bryman (2012) into account. Bryman (2012) states that in designing an interview guide, one should aim to

- 'create a certain amount of order on the topic areas so that your questions about them could flow reasonably well';
- 'formulate interview questions or topics in a way that will help you to answer your research questions';

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- 'use a language that is comprehensible and relevant to the people you are interviewing';
- 'not ask leading questions;'
- 'remember to ensure that you ask or record 'facesheet' information of a general kind ... because such information is useful for contextualising people's answers' (Bryman, 2012, p. 473).

At the start of each interview, I asked questions about the interviewee to allow for a settling-in process before engaging interviewees with the focus questions. Initial questions included details about themselves such as name, programme registered for, personal interests, and so forth.

While questions were placed in a particular order on the interview guide, I did not necessarily ask them in that order, but allowed a natural conversation to flow while ensuring that all aspects were covered. My interview guide consisted of approximately 30 questions. I believe that this was a fair number of questions, and they led to the responses I required for the purpose of my investigation.

3.6 Sampling strategies

Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (1999) explain sampling as 'the selection of research participants from an entire population, and involves decisions about which people, settings, events, behaviours and/or social processes to observe'. They continue by stating that a sample 'in a particular study is influenced by the unit of analysis' (p. 49). Various kinds of sampling may be used. Bryman (2012) describes purposive sampling as 'a non-probability form of sampling' (p. 418). Bryman (2012) further elaborates that purposive sampling is strategic, and seeks to make the sample of participants relevant in relation to the research questions (p. 418).

My sample, drawn from the general population of students at Winter College, comprised registered international students who had successfully completed a first year of study and had been students at Winter College the previous year. The participants were of both genders and all originated from outside of South Africa.

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Statistical information received from the college registrar's office revealed that 298 students were registered at the start of the academic year at my research site. Out of the total enrolment, there were 25 international students. For my sample, I selected 15 international students registered in their second, third and fourth years of study.

3.8 Data reduction strategies

Terre Blanche et al. (1999) identify the following qualitative analytic approaches; 'phenomenology (Kruger, 1979), grounded theory (Straus & Corbin, 1990) and thematic content analysis (Smith, 1992)' (Terre Blanche et al., 1999, p. 322). They list the following steps in the interpretive data analysis process: 'familiarisation and immersion; inducing themes; coding; elaboration' (p. 322). While they identify these steps, they suggest that they are merely a 'helpful starting point' for researchers.

For data reduction, I used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, according to Bryman (2012), is 'one of the most common approaches to qualitative data analyses' (p. 578). He suggests further that this approach that can be seen embedded in many other approaches, which include 'grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis' (Bryman, 2012, p. 578). Bryman (2012) states that themes are like codes for some researchers, but for others a theme 'transcends any one code and is built up out of groups of codes'. Bryman (2012) describes the framework approach to thematic analysis 'as a matrix based method for ordering and synthesising data' (Bryman, 2012, p. 579). In this investigation, I used the framework approach to thematic analysis as it allowed me to divide data into themes and subthemes which are easily identifiable. It is a useful way of discerning relevance and meaning, and organising data.

3.8.1 Coding

Bryman (2012) describes coding as the starting point of most forms of qualitative data analysis. When defining coding, he says it is 'the key process in grounded theory, whereby data are broken down into component parts, which are given names' (Bryman, 2012, p. 568). He further states that '[Coding] entails reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels (names) to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance and/or appear to be particularly salient within the social worlds of those being studied' (Bryman, 2012, p. 568).

Babbie (2010) sees coding as 'the process whereby raw data are transformed into standardized form suitable for machine processing and analysing' (p.338). Babbie (2010) also suggests that coding produces the content for analysis. Three processes of coding are identified: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Babbie (2010) intimates that logic in context with conceptualization and operationalization should prevail when coding takes place and that one should 'refine (the) conceptual framework and develop specific methods for observing in relation to that framework' (p. 338). Terre Blanche et al. (1999) describe coding as 'marking different sections of the data as being instances of, or relevant to, one or more of your themes' (p. 324). Babbie's (2010) interpretation of coding above was noted and appeared to be helpful advice which I considered carefully.

After scrutinising the concept of coding, I found that it is essentially a process of categorising data in a specified context and placing it strategically with other pieces of data to develop an understanding of the theoretical framework. This process of coding is intended to lead to the answering of research questions and ultimately to fulfil the aim of the research.

I coded as I progressed with my data collection, a suggestion made by both Bryman (2012). Bryman (2012) cites several reasons for this suggestion, which culminates in the understanding that one does not want to end up being inundated with data where everything needs to be coded at once. This, I felt, would be overwhelming and possibly lead to errors. It is always wise to avoid being overwhelmed by the amount of data that one must code within a limited time. Bryman (2012) further provides a complete set of steps for coding:

- 'Code as soon as possible.'
- 'Read through your initial set of transcripts, filed notes, documents, etc. without taking any notes or considering an interpretation …'
- 'Do it again … but this time begin to make marginal notes about significant remarks or observations.'
- 'Review your codes … possibly in relation to your transcripts.'
- 'Consider more general theoretical ideas in relation to codes and data.'
- 'Remember that any one item or slice of data can and often should be coded in more than one way.'
- 'Do not worry about generating what seem to be too many codes …'

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- 'Keep coding in perspective. Do not equate coding with analysis.'
  (Bryman, 2012, p. 576 – p. 577).

These steps were simple to follow, and I did so, finding the guidelines helpful. They made sense and were effective at helping me to organise data into meaningful categories.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Terre Blanche et al. (1999) declare that 'the essential purpose for ethics is to protect the welfare of the research participant' (p. 61). They further state that 'the leading universities in South Africa require that social research involving human participants be reviewed by an independent research ethics committee' (Terre Blanche et al., 1999, p. 61). It was therefore mandatory for me to submit a proposal for ethical clearance, which I did, and received clearance from the University of the Western Cape before data collection. I also obtained permission from the institution where the research was conducted. These documents are included as appendices to this research paper.

Bryman (2012) asks two critical questions in his introduction to ethics and politics in social research: 'How should we treat the people on whom we conduct research?' and 'Are there activities in which we should or should not engage in our relations with them?' (p. 130). He asserts that 'research that is likely to harm participants is regarded as unacceptable' (Bryman, 2012, p. 135).

3.10 Informed consent

Bryman (2012) also discusses the matter of 'informed consent' (Bryman, 2012, p. 138). This is a sensitive issue which impacts the involvement of the participant. I find the statement he makes about giving the prospective participant 'as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in the study' (Bryman, 2012, p. 138) useful, and followed this principle. Therefore, I prepared an information letter which I presented to each participant prior to data collection. I spent significant time explaining the information in the letter so that they could understand the nature of their involvement in my research.

It was also incumbent upon me to uphold ethical principles by doing the following; I respected the anonymity of all participants at all times and included a confidentiality clause in my consent form. I provided a consent form, which the participants signed to give me permission to conduct and record the interview with an electronic device. I also ensured that all participants were treated with respect at all times, were not manipulated in any way, and that I refrained from making judgements about them during the interview process.

SECTION 4: Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this section, I provide an analysis of the data.

At the start of this study I intended to provide an answer to the main research question, which is 'What are the relationships between student intentions, institutional commitments, social integration, academic integration and student persistence?' I had an idea that social integration could have a significant influence on international students' persistence and used Tinto's (1997) model as my conceptual framework. Also instrumental was Ross's (2014) statement: 'Tinto's theoretical model is useful because it recognises factors beyond the control of academic institutions. These may influence retention and success at IHLs [institutions of higher learning], including students' academic abilities, and study and language skills' (p.120).

Tinto's model of linking classrooms, learning and persistence formed the foundation of my research and needs to be clearly understood in order to draw effectively from the data which I collected. I thus refer to the schematic of this model attached as Appendix E. A close study of this model places Tinto's (1993) original positioning of integration at the centre of a decision that a student may make as to whether to persist with studies or to depart. The factors which influence this decision are reflected in Tinto's (1997) model, and gave me some idea of where to begin and how to structure my interview guide. Therefore, I asked questions that related in some way to the model; questions regarding academic performance, faculty interaction/validation, extracurricular activities and peer group interaction. A correlation became apparent between the participants' responses and their levels of integration in the social and academic life of the institution. In addition to providing the answers I was searching for, student responses opened a whole new understanding of the nature of persistence in the face of adversity.

4.2 Participants – an overview

The 15 international participants interviewed were full-time students from seven different countries; Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritius and Zambia. They included ten men and five women whose ages ranged from 20 to 45. In terms

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of religion, 14 of the participants were affiliated with the faith represented by the institution while one was from another faith. When considering the income levels of the participants, I found that none of them were employed and all depended on bursaries from their home countries, family support (parents) or goodwill sponsors.

4.3 Profile of the participants

John is a 22-year-old unmarried male student in his second year of study. He registered for the BA Theology degree in 2016 and started the programme in the second semester. Prior to his current study programme, he studied Computer Science at a local college in Angola. He desires to become a pastor in his church, but would accept offers to work in either South Africa or Brazil should the opportunity present itself.

Grant is a 23-year-old male student in his third year. He registered for the Bachelors in Business Administration (BBA) degree in 2014 and intends to complete his final year in 2018. His reason for studying is simply to acquire appropriate qualifications for the workplace.

Sophia is a 22-year-old female student in her third year of study. She registered for the BA Communications degree in 2015. She first registered for studies in 2014. She desires to complete her studies in 2018 and to earn a living in any communications position. She intends to gain world knowledge while staying in Cape Town, South Africa.

Anesu is a 34-year-old third-year male student. He is married and lives with his wife and children on the college campus while studying full time. He registered for the BA Theology degree in 2015, but holds a diploma in Theology, which he acquired at a university in Mozambique. He returned to studies in order to equip himself to serve his church as a pastor in a modern society.

Eve is a 22-year-old female student in her third year of study towards a communications degree. She first registered at this college in 2013 as a language student and then moved on to further her studies in this programme in 2015. She is single and desires to achieve her goal of financial independence at the end of her studies.

Eden is also a 22-year-old single woman in her third year of study. She registered for the BA Communications degree in 2015. She desires to find a career in England after completing her studies. It is her desire to work for the BBC at some point in her life.

Musa is a 23-year-old male student. He registered for the BBA Management degree in 2015 but initially started his studies in 2013 in a foundation year bridging course programme at the same college. He is the only one of his family in South Africa, and would accept a position in South Africa and live here, should the opportunity arise.

Daniel is a 35-year-old married male student in his 4th year. He registered for his study programme in 2014. His initial registration was for a BA Accounting degree but he believes he was called into the ministry of his church and subsequently changed his course of study to Theology.

Allan is a 26-year-old male student. He registered for the BA Theology degree in 2015 but started with a BA Information Systems programme in 2013. He is single and desires to return to his family in Mauritius upon completion of his studies.

Thabo is a 23-year-old second-year male student. He registered for the Diploma in Business Management programme in 2016. He first registered at this college in 2012 at the Language Institute. He feels obligated to obtain a degree and sees it as a first step towards independence.

Peter is a 42-year-old 4th-year student. He registered for the BA Theology degree programme in 2014, and is continuing in his quest to add this degree to his existing qualification. He already holds a diploma in theology, and worked for the church as a pastor before his studies. It is his desire to return to service after completing this study programme.

Mandy is a 23-year-old female student. She registered for the B Com Accounting degree in 2015. She is in her third year of study and desires to settle in South Africa after completion of her studies.

Harry is a male student under 25 years of age. He registered in 2015 for the B Com Accounting degree. His desire is to become a professional accountant and uses this as his motivation to persist. He further highlights the idea that he is dependent on his parents and aspires to become financially independent at completion of his studies.

Joyce is a 27-year-old female student. She registered for the BBA Management degree in 2015. At the start of this study programme, she already held a Diploma in Business Management. She desires to gain financial independence and eventually to give back to her parents for the sacrifices they made for her success.

Randy is a 33-year-old male student. He registered for the BA Theology degree in 2013 and is in his 4th year of study. Randy has a bricklaying diploma and worked in the industry before applying for theology. He desires to serve his church as a minister and to fulfil his role as provider for his family.

4.4 Institutional experiences of international students and persistence

Institutional experiences, according to Tinto (1997), are those experiences of a student during the period of study that directly relate to the institution where the student is registered to study. He refers to it as 'subsequent experiences within the institution, primarily those arising out of interactions between the individual and other members of the college, students, staff and faculty' (Tinto, 1997, p. 116).

Institutional experiences are one of the components of Tinto's (1997) model, in which the academic system is distinct from the social system, as can be seen in Appendix E. I used institutional experiences as the starting point of my investigation because I regard the student's experiences of a higher learning institution as having an impact on the student's ability to integrate and to persist. I acquired an understanding of the student's relationship with the institution while listening to their responses to the question of whether or not the institution had made them feel welcome at the start of their respective programmes. An overwhelming majority of participants felt that the college made a special effort to make them feel at home.

John, a young, single Theology student, felt particularly strongly about this:

> From the first day that I got here, I could see, because of the environment itself, it shows that it is an Adventist institution; and when I saw people doing certain things ... those were the things I did since the beginning, since I was a child, at home. So in a sense it felt like home. I felt that I was home. As Adventists we are a family. All over the world, we do things similarly (John, Interview, September 29, 2017).

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Another young student, Thabo, from the Business Faculty explained it in this way:

> I have never experienced anything other than positive vibes.
> (Thabo, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Peter, a fourth-year Theology student, felt that the college went out of its way to make him feel at home.

> I was put into a guest room before I registered and was treated really well. They fed me and saw to all my needs at that time. So yes, they went out of their way to make me feel welcome (Peter, Interview, September 29, 2017).

Sophia found the welcoming process to be personalised. In her response she identified a personal recognition.

> Yes, they did. By introducing me to the teachers and classmates as well … I felt welcomed (Sophia, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Anesu, Eve, Musa, Daniel, Harry and Randy started their responses in the affirmative and added, with some enthusiasm, to their responses by mentioning some of the programmes to which they were exposed.

> Yes, of course, they welcomed me … Ja, the college, they made sure that you feel at home … of course there is a programme they do to make sure … orientation, and explain what's going on and what you are expecting. (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

> Yes, very much. They welcomed me with a beautiful smile. They are all kind. (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

> Ja, they made me feel so very, very welcome. We had orientation, we had the Peninsula tour. We had ball games at the gym … (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

> Ja. In the orientation we felt that they welcome us … they just give us a bag and everything belong to 'Winter College' (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017).

> Yes. We went on the Peninsula tour, had orientation and were given opportunity to present (Harry, Interview, October 3, 2017).

> Yes, yes. Actually it is true. According to my realisation … I felt that the college did all they could do to help us so that we could go through with our programme, yes. They did their best. For the first time when we arrived here we orientated and so forth (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Allan spoke of his introduction to his accommodation.

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Yes, they did. My first year I stayed in the dorm. My first year, the dean … he asked for me in his office … and we sat and we chat together. Actually he gave me the best room. It was the biggest room, for two students, I was the only one in that room. He took me to a shop in his car and showed me the place (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Several participants recall that they were taken on a tour of the Peninsula, referred to as the 'Pentour'. These efforts made by the college clearly had a lasting impact on the new students and can therefore be listed as an example of a positive interaction with the institution, initiated by the institution. Students were introduced to the lecturing staff during their orientation, and, as mentioned by Sophia in particular, some developed bonds with lecturers whom they now regard as mentors. The aspect of mentorship will be further explored later in this paper under 4.7.2: Institutional Commitments. It appears that the positive relationship established at the beginning of their programmes of study enabled some student to feel open and trusting about raising their concerns with faculty members, an aspect Tinto (1993) considers in his 'Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure'. As discussed under my conceptual framework, faculty validation is apparent in the experiences reported by the students.

Randy felt very comfortable approaching the dean of his faculty.

Most of the time when I have a problem, I approach him (the dean of the faculty) … because he is the right person to help me. At the end of the day I feel comfortable because they are welcoming me as I am (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

In Allan's case below, one can clearly discern an element of social and academic integration, a fundamental pillar of Tinto's (1997) conceptual framework as used in this study. As previously stated, Tinto (1997) asserts that the social, out-of-class connections or affiliations which certain activities offer help to secure the academic involvement of students. I refer to this as faculty validation. Allan felt personally validated by his lecturers, and felt he could speak to any of them outside of the classroom when he needed academic support.

The lecturers, they are very open, all of them. Anything you need, my first year I would go to all them. Something I didn't understand, I would go to their office for clarity and what they expected from me and things like that (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Amongst others, Allan and Randy shared their personal challenges with these faculty members who in turn encouraged and supported them. Many found solace in the idea of having someone to

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speak to when it became necessary during the course of their tenure as students at this institution. Their experiences clearly show that they enjoyed good relationships with faculty members outside of the classroom. Tinto categorises such relationships as social, and says that these 'outside the classroom' conversation between students and faculty members help establish connections which result in better student involvement on an academic level; they are thus an example of social and academic integration in their effects.

When asked about the kinds of challenges they faced as international students, a number of issues were raised. The one which stood out among the participants was the language barrier. While Sophia, Eden, Mandy and Harry arrived at the institution with a fairly confident command of English, the institution's language of instruction, many of the others had challenges. Daniel, Eve and John found this to be a serious concern in the beginning.

> The first thing is my barrier, language. Because English is not my first language. (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017).

> First of all, language … to learn, yes. (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

> My biggest challenge was the language. This was a challenge for me in the beginning, I must tell you. (John, Interview, September 29, 2017).

Some had less serious concerns about language than others, but still felt that language difficulties affected them. These included Peter and Allan.

> There are many challenges … sometimes it's the language (Peter, Interview, September 29, 2017).

> English. We don't talk English in Mauritius but we study English at school … I understand English. It's not the same thing when you understand and when you talk (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

The college, however, offers international students access to their English Language Institute before they begin their degree or diploma programmes. Their participation in this language based programme at the beginning of their period of study was a clear example of another positive institutional experiences that participants mentioned and valued highly. Tinto (1997) affirms that student involvement in institutional activities leads to integration, and Barnett (2010) adds to this notion by stating Tinto's (1993) assertion that a student's 'sense of membership in the classroom' (Barnet, 2010, p. 195) is linked to the student's sense of belonging, and thus to his academic integration. The English Language Institute at Winter College offered the participants an avenue

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to a sense of belonging, both to the classroom and to the institution. Thabo, for example, registered at the college for the first time in 2012 and was involved with the Language Institute until he registered for his current programme, a Diploma in Business Management, in 2016. In my interview with Thabo, I found that he understood English and was able to express himself well. He informed me that he had completed three levels of competency as a student of the Language Institute; namely the Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced course in English. Eve, a registered student for a Bachelor's Degree in Communications, also attended the Language Institute and stated that it aided her in overcoming her language barrier. She did, however, also indicate that during her time there, she was the only student in the programme and did not like that very much. She indicated that she would like to see this part of the college programme receive more attention and promotion:

> Language school ... Yes, it helped a lot … February until November, yes, one year (in 2013). … but they can make improvement. When I came here it was only me … they can make more marketing to bring people to do English here. (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

I found that the Language Institute plays an important role in overcoming the language barriers experienced by students at this college and participation in its programme may be regarded as a positive institutional experience. Programmes such as the language programme run by the Winter College Language Institute can be perceived as an element of Tinto's model which, as he explained, 'serve to provide individuals with opportunities to establish contacts … which lead to the possibility of incorporation into the life of the college' (Tinto, 1993, p. 99). This part of the college programme and the support it provided really paid dividends for Thabo and Eve. Later in the study, under 4.6: Language Proficiency, I refer more specifically to the concern of language as a barrier for international students.

Several participants spoke about their challenges from an academic point of view. When looking closely at these, one may deduce that these challenges are indirectly linked to the matter of language as a barrier. Thabo here refers to the pressures he experienced:

> Personally … You start to feel the pressure, it's like you just want to get out there, so it's just pressure to finish … (Thabo, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Harry, Mandy and Sophia referred to the course work and busy-ness of the programme as the one of the challenges they experienced.

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The programme is very heavy … it is a heavy load, the course work. (Harry, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Um, I think maybe the workload sometimes … (Mandy, Interview, October 3, 2017).

The only challenges I am facing now it's … um, I think the only challenges is difficulties in school maybe … the bottom line is things are getting hard. I just need to push, push, push. (Sophia, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Another challenge mentioned was the matter of finance, which can be perceived as a component of the individual's overall experience of the institution. Tinto (1993) reminds us that institutional experiences are those which a student undergoes during the period of studentship. Some international students felt that the institution could do more to support them in the area of finances. There was an overwhelming frustration among them caused by the fact that the financial support structures were geared toward assisting local students rather than international students. This matter receives more attention under point 4.7.2, Institutional commitments. Anesu, a married Theology student, raised this matter with confidence. He elaborated by listing his specific financial challenges.

Financial problems, money to register, food, accommodation … so all these things is a challenge, and as a Christian you must make sure all these things come together. (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

Two other students, Peter and Joyce, had this to say about the financial challenges:

Aah, finances. As an international student I don't get support from the college … South African students get financial support ahead of us. I have to find my own means to support myself financially. (Peter, Interview, September 29, 2017).

They need to also, like when international students are coming, they need to understand that, just like the students from here in South Africa, we also have, we might also have financial problems. (Joyce, Interview, September 28, 2017).

When asked what improvements the college could make to address his financial challenge, Anesu said

They can seek sponsors who can help students who are struggling like me … to help with financial issues so that they can finish their studies. (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

Despite the very positive view participants had about the college's initial welcome of them, the international students had criticisms to do with their position as foreigners. Many seemed to feel

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that the college favoured local students. Tinto (1993) asserts that 'fraternities, sororities, student dormitory associations, student unions' (p. 99), etc. may serve to offer students the opportunities to become incorporated into their institutions. International students felt that there was a definite leaning toward local students which had the effect of making them feel excluded. They cited the example of lecturers using local examples and contexts in their teaching, and ongoing language difficulties, which meant that they sometimes did not understand their lecturers. Randy, a Theology student in his fourth year, felt that the tuition given in classrooms was sometimes geared toward a South African context, and that international students needed help with becoming familiar with this context. Randy felt that lecturers could do more to ensure that international students understood the work.

> Sometimes in the lecture rooms the context is South African contexts so we as foreign students…when the lecturers make examples…or relate questions, it's about what is happening in South Africa. We are not grasping it quickly like the South Africans. That is the challenge … Patiently they can help us with what is happening here … so if lecturers can explain immediately after class or if we can have remedial classes so that the lecturers can help us to understand what he or she was talking about in class. I think it will be one of the best [methods] they can use. (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

John felt that he needed some time to get used to the context in South Africa.

> Different people, different system of education, everything was new for me. I had to adapt. Now I am more acquainted, more familiar with the education system. Different people as well, you know. You know, within South Africa we'll find, even though it is one country, but different cultures … people speaking different languages. It was a bit of a challenge. (John, Interview, September 29, 2017).

In citing the language barrier as a concern, Musa, a single male studying Business Administration, used the term 'discrimination' as one of the challenges he felt international students were confronted with. Tinto (1997) refers to the classroom experience and indicates why integration should matter. Musa's interpretation of his experience here is a testimony to a lack if integration. Musa noted that he was not experiencing discrimination personally but saw it in the way fellow internationals were treated.

> We are discriminated against. There is still that discrimination … because of the language barriers … there is a lot of discrimination among the students … It is language based and where we come from, for example, the behaviour … 'You are from a poor nation, you don't know anything'. 'I can tell you, you can't tell me'. (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

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Musa suggested that the college should get someone from outside to speak to the students regarding the form of discrimination which he felt he was experiencing.

> To have someone, not from the college, to come and mediate; to come talk to the college, and come talk to us … without fearing that we can be exposed, and some think maybe the teachers won't like us … to find a mutual ground. (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

I noted that this was not a matter raised by any of the other participants, but suspect that Musa verbalised what other students cautiously avoided in their responses. Joyce, a more mature single female (over 25 years of age) and a Business Management student, phrased a similar concern differently.

> Sometimes it's the language. They are not so accommodating. They know you don't understand something so they would speak in their language that you don't understand … not the lecturers, students. (Joyce, Interview, September 28, 2017).

Fellow students play a critical role in the institutional experiences of their peers. The attitudes of fellow students clearly affected Joyce's experience as a student. When she turned her attention to the college, her concerns were more financial.

> They [the college] need to understand that just like South African students, we might also have financial problems. I know that financially, they can pay - the South African students - their fees in arrears. But for us international students, they want us to pay all of it when we come … which I thought was very unfair, because we are all students. It doesn't matter where we are coming from … we all have problems. (Joyce, Interview, September 28, 2017).

Grant raised the idea that the college could possibly look at improving their language policy to accommodate the concerns of the international students.

> The policy of the language can be changed to make it easier for us as foreign students to understand better. (Grant, Interview, October 2, 2017).

I observed that, while the institutional experiences of the international students were differently presented, they were really very much the same in essence. Their perspectives and points of view showed areas of commonality. They generally revealed two challenges: the language barrier and financial difficulties. These aspects are examined more closely under 5.3, Findings. In general, their institutional experiences are closely aligned with the two systems which Tinto (1993) identified in his model; the academic system and the social system, but are more specific in nature, having to do with interactions with faculty and peers respectively. These interactions (with faculty

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and peers) usually take place in and beyond the classroom, and determine the overall institutional experience of the student.

Therefore, in analysing the participants' responses, I understood the following regarding institutional experiences: Students may be more deeply affected by their informal interactions with peers and staff than initially assumed. The nature of these interactions affects the students' ability to integrate into the institutional systems and even their eventual decision to persist in studies.

4.5 Personal normative integration, intentions and student persistence

Tinto (1993) refers to integration as a form of membership. In other words, it refers to a student's sense of belonging, as Karp, Hughes and O'Gara (2008) put it. Tinto (1993) further reminds us that 'integration in college is an interactive one' (p. 106). It therefore must be acknowledged that the individual student plays a part in creating his or her own sense of belonging at an institution. Students who register for a certain programme at a college or university become its members, but this does not necessarily imply that they feel a sense of belonging. Students who 'belong' to an institution still need to do the work of integrating into the life of that institution in order to affirm their membership. In other words, membership is not just about registration, it requires student involvement, leading to integration.

Personal normative integration supports positive intentions which ultimately strengthen student persistence. However, the intention needs to be there from the outset. A sense of belonging merely strengthens what is already there, in that students who feel a strong sense of belonging or membership will be psychologically motivated to persist with their good intentions and persevere in their studies.

It is generally accepted that a student who registers for any course of study does so with the intention to successfully complete it. However, there are many factors which ultimately influence their outcome. The following comment by Tinto (2003) on persistence is relevant here: 'Learning has always been the key to student retention. Students who learn are students who stay' (Tinto, 2003, p. 3). He further said that '… students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning' (Tinto, 2003, p. 3). Who, then, are the students who persist? Most of those students who persist become involved in social and academic activities and are surrounded by a strong

academic environment. This observation is summed up in Tinto's (1997) model and his concurring statements. Tinto (1997) places special emphasis on the time and energy that students will invest as a result of their involvement. So, in an attempt to explore this aspect, I asked the participants questions concerning the effort they put into their academic tasks. This would yield insight into the time and effort that students put into their work, which Tinto regards as important, and also into the aspect of whether or not they were actually 'learning' which, according to Tinto (1997), is a factor that leads to student persistence and completion of studies.

Students provided information regarding the amount of time they spent on their studies. Another area of interest to me was how students made the decision to register for a course of higher learning at a tertiary institution, and how this decision influenced their persistence.

Allan, the 26-year-old BA Theology student, made it clear that Winter College was not his first choice of institution.

> I wrote applications everywhere … US, UK, France, Australia. I got responses from here and [one other], but I chose this one. (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Allan chose to study at this college because its courses are internationally recognised and he wanted to study Theology in order to become a church pastor. The college offered a course that interested him. He further indicated that he spent about five hours per day on his studies, and had successfully completed each year of study until that point.

Anesu explained that he came from a poor background but had every intention of studying at a reputable institution and in so doing, gain a qualification that would enable him to help his family out of their impoverished situation. While he applied to other colleges as well, he was encouraged to attend this particular college, not because it was especially affordable, but because a previous lecturer at a university in Botswana had attended this college and motivated him to do the same.

> One of my lecturers at my previous seminary encouraged me by saying that the best seminary was this one. He said it was excellent and the lecturers here are good. Most of the time I study five to six hours during the night. (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

He explained that he struggled in the beginning and had difficulties with some subjects because of the language (English) but had since settled in. He had never had to repeat a year but had to carry subjects into the following year in order to gain the relevant credits for continuation of the

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registered programme. He mentioned that this was challenging for him but with much effort, he was succeeding. He spoke fondly of his family and mentioned that they were here with him. They, however, had plans to return to their home country upon completion of his studies. His own desire to return home caused him not to consider staying in this country or to think of pursuing a career in any other country but his own.

Randy referred to Winter College as 'a Christian university of excellence' and was a proud student of the college. 'It is my heart!' he said. He chose the college because of the Theology programme and spoke of the affinity he had for religious studies and his religion in particular:

> I was reared to be a pastor, around my community and by local church members. (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

As a result of this, he dedicated much time to his studies; he said that he sat with his books for at least five hours per day. He, too, had to carry some subjects over into the next academic year but did not have to repeat an academic year of study. He mentioned three modules that he had had to repeat thus far. He is a family man who left his wife and three daughters at home while living in the college hostel. He was thus motivated to return home but was open to work opportunities in South Africa should they present themselves.

Sophia said that her parents chose this college on her behalf and mentioned that her brother had studied there previously. The reason her parents sent her here is that it is a Christian-based institution affiliated to their religion. She herself settled in well because she enjoyed the study programme (Communications) and enjoyed her level of involvement in college activities, having learned to work in groups during her course of study.

> In my course I learn how to work in groups. I find that the more I work in groups here the more it prepares me for the work out there. In most companies, managers divide people (workers) in groups to do tasks. (Sophia, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Sophia was also committed to study four hours per day and as a result had completed each year successfully thus far. Her family were in her home country and she was therefore motivated to return home once her studies were completed. However, she mentioned that she would consider staying in South Africa if work opportunities were available to her after completion of her studies.

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Thabo was motivated by family and friends to choose the college. His uncles had attended the college, and the family had a measure of confidence in it. His interest in Business Management, and in particular, Accounting, was his main attraction from an academic point of view. Unlike the other participants, he did not have set study hours:

> When I came, I used to study, now I don't … only when necessary. So, let's say, per day I don't study, but during times I need, like exam times, I study pretty much, twice a day, which is two hours. (Thabo, Interview, October 3, 2017).

This rather haphazard approach to studies had not prevented him from passing each year, although he had had to carry some subjects into the following year. He was in South Africa with his cousin but planned to return to his parents after completion of his studies. He was toying with the idea of possibly seeking employment in Portugal since he had visited there once before.

John was very clear in his opinion about this college.

> South Africa is one of the best places to study and this college is the only one for me (religious institution of my church) because of the course that I am doing; it is the best college for Theology. Because of my religion I had to come here. (John, Interview, September 29, 2017).

When he was asked what he found particularly attractive about the academic programme, he had this to say:

> I wanted to do God's work and I wanted to spend more time with God. (John, Interview, September 29, 2017).

John said that he studied as much as he could and spent an average of three to four hours per day with his books.

> Per day I will study three to four hours. I study as much as I can. I just study as soon as my classes are done; I go to the library or I go somewhere else and I just study. (John, Interview, September 29, 2017).

He had successfully completed each year's programme and had no need to repeat any courses. John's brother-in-law was with him in South Africa while the rest of the family were in their home country. He intended to pursue further studies in South Africa after completing his current programme of study and earmarked South Africa and Brazil as places where he wished to pursue a career.

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Grant initially visited several universities in different countries before making a decision regarding a college. His parents had intended for him to study in Europe, but he chose this college in South Africa because he wanted a calm, peaceful environment and to be successful. He felt that he had found these qualities at Winter College.

> I had a cousin who studied here back in 2000 to 2003. Actually one of our current lecturers studied here with him at that time. My parents initially wanted me to go to Europe because we have family there, my grandparents live there … But I wanted a place where it is calm, it is quiet … and I can feel at home because I am not much of a person for going out. Then he suggested, 'I studied at this place in South Africa and it is like this, (calm and quiet) but the catch is that it is a religious school.' I am not much of a religious person but I said it is fine I will consider. So I took one month just to come here. I went to other universities as well, Europe, US, etc. but I just decided it is fine here. One thing that motivated me … I don't know why or how, but Angolan people who studied here, they did not take long to get a job. They are all in high positions now. I also want to be successful like them (Grant, Interview, October 2, 2017).

Grant considered himself a lazy student and said that he studied only the day before he wrote an examination or test, when he would take several hours preparing.

> I'm the type of student that is very, very lazy. So I only probably the night before or the day before and when I start studying I will take between seven to eight hours just to cram everything in… (Grant, Interview, October 2, 2017).

He had come to realise that this approach did not work for all subjects, and said that he was learning to take more time with subjects such as Accounting, for example. He said that he now assesses how much time he needs for a particular subject and plans accordingly. However, he did not have a daily study plan but still based his studying on examination timetables. It had worked for him in the sense that he had never had to repeat any subjects and had successfully completed each academic year so far. Grant would consider staying in South Africa even though his family was at home in his native country. He was open minded about job opportunities and fancied working in Finland, where he said they offer good salaries and good work conditions.

Daniel was encouraged by his wife to pursue studies at the college.

> The first time, I didn't have any idea where to go, but thanks to my wife and the church … (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017).

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He initially enrolled for a course in Accounting, which was what had originally attracted him to the college, but he changed to Theology during this period. He felt that he needed to find something that he was interested in doing and found Theology.

> Theology … that can be a long story. To cut it short … because there were some times also that I feel empty. I couldn't do anything in this country, but I said let me find something what I can do, and then I came in Theology … but interesting thing is, about knowing God, I was pursuing … (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017).

He generally spent two hours per day with his studies and had never needed to repeat a year. He and his wife were currently residing on campus in a college home, and he was open to work opportunities anywhere in the world. The UK seemed to be a place of interest to him, should the opportunity arise to pursue his chosen career there.

To Musa, the college created a picture of 'home' in his mind. He loved this and found Accounting an added attraction. He spent three to four hours per day with his studies and had never had to repeat a year.

> I chose [Winter College] because it painted the picture that I'll be at home, even though I'm not at home. I was only attracted to acting. My role model, he came to (Winter College) … came home with a degree. I don't spend more than four hours (studying), sometimes three. (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

As a single male with his family back home, he felt no strong inducement to return and said that he would take a position anywhere in the world. He said that he was comfortable in South Africa and would not mind settling here.

Eve did not have a choice but to follow the direction of her aunt who brought her here for church and religious reasons.

> I did not choose [Winter College] but I called my aunt, she studied here. She did things to me, and I am here because she is [religious]. (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

She, too, had not had to repeat an academic year, and said that she studied around three hours per day.

> Eish, I even sleep late … if I start (studying) at seven pm and can stop at 10 … (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

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Eve earmarked England as a possible place to build a future.

Harry originally wanted to study Engineering, a course which Winter College does not offer. Family, however, advised him to do Accounting instead.

> I wanted to study engineering but [Winter College] was not my first choice. Then I was advised to do Accounting, by my family … and I've fallen in love with it (Harry, Interview, October 3, 2017).

As he mentions above, he subsequently 'fell in love' with his subject and thoroughly enjoyed the small classes with close contact and personal attention. He hoped to pursue a career in the USA but did not mind considering opportunities in South Africa.

Peter ascribed his choice of institution to the good reputation of the college, according to acquaintances.

> I heard that [Winter College] has a good reputation … and quality education, so I wanted to be a part of it. (Peter, Interview, September, 29, 2017).

Acquaintances told him that this college offered quality education and he wanted to improve his English proficiency there. This all worked in his favour. Since his family was in South Africa with him, he was willing to accept whatever opportunities presented themselves to him.

Mandy chose the college after it was recommended by a family friend who belonged to the same religion.

> It was recommended by a family friend who also studied here, and also because it was a [religious] institution (Mandy, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Accounting was not her passion, but she felt drawn to it because of her father.

> Accounting, B. Com Accounting. My dad was also an accountant (Mandy, Interview, October 3, 2017).

She spent around two hours per day studying and had never needed to repeat a course.

Eden, on the other hand, did research on possible colleges and found Winter College to be the most suitable for her and her passion for communication.

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> See, thing is, I, when I was to choose the place to go I did a thorough research on which university or college had the best education programme I wanted to do … and [Winter College] was. (Eden, Interview, September 21, 2017).

She studied for five hours each day and had successfully completed each academic year. Like Mandy, Eden lived in the hostel while her family remained in her home country. Both Eden and Mandy said they wished to pursue their careers in the UK.

Joyce was drawn to the Business Management programme and spent four hours with her books during exam times. She had completed her courses successfully each year.

> Um, well, I was looking for Business Management. I think I like the fact that they put in values. It actually does help to your way of life. In a day … it depends if I have a test. If I do have an exam, probably four hours (Joyce, Interview, September 28, 2017).

Joyce had this to say about what attracted her to Winter College and her programme of study:

> I think I like the fact that they have personal values incorporated in the study programme … I am very happy here and cannot see myself anywhere else (Joyce, Interview, September 28, 2017).

As is clear from the responses of most participants, the college affiliation to the religion to which they belonged played a significant role in their choice to study there, although it was not the case for all. The academic offerings of the college also helped, and the students were clearly interested in a college with a good reputation that would offer a high quality of teaching. What also stands out from their responses is the fact that they were academically involved in their courses and valued the opportunity to study, although for diverse reasons. The concept of an integration of personal faith and the academic courses seemed to play and important role, as aptly summed up by Joyce, above, who refers to the fact that the courses had 'values', which helped with everyday life. She had picked up on a principle espoused by the college, which is the principle of the 'integration of faith and learning'. This and other motivating factors had brought students to the college, which supported their choice by striving to foster a sense of belonging, which would naturally increase a sense of the integration of the person as a whole into academic life.

The participants' responses reveal that they experienced personal normative integration. The observations noted above clearly underscore Tinto's notion that academic integration influences intention to successfully complete a programmes of study (Tinto, 1993). It is also interesting that these students had all successfully completed each year of study thus far. Their academic success

appears to be driven by their keen academic interest and motivated states of mind. Likewise, there appeared to be a clearly discernible element of social and academic integration (personal normative integration), and they were reaping the benefits of such an integration, since they were clearly motivated and persistent. They were prepared to spend considerable numbers of hours with their studies, in other words, 'time on task', in order to persist and succeed. This coincides with Tinto's (1997) comment that, 'the more students are involved … the more likely they are to become more involved … and invest the time and energy needed to learn' (p. 615). This observation leads to the next point, student effort.

4.6 Language proficiency, social integration and persistence

In Tinto's (1997) model, the component of 'student effort' features prominently. Student effort refers to the student's activities that contribute to persistence. More specifically, it is that link between the social affiliations and the academic involvement of the student (Tinto, 1997, p. 615). Furthermore, Tinto (1997) reminds us, as referred to above, that 'the more students are involved, academically and socially, in shared learning experiences that link them with their peers, the more likely they are to become more involved in their own learning' (p. 615). Students in my sample invested considerable time in their studies, making a concerted effort to achieve success. While the concept of 'time on task' is covered above, it needs to be noted here how important student effort is for achieving the personal normative integration that Tinto (1997) refers to in his model.

The fact that international students are not always well understood because of limited English language proficiency may somewhat limit their social integration. As a case in point, Eden felt that because of her language barrier, South African students were not very welcoming and that she had not integrated well with them. Her observations strike a note of negativity, showing how in fact, despite other positive aspects of the college, integration for her was almost entirely absent.

> I don't think that I feel like I'm a part of the campus community. In my mind I am just here to get my degree and then I just want to go. I have been in South Africa for a while but even now, when you are in a circle of South African students they would speak in their own languages and I would ask, 'What are you guys saying?' They would say, 'Oh nothing' and then continue with their conversation (Eden, Interview, September 24, 2017).

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The English language classes offered by the institution made a significant difference in the lives of the international students. Thabo, for instance, spent a large amount of time preparing himself for integration into the college academic programme by attending the Language Institute programme. He arrived in 2012 but only started his diploma course in 2016. He eventually completed three levels of language competency prior to his registration for his Diploma in Business Management.

> 2016 is when I actually did register for the programme that I'm in but, a few years ago, I think it was 2012, that I came. I wanted to study but they, they told me that I needed to do some more learning, English learning. So I registered for the Language Institution for six months or, almost a year (Thabo, Interview, October 3, 2017).

In total, eight of the fifteen participants had attended the Language Institute upon arrival in Cape Town. Allan, Daniel, Grant and Randy shared their experiences below. Allan said

> We did English in first year. There are two categories of English … They put me in English writing my first year (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Daniel needed the classes and mentioned how he learned English communication.

> They knew that English wasn't my first language, but they helped me a lot. We have also a skill of learning, or listening skills, speaking as well (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Grant just needed to improve his writing skills and acquired this skill at the college.

> When I came here I already knew English but because we were always jumping from one country to another I didn't learn how to write properly. So when I came here I just needed to learn how to write (Grant, Interview, October 2, 2017).

Randy recalled how he started his study programme and what he had to do specifically.

> In 2013 when I arrived here we started on foundation and then, part of the modules I was doing was English. Most of the time we use to be giving the presentations so we can stand in front of others and then present whatever we were asked to present. So I developed the skills concerning that language (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

The improved English language proficiency of the participants proved to make a significant difference to their academic lives and helped bridge the gap between international students and local students, causing social integration to occur.

Eve initially did not understand what was meant by the question of whether or not she felt part of the campus and her level of involvement in activities, but once she understood, she responded with keen interest. She affirmed that her involvement in extra-curricular activities made her feel a part of the campus community. Her language proficiency was a concern in the beginning, but after she attended the Language Institute she gained a great deal of confidence. She also made extra efforts to improve her English.

> They are friendly, very friendly, the lecturers as well as the students. Cultural day, yes I was involved in cultural day activities. I also do aerobics every day. My language (in)ability makes me to be involved. I want to learn more through the activities and want to help others to learn as well (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

Eve further explained how she felt when she first arrived at the college:

> When I came here I was afraid. I have a friend who helped me to speak English. I read a book … I would stand in the corner and wait that they would invite me. After I became involved in aerobics and activities I became OK. I am feeling comfortable now … I can talk. (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

Musa also explained that his proficiency in English helped him feel more comfortable, giving him the confidence to get involved in college activities. He sketched a picture of how he had grown in character and built a sense of belonging over the years.

> I contributed to cultural day because I am the only Swati at the college. It makes me feel special, it sets me apart from the rest (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

He elaborated:

> It helps a lot that I can communicate comfortably in English. When I came here in 2010 I could not speak English, that made me feel inferior. After I learned how to speak English I was very confident and very comfortable. So, English does play a huge part in making me feel comfortable … The South African students used to laugh at me when I could not speak English properly, but after I got to learn how to speak English everything was fine. In soccer we shout a lot … after the game you end up having more friends than what you had before you started (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

In terms of his language communication skills, Allan explained that he was given college support through special English classes. He was given an English exam, which he passed. He recalls it as a programme called English Writing:

> We did English in my first year … English writing. They put me in English Writing my first year and after a week I went into an English academic writing class. In some aspects my language has influenced my lack of interest to participate in activities (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

4.7 Goals, commitments (T1) and persistence

4.7.1 Student intentions and related factors

Earlier, I alluded to Tinto's (1993) reference to intentions as 'plans' (p. 115). Tinto (1993) mentions two levels of intention; 'entry-level goals and commitments' and 'post-integration goals and commitments' (p. 114). Tinto (1993) clarifies intentions, goals and commitments by stating that 'intentions or goals specify both the level and type of education and occupation desired by the individual' (p.114).

Students require support structures in their quest to persist. My next step was to look more closely into the factors which supported their intentions to persist. The terms 'support' and 'student persistence' in the context of this study are defined under point 2.6. In seeking to understand the factors that constituted support and strengthened student persistence, I asked the international students participating in this study several questions on their intention to persist with studies. The comments below reveal what participants said in this regard.

Summing up their comments, it is clear that family was a strong component of the support structure of these students; ten participants placed family first, four said lecturers and one placed himself as his main source of support. Most participants also cited support from God, which together with family formed a leading response. The notion that family played a significant role in their support and eventual persistence comes across strongly in the comment below. Friends and lecturers feature, too.

This was Harry's response when asked who provides the most support to his success as a student:

> Parents, for the motivation they provide, but mostly my friends, classmates that I am working with. We push each other (Harry, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Harry also believed that his father would be the one to give him the best advice if he ever considered dropping out. He stated that he had always received good advice from his father. Harry was not the only one who felt this way.

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Mandy, a young female student, also in the B Com Accounting programme, said

> Friends and family, they provide emotional support. This determines how well you are going to move on after that (Mandy, Interview, 3 October 2017).

Mandy also said that she would consult a special friend rather than lecturers if she felt the pressure to drop out.

> I think I will first pray about it and then talk to one of my friends about it, one of my best friends. This person studies here and is a Theology student. I think we have a good relationship in that department (Mandy, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Peter, one of the married students mentioned earlier, said he would first consult with his wife and God. His wife, he explained, went out of her way to support the family financially while he was in the study programme. Upon reflecting on his experience and the kind of support he received from his wife and God, he stated the following:

> We had to sell our house and car, but God provided for my family. My wife worked odd jobs. God opened doors for us (Peter, Interview, September 29, 2017).

Interestingly, Peter indicated that he would consult with lecturers should he at any point consider dropping out. He believed that his mentor, a lecturer in the Theology Department, would give sound advice.

Anesu explained that he was the only one of his family members who had been afforded the privilege of engaging in further studies. Having said that, he mentioned 'God' and 'miracles' as the factors which provided him with support towards his success. He also referred to the support he received from an international church that paid his tuition fees.

> One of the churches outside the country is paying me only school fees. I don't know them and they don't know me. If I explain, it is a long story, but I call it miracle (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

In response to the question about whom he would go to for advice should he ever consider dropping out, he was emphatic.

> No, no, no, no! I am not feeling that I can stop. My focus is going on. I know that the Lord is with me and I will finish (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

Anesu, like many others, came to South Africa with a purpose: to equip himself to serve the church. he intention was clear – he was going to serve as a pastor in his church. He further explained his motivation for studying:

> The world is different, education and technology is necessary. I have to be equipped to serve as a pastor in this day and age (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

Randy, on the other hand, acknowledged that while family was his first level of support, his friends and the dean of his faculty also played a role in his support structure. The dean, he said, was always available to assist and support him:

> You'll realise that my family supports me financially and my friends support me emotionally, and the students that I am studying with right here are supporting me, especially with academic work. For example, I mentioned the challenge that we are not South African. So if the lecturer is making an illustration about what is happening here in South Africa, my fellow students will help me and try to explain what the lecturer meant around it (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

He elaborated by stating:

> Actually the person that I can approach if I want to drop out will be the dean of the faculty. Most of the time when I have a problem I approach him so he is the right person (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

When asked about the help offered by lecturers during personal crises, Randy talked about an experience he had had:

> Actually there was a time when I had to miss some classes because of personal reasons. I remember in 2014 when I had a funeral at home, my youngest sister passed on. So I had to miss some of the classes and then before I could go home I approached the concerned lecturers. I told them about the funeral and so forth. They allowed me to go, and when I returned they helped me to get the information that was taught during my absence (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

There was clear evidence that the international students received a great deal of support from staff, especially when they had to miss classes. All the participants made clear declarations in this regard. Thabo proudly explained that it was lecturers whom he turned to for advice and support.

> Lecturers, specific lecturers. I have specific lecturers who push me, that make me strive, the dean of my faculty … when they know that you are behind with your work, you are more than welcome to actually go and talk to them. (Thabo, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Eve went as far as mentioning the name of the lecturer she trusted to provide support and advice.

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[Name of lecturer]. I went there yesterday to talk to her about … I cried. She prayed for me and I'm OK now. (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

Daniel spoke about the 'good support system' that he felt existed at this college.

> Firstly, my wife; the lecturers also. We have a very good support system here because we are a [religious] institution. They provide everything holistically, the physical, the spiritual side. If you feel you are spiritually down they assign someone to follow-up with you. (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017).

When Daniel was forced to miss classes, he received the support he needed from lecturers. He gave his reason for his absence and then stated the level of support the lecturers provided below.

> Sometimes the Home Affairs, they trouble you to renew your documents. That was the major reason that I skipped class. We got into one-on-one sessions. Comparing to my country, I find it better because you get to see your lecturer personally. (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017).

Allan, a third year Theology student, developed a bond with a specific lecturer and felt comfortable going to him with challenges and for motivation when necessary. He indicated that he would go to lecturers for advice and support.

> My lecturers, but not all of them. I would choose him because he gives me counselling. I think he would advise me wisely. My first year I never missed classes, but my second year … When I feel I have this and this and this, I would take off. The lecturers don't really say anything. It happened once or twice this semester. I would go after class and say to him, Sir I could not come to your class today, then he would help me catch up. (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Musa spoke of a specific lecturer who was very supportive and understanding.

> I missed a lot of classes. I got support from my lecturer. She is like a mother to me. She doesn't believe that when you are absent or your marks are low it is only that … there is a root to the problem. She believes that is just the fruit, there's a deeper reason. She calls you in her office, she talks to you. She attend to your holistic life, your choices, how you are eating, how many hours do you sleep, do you drink a lot of water. Those typical things that most of the time we ignore. They are the root to our problems. (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

Very few of the participants had seriously considered dropping out. Thabo, Allan, Eve, Eden, Paul, Peter and Mandy expressed their intentions in this way:

> I have one year left, so the worst is past. I am on a roll, I feel confident (Thabo, Interview, October 3, 2017).

> I will complete, because of friendships and support (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

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I am here because of my parents. I will finish for their sake (Eve, Interview, September 2017).

I am one hundred percent committed to complete my studies (Eden, Interview, September 24, 2017).

I will complete because of my church, to serve them better (Paul, Interview, September 26, 2017).

Yes. I will complete studies as scheduled (Peter, Interview, September 29, 2017).

Yes. I am confident I will complete my studies, I enjoy the content. (Mandy, Interview, October 3, 2017).

The confidence these students showed seemed to be based largely on the support structures and relationships the students had built over time, both with family and with lecturers. The personal faith of the students, coupled with the fact that their faith is a shared one with their lecturers, also played a role in their persistence. Several students went as far as mentioning the names of the lecturers they felt they could confide in and who provided individual support. This is referred to as faculty validation. Tinto (1993) includes it in his model, referring to it as faculty interaction, while other theorists, including Boeren et al. (2010), also expand on this concept. What became clear was that all the participants felt that they could go to their lecturers and would receive sound advice and motivation which they felt kept them going. Dropout seemed a hardly considered by any of them. They coupled the strong support they received with their own personal strong and well-defined intentions; in some cases to make their families proud, in other cases to bring their families out of poverty, and in other cases to serve God better as pastors.

Therefore familial support system, social system or external community (in the context of Tinto's theoretical framework) formed a strong motivation for persistence among the participants. For some, it was the specific reason why they attended an institution of higher learning. Family bonds came across clearly in the comments below. Grant alluded to the fact that while other family members had completed tertiary education, he was the only person on his mother's side of the family to continue studies beyond grade 12 , implying that completing studies was, in a way, a matter of family pride for his mother.

… so at this point my mom is the only one who does not have a graduate student yet, so I will be the first (Grant, Interview, October 2, 2017).

Eve, Joyce and Musa also attributed their determination to complete their studies to family:

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Basically I am here because of my parents…I'm gonna do it to show them I can. (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

I need to finish so that I can go work. It gives strain to the parents. They need to also have peace of mind, to say, 'Ok, we have done everything we can for her.' (Joyce, Interview, September 28, 2017).

This December I am graduating. My background, and especially, I am scared to embarrass my parents. (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

Daniel described the lecturers and faculty members as his family at the college:

What I really appreciate about our lecturers, what they doing, and they doing an amazing job. They take care of us. But sometimes also in class we call them parents (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017)

When speaking to Sophia about whether she would complete her studies successfully, she recalled that when things became challenging for her, she turned to her father who appeared to be her motivation. Sophia shared a conversation she had had with him.

I believe I can do this. Last week I was just talking to my dad and I told him that things are actually getting harder and things. One thing that he responded is like, 'My child, as I always tell you, easy things, we find them in heaven, not down here. So things have to get tough in order for us to push because easy things don't make us stronger.' (Sophia, Interview, September 24, 2017).

The financial support necessary for their study programmes was primarily supplied by the participants' families; in some cases, parents, and in others, their partners. The college fell far short in this regard (financial support) when it came to international students. The word 'unfair' was used by Joyce when she referred to the lack of financial support:

We also have financial problems. I know that the South African students can pay their fees in arears, but for us international students, they want us to pay all of it when we come otherwise we are not able to register, which I thought it was very unfair (Joyce, Interview, September 28. 2017).

Another phenomenon which reflected strongly among participants was their religious grounding. John credited his relationship with his God as a determining factor in his persistence or 'anti-dropout' intentions and status.

I will complete because I believe God has a purpose for my life, and my coming here is not by chance, or maybe by human will. I believe that I … I'm responding to a call. So, the one that called me will lead me until the end of the process (John, Interview, September 29. 2017).

Anesu felt that his studies would help him be a better worker for God in his church:

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My main motivation to complete is to serve my church better (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

4.7.2 Institutional commitments and student persistence

In seeking to understand the notion of institutional commitments, one needs to revisit one of the many discussion points Tinto (1993) engages his audiences on. He describes commitment as a quality which 'indicate(s) the degree to which individuals are committed … to the attainment of … goals' (p.115). He elaborates by stating that 'the institution into which they gain entry (institutional commitment) … along with external commitments … help establish the initial conditions for subsequent interactions between the individual and other members of the institution' (Tinto, 1993, p. 115). Thus it must be understood that institutional commitments play a part in securing student commitment, and may reflect the degree to which students remain faithful to their institutions. It is the state of constant interaction between the two parties that enhances student commitment.

Institutional commitment is therefore another important element of Tinto's (1997) model of student retention, which essentially encompasses the level of involvement and engagement with the student by the institution. I asked questions which I believed would reveal the types of commitments Winter College customarily made with regard to their students. Another factor I considered under this theme was how such commitments advanced student persistence. The observations below reflect only some of the responses from the participants.

In Peter's case, the college provided little or no support in the area of finances. He mentioned that he depended on his family to support him financially throughout his study programme:

No. I don't get financial help from the college. My family helps to pay my bills (Peter, Interview, September 29, 2017).

However, the lack of financial help did not make him feel that he wanted to drop out since he had the support of lecturers to whom he could speak for emotional and academic motivation. He felt that the college was preparing him for work in the church and that in itself served as motivation to him. Harry shared a similar experience. He complained about the lack of financial support but found strong faculty validation through supportive lecturing staff:

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> Financially, I am on my own. I have to count on family to help with money matters (Harry, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Eve, Musa, Daniel, Grant, Thabo and Sophia all shared the same experience of receiving no financial support from the college, but managing through the support of family:

> My parents. Hostel is there, but I have to pay – meals I have to pay (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

> [Financial support] Not for me. My father pays, obviously (Musa, Interview, October 2, 2017).

Daniel explained it in this way:

> In the bigger picture, faculty does an amazing job. They are like parents. Sometimes we call them our parents (Daniel, Interview, September 21, 2017).

> No [financial support]. My parents and my grandparents sometimes. (Grant, Interview, October 2, 2017).

> No. It's my parents; they normally are the ones who support me (Thabo, Interview, October 3, 2017).

> No. From the years that I studied here personally I haven't [received any financial support]. My parents. (Sophia, Interview, September 24, 2017).

It was clear the relationship between most students and faculty was good, and that the emotional and academic support they received from lecturers seemed to overshadow the lack of financial support. Musa said that the faculty did everything in their power to assist the students. He described how 'helpful', 'lenient' and 'supportive' they were. Eve enjoyed the privilege she had of consulting with a particular lecturer whom she considered her mentor. She recalled a particular conversation with a staff member:

> She said to me, 'Don't give up! You can do this.' So I listened to her because I could trust her judgement and she made me feel comfortable and at home (Eve, Interview, September 29, 2017).

Eden listed a number of things that she discovered the lecturers did to help students. She referred to the support programmes at the college:

> Mentorship programmes. I know they provide learner support for those who don't do so well (Eden, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Sophia reflected on how faculty members were always willing to help students in need. She received advice from lecturers when her averages were low and needed to be improved:

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When I'm sick … um, sometimes we don't have time to go the hospital. The dean, the college provides [gives support]. (Sophia, Interview, September 24, 2017).

Randy, with his poor language skills, received appropriate reading material from staff members to assist him in improving his communication skills. When asked whether he ever thought about dropping out because of difficulties in English, he stated that he did not really think about it because of the support he received from his lecturers:

Not really. Ever since I arrived here I got a support from the lecturers. They are helpful (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

One critical observation made by many of the participants was that financial support structures favoured the locals. Some of them even felt that they were disadvantaged in this regard and stated that, while their needs were similar to those of South African students, they enjoyed little or no college support to help them survive financially. Parents and other family members were primarily responsible for carrying the financial burden of these international students. Eden referred to her own means of raising funds to supplement family support for her studies and indicated that her parents paid her fees but that she had created her own income by baking and selling cakes.

Well, my parents pay most of it, but for all my other expenses, I tried to create a new business to get in money. I bake. (Eden, Interview, September 24, 2017).

For most, the matter of accommodation presented serious financial drawbacks. While the college does offer hostel accommodation as well as private housing, it comes at a cost too high for some to bear. Harry lived on the campus, but in a private house which he shared with another family.

I don't stay in the hostel. I live on campus but with a friend and his family. I have to pay them to stay there (Harry, Interview, October 3, 2017).

Several of them lived off campus in accommodation they had arranged for themselves at a lower cost than that which the college provided.

Harry stated very clearly why he was determined to persist and successfully complete his studies:

I want to finish to become financially independent (Harry, Interview, October 3, 2017).

He mentioned that he did not want to rely on anybody after completion of his studies.

Grant also made it clear that he had to complete his studies but for the sake of his parents:

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I will complete for myself and my parents (Grant, Interview, October 2, 2017).

He revealed that all the members of his family had studied at tertiary level but that he would be the first from his mother's side of the family to complete his studies.

What emerges from the comments is that many of the participants had strong personal reasons for completing their studies. The desire to please and bring honour to the family featured strongly, as did the determination to make something of their lives and be successful. Their drive and will power derived in part from the post-integration commitments and goals that Tinto highlights in his model. The personal commitments referred to by Tinto played a major role in the outcomes of these participants. The role of personal goals and commitment is discussed in Chapter 5.

A further area of interest was whether or not academic integration occurred in their experience. Most concurred that it did. Randy, for example, pointed out that the institution was like home to him:

> Now I feel that [Winter College] is home. Even now I feel that [Winter College] is my home, we are a family. (Randy, Interview, September 21, 2017).

He underscored his emotional attachment to this institution by saying, 'Winter College is my heart.' He was so integrated into the life of the college that he saw it as a part of his existence during his student years. Winter College was to him, as mentioned under point 4.5, 'A Christian university of excellence'. He took pride in the college and his affinity for Theology and cited this love of Theology as the reason why he chose the college.

Anesu proudly spoke of how the lecturers took time to explain aspects of the work which he did not understand in class:

> When you go to the lecturer and explain your problems, he'll try to explain what you have to do (Anesu, Interview, September 26, 2017).

He studied for long hours and had built a close relationship with lecturers, whom he referred to as his mentors.

Allan mentioned the academic support he received from fellow students who helped and never judged him.

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My friends helped me, they never judged me. Actually some of them told me that my English was good. Sometimes when I couldn't communicate I say something that is similar to that thing and then they give me the name (Allan, Interview, September 24, 2017).

He had embraced the college from the onset because his experience was once of feeling very well supported by lecturers. He felt that he could go to them for help whenever necessary. Anesu and Randy were indeed integrated into the academic life of the college. Similar experiences can be seen in the responses of most of the participants.

In reviewing the above, one can clearly identify the factors in Tinto's (1997) conceptual framework in the responses of these participants. Factors such as institutional commitment, faculty validation and the important role of student intention and effort clearly played a part in the students' ability to persist. Pre-entry goals and commitments were transformed into long-term determination and motivation, partly by the ongoing support of parents and partly by the high level of emotional and academic support provided by staff at this college. The data suggests that for each student, the institutional experience may have been slightly different, but the factors which enhanced their persistence were similar. Clearly the college was able to provide a blend of emotional and academic support that was almost seamless; students spoke of being prayed for by staff members, and of being personally encouraged when they experienced academic difficulties. The participants in this study evinced high levels of motivation without downplaying the hardships they encountered. As a result, they inclined toward persistence, and their personal interactions with faculty member certainly played a key role in this outcome.

SECTION 5: SUMMARY, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

In this section, the findings are summarised and discussed and recommendations are made. I also offer new theoretical insights on the matter of student persistence and the factors that affect it.

5.2 Summary

Previous research shows that there is a low rate of persistence in many higher education institutions and conversely a high rate of student attrition. The study was therefore conducted with the specific aim in mind of investigating what prompts international students, in particular, to persist in their studies at a faith-based institution of higher learning. This required that both barriers experienced by these students be identified and examined along with the factors which contribute to persistence. This would possibly lead to new theoretical insights about student persistence in higher education.

To this end the following research question was asked: 'What are the relationships between student intentions, institutional commitments, social integration, academic integration and student persistence?', with the intention of uncovering the social and academic factors which influence student integration. Tinto's (1997) model of Institutional Persistence was used as the conceptual framework because it gave guidelines on areas to be investigated and allowed me to formulate the kinds of questions that would best yield answers to the research question. The model offers steps in the process toward persistence which are clearly present in the life of a student and provide a passage to the desired outcome. According to Tinto (1997), the factors which most strengthen a student's passage to persistence include the setting of goals and commitments, institutional experiences, personal normative integration and student effort, with a successful educational outcome being the ultimate goal.

I conducted research at a site which I perceived to reveal positive outcomes with regard to its students, and where persistence was amply demonstrated by its students. I used a qualitative approach, intending to uncover themes in the findings that would enable new insights and possibly a contribution to existing theory about student persistence. The deductive approach was used, since data was collected through one-on-one interviews with participants. I selected 15 international students aged 20 to 45, both males and females, some married and some single. Data

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analysis was approached with the main research question in mind, as stated above and in section 1.5. The main research question and sub-questions informed the questions I asked of participants in interviews, with their responses helping me to develop an understanding of their goals at the commencement of studies, their involvement in the academic programme and their integration into the life of the institution – and how all of these factors affected their persistence.

5.3 Findings

At the start of my investigation I asked, 'What are the relationships between student intentions, institutional commitments, social integration, academic integration and student persistence?' I broke this down into these sub-questions: 'How do institutional commitments and academic integration influence student persistence?', 'How do student intentions and social integration influence student persistence?' and 'What are the relationships between institutional commitments, academic integration and student persistence?' I therefore submit the following findings based on responses to questions asked during interviews in the hope that they may aid institutions and students in their quest to persist in their studies until completion.

My study confirmed that there is a strong relationship between student intentions, institutional commitments, social integration, academic integration and student persistence. The following summations define the findings of this study.

'How do institutional commitments and academic integration influence student persistence?'

- Institutional commitment, demonstrated through the English programme offered to the foreign students, facilitated their academic integration and persistence. This is illuminated by Tinto's (1997) assertion, '… involvement seems to be the key. Students who are actively involved in learning, that is, who spend more time on task especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay' (Tinto, 2003, p. 3).

- Institutional commitment to bridge the gap between students and staff members beyond the classroom enhances persistence among international students. Tinto (1997) asserts that social, out-of-class connections or affiliations help to secure the academic involvement of students. Barnett (2010) concluded that 'higher levels of faculty validation modestly predicted increases in student's intent to persist' (p. 213).

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- Institutional commitment to support students through mentorships enhances persistence. Such mentorships are included in Tinto's (2003, p. 3) argument that, 'Support may be provided in structured forms such as summer bridge programs, mentor programmes, and student clubs …' Tinto (2003) reflects on institutional commitments to support students by stating that 'students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social, and personal support' (p. 3).

- Institutional commitment to attain competence among students through sound educational practices and academic integration positively impacts student persistence. The integration of faith and learning as a practice at Winter College fosters students' sense of belonging and involvement, and enhances persistence. This concept is practised by faculty and staff at Winter College. In this regard Tinto (2006) states that 'the growing body of research on the impact of learning communities on student retention stands out as having provided solid evidence of practices that enhances student retention' (p. 7). Tinto (1997) also points out that the 'classroom experience shapes student persistence' (p. 614). Barnett (2011) further reflects upon Tinto's comment regarding 'integration as a sense of competent membership' (p. 200). She elaborates by defining competence as 'a sense of possessing the knowledge and skills needed for success in the college environment', and membership as 'a sense of belonging or being a part of the college community' (Barnett, 2011, p. 200). An additional point to consider here is Tinto's (1997) statement that 'participation in a collaborative or shared learning group enables students to develop a network of support' (p. 613). He concludes this summation by suggesting that it 'helps bond students to the broader social communities of the college while also engaging them more fully in the academic life of the institution' (Tinto, 1997, p. 613). Winter College amply demonstrates sound educational practices and an unusual degree of interest in the integration of students' academic and personal lives, a factor which is evidently felt and appreciated by the students, who felt free to come to lecturers with a variety of problems, not only those that pertained strictly to academics.

'How do student intentions and social integration influence student persistence?'

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- Student intentions to study successfully are shown in their pre-entry commitments which influenced their persistence. The pre-entry goals (Tinto, 1997) with which students enter college usually include the intention to complete the course and are often motivated by parental support. The intentions of several students who chose Winter College and particular courses of study were influenced by family and parents. Pleasing and not disappointing family became a major source of motivation and strengthened the intention to persist. Boeren et al. (2010) cite an observation made by Bourdieu in this regard: 'As Bourdieu (1973) showed in his work, the parental environment is an important place for transferring cultural values, which significantly influence subsequent educational and career choices' (p. 7). The findings in this study bear evidence of this.

- Student social integration through participation leads to persistence. Such student intentions are impacted by psychological factors such as personal drive and the need to be useful. Involvement in college activities such as community projects, a strong sense of personal drive and the need to be useful have the capacity to motivate students to persist, especially when they realise that they have the ability to enrich the lives of others. In listening to the participants in this study, I found that the mindset of some was strongly shaped by the desire to add value to the lives of others. Several were motivated by personal goals such as the desire for self-improvement – especially since so many were from disadvantaged backgrounds – and also by a sense of community obligation. Boeren et al. (2010) discuss this psychological factor by referring to Keller's (1987) concept of motivation as mentioned in my conceptual framework.

The notion of personal motivation was a strong factor in the lives of these international students. While Tinto (1987) does not spend pay much attention to this aspect, he does recognise its presence in the lives and experiences of students. His model covers this aspect under the broader concept of social integration and pre-entry attributes, such as family background. Social integration, Tinto (1993) states, 'centres around the daily life and personal needs of the various members of the institution' (p. 106). Further, he notes that it refers to the ability of the students to integrate into the operation of the institution by engaging in social activities (Tinto, 1993). Such an integration of personal goals and social

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integration into the life of the college was demonstrated by many of the participants in this study because of their strong desire to make the most of their studies and serve their greater purpose, as they understood it.

- Student intentions to participate in extra-curricular activities facilitates social integration and increases persistence. Tinto (1987) proposes that student participation forges friendships, stating that 'student participation in extra-curricular activities often leads to friendships that extend well beyond those formal social activities' (Tinto, 1987). This was the case at Winter College, where most participants felt more 'at home' after they had made friends as a result of involvement in extra-curricular activities. Tinto (1993) recognised this when he wrote about the relationship between the 'social and academic systems of an institution' (p. 106-108). Tinto (1987) addresses 'competent membership' (Barnett 2010, p. 200), a term which Barnett (2010) explains as a sense of belonging which is developed by the students when they receive personal attention and support, which students seem to receive at Winter College. In my understanding, the term 'competent membership' captures the sense of social and academic acceptance and belonging experienced by students who become involved in the life of the institution.

- Students' intentions to attend the college of their choice enhances social integration and raised persistence. Tinto (1997) discussed social, out-of-class connections and asserted that these help to secure the academic involvement of students. In this way he affirmed the relationship between student intentions and social integration in relation to academic or college involvement. The students who chose Winter College were, in many cases, motivated by their values and ideals which seemed to be reflected in the ethos of the college. The Christian values which they expected to find helped with their decision. The social environment from which they came also had an impact on their choice of institution. Tinto (1993) advocates the view that 'commitments indicate the degree to which individuals are committed both to the attainment of those goals (goals and commitments) and to the institution into which they gain entry (institutional commitment) (p. 115). Here we note the student's intention to attend a college of choice. Participants in this study were committed to their college of choice because it reflected their own mindset and aspirations.

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'What are the relationships between institutional commitments, academic integration and student persistence?'

- There is a strong relationships between institutional commitments and social and academic integration and persistence. Tinto (1997) declares that there is a distinct relationship between social and academic integration. He also notes as a finding in his 1997 study that where social and academic worlds meet, collaborative learning occurs and fulfils both the academic and social needs of students (Tinto, 1997, p. 613). It was clear from participants' comments that the more they were involved in the social life of the institution, the more motivated they were to persist with their studies. This was particularly evident in the students who said they had frequent out-of-class contact with their lecturers. An overwhelming majority of the participants felt that the college had made a special effort to achieve the objective of enhancing their commitment by encouraging both social and academic involvement. They were motivated to spend more time with their academic work as a result. Tinto (1993) made it very clear that 'the character interactive of the model (Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure) serves … to highlight the important dynamic interplay between social and intellectual components of student life' (Tinto, 1993, p. 120). In other words, influences from the social sphere of the student, which particularly includes the home, play a major role in the life of student and their desires to persist. In describing their institutional experiences, participants mentioned that they were made to feel welcome and at home. 'Home' represents a sense of belonging, and the desire to feel 'at home' was experienced by most of the interviewed students. Boeren et al. (2010) concur with the idea that the social world of the student, in particular the home, plays an important role in shaping the intellectual life of the student. Boren et al (2010) refer to the socio-economic backgrounds of students in relation to the educational attainment of parents. They go a step further and make this assertion: 'In addition to the parents' educational attainment level, statistics show that a person's own educational attainment has an even greater impact on the decision to participate in adult education activities' (Boeren et al. 2010, p.7).

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5.4 Recommendations

The research findings above lead to the following recommendations.

a) The college ought to strengthen its institutional commitments to improve academic integration. A formalised mentoring programme could improve academic integration. Improvement of financial assistance could facilitate academic integration and persistence.

b) The college management should evaluate its institutional commitments by revisiting the idea of structured support groups for students where faculty members are involved to create greater academic integration. This, along with programmes of support on a more regular basis, would boost faculty validation and may enhance student persistence.

c) The college staff should consider student intentions an important factor in facilitating academic integration and student persistence. The college management should facilitate processes through which student intentions are addressed through the curriculum. This could improve academic integration and student persistence. All college staff members should take a greater interest in student intentions and should increase persistence levels which are influenced by a host of psychosocial factors. Personal drive and community engagement should be recognised and rewarded where possible. In contrast to this, demotivating factors such as financial burdens should be significantly reduced to allow students greater levels of focus on social and academic involvement in the activities of the institution. This issue has to be considered as significant as a means to enhance student persistence.

d) The college should strengthen its institutional commitments to integrate faith and learning more effectively into its programme in order to improve social and academic integration and thus enhance student persistence.

e) The college should expand its institutional commitment to social integration by encouraging greater levels of participation and involvement in activities such as the debating society, the campus choir, cultural days and variety shows where students display and introduce their cultures, hobbies and talents to the college community.

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5.5 New theoretical insights and perspectives

'What are the relationships between student intentions, institutional commitments, social integration, academic integration and student persistence?'

In my research I found that student intentions, institutional commitments, social integration and academic integration unequivocally influence student persistence. Several factors within these components contribute differently to the eventual outcome of persistence. These factors constitute my theoretical insights and perspectives below.

Social integration and academic integration exist as two inseparable components in the process of attaining student persistence. Tinto (1997) asserts that the social, out-of-class connections or affiliations that students enjoy help to secure their academic involvement. Tinto (1982) alluded to this in his discussion of his early model when he clarified that 'it [the model] sought to focus attention upon the impact the institution itself has, in both formal and informal manifestations, upon the dropout behaviours of its own students' (Tinto, 1982, p. 688). Of course Tinto (1997) later redesigned his model to show how an outcome of student persistence may be produced. According to Tinto (1993), 'the social system of the college centres about the daily life and personal needs' of all those who make up the college community, but places emphasis on students. He then remarks that 'it is made up of those recurring sets of interactions among students, faculty and staff that take place largely outside the formal academic domain of the college' (Tinto, 1993, p. 106). While these social interactions take place outside of the classroom, they establish relationships between lecturers and students which impact their academic integration. I therefore assert that social and academic integration are two sides of a coin and together have a stronger impact on student persistence than either element would do alone.

Faculty validation which enhances institutional commitments is a form of social and academic interaction by staff members which influences students' intentions. The concept of faculty validation, which Tinto (1997) referred to in his conceptual framework and model, contributes to student persistence to a much larger degree than initially understood and accepted. Tinto (1993) explains it as a form of faculty-student interaction. In his consideration of the student's contact and interactions with staff, he suggests that such contact has an impact on how students feel about the institution's interest in them (Tinto, 1993). He concludes that this interaction influences the growth of the individual's commitment to the institution and that it can lead to persistence (Tinto,

1993, p. 117). Thus the role of staff, and the mentoring which takes place as a result of their ownership over their respective study programmes and inadvertently their students, plays a significant role in the individual student's decision to persist. Staff members who are committed to their roles as mentors can make a difference in the lives and the persistence of students. I found that students were faithful in their studies when they felt they had the support of, and received personal interest from faculty members, i.e. lecturing staff.

Practices of teaching and learning used by institutions have the capacity to reinforce the relationship between student intentions, institutional commitments, social integration, academic integration and student persistence. Tinto (2006) proposes that two areas which he describes as 'ripe for exploration' (p. 7) are linked to studies about the student and his relationship with the institution. The area of interest here is 'the effects of classroom practice upon student learning' (p. 7). He points out that classroom practice has a distinct relationship with persistence. The application of this assertion should lead to improvements in classroom practice, such as teaching methodology. Tinto (2006) explains that 'the growing body of research on the impact of learning communities on student retention stands out as having provided solid evidence of practices that enhances student retention' (p. 7).

While the integration of faith and learning as a practice is not new to the study of educational practices, the principle brings a new dimension to learning context which certainly advanced student persistence at Winter College. Furthermore, such an integration enables the lecturers to demonstrate the principles of their organisation. It also creates an avenue through which they can present their curriculum from the premise of their faith-based intellectual system without diminishing the value of the academic programme. In fact, the integration of personal faith and academic achievement seems to be a major driving force behind the high levels of student persistence at Winter College. The integration of faith and learning has a direct bearing on the kinds of relationships students enjoy with faculty and staff, manifesting in relationships that spill over from the academic and touch students at a deeper level than might ordinarily be the case. Among faculty members and students, this practice epitomises true education. Ellen G White, an acclaimed writer in the faith tradition to which Winter College subscribes, sums up what a 'true education' comprises in the following words:

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> True education means more than the pursual of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. (White, 1903, p. 13).

The identity and context of a college has much to do with the student's commitment to it. Tinto (1993) explains that intentions include the 'type of education and occupation desired' by the prospective student (p. 115). According to Tinto (1993), the student's commitment 'to the institution into which they gain entry … helps establish the initial conditions for subsequent interactions between the individual and other members of the institution' (p.115). The identity and context of the college thus influences the individual student to interact with others and therefore integrate into college life. Winter College attracts students who seek what it offers; a Christian environment, personalised attention which is both academic and personal or spiritual, and a place where students are made to feel 'at home'. It was mentioned under point 4.4 that the overwhelming majority of participants felt that the college made a special effort to achieve this objective, particularly at the start of the study programme. The high level of social engagement promoted by the college informed the students' institutional experiences. They were motivated to spend more time with their academic work as a result.

In as far as the student's relationship with the institution is concerned, 'involvement' may means more than has hitherto been understood. Involvement is not limited to participation, such as in extra-curricular activities, but includes active support such as listening and vocal encouragement. Tinto (1993) suggests that college associations, extra-curricular programmes and extramural sports are ways to provide opportunities for students to establish contact with other students, and this, he says, leads to possible 'incorporation into the life of the college' (p. 99). When he explains the social system of the college, Tinto (1993) suggests that it 'centres around the daily life and personal needs of the various members of the institution, especially the students' (p. 106). He explains it as 'the recurring interactions that takes place outside the formal academic domain of the college' (p. 106). It needs to be understood that social integration refers specifically to the ability of the student to integrate into the daily operations of the institution, achieved through engaging in social activities (Tinto, 1993). The gathering of students in social contexts creates a sense of belonging (to a group and therefore to the institution) even though fostering a sense of belonging may not be the stated purpose of engaging in extracurricular activities. Other activities such as participating

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community improvement projects, social clubs, support structures and worship services may also fall into this category. Some of the participants were involved in some of these college-based community projects and activities and most participated in worship services. A number of students supported their peers and friends by attending their institution's sports/extra-curricular teams to cheer from the sidelines. Others were involved by association, such as when they got involved in a variety of ways with specific institutional events, projects or activities. Students at Winter College are not all directly involved in the extra-curricular activities of the institution but many are involved as by-standers and supporters of the campus activities.

5.6 Conclusion

Several interesting findings emanate from this study which are not mentioned in the literature reviewed. These observations could be used to inform other researchers in their studies. First, it becomes clear that social integration plays a significant role in the student's ability to persist with studies. The Winter College social and academic environment deliberately nurtured strong social bonds and relationships among students and between students and their lecturers. These contributed to the high level of commitment to studies and the fact that most either expressed directly or implied that dropping out was not even a consideration for them. Notable, too, was the aspect of mentoring in these students' relationships with lecturers, with many students feeling that lecturers went above and beyond what most lecturers might do. These mentor/mentee relationships evidently played a major role in their persistence. These relationships also served as significant contributors to the integration of the social and academic aspects of students' lives. Therefore, it may be stated that an institution, meaning its policies, structures and ethos, has the capability of enhancing persistence.

Several corollary insights are revealed here. First, integration can be shaped by an institution's relationship with its students. Second, students integrate more readily if the value of the integration of social and academic life is fully accepted and deliberately pursued by the institution. Third, various psychological factors play a role in student retention, each set of psychological factors being unique to the individual students. This personal and psychological aspect of the individual student needs to be acknowledged and understood, and used to generate motivation for persistence, whether by the student himself or by the institution. Fourth, personal influences, such as family,

religion and background, matter for persistence. They should be looked at as factors which can either enhance or detract from student persistence. A final observation is that there may be much to be learned from further study on the nature of student-teacher (lecturer) relationship, and what constitutes the ideal blend of academic and personal support.

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APPENDICES

INTERVIEW GUIDE   **APPENDIX A**

Profile

1. Name & Surname: _____

2. Contact details: Phone Numbers: Home: _____

                                      Mobile: _____

3. Age: (encircle) 20 – 25 ; 25 – 30 ;   30

4. Gender: _____

5. Nationality: _____

6. Race: _____

7. Marital Status: Married: _____   Single: _____   Divorced: _____

8. Religion: _____   Church Membership: _____

9. Highest school level pass: _____ School Certification: _____

10. Post School qualifications: _____

11. Source of Income (if any): _____

12. Current Employment Status: Employed: ☐

                                   Unemployed: ☐

13. Income Category (if applicable):

      Below R10 000   R10 000 – R20 00   R20 000 – R30 000   Above R40 000

14. Course currently registered for: (Degree, Diploma, etc.) _____

15. University/College you are currently registered with: _____

16. Year of study: (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th)   _____

17. Year first Registered: _____

18. Period(s) of deregistration (if any): _____

19. Reason(s) for Study: _____

    _____

Experiences as an international student

20. When did you register at Helderberg College for this first time?
21. When did you start the programme for which you are currently registered at the College?
22. Did the College make a special effort to welcome you as an international student?
23. If so, what were these efforts?
24. What kind of challenges are you experiencing as an international student?
25. What improvements can be made by the College management and staff to address your challenges?

'Dropping out', support and student persistence

26. Who provides the most support to your success as a student - your family, friends, lecturers, friends at college?
27. What kind of support do they provide?
28. If you considered 'dropping out' who would you seek advice from?
29. Why do you think that she/he would be able to provide you with good advice?
30. Have you ever missed classes because of a personal crisis, and were helped by a lecturer to 'catch up' with your academic work?

Peer group interactions, language barriers and integration

31. What has contributed most to you feeling part of the campus student community?
32. In which social activities do you participate?
33. In which ways do your level of English language skills influence the way in which you interact with other students?
34. How did the College assist with developing your English communication skills?
35. How did the South African students react when you could not communicate clearly in English?
36. In which ways did your increased participation make you feel more 'at home' in the College?

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Student intentions and persistence

37. As an international student, why did you choose to study at Helderberg College?
38. Does the College offer a particular academic programme that attracted your attention?
39. If so, what is particularly attractive about this academic programme?
40. How many hours per day do you spend on your studies?
41. Have you successfully completed your studies each year?
42. Are you married, and do you have a family?
43. Does your family live with you?
44. Will you return to your home country after studying at Helderberg College?
45. If you do not wish to return to your home country, in which country would you like to work?

Institutional commitments and student persistence

46. Does the College provide financial support for your studies?
47. Does this cover all your expenses in ways that would ensure the successful completion of your studies?
48. Does the College provide housing and meals and is it adequate to ensure the successful completion of your studies?
49. What other kinds of support does the institution provide?
50. Do you think that the academic programme enable you to meet the requirements for employment in the Church? Explain why you feel this way.
51. Have you ever thought about 'dropping out' of the programme because you found communication in English, difficult?
52. If yes, what stopped you?
53. Are your lecturers committed to make English Language communication more manageable so that you can complete your studies successfully? Elaborate on your answer.
54. What improvements could the lecturers include in order to make English Language more manageable?

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FACULTY OF EDUCATION

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Email: vnomlomo@uwc.ac.za

LETTER OF PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH   **APPENDIX B**

(Name and address of Institution)

Dear Sir

Request for permission to conduct research

I herewith wish to request permission to conduct research at your institution.

I am a registered student for a Masters programme in Adult Learning and Global Change at the University of the Western Cape. As a requirement I am expected to write a research paper on a relevant topic.

I currently serve as deputy principal at Good Hope Adventist High School, an institution under the Cape Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Over many years I have developed a close association with your College by participating in the institution's activities. Over time I have observed that foreign students experience few difficulties in completing their studies. This has attracted my attention and I would therefore like to investigate 'student intentions and goals' and 'academic integration' that enable students, to succeed in their studies.

For my investigation I would like to select 20 foreign students who are in their 3rd year of Theology Studies. I would like to conduct interviews with participants using an interview guide. Their insights could potentially inform the teaching and learning strategies that could enable South African students to complete their studies as successfully as foreign students. I will provide each participant with an Information Letter which conveys information about my research study. I will also request participants to complete a consent form prior to the interview. All information which I obtain will be considered confidential.

I trust that my request will meet your favourable consideration.

Yours in Christian Education

R De Buys

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INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS   **APPENDIX C**

Dear _____

My name is Romeo De Buys. I am a student at the University of the Western Cape currently involved in a Master's programme in Adult Learning and Global Change.

Over many years I have developed a close association with your College by participating in the institution's activities. Over time I have observed that foreign students like yourselves experience few difficulties in completing their studies. This has attracted my attention and therefore I would like to investigate 'student intentions and goals' and 'academic integration' that enable students, like yourselves, to succeed in your studies.

You are among the 20 international students whom I have selected as participants for my research study. I will conduct interviews with participants and present you with questions which I have included in an interview guide. Your insights could potentially inform the teaching and learning strategies that could enable South African students to complete their studies as successfully as foreign students.

I will maintain the principle of confidentiality by not divulging any information related to the research. When reporting on the findings of the study, all participants will be anonymous. To this end I will use pseudonyms to replace real names of participants and use a fictitious name to conceal the identity of the institution.

Your participation will be voluntary and you may withdraw at any time during the research and/or interview process. Before the interview commences, I will present you with a 'Consent Form' and request that you read, and sign it.

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I trust that the information provided here is clear and provides an understanding of my research study. I thank you in advance for your consideration to participate.

If you wish to contact me for more information, my contact details are as follows:

Email Address: romeod361@gmail.com ; Contact Number: 0835628154

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

Supervisor: Professor Z Groener; Email: zgroener@uwc.zc.za ; Telephone (Office): 021 9592801

Yours in education

R De Buys

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PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM   **APPENDIX D**

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project. I kindly ask that you read through the information provided below and sign where required.

I, _____ herewith consent to participate in the research study. I have read and understood the information letter and the purpose of this consent form.

- I consent to be interviewed
- I give permission that the interview can be recorded with an electronic recording device
- I understand that my responses will be used as part of the research paper
- I understand that I may withdraw from this research project without providing an explanation

Participant signature: _____   Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____   Date: _____

Please note that this form must be signed and returned to the researcher.

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APPENDIX E: TINTO'S SUGGESTED MODEL LINKING CLASSROOMS, LEARNING, AND PERSISTENCE (1997)

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