Access, barriers to participation and success among mature students at a University in the Western Cape

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Abstract

This research study is informed by the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013) in which the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) sets out its focus and priorities concerning higher education and training. The main purpose of this study is to find out how mature students participate despite the barriers that they experience while participating in post-school education and to offer an opportunity to achieve greater clarity about the way that the students who exercised agency overcame the barriers that they faced and in turn, achieved success.

Theoretical perspectives on agency and structure (Giddens, 1984) (Archer 2003) and barriers to participation (Rubenson and Desjardins, 2009) provide the analytical lens through which I explore the ways that adult students assert their agency while accessing higher education and how they mediate barriers to participation to achieve success.

The nature of this study has urged me to use the qualitative research approach with a semi-structured interview together with an interview guide as the research instrument to interview 17 participants. This method provides greater depth and detail of attitudes, feelings and behaviours. Findings revealed that the mature students acted with intentionality which was underpinned by a belief in their academic capabilities to succeed.

The data confirmed that the participants had responded to circumstances that were not of their own making. The students shared the conviction that once qualified, they would experience an enhanced purpose in society and have a better quality of life, for themselves and for their families.

In conclusion, access to higher education and the development of individual and group agency is central to the well-being of nations as well as individuals. As a developing democracy, exercising agency is vital to the development of our country.

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Declaration

I declare that the research paper Access, barriers to participation and success among mature students at a University in the Western Cape is my own work and has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other University. I am submitting this paper in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters in Adult Education and Global Change. All the sources I have used or quoted from have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Gillian Williams

Signed:

G.A Williams

Date:

02 August 2021



Glossary of Terms

DHET: Department of Higher Education and Training

B. Ed: Bachelor's in Education

NDP: National Development Plan

MALG: Masters in Adult Learning and Global Education

TVET: Technical Vocation Education and Training

RMF: Rhodes Must Fall

FMF: Fees must Fall



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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

In this section I introduce my research study. It provides the background and context and outlines the rationale, research problem, aims and the research questions of this study.

Background and context

This research study focuses on access, participation and barriers to participation among mature students at a higher education institute in Cape Town, South Africa. This topic was of interest and relevance to me because I observed that mature students, despite their disadvantaged background and socio-economic circumstances, persevere and succeed in their studies.

This research study is informed by the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training 2013 of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in which it sets out its focus and priorities concerning higher education and training. Drawing from the National Development Plan 2030, the White Paper states that:

The National Development Plan outlines three main functions of universities. First, universities educate and provide people with high-level skills for the labour market. Second, they are the dominant producers of new knowledge, they assess and find new applications for existing knowledge, and they validate knowledge and values through their curricula. Third, they provide opportunities for social mobility and strengthen social justice and democracy, thus helping to overcome the inequities inherited from our apartheid past (DHET, 2013, p. 27).

This National Development Plan (NDP) projected for 2030 enables the DHET to shape its impending plans for higher education which it sets out in the White Paper (DHET, 2013). The DHET's objective is to create access to quality post-school education which they see as foremost in fighting inequality, a major barrier to access and participation in adult learning in society in South Africa.

The South African government, in its National Development Plan (NDP) (National Planning Commission, August 2012), projected for 2030, acknowledges the role that adult learning plays in eradicating poverty and providing better economic and social prospects for its citizens. Quality post-school education is listed as one of the top five imperatives of the NDP. However, tertiary education in South Africa remains exclusive, with only a certain percentage of South

African matriculants pursuing tertiary education, and few entrants successfully completing undergraduate degrees.

The role of adult learning and participation in adult education, as stated by Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), is vital in promoting the welfare of the population. Notable scholars in adult participation in education, like Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), assert that there has been minimal research done within the global scholarly community about participation and barriers amongst mature students. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) in their studies, state that different perspectives between Nordic and non-Nordic countries are shared from the International Adult Literacy Survey as well as the Eurobarometer data. These results highlight the constraining and enabling elements to participation in these European countries and explain why certain groups participate more or less than others. I further refer to Giddens (1984) and Archer (2003) who focused on agents and agency. Archer (2003), a key theorist on the subject of agents and agency, asserted that agents could use their powers as a group and could use their collective power to impede or facilitate agency. Giddens (1984) in turn stated that "action, meaning and subjectivity should be specified and how they might relate to notions of structure and constraint" (1984, p. 2). Giddens' and Archer's global perspectives yield insight into the way that social practices impact participation in adult learning.

As a developing democracy, South Africa has a significant and growing inequality gap to address. If more was known about the way that South African mature students access higher education and the way that mature students participate as well as the barriers that they experience while participating in post-school education, then greater clarity could be achieved about the way that the mature students exercise agency while dealing with the barriers faced while studying.

This research paper is aimed at generating insights about how mature students access higher education and to develop new theoretical insights about how these mature students were able to act as agents despite their disadvantaged backgrounds and circumstances as Archer (2003) and Luckett and Luckett (2009) propose.

Rationale

In this research study, I examine the access, barriers as well the successes of mature students who are studying towards an Education Degree (B. Ed and PGCE) and to find out how Rubenson and Desjardins' (2009) "Bounded Agency Model" and post-school education

assisted in helping them to overcome their circumstances. I investigated their successes so that I could identify what made them thrive and thus share the path that eradicated poverty and changed the lives of these mature students and the lives of their families.

The theoretical perspectives of the Nordic model of adult education (Rubenson and Desjardins, 2009) that emerge from this paper could contribute to the understanding of agency and how it helps to overcome structural, dispositional, and institutional barriers. The further aim of the study is to research the phenomenon of Nordic and non-Nordic welfare state regimes and how it can affect a person's capability to participate. Hitlin and Elder (2006) understood agency to be a universal trait but speculated as to why so few exercised this freedom. They argued that individual behaviour is not caused by society but rather by the perception that agents have of their social realities. Hitlin and Elder (2006) further identified that human agency was interpreted in different ways and have the "ability to initiate self-change" (p. 35). This study asks how international policy measures aid in overcoming both structurally and individually based barriers and in turn help us to understand the South African context and to use the information to benefit local students.

Investigating the barriers to participation of mature students in adult learning, in the South African context, is important to me because I have personally participated in adult learning after I had completed my first Diploma in Education. All my post-graduate studies have developed through adult learning. Collaboration with my peers while studying part-time as a mature student has given me a sense of belonging in a world of life-long learning and resulted in strengthening my ability and skills as a teacher and as a leader in the education community. The theoretical perspectives that emerge from this paper could contribute to the understanding of the way that agency helps to overcome structural, dispositional and institutional barriers.

Research problem

In its White Paper for Post School Education (2013) the government promotes the expansion of access to higher education, especially for disadvantaged people. Although the government has created institutional structures and allocated resources to facilitate such access, mature students in higher education encounter barriers to access and participation that undermine success. The research problem is embedded in the mismatch between government's structures

and resources, and the barriers to access and participation, experienced by students in higher education.

Luckett and Luckett (2009) propose that higher education students, despite their disadvantaged backgrounds, could exert agency in ways that enable them to succeed. This study investigates mature students' agency to overcome barriers to participation and provides insights into the mismatch between structure and agency.

Research aims

The aims of the study are to:

- 1. Investigate the relationships between access, barriers to participation and success among mature students in a higher education institution.
- 2. Generate new theoretical insights about the relationships between access, barriers to participation and success.

Research questions

The specific questions the research aimed to address are:

1. What are the relationships between access, barriers to participation and success among mature students' participation in the B. Ed programme?

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- 2. What constraints / barriers did mature students experience while studying?
- 3. How did mature students overcome these constraints / barriers / inhibitors?

Limitations

The potential for limitation of this study is that I am a part-time student in the Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change (MALC) programme and not a full-time member or student in the Education Faculty, which may create opportunity for interviewer bias. Ethical considerations are an attempt to overcome these limitations.

Anticipated findings

I have anticipated that this study could add value to the field of access, barriers to participation and involvement in adult learning. An understanding of adult learning and its barriers and successes will contribute to our knowledge and perceptions of this field. I expect that the

insights gained from this study could assist in developing strategies to improve access and participation for mature students at higher education institutes.

Overview of sections

In section 1, I provided the background and context of the study by explaining the rationale and outlining the research question, sub-questions and research aims which frames my research.

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

In Section 3, I present the description of the methodology and design of this research study which includes the research approach, selection of participants, data collection and data processing.

In Section 4, I present the data analysis and interpretation.

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

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SECTION 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this section I construct my conceptual framework in which I include theoretical concepts and perspectives I identified through a literature review. The main components of this conceptual framework are as follows: access to post-school education, barriers to participation, agency and structure. The main theories from which I draw these components are: Giddens (1984) and Archer (2003). Giddens (1984) focused on agents and agency and proposed that "to be a human being is to be a purposive agent, who both has reasons for his or her activities and is able, if asked, to elaborate discursively upon these reasons" (Giddens, 1984, p. 3). Archer (2003), a key theorist on the subject on agents and agency, asserted that agents could use their powers as a group and "have the generative power to impede or facilitate projects" arguing that agency is dependant "on the activation of their causal powers" (p. 7) or these powers to be exercised. Giddens (1984) also stated that "action, meaning and subjectivity should be specified and how they might relate to notions of structure and constraint" (1984, p. 2). Giddens' and Archer's perspectives yield insight into the way that social practices impact on

participation in adult learning, that such practices are recursive, helps researchers recognise how "agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible" (Giddens, 1984, p. 2) and how these agents recreate these actions with their deeds.

2.2 Agents and Agency

According to Hitlin and Elder (2006), there may never be an answer to the question of what constitutes human agency that satisfies all theorists. The aim of these social theorists is to present ideas and to provide a space for researchers to understand the phenomenon. Hitlin and Elder (2006) draw upon the nature of human agency and try to define the phenomenon, seeking to investigate agentic action in various circumstances and the impact that it has on the agents' life courses.

In theory, it is claimed that individuals can act at any time. Even those without power can make decisions about their actions. Hitlin and Elder (2006) thought of agency as a universal trait shared by all people but speculated as to why so few exercised this freedom. They argued that "society does not "cause" individual behaviour in a deterministic way" but agents "make decisions based on reflection and the internalization of their social realities" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 37). Hitlin and Elder (2006) identified the different ways that human agency was interpreted and citing "Alexander (1992, 1993) who "focuses on moments of freedom", and "Thoits (2003)" who "discusses the ability to initiate self-change" (p. 35). It seems evident from these agentic actions of self-change and that they support Archer (2003).

According to Hitlin and Elder (2006), agency is a central concept that affects individuals and the way that it influences their paths. Hitlin and Elder's research on agentic action showed that agency implies freedom of movement and the ability to initiate self-change. Agency can even be present in those without power. They cite Hegel, Sarte and Goffman, who discussed the fact that even slaves and mental patients can make autonomous decisions. They reasoned that society does not cause individual behaviour but rather reflects social realities. Hitlin and Elder (2006) also believed that people who are better off socio-economically have more social opportunities to structure a better life for themselves than those with fewer prospects. In his study, Gecas (2003) asserted that having control over one's circumstances allows agents to make things happen as opposed to those who believe that they are powerless and cannot make

things happen. Bandura (2006) concurs with these researchers, stating that people are more than just bystanders in their lives; they are contributors in their life-course.

I now examine agency and the capacity of the agent to be an active participant in changing their life circumstances rather than a product of the environment that they are born into.

Giddens's (1979) theory of structure and agency is widely discussed in the literature and has given rise to many ideas and models that expand upon it. Various dimensions of the concept of agency are examined by Giddens (1979):

The concept of agency as I advocate it here, involving 'intervention' in a potentially malleable object world, relates directly to the more generalised notion of *Praxis* Second, it is a necessary feature of action that, at any point in time, the agent 'could have acted otherwise': either positively in terms of attempted intervention in the process of 'events in the world', or negatively in terms of forbearance (pp. 55-56).

Giddens (1984) indicated that actions cannot transpire unless the agent intends for them to materialise. Giddens (1984) also argued that certain acts occur unintentionally but these do not constitute agency, stating "that agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place" (p. 9). He points out that social practices engaged in over time, rather than individual experiences, and societal entities influence the way that the agent constitutes acts of agency. He states that the individual is shaped by his or her environment and the recursive habits and practices of society assume this quality of reflexivity, where actions are performed without conscious thought.

Giddens (1984) refers to the conscious and unconscious motivation of the agent as part of his or her socialisation and learning experiences. He sees conscious and unconscious motivation as the difference between the agents' ability to say what needs to be done, and what is simply done. The historical theory posited by Giddens (1984) is that agency creates events that allow agents to act differently from what might be expected and thus influence their own circumstances and improve aspects of their lives.

Agency enables people to act autonomously, and yet many theorists point to the role played by structure in either enhancing or impeding the autonomous nature of the individual. The

structure versus agency debate is posed in the question by Archer (2003) as to how structure influences agency. She questioned whether an individual could ever act as a free agent or was mostly influenced by social structures and his/her environment. Archer (2003) examined the interplay between the two concepts, holding that that social realists did not offer any satisfactory answers. She unpacked these concepts in her investigation of "Bhaskar's 1989 Transformational Model of Social Action" (Archer, 2003, p. 3) discussing social conditioning and the role that social conditioning plays in the relative strength of the two causal powers. The two powers, are, of course, the way that social structures impinge upon the agency of individuals and the fact that individuals do possess agency and a measure of autonomy.

Archer (2003) further explained that structural properties can affect the agent and either

Archer (2003) further explained that structural properties can affect the agent and either constrain or enable the agent. She argued that only when one investigates the way that people pursue agency, can one determine their constraints and enablements. One must investigate historical factors to determine to what extent structural objectivity and agentic subjectivity influences the agent and their relative levels of agency. Once this is considered and understood, researchers may be able to comprehend the way that constraints and enablements condition the way that agents act. Giddens (1984) did not deny that social structures influence the individual's ability to change their circumstances. Archer (2003) agreed with Giddens' (1984) theory. For both Giddens (1984) and Archer (2003), social structure was replicated and changed by the individual's sense of agency. Archer (2003) was however part of a much broader group of scholars who offer a wider scope of theoretical ideas.

Agents exercise agency when, as adults they access education upon admission to a place of learning. However, the agency demonstrated when individuals access education, they may nonetheless experience dispositional and structural barriers. People exercise different forms of agency to overcome the barriers they face. The way that people achieve success is a direct result of the way that they exercise agency, both before and after these barriers present themselves. Archer (2003) supports this idea by stating that agents create agency to achieve their goals. Giddens (1984) points to the ability of adult learners to believe in their ability and in turn to work towards a set goal, despite obstacles.

It is evident from the citations above that human agency is a contested concept. Hitlin and Elder (2006) found that agency was a useful sociological concept. They questioned whether one is born with it or whether it is nurtured. Everybody is born with a sense of agency. However, the way that it is exercised in the face of structural and other barriers, determines the way that it

limits or empowers people. The core concept of agency manifests itself in multiple ways. In the following sections I attempt to discuss these concepts of agency in greater detail.

2.3 Modes of agency

According to Bandura (2006), social cognitive theory differentiates amongst three modes of agency. These modes are individual agency, proxy agency and collective agency. Daily human performances depend on all three modes. Individual agency allows agents to affect their own lives and circumstances. Despite trying to change their direct circumstances, people do not always have control over their environment. In such cases, this is when the agent exercises social or proxy agency. People may also influence others to act on their behalf or perform a joint action as part of a group to enact change. This collective agency allows the group to pool resources, knowledge, and skills. An example of this collective agency was shared by students who worked together with tutors to improve academic writing skills as well as computer literacy abilities. They also jointly used library resources to enrich their learning experiences. This made a difference to these mature students who did not know how to use resources at the beginning of their degree. In their final year, they in turn acted as tutors to other students. The students interviewed were proud of these successes that they had achieved over their four-year study period.

2.4 Agency, intentions and intentionality

When one thinks ahead, one acts with forethought and intentionality. In considering intentions and intentionality and the way that these impacts on the agency exercised on the individual, one may refer to Giddens (1984) who stated that the intention of the individual to act as a perpetrator in their own circumstances allows them to act and make a difference at any phase of their life. Giddens (1984) emphasised that agency is made up not only on the intention to act, but to do things required.

Giddens (1984) stated that people can alter their life's course when pursuing their goals and Archer (2003) presented a similar view stating "that only people possess the intentionality to define and design courses of action in order to achieve their own ends" (p. 6). I refer to Nina's act of intentionality, a student whose intention was to change her status from cleaner to student by wearing her varsity jacket, and later to teacher. She was no longer invisible. Giddens (1984) characterised agency as "an act which its perpetrator knows, or believes, will have a particular quality or outcome and where such knowledge is utilized by the author of the act to achieve

this quality or outcome" (p. 10). Bandura (2001) stated that when one intentionally makes things happen, one is an agent. Thus, it incorporates both intention and the ability to act.

Bandura (2001) stated that agency goes beyond intentions and intentionality when forward planning "manifests itself in many different ways" (p. 7). When students set goals and foresee the possible results of their actions, they are able to avoid detrimental behaviours and act on the goals that they have set. This may be perceived as forethought which allows students to "motivate themselves and guide their actions in anticipation of future events" (p. 7). Bandura (2001) further explains that forethought and planning impart direction, meaning and coherence to the life of the individual. As the mature student advances in life, they may act with intentionality and show forethought and thus structure their lives so that they experience development and change. Bandura (2001) claimed that the agent should not only think ahead but should motivate themselves as well. Once an agent sets an action plan, they have to act so that they achieve their goals.

Bandura (2001) points out that agency does not only include making choices but includes plans of action to shape the world of the agent. Self-regulation, as described by Bandura (2001) consists of "self-monitoring, performance self-guidance via personal standards, and corrective self-reactions" (p. 8). For this reason, I investigated the intentions of mature students, like Harry who who selected a course of study with the education faculty of a university and whether they achieved their desired outcomes.

Banduras' observations prompted my investigation to find out whether and to what extent the individuals concerned were intent on moving ahead and whether their agentic acts were a consequence of their motivation. I felt that it would be interesting and worthy of studying to see how mature students as agents acted with intentionality and as intentional perpetrators make a difference in their lives.

2.5 Agency and actions

This section discusses agency, actions and intervention. Agents exercise agency when making interventions in their own lives. This research paper aimed to uncover whether this agency had the desired outcome for the agents who participated, and to further investigate whether and to what extent the agency was used to achieve their goals. The goal was thus to investigate not only how mature students intervene in their own lives but whether this intervention worked for the agent and how it impacted on their environment. Did this intervention create a change in

their own lives, the lives of their family members and society as a whole? This is verified by a mature students' actions when enrolling in the teaching programme because she needed to change her family's reality for good. Her daughter needed a better example and professionals are viewed with respect in her community. She could not let the cycle of abuse, poverty and drug addiction continue for her 11- year- old daughter.

Hitlin and Elder (2006) endorsed the idea that some people have more agency than others, and that human agency operates on how things happen rather than what things are. Bandura (2001) stated "that people are not only agents of action but self-examiners of their own functioning" (p. 10). According to Hitlin and Elder (2006), when people reflect on their own actions, they are able to uncover their own internal motivators to add meaning to their lives. Adult students pursuing further educations, can then engage in such reflection, and can determine whether their actions have had the desired effect. From general observations, it is apparent that people's actions can achieve their anticipated outcomes, which in turn leads to optimism and the ability to press on despite hindrances and temporary failure. The nature of human agency and the way that people are socialised into believing their own views is a concept worth investigating. Part of the aim of this study was to find out how agentic intervention impacts on the lives of mature students and how they overcome barriers that limit their participation in adult learning.

2.6 Agency, capability and capacity

In this section I discuss the individual agentic capabilities of mature students. The capacity for agency is related to both actions of resistance and change, and to the individual ability to create lasting action, as Hitlin and Elder (2006) noted. These scholars stated that these self-perceived capacities allow the individual to hold the belief that their current actions will have a positive impact at a later stage. The researchers suggested that the ability to make plans well in advance of action is not an exercise of agency per se, but a reasonable way to increase one's sense of agency.

Without the belief in one's capacity to act successfully, the agent will not consider themselves a success. These scholars proposed that agents act successfully when they can "deliberate reflexively through internal conversations and decide how to respond or react to objective circumstances that are not of their own making" (p. 3). The purpose of the interviews conducted in this study was to understand the way in which mature students reflect, react and respond to the social structures they faced and to find out how they exercised self-efficacy to aid with the act of agency.

Self-efficacy is an example of individual capability, as defined by Gecas (2003). Gecas (2003) stated that self-efficacy is a fundamental capacity for building a self—concept and having a sense of personal value. It related closely to the idea that the individual has the capacity for a degree of mastery over their environment and can reflect upon their actions. Hitlin and Elder (2006) expressed a similar view, stating that self-efficacy is the confidence to act for oneself and the unwavering belief in a positive result. These perspectives on self-efficacy highlight the capability of mature students and the way that personal capability affects the individual's ability to act with self-agency. Hitlin and Elder (2006) refer to Gecas (2003), who identified the capability of self-worth as an essential means of self-agency. These scholars stated that Gecas (2003), drawing on Bandura, defined having a sense of personal value "as having control over one's circumstances, and being capable of carrying out actions to produce intended effects" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 41).

Another aspect of agency is planfulness as a capability, a concept developed by Clausen and cited in Hitlin and Elder (2006). The latter scholars claimed that planfulness is an aspect of agency and could guide one's life course. Clausen (1991) supported the idea that adolescents, who measure high on this construct, achieve higher success in adulthood than those who lack this quality. Hitlin and Elder (2006) stated that having a sense of value and worth gives the individual the ability to make long range plans and successfully display self-efficacy. They concluded that agency represents the human ability to influence or alter their life course.

This study investigates the way that mature students exercised agency so that they were capable of realising their long-term plans. External rewards are not the only factor that motivate agents, the ability to shape and regulate one's circumstances and future are also powerful motivators. In this research, I explored how social support from their community and families affected the students' sense of agency and whether this positive relationship was empowering to these mature students. Affirming relationships are helpful in influencing human agency. Cate shared her family's belief in her and their support both emotionally and financially. This encouraged her to study persevere. Hitlin and Elder (2006) stated that agency can represent individual differences as well as achieve success within bounded social structures. Delving into the beliefs and perceptions of the students, through the data analysis, will be valuable in order to find out whether and to what extent their beliefs influenced their actions, and whether their actions had a positive outcome.

2.7 Agency and resilience

According to Makoelle and Malindi (2015 resilience is one's ability to achieve a constructive result despite adversity, to forge ahead despite unfavourable conditions and to keep recovering even after the continuous distress.

Self-efficacy, which builds resilience, is defined by Gecas (2003), as fundamental to the self-concept. If an individual has a strong sense of value and self-worth, they become more resilient. According to Bandura (1989) there is enough literature attesting to well-being and personal efficacy leading to a sense of personal belief. Resilience may be built despite social circumstances filled with barriers and difficulties. Despite "impediments, failures, adversities, setbacks, frustrations, and inequities", the belief in oneself is vital and the will to persevere as well as the individual's ability to maintain their self-assurance is of great value in achieving one's personal goals and ambitions. The relationship of self-efficacy and optimism thus plays a key role in the way that agents cope with intimidating tasks. This combination enables one to master one's environment and reflect upon one's actions. The factors that enable personal resilience are an indicator of the probable success of an individual in undertaking any project and were deemed worthy of examining as part of this study. This is evident in the actions of a refugee student who knew that he could master academia but needed support and reached out to others and deemed himself worthy of those who supported him.

2.8 Agency and alternative courses of action

Taking an alternative course of action allows individuals to get the most out of circumstances that are not of their making and to create their own course of action when obstacles arise (Archer 2003). It permits the agent to find alternative outcomes.

Powell and McGrath (2013) stated that the need for learners to be heard is not just a South African issue and that very little data is available that expresses the views of the learners, about adult learning. According to these scholars, the history of colonialism and apartheid and the effect of global capitalism on the South African labour market has shaped the historical process of engagement in skills development and post school education. Powell and McGrath (2013) wished to extend their research beyond that found in literature, which is limited to

understanding the structural obstacles that learners face. Students' agentic acts as alternative courses of action could lead to inventive aspirations for a better life.

2.9 Agents, agency and structural transformation

Resistance, the capacity to resist and to create change, may be a form of social transformation. Resistance is an agentic act and can aid in social transformation. However, according to Giddens (1984), agency is needed, but not insufficient on its own to create resistance to social pressures. In the article, "From Marikana to #feesmustfall: The Praxis of Popular Politics", Naicker (2016) examined the way that student protests influenced popular politics in South Africa in 2015. The researcher explained that the way that universities are currently structured allows only a few privileged people access to higher education and that this limited access maintains the academic status quo. She remarked that these unchanging and unchallenged advantages played a role in the student protests at the time. Naicker (2016) explored the way that the failed attempts at transformation created growing uncertainty in higher education institutions and led to resistance as agentic action on the part of the protestors.

Empowerment as a form of agency implies that the agent can create social and structural transformation by exercising agency and influencing their immediate environment. Kipo (2013) confirmed his understanding of agency by drawing on Sewell explaining that "all human beings have the capacity for agency" and "that all members of society exercise some amount of agency in the conduct of their daily activities or lives" (p. 19). These scholars shared the belief that since we are all born with an aptitude for action, we can influence or control structures. Kipo (2013) asserted that power relations are based on the individuals' capacity to make a difference to their own lives and the lives of others (p. 19). Agency creates empowerment when it places resources within the reach of the actor or agent and thus enables them "to apply them to new contexts" (Sewell 1992, p. 20). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency "as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 970). Structural transformation through student agency and the empowerment of mature students can help "actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Acts of agency leads to social transformation when agents are empowered with new knowledge, schemas and resources and shape their lives and history. In the South African context, exploring the way

that agency transforms both for the mature student and society, and finding out whether the students were able to influence structures which they find themselves, is worthy of research.

2.10 Agency and future decisions

Agency enables humans to rise above their environmental influences and to act in a way that shapes their lives, current circumstances, and future decisions (Bandura, 2006). Social systems are created over time and influence the way that people live, work, socialise and are educated. It has an underlying influence on everything in society. Human abilities and quality of life have changed over time, and humans have exercised agency to shape their conditions and intentionally influence their circumstances. The essential forms of human agency, which have the greatest influence on human beings, are intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness.

Intentionality discusses the intentions of agents which shape their circumstances. The intention is the action plan that is put into place by agents in pursuit of improving or altering their lives. I aim to look into the collective endeavours (Bandura, 2006) of the mature student and to understand how intentionality made these students more than just products of their circumstances.

Forethought, according to Bandura (2006), is the setting of goals and the act of anticipating likely outcomes which motivate the efforts of the agent and the actions that create change. The agent visualises a change of circumstances guided by motivating possibilities such as improved job opportunities, advancement in society, increased salary, promotions, or simply a change in role within the family. Forethought allows the agent to put their plans into perspective and to "give meaning to one's life" (Bandura, 2006, p. 165).

Bandura (2006) claimed that self-reactiveness, the third agentic property, is a self-regulatory act that goes beyond intentions and thinking ahead. It involves forming a course of action and acting on it. This research looks more closely at the gap between thought and action. An action brought about by a participant who found that work in his field was scarce and decided to become a teacher so that he could train people in his field.

Self-reflectiveness gives the agent an opportunity to examine their self-efficacy. This thought process allows the participant to reflect upon their plans and actions and to make changes where

and when needed. A question of interest in this study is the role that self-reflectiveness plays in shaping the behavioural and situational influences of the agents in the case, adult students.

Environmental influences could be affected by human agency and thus contribute to shaping the lives and circumstances of the individual.

2.11 Agency and structure

Archer (2003) acknowledged that there is no agreement about the relationship of structure and agency and whether one aspect is weaker or more dominant. Their causal powers are different and they each make separate inputs into the social outcomes of agency. An adequate thought process about the relationship between the two causal powers of agency and structures must be understood in order to recognise the way that structure affects agents and their ability to act.

Luckett and Luckett (2009) refer to Archer (2003) who identified the problem as the connection between structure and agency. This balance between the two elements interests me and prompts me to construct a conceptual framework to investigate the way that financially disadvantaged students access support programmes in higher education. I wanted to find out how mature students who act as agents, overcame structural barriers and constraints by examining the dynamics of their new identities that allow for transformation within students who wish to move out of their inherited structured contexts.

Other scholars in South Africa, such as Luckett and Luckett (2009) and Powell and McGrath (2013) have analysed agency in post–school education. They have questioned why students access education, and how they exercise agency when faced with constraints. These scholars adopted the theoretical approach of agency and structure in respect of access to post-school education. The particular structural barrier I investigate in this study is lack of finances, as it is relevant to the lives of the majority of South African adult students. Luckett and Luckett (2009) examined Archer's (2000) social realist theory that studied the philosophy of being and existing. Their thinking offered a different view from that of students as "victim of apartheid" and was an effort to counter this prevailing narrative (Luckett & Luckett, 2009, p. 2), a view with which I concur.

Luckett and Luckett (2009) indicated that these subjectively defined concerns cause agents to act on them and prioritise their need to engage with natural, practical and social orders of reality. Luckett and Luckett (2009) cited Archer who proposed that agents deliberate through self-talk when confronted with constraints or enablers. Through self-talk, agents can determine the way that they might respond to circumstances which they have not caused or created.

The researchers mentioned that Archer (2003) proposed the development of personal identity for an agent seeking access to education. Archer (2003) highlighted the fact that individuals need to answer various questions about what they want and how they might go about getting what they wanted. Luckett and Luckett (2009) promoted the idea that human agency creates prospects which enable people to change their circumstance through actions conducted individually or as a group. This collective action allows groups who critically reflect on their situation to change the society in which they find themselves, by fully realising their causal powers as agents.

This paper is aimed at researching the emergent powers that influence the learning of these mature students. The influence that structure and agency have on each other increases the explanatory power of each in relation to access to learning.

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2.12 Structure

A prominent scholar, Anthony Giddens (1984), conceptualised the idea of structuration. The key point in the theory of structuration is the connection between the person and society. Giddens (1984) suggested that structure and agency are two concepts in a mutual relationship. Social structures are created by the actions of people while their actions replicate the social structures. Sewell (1992) cites Giddens when he argues that the circumstances making up these structures may be thought of as having a "virtual existence" (p.8) that are put into practice in a variety of circumstances. Sewell (1992) maintains that agents are empowered by structures in the way that they mobilise their resources as well as how they use their knowledge to access these resources.

Giddens (1984) describes structures as "rules and resources", a concept which Sewell (1992) expand on. Sewell (1992) maintains that these complex rules and structures are an enactment of a "virtual existence" (p.6) in space and time and that structures are bound "not only by rules but by resources as well He does, however, critique Giddens whom he says is unclear in his conceptualisation and gives inadequate examples of the rules that bring about social systems.

Sewell (1992) expands the discussion by referring to Levi-Strauss who profoundly influenced anthropologists to conceive of rules as existing at different levels. Sewell (1992) further acknowledges that agents are empowered by structures that allow them to use what they have and to access the resources they need. Structure is not a fixed concept; it is vibrant thus making transformation possible and makes it possible for humans to shape their lives.

2.13 Bounded agency, structure and barriers to participation

The Bounded Agency model aids researchers to understand participation in adult learning. The main premise of this model is that individual agents employ resources to make changes in their lives. There are two aspects to this observation: a lack of resources which act as a constraint to the individual and the fact that the capability of the person making use of the resources may be constrained by self—imposed limitations. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) researched the Bounded Agency model, analysing data from several surveys and identifying three types of barriers that affect agentic action: situational, institutional and dispositional. They concluded that situational and institutional barriers were constant, dispositional barriers however, varied greatly.

Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) emphasised "the constraining and enabling elements to participation" (p.187) and used it to examine group participation. They further investigated the way that welfare state regimes access political resources.

Whether or not the constraints experienced in the South African context is a matter which requires investigation.

2.14 Barriers to participation in adult learning in post-school education

In this study I make use of Desjardins and Rubenson's (2009) Bounded Agency Model to look at government intervention, public policy frameworks and other structural barriers that may have influenced adult involvement in post-school education. The Bounded Agency Model is based on the hypothesis that government intervention, or the lack of it, influences the decisions by adult learners to participate in post-school education. Researchers agree that there are constraining and enabling factors that affect adult learning participation patterns. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) questioned to what extent barriers impact on adult participation in education and which elements play the largest role in hampering this participation.

Structural constraints, according to Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), are the most evident because they depend on the relationship between state and society. Welfare state institutional practices, as in the Nordic countries researched by Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), rely on policy practices which influence participation both negatively and positively, regarding adult education. It would thus be interesting to survey South African adult students to find out how policy practices and structures impact on their participation levels.

According to Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), who interviewed adult learners, lack of time and cost were the main reasons that some adults did not avail themselves of opportunities to further their education. These scholars point out, however, that adults would rather give socially acceptable answers to questions of this sort, as such responses may reflect better on them than the truth, which may include lack of self-confidence or other psycho-social reasons. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) go on to remark that situational barriers tended to dominate when they questioned their participants. Family and household related barriers also rated highly as constraining factors for adult learners. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) were of the view that the unwillingness to participate could also be perceived as a constraining factor. This unwillingness may be classified as a dispositional barrier and arises because of poor self-concept that may have developed in the adults over time. The adult learner, according to Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) has concerns about their ability to succeed giving them a negative attitude towards adult education. This attitude can be a distinct deterring factor to participation in adult education.

Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) acknowledge that adult education is vital. Constraints experienced by people directly affect the conditions they faced. Various constraints all factors can be contributors to these and can affect the dispositions of individuals. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) give examples of liquidity constraints and information constraints. The authors mention a variety of family-related barriers, job-related barriers, situational barriers and dispositional barriers in Nordic countries.

2.14.1 Structural barriers

MacKeracher, Suart and Potter (2006) suggest that "structural barriers are hard to recognize because they are based on unquestioning adherence to 'traditional' practices" (p. 17). These traditional thinking practices could create stereotypical beliefs about adult learning.

MacKeracher et al. (2006) are of the opinion that higher education systems could be created so that even the most disadvantaged mature students may access higher education.

Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) suggested that structural barriers, such as institutional and situational obstructions, can cause dispositional barriers. These scholars state that social constructs support a social order that is entirely functional based on strength, skill and capacity. As an example, they cite the fact that those who are well educated are better able to resolve difficulties than those who are less educated. This aspect, however, may vary in degree as societies where the social order has deteriorated and no longer functions may well prevent the practice of rights and privileges by individuals within that society. Social structures can support an unfair hierarchy by creating privileged and underprivileged communities. Structural barriers, as illustrated by Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), appeared to be dominant in Nordic countries, but the welfare state (prevalent in Nordic countries) implements its labour market practices in such a way as to assist adult learners to overcome these constraints. The structural conditions of an institution, as stated by Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), play a considerable role in limiting the choice of adults to participate. Financial resources, credit supply and other liquidity factors are strong limiting factors in adult learners' ability to access further learning opportunities. Subject choice and study paths are also factors that limit the choice to participate.

Policy around adult learning may be considered an institutional barrier. An example presented by Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) is the supply-side policies in Nordic countries that target service providers as opposed to demand-side guidelines that are aimed directly at the individual. The service provider then decides on the training policy and does not target the needs of the adult learner

a) Institutional barriers

Cross (1981) described institutional barriers as systemic "practices and procedures" (p. 98) that disadvantage certain groups of people. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) cite Cross when referring to institutional barriers such as "lack of attractive or appropriate courses and institutional policies and practices that impose inconvenience" (p. 137). Barriers created by organisations can deter participation by adult learners. Below are examples of some of the institutional barriers investigated in this research.

i. Unreliable public transport services as an institutional barrier

Mobility or distance from the learning institution is a factor that impacts on the ability of the student to reach the establishment. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) referred to Sen's capability approach about students' ability to meet the requirements to enter a course of study, which is closely related to "the disposition of the individual toward further development" (p. 197). According to Archer (2003), one needs to examine "the interplay between two different kinds of causal powers" (p. 3), the one causal power being structural and cultural power, and the other agents and their own power to act upon the situation in which they find themselves. Archer (2003) refers to the way that structural conditions affect the agent and influence the way that they act to overcome the constraints that they face. One such structural condition is the transport system in South Africa. It impacts on all members of society, including those in very different socio-economic contexts. Mobility as a barrier could impact the way that the agent engages in learning.

ii. Language as an institutional barrier

Language can have a constraining or an enabling effect on learning. Archer (2003) investigated the way that "differential life chances allocated to those differently situated in society" (p. 5) have an impact on adult learning. She questioned whether different opportunities have varying results on achievement. An example of this is Archer's (2003) illustration of a "native English speaker" who "may advance her academic career" because "conditions of her actions are the heritage of British colonialism" (p. 4). Owing to English language predominance, some mature students will be more advantaged than others. In the light of this observation, exploring whether language has a constraining effect on adult learning, whether mature students are able to use their personal powers to exercise agency is a worthwhile course of investigation.

iii. Student protest as a barrier and fees must fall as an example

Protest action has a varying impact on achieving individual or group demands. It could be negative or positive. The Rhodes Must Fall movement, which later became the Fees Must Fall movement, was referred to by Suntosh Pillay, who wrote that "One wonders if the student from the University of Cape Town (UCT) knew that his act of defiance would be the tipping point for an international movement calling for the decolonisation of higher education" (Pillay, 2016, p. 155). The Fees Must Fall movement and other subsequent protests may have had a negative effect on participation in education or access to the institution.

iv. Access to lecturers/lecturer attitudes and academic writing ability

Institutional constraints such as access to lectures and previous academic ability has a constraining effect on adult learning and whether or not "agents enjoy their own powers of reflexive deliberation" (Archer, 2003, p. 7) to achieve positive outcomes. Archer (2003) highlighted how structural constraints and enablements work differently in different human projects. Agents could, at times, be confronted with constraints and be "deterred from pursuing them" (Archer, 2003, p. 6) or be encouraged to overcome these barriers by finding ways around the difficulties faced. Academic writing ability could be perceived as a structural constraint that impedes success in studies. People may have innate ability and good ideas but lack the educational background to write well in English. The requirement to write in an academic style becomes a burden on top of an existing burden.

v. Financial assistance as a barrier

Lack of money may be considered a common barrier to accessing higher education. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) referred to "liquidity constraints" (p. 264) as a complex barrier which is to both situational and institutional constraints. Both these constraints, situational and institutional, impede learning. Without financial assistance, higher learning may continue to prove inaccessible to many South African students.

vi. Subject choices

Investigating whether students choose a field of study out of interest out of necessity is worthy of research. Policies on funding could influence the students' decisions to become teachers, for example. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) highlighted the way that policies unintentionally create constraints. They stated that to "distinguish between demand side policies and supply side policies" (p. 265) and to investigate the impact these policies have on successful participation in adult learning, is of value. Bursaries and public funding often determine students' subject choices and fields of study. Policies that limit funding to certain fields of study could have an influence on career pathing.

b. Situational barriers

Situational constraints are those that relate state, family and work relationships according to Desjardins and Rubenson (2013). I refer to these scholars' use of the term "liquidity constraints" (p. 264) which are the financial resources, or lack thereof, at the disposal of the student. The ability to participate may be directly affected by the financial means of the learner.

When finances become a barrier to participation by adult learners, it impacts on the entire life situation of the mature student. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) questioned a number of adults on their experienced barriers to participation. The greatest barrier cited mostly by women was "family related" issues that take up too much time and energy. The inherent belief in many mature students is that education is done at a young age and that as people get older, they need to become wage earners and not students. This view may also be considered a factor that limits their participation in adult learning. It is worth mentioning that a barrier could be both situational and dispositional, as in this case. These factors limit the learners' ability to access education and further impacts on the situation in which they find themselves.

Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) summarised their findings by saying "that the welfare state regime can affect a person's capability to participate" (p. 197). Society is constructed in such a way that results in barriers that are not of the making of the participant. However, according to Rubenson and Desjardins' (2009) empirical findings, barriers themselves are not the greatest constraining factor in adult participation patterns. It is the ability to overcome them that plays the greatest role in determining success in participation. Data presented in the EU adult survey of 2005-2008 (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013) "suggests that overcoming situational and institutional barriers is linked to public intervention schemes" (p. 276). These schemes play a role in reducing structural barriers, which in turn are linked to overcoming situational constraints.

In reading Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), one discerns the relationship between structural and situational constraints, and how unequal participation rates are impacted by "specific socioeconomic and cultural contexts" (p. 275). These constraints have a critical effect on disadvantaged individuals. According to Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), until policy is remedied, formal education systems will "reinforce social inequalities" and "the distribution of social power and resources" (p. 275) will remain unequal. The commonalities in research about barriers to participation are not found in barriers or constraints themselves, but in the factors that enable people to overcome these barriers. An understanding of the barriers to participation allows the researcher to appreciate the way that people identify their roles in the world and to analyse the way that they interact with the world. Once these theoretical perspectives are explained and further studies are conducted, participation patterns could be identified, and policies introduced to overcome these barriers. As Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) explained, governments, in their "efforts to promote adult education" could "devise strategies and policies which can mitigate those constraints" (p. 277). Cross (1981) explained that situational barriers

can vary and that they are only "arising from one's situation in life at one given time" (p. 98) while Darkenwald and Merriam 1982) encapsulated it as "an individual's life context at a particular time" (p. 137). Below are descriptions of these barriers.

i. Work and attitudes of employers as a situational barrier

Working conditions and employers' attitudes, whether encouraging or discouraging, can impact on the decision by employees to access adult learning. In cases where employers are discouraging the internal mechanism of the adult learner to express themselves through inner conversations and mental dialogues could help the individual to define and clarify beliefs, attitudes, goals, and practices about adult learning. In their investigation into theories on barriers to participation, Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) mentioned the usefulness of trying to understand barriers and the way that individuals interpret the world. Before looking at specific barriers, one has to consider the way that the individual overcome such barriers like a discouraging employer.

ii. Departmental norms as a situational barrier

Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) reported that adult learners are "bounded by structures and contexts ... that constrain choices" (p. 192). Traditional teaching practices at an institution could contribute to the situational constraints experienced by adult learners. Clarifying the way that different departments at a university operate and finding out whether the norms are a constraining or enabling factor in adult learning might be an interesting subject of study.

c. Dispositional barriers

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) classified psychosocial barriers as the "held beliefs, values, and attitudes" (p. 137) that influence participatory behaviour. The term 'psychosocial' includes the role that the environment of the participant plays on their mind-set and the influence it has on their attitude towards adult learning. Rubenson (2006) referred to a dispositional barrier as the perception that there is little to gain by participating in adult learning or further training in the workplace. It would include the concerns that an individual might have about their ability to succeed. Rubenson (2006) refer to the belief that age impacts on returning to study and along with previous bad experiences with education and schooling. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009)

reported that although individuals exercise some agency when it comes to education, they are also bound by structures and their contexts. These scholars explained that social context "structures and conditions the habitus" and this determines how the "person acts, thinks and orients himself or herself in the social world" (p. 196). Dispositions, according to these scholars, are a result of experiences and memories that have created ways of thinking in the minds of people over long periods of time. An example given by Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) is the self-belief of some that they were never good at studying, a perception that arises because of past experience at school. Individuals do not want to relive the experience of "being at school" and may state that they are too old to learn anything new. Archer (2003) and Luckett and Luckett (2009), in their Theory of Human Agency, observed that if people were to deliberate when confronted with constraints or enablers, they would able to "decide how to respond or react to objective circumstances that are not of their own making" (Luckett & Luckett, 2009, p. 3). These scholars concluded by stating that Archer's (2003) research provides an outline for understanding the rise of new identities. New identities allow for transformation within mature students who wish to leave their inherited backgrounds and overcome dispositional barriers.

i. Mind-set and age difference as a dispositional barrier.

The disposition of the adult learner can be a constraining or enabling element in adult learning. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) referred to the "internal resources of individuals" (p. 264) and the way that their nature and personality impact on whether their goals will be realised. They further mention the uncertainty of the individual as to whether there are benefits to learning new skills. The internal resources of a positive mind-set in the mature student could be an enabling factor in their learning, while a sense that they are too old to fit in with younger students could be a barrier.

ii. Individual personality traits as a dispositional barrier

According to Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), structural constraint can be a factor that causes dispositional barriers in the adult learner. The socio-economic environment that individuals find themselves in, impacts on the way that they perceive themselves. Their personal circumstances may also play a role in shaping their personality traits and self-esteem and can restrict a persons' "freedom to participate" (Rubenson & Desjardin, 2009). These authors went on to refer to Sen's capability approach which states that "capabilities can play a crucial role in the decision to participate" (p. 196) in adult learning.

2.15 Overcoming barriers to participation

According to Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), in Nordic countries adult education opportunities are supported by the state with the assistance of civil society. This is "in the form of folk high schools and adult education associations" (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 198). These scholars have found that through these structures, people who live in Nordic countries have admission to adult education which enables them to "respond to different aspirations and needs than the formal educational system or the education and training that is supplied by employers" (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009 p. 198).

This research study is aimed at creating awareness about the variety of challenges faced by South African adult learners. Some people are able to surmount the barriers that previously stopped them from achieving a better life-course. One of the aims of this study was to look into the ways that the adult respondents "were most committed to achieving their educational goals" (Goto & Martin, 2009, p. 17).

Addressing barriers to participation in higher education have a variety of benefits for the individual and for society. Adult students develop the capacity for self-efficacy, planfulness and optimism when reflecting on their actions which can have a positive impact on decisions made at a later stage in their life.

The literature used to explore agency and access and to understand how a portion of mature South African students have acted as agents of change in their immediate environment in order to overcome their unique and shared barriers to participation. This research is also aimed at looking into the success rate of the mature students' actions and the way that they are able to affect their circumstances through their actions. Understanding the history and perspectives of mature students is valuable and the extent to which these actions influence social structures is the subject of this research paper.

2.17 Summary

The literature discussed in this section has facilitated a deeper and broader understanding of the mature students who formed the subjects of this study. It has enabled me to understand how mature South African students act as agents of change in their immediate environment in order to overcome their barriers to participation. The perspective of a variety of theorists' shed light on the twin concepts of structure and agency, and how these two causal factors shape the destiny of so many South Africans struggling to improve their circumstances in life.

SECTION 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this section, I discuss the research design and provide a description of the methodology that I used for this study. This includes the purpose for the research approach, research site, research instrument and methods of data collection. Finally, I discuss the selection of the participants, data collection, data analysis and research ethics.

Research questions

The specific questions the research aimed to address included:

- 1. What are the relationships between access, barriers to participation and success among mature adult students' participation in the B. Ed programme?
- 2. What constraints / barriers did mature students experience while studying?
- 3. How did mature students overcome these constraints / barriers / inhibitors?

Research approach

I adopted a qualitative research approach to my research. Bryman (2016) claims that "qualitative research is a strategy that emphasizes words rather than the quantification in the collection and analysis of data" (p. 294). He contends that qualitative research is sometimes viewed as the absence of numbers. Bryman declares that "several reasons might be proposed for the unease among some writers concerning the specifications of the nature of qualitative research" (p. 295).

Qualitative research integrates diverse research methods that vary from each other significantly. Bryman (2016) states that qualitative researchers employ a "substantial amount of interviewing with focus groups, discourse analysis, conversations and the collection of texts and documents as examples of research methods associated with qualitative research" (p. 295). According to Babbie (2013), each research method has its own strengths and weaknesses, and concepts are more "appropriately studied through some methods than through others" (p. 114). This qualitative approach also allowed me to investigate the access and barriers to participation among mature students and to understand how they succeeded.

Research site

I selected a university in the Western Cape, South Africa as my research site as South African universities have begun to reflect on their role and responsibilities in the challenge of access to higher education.

Research participants and selection

Sample description

I selected 20 research participants who were of a mature age and had successfully completed their first three years of study at a university in the Western Cape. The participants were mature students registered for the Bachelors in Education Degree (B.Ed) as well as the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Initially, I selected the B.Ed students only but due to a poor response from this group of students, I then approached lecturers in the education faculty who allowed me to speak to the PGCE students who then volunteered to be part of this sample. The purpose of selecting this group was due to my interest in mature students who entered the teaching profession and also based on Babbie (2013) who suggested that a sample should be selected on the "basis of knowledge of a population" (p. 128). These mature participants, in my view, had experienced barriers, yet acted with agency during their studies and were thus well-placed to provide me with the required information for the study.

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Babbie (2013) stated that the elements of this purposive or judgmental sampling is more appropriate when considering the purpose of the study. The Faculty of Education offers programmes designed to develop the professional capacity of students who aim to study teaching. Further intentions of the faculty are to allow students to become reflective contributors and advance education within their communities. The Education Faculty offers both undergraduate and post-graduate academic programmes. I tested a small subset of the larger university population in the Education Faculty.

Sampling strategies

After consent was granted, I performed non-probability sampling with 17 of the participants as not all participants arrived at the set appointments. Sampling depends on the type of research being conducted and the method I used was purposive sampling. This type of sampling, according to Babbie (2013), allowed me to select a wider variety of participants to test the broader applicability of questions. Bryman (2016) stated that purposive sampling is the "sampling conducted with reference to research questions" (p. 325). Purposive sampling draws

on two useful distinctions. In the first characteristic of this sampling method, Bryman (2016) cites Teddlie and Yu who refer to sequential and non- sequential sampling. In this study, I used sequential sampling which allowed the research to evolve as befits the research questions. Non-sequential sampling has a more fixed nature, which disallows additions to the research questions. In the second distinction of the purposive sampling method. This purposive sampling method is contingent when the criteria evolves over the course of the research. This sampling strategy, as stated by Bryman (2016) allows the research to develop as the study advances whereas with the priori purposive sample, the criteria is set at the beginning and does not allow for flexibility or growth. In qualitative research projects, the way that sampling occurs contributes to the way that the researcher understands the study. It is thus important that the sampling allows the research to evolve and advance.

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interview

I used a semi-structured interview as my research. Bryman (2016) stated "that the qualitative researcher seeks close involvement with the people investigated so that he or she can genuinely understand the world through their eyes" (p. 316). Bryman (2016) continues to state that the semi-structured interview approach inclines to be much less controlled in qualitative research. He affirms that in qualitative research there is a greater emphasis on understanding concepts in the initial research ideas and on interviewees' own viewpoints. The interviewee then has a wider choice when responding to the questions. However, all the questions were phrased and asked in a similar way from interviewee to interviewee. I valued this method as a social science study tool because it gave clear insight into the way that mature students who acted as agents deliberated when confronted with constraints. They could then inform me of the way that they responded to their circumstances. It also gave me some leeway and flexibility to ask further questions in response to what noteworthy replies were (Bryman, 2016).

Developing a rapport with the contributors is a good way to build a relationship that encourages participation. Babbie (2013) referred to rapport as an "open and trusting relationship" (p. 345) between the researcher and the participant. According to Barriball and While (1994), respondents may or may not distort the result of any research if their "response rates are low or particular groups are unrepresented" (p. 328). The advantage of this rapport with the interviewees is that it allows the researcher to "overcome the poor response rates" (p. 329) of

this method of data gathering. Barriball and While (1994) also state that once the respondents buy into the value of their contribution to the research, their interest and confidence in participating increases. I found the relationship that I developed with the participants and the connection that was made during our conversations to be the most profound part of the research. Careful thought was given to the level of friendliness and ease as I did not want to persuade the participant to want to please me, or to extend the length of the interview.

Bryman (2016) states that the semi-structured interview has the "advantage of allowing for varied insights because of its unstructured nature" (p. 370). The flexible nature of the interview allowed the participant to take the lead during the conversation thus allowing the interview to "advance to different levels while the research progresses" (p. 371). This was evident when one of the participants asked me to stop the questions so that she could just tell her story, which reiterates Bryman (2016) who also suggested that the researcher should be prepared to change the questions during the actual interview so that the investigative questions are answered without leading the participants. Bryman (2016) continues by citing Kvale who proposed a set of criteria for a successful interview. He recommended that the interviewer be knowledgeable, and the questions structured, clear and to the point to give the interview purpose. I studied the questions well so that I did not interrupt and simply let the interview flow. I had to show sensitivity, be gentle and open-minded to what the participants were sharing yet be critical and contest what they perceived as inconsistencies in their replies. Finally, as the researcher, I needed to be clear about interpreting the participants' statements without impressing my own meaning upon them.

The semi-structured interview does come with its own limitations, however, like the bias factor. Bryman (2016) refers to the propensity for people to steadily agree or disagree within the framework of a response. He said that "acquiescence is a form of satisficing behaviour" (Bryman, 2016, p. 170) could create its own limitations. The social desirability effect also impacts on the interview as participants answer the questions according to what is considered socially desirable. These are factors that I carefully considered while doing my semi-structured interviews with my participants.

Participants who were interviewed for this study were mature students that were studying for the Bachelors in Education Degree at a university in Cape Town. There were seven men and ten women who contributed to this study. The interviews were all between 30 minutes to an hour as many of the participants were eager to share their stories. I recorded the interviews,

with permission, to ensure that the data was accurate. This also assisted me with transcribing the interviews at a later stage. I did my own transcribing and as a full-time teacher, I needed to work after hours and thus needed to listen to the interviews a few times while transcribing. Upon reflection, this was not an easy task as I did not qualify for study leave (teachers do not get study leave for a master's degree) and had to work after hours and at the convenience of my participants. The recording also assisted in this process.

Research instrument

Interview Guide

An interview guide was used as my research instrument. Bryman (2016) explains that in interview guides, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are referred to as in-depth interviews. A good interview guide has a data collection plan that will help the researcher to collect evidence that is relevant to the research question. While I prepared the interview guide, a definite amount of order in the questioning was needed to create the flow of the interview and allow it to be altered as required by both the researcher and the participant. The questions were not too specific but set in a way that made understanding for both the participant to grasp and the researcher to analyse it. I made sure that the language was clear to the interviewees and not leading them to specific answers in any way. Bryman (2016) also recommends that probing questions be asked so that the researcher can get the "participant to explain their initial responses and specifying questions to get direct responses to the questions" (p. 375). I used these probing questions to allow the participants to open up when they felt unsure about being honest about sharing their experiences.

Data capturing

I used an audio recorder to record the interviews and stored the data on my computer hard drive to ensure no losses or technical threats to my device. I also made handwritten notes to back up my research interview information. Interviews were audio-taped, subject to permission being granted, and transcribed, validated and analysed.

Data processing

Earl Babbie (2013) wrote that researchers will amass "volumes of observations" (p. 116) that will not be immediately interpretable. This was a challenge during the transcribing process. My data was transcribed as texts and I evaluated which observations were relevant and what to discard. The data processing phase of my research involved the classification of the written

answers and the information is then transferred to my computer as recommended by Babbie (2013).

Data analysis

Babbie (2013) stated that the analysis of qualitative social research data is coding. Coding, perceived by Bryman, et al. (2014), is the starting point for most data analysis but the coded data will not be "presented in its original form but will be interpreted and re- presented by the researcher" (p. 336). Grounded theory has become widely used in analysing qualitative data. Grounded theory is the "theory that was derived from data" and is "gathered and analysed from through the research process" (Bryman et al., 2014, p. 345). I considered the topics that were coded and tried to find the subjects' perspectives on each of them. Theoretical sampling has also emerged as a grounded theory tool to analyse data. The outcomes of the grounded theory, according to Bryman et al (2014), is that the "value of the concepts is determined by their usefulness" (p. 346) and that the researcher will then be able to recognise the concepts and relate it to the experiences of the organisation. It also helped me to verify the initial hypotheses about the relationships between the different concepts. Grounded theory thus allows the analysis process to contain "linear and iterative dimensions that allow for logical systemic analysis, introspection and reflection" (Bryman et al., 2014, p. 347).

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Research ethics statement

According to Babbie (2013), researchers need to be aware of the difference between "what is proper and improper in the conduct of scientific inquiry" (p. 32). The most important aspect of research is the relationship between the researcher and the participants as well as the institution. Here I discuss the ethical issues involved in this research, which is paramount in protecting the rights of the participants.

No harm to participants

Clive Seale (1998) stated that "it is important that no harm, physical or psychological, will come to anyone taking part in your research" (p. 119). Harm, as defined by Bryman (2008), is considered anything unacceptable towards research participants by researchers. Ethical standards uphold the integrity of research, and the best interests of the participants must be foremost on the researchers list.

Voluntary participation

Babbie (2013) claims that a social researcher often requires that people reveal personal information about themselves; participants' participation must be voluntary and not motivated by personal benefit. Voluntary participation must be grounded on the understanding of the basis of the research. Participants must not be harmed by the research. Ethical norms of voluntary participation are formalised by the concept of informed consent (Babbie, 2013). A research project must guarantee anonymity; thus, the researcher and not the readers should be able to "identify a given response with a given respondent" (Babbie, 2013, p. 35).

Consent from institution

Before gathering data, I applied for permission to conduct research at the research site to the registrar of the university (See Appendix B).

Consent from participants

I drafted an information letter (See Appendix C) in and a participation consent form (See Appendix D) that was signed by my participants in which the format of the interview was explained. Anonymity and confidentiality are also important in protecting research participants. I ensured that all data received from participants were treated as confidential. The participation conveyed that participation was entirely voluntary.

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Anonymity and confidentiality

Each participant signed a consent form (See Appendix D) which is a participation consent form that serves as an agreement between the researcher and the participant. It outlines the responsibility that the two parties are taking towards each other.

These participants were put at ease before each interview because this endorsed my belief and what Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden, (as cited in Bryman, 2012) stated "that concepts of relationship and power between researchers and participants are embedded in qualitative research" (p. 93).

Summary

In this section of my research, I reflected on the research approach used in this study. Data collection methods were discussed, and ethical issues were considered to protect participants. The qualitative research approach allows for the validating of data which is critical in ensuring that all data collected is credible and we can depend on it.

In the next section I present my data-analysis.

SECTION 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The aims of this study were to investigate the relationships between access, barriers to

participation and success among mature students in a higher education institution as well as to

generate new theoretical insights about the relationship between access, barriers to

participation, agency and success.

I identified three themes, which emerged from the data gathered during the semi-structured

interviews held with the participants in the education faculty. The first theme was barriers to

participation experienced by the participants before and after accessing the higher education

institution was one theme. The second theme: Agency, and reasons for accessing this course in

particular, was a second theme. The third theme looked at the successes shared by the

participants once they overcame the barriers that they experienced while engaged in the

Bachelors in Education course.

Under the three different themes, I identified the various categories and coded the data

according to the several themes that arose, as suggested by Bryman (2008).

Biographical information of participants **EXAMPLE**

Participants in this study were mature students who were studying for the Bachelors in

Education Degree at a university in Cape Town. This degree allows participants to become

teachers after they have completed four years of study.

The ages of the participants ranged from 21 years to 50 years. There were seven men and ten

women who contributed to this study. There was a mix of home languages among the

participants, but all participants spoke English during the interviews as it is the language of

learning at the university where I conducted the study. Four of the participants that I

interviewed spoke Xhosa as a home language while six participants spoke English and the other

six participants spoke Afrikaans. One participant spoke Zulu.

All participants were full-time students; some worked to supplement their income as not all

qualified for financial assistance, which revealed their socio-economic barriers to participate

in learning. All the participants lived within the proximity of the university. Some participants

relied on public transport to travel to the university while others chose to walk or find alternative methods of transport. The participants who utilised the public transport system encountered challenges which will be discussed in this section.

A brief synopsis of each participant

I have given each participant in this study a pseudonym to protect his or her identity and the confidentiality of the study. The race and gender were included for historical statistical purposes.

Anele is a 25-year-old black woman whose home language is Xhosa. She is single with no dependants. Anele lives in Kraaifontein, a suburb in Cape Town. Her reason for choosing teaching was to use her voice as an instrument of change in black society. Her barrier to participation was financial constraints and a dispositional barrier created by her grief after her father, who was the family breadwinner, had passed away. Her siblings are funding her studies while she works to supplement her income.

Danilo is a 31-year-old black man from Uganda. He is single with no dependants. He speaks English, Swahili and Luganda. He has lived on his own since he was 14 years old. He worked as a gardener in a Cape Town suburb called Plumstead while studying towards a Diploma in Agricultural Science. He then joined the local church and taught a Sunday school class. His passion for teaching started there. The local church funds his studies, as well as a couple for whom he did garden work. He lives with this couple now. They invited him into their home after they bonded while gardening together. He still supplements his income with his gardening business. His barrier to participation was access to funding because he is not a South African citizen. He has refugee status.

Nandi is a 22-year-old black woman from a small fruit growing town an hour out of Cape Town called Klapmuts. Her home language is Xhosa. She is also fluent in English and Afrikaans. She is the breadwinner and has her parents and a younger sibling as her dependants. Her parents receive a state pension, but it is not enough to sustain the family. She works at a fruit farm every weekend and has a bursary from the local community. She works every holiday too as part of the bursary conditions. Her barrier to participation was funding.

Zandi is a 24-year-old black woman who stays in the university residence. She is from Kokstad, Kwazulu-Natal and speaks Zulu. She is single with no dependents. She pursued teaching because of the NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) funding, a DHET bursary

scheme. She also shares the bursary income with her family. Her barrier to participation was funding.

Ester is a 45-year-old coloured Afrikaans speaking widow who lives in a town called Atlantis, known for its impoverished status on the west coast of Cape Town. She has four dependants. Ester was in an abusive relationship with her late husband whom she divorced but had to take care of when he became ill. Her sons are drug addicts. She decided to enrol in the teaching programme as it offered a state funded bursary and she felt that she needed to change her family's reality for good. Her daughter needed a better example and professionals are viewed with respect in her community. She could not let the cycle of abuse, poverty and drug addiction continue for her 11- year- old daughter. Her story describes the many barriers that she faced before participating in adult learning.

Nina is a 45-year-old married coloured woman who speaks Afrikaans and comes from the community called Belhar. She has two dependants and works as a cleaner at the university. She starts her day at 6.30 a.m. She cleans until her first class at 10 a.m. and then changes into the university jacket. She says her status changes once she wears this jacket. She is no longer invisible. Her cleaning shift starts at 3.30 p.m. and ends at 9 p.m. With the support of her husband and son, she can study and help her 15-year-old daughter with her homework. Her income pays for her studies and she must take unpaid leave to attend the teaching practice sessions. Her first barrier to participation was related to the apartheid history of SA which later became financial.

Lee is a 23-year-old black man from Cape Town who speaks Xhosa. He was inspired to teach by his high school teachers. He still receives support from them when he needs help with projects and teaching practice advice. He wants to see the world and with this teaching degree, as he can travel and teach. He has no dependants and receives a bursary from the state. His past teachers also assist him with clothes and food if he needs it. He works part-time as a tutor at the university. His barrier to participation was financial.

Mike is a 22-year-old black man from Cape Town who speaks five languages. He did not specify his area of residence and chose to keep Cape Town as his home in the interview. His home language is Xhosa, but he also speaks Sotho, Zulu, English and Afrikaans. He has no dependants. His church supports him with a portion of the payment of his studies. He works to supplement his fees. He loves mathematics and wants to inspire future mathematicians. His barrier to participation was financial.

Jake is a 28-year-old Afrikaans speaking white man from a small town within the Cape Province. He has no dependents. He has a previous degree, which qualified him to be a game ranger. He struggled to find work as he did not fit the BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) profile at the time, which proved to be a barrier to accessing work. He then decided to study teaching so that he could train future game rangers. He worked with people who had the knowledge of the bush but had no formal training. He wants to be part of a changing South Africa and contribute to environmental education and training for future generations.

Cate is a 33-year-old coloured woman with twin dependants. She is from a suburb called Belhar, in Cape Town. Both her sons are autistic. Her home language is Afrikaans but is fluent in English. All her siblings are professionals with degrees. They encouraged her to pursue her teaching degree so that she could help her sons with the challenges that they face. With the support of her husband and siblings, she manages to attend lectures on a full-time basis and the family supports her financially. The most important barrier to her participation was the way that she perceived herself and her academic ability within her family dynamic.

Enver is a 21-year-old coloured man who has no dependents. He lives in Athlone. He is bilingual. He is fluent in English and Afrikaans. Both his parents are teachers, and he claims that he is entering the family business. He wants to educate future generations. He has a state bursary.

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Arnold is a 23-year-old white Afrikaans man from Kuilsriver. He has no dependents. He dropped out of his first course of study as he realised it was not what he wanted and that it was too difficult. He was a very good sportsman at school and decided to pursue teaching so that he could focus on coaching. He is motivated by his experiences. He wants to encourage young people to have a goal, as he knows how difficult it is to drop out and struggle to find work. His main barrier to participation was being Afrikaans and learning in English.

Leilah is a 21-year-old coloured woman with no dependants. She lives in Wynberg and speaks English as a home language. She is also able to communicate in Afrikaans but does not feel confident enough to call it a second language. She wants to be a teacher despite being discouraged by her mother, who is a teacher. She was a struggling student at high school but feels that she has found her true calling. She has made the Dean's list every year. This motivates her to share her story with future students. Her barrier to participation was her academic struggle and her fear of failure.

Harry is a 51-year-old coloured English-speaking man from Bellville. He has adult children and thus does not classify them as dependants. He worked as a chef in the South African Navy. He always wanted to be a teacher but had to work to support his younger siblings. This was his main barrier to participation in higher education. Once his own children were no longer dependant on him, he returned to full-time studies. He says the biggest challenge was fitting in with the younger students who wanted to party while he wanted to work. According to him, his greatest success was getting his younger classmates to class on time. He wants to inspire the youth to set a date to their dreams and follow then through.

Sherry is a 21-year-old coloured woman from Manenberg who has no dependants. She speaks English and Afrikaans. Her parents encouraged her to study as they found her to be aimless and without motivation. The bursary motivates her to complete her course of study. She stated that her greatest barrier to participation was her mindset. She was not an academic student and was afraid of failure.

Barriers and accessing higher education

Participants stated that initial access to higher education was a difficulty that impacted negatively on their participation. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) point to structural constraints, which can be seen as a factor that causes dispositional barriers in the adult learner and "restrict a person's capability and hence freedom to participate" (p. 196). Participants experienced these constraints during their first year at the university. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), referred to Sen's capability approach and stated that "capabilities can play a crucial role in the decision to participate" (p. 196) in adult learning. At the time, the participants perceived their capabilities to be hampered by the barriers below.

Participants as agents

Archer (2003) claims that participants are thinking and deliberating beings who have the capacity to alter their place in society. She states that "agents possess properties and powers distinct from those pertaining to social forms" (p. 2). Archer (2003) further refers to "two different kinds of causal powers those pertaining to structures and those belonging to agents" (p. 3). From this, it is my understanding that humans are capable of exercising agency and have the power to change their life—course.

These participants shared their barriers to participation and how it impacted on their earlier development:

I failed my first year because of my grief and mindset. I lost my father and had no support in Cape Town. Even though I was an adult I needed support and I did not know how to reach out (Anele, Interview, September 19, 2018).

I came from a small village and worked at a fruit farm. I did not know how to study. I was a fruit grower. I was always anxious that I would fail. I failed geography in my first year. It was very hard at first (Nandi, Interview, September 26, 2018).

I was in an abusive relationship for years. It impacted on my confidence. I had to confront my fears so that I could make a change for my daughter. I just look ahead when I feel challenged (Ester, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Giddens (1979) argued that agents "could have acted otherwise" (p. 56) when faced with adversity. They could act "positively in terms of attempted intervention or negatively in terms of forbearance" (p. 56). Here participants shared their earlier dispositional barriers when faced with adversity:

Being rejected for nursing twenty years ago made me feel unworthy. I was a cleaner for many years and that made me feel invisible. I applied a few times to study then gave up (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

I am not a confident person. I thought I would not be accepted at university, so I never tried before (Mike, Interview, September 27, 2018).

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The following responses exemplify what Giddens (1984) writes about agents who are recreated by the "very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors" (p. 2). He refers to the way that human agents act which is possible "only because of the continuity of practice" and the "ongoing flow of social life" (Giddens, 1984, p. 5). With the support of the community and family, these participants were able to access higher education and overcome their feelings of inadequacy:

I was always afraid to fail. Not many people are successful in my community, but it was my community that pushed me to study. I want to make things better for them (Lee, Interview, September 27, 2018).

I thought that I wasn't as clever as my siblings, so I went to work instead of study. They turned out to be the people who pushed me to go back and do a degree. I have two autistic children. I must do better so that I can help them (Cate, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Agency, agency and intentions

Giddens (1984) referred to agency as the intention of the individual to overcome their constraints by acting to make a difference in their lives. Archer (2003) confirms this when she states that people possess the ability to construct a course of action so that they can achieve their goals. Giddens (1984) explained that agency is often referred to the intention of the individual acting as a perpetrator in his or her own circumstances, acting to make a difference at any phase of his/her life. Bandura (2001) defined intentions as "a future course of action to be performed" and as a "proactive commitment" (p. 6) in changing the course of agents' lives. Participant responses confirm Bandura's (2001) definitions:

I want to change things for my family. My parents are disabled and rely on a social grant. I want to further my studies by doing educational psychology so that I can help people (Nandi, Interview, September 26, 2018).

I needed to change things for myself and for my children. I will be an example to my daughter (Ester, Interview, September 19, 2018).

I worked as a cleaner for many years. I want to be a professional. I want to be seen as more than just a cleaner. (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

Hitlin and Elder (2006) refer to human action as an "existential agency" which allows the agent "to act freely in a fundamental manner" (p. 37). These acts are performed by individuals who "possess varying senses of agentic potential" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 37). Jake was faced with a stumbling block in his career but chose to exercise personal agency "within socially structured opportunities" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 37):

I am a qualified game ranger but couldn't find work because I did not fit the BEE status of the job market. So now I am doing teaching so that I can train game rangers. Many people have the knowledge of the bush but not the formal education. My passion is to empower people. I want to give back. I don't want to be a sponge. I want to contribute to society (Jake, Interview, September 26, 2018.)

Danilo depicts agency and intentions for his future through his reasons for studying as follows:

I have been living on my own since I was 14 years old. I am from Uganda. I had to escape my country and lived in SA for many years. I worked as a gardener. I taught Sunday school and the passion for working with children started there. I will not stop until I have my PhD. I want to change the way that education is measured. Academic achievement is not the only way to measure a child. Intelligence is everywhere, we just choose not to see it in each child (Danilo, Interview, 27 September, 2018).

Danilo is exercising his "personal capacity" so that he can "relate his circumstances in order to plan his future actions" (Archer, 2003, p. 10). This supports Bandura's (2001) theory that "intentions center on plans of action" (p. 6). Adult learners do not always have a detailed plan at first but with intentional agency they are able to produce successful outcomes. Danilo used his skill as a Sunday school teacher to enrol in the B.Ed. degree. His intention was to use that experience to act and then plan his future career or academic path.

Anele wanted to play a role in building society and share her strengths with young people. She intends to be an agent of change. This becomes evident from Anele's response when she reveals that she wants to work with young people by exercising her personal agency and her "shared intention ... in the service of common goals and intentions collectively pursued" (Bandura, 2001, p. 7):

I want to work with young people where I can use my voice so that we can be heard in black society (Anele, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Barriers to participation, agency and addressing barriers

According to Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) "constraining and enabling elements to participation" could "explain why certain groups participate more or less than others" (p. 262). Using Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), I aimed to understand and interpret the nature of constraints of adult learners in the data.

Barriers to adult learning are categorised as structural, situational and dispositional. Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) considered structural barriers to be influenced by "broader structural conditions and targeted policy measures" (p. 195).

Structural barriers are identified as a constraint because of the distribution of state resources. Structural barriers experienced by the participants were unreliable transport, language barriers, lecturer attitudes, academic writing abilities, lack of finance or access to financial aid and the attitude of the administrative staff towards students:

I don't feel safe in the taxi, but I must get to campus (Arnold, Interview, September, 9, 2018).

All lectures are in English and I was at Xhosa school (Lee, Interview, September 27, 2018).

The participants also experienced situational barriers, which are directly associated with the individual's personal circumstances such as the financial circumstances of the family, difficult employers and the distance from the university:

I was a cleaner for many years and couldn't afford to study. I applied a few times but then gave up (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

My husband was abusive. He would take my money. I could never do anything for myself (Ester, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Dispositional barriers included the way that participants thought processes impacted on their adult learning journey, positively or negatively. Rubenson (2006) referred to dispositional barriers as the perception that there is little to gain by participating in adult learning or about their ability to succeed. These barriers are intrinsic and include individual personality traits that are brought about by low self-esteem or the fear of failure:

My attitude towards maths, my fear of maths. I thought it would be difficult and I was scared of failing (Mike, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) expressed the view that unequal participation to adult learning is reflected in the many factors that are located in the barriers surveyed in their research. Similarly, these factors are reflected in the research done by me. Most constraints and enablers are embedded in the way that "societies organise access to and participation in education"

(Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013, p. 275). In almost all of the responses from the participants, dispositional barriers were overcome once adults attended to their structural and situational barriers. Structural barriers, in Nordic countries researched by Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), were linked to policy and programmes, while situational barriers were related to a "broader range of welfare and labour market services" (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013, p. 276).

Agency and overcoming structural barriers

Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) defined structural barriers as the "institutional practices and procedures that discourage or prevent participation" (p. 262) in adult learning. These constraints are mostly limitations faced by the institution, for example, resources or policies impacting on the way that resources are allocated. According to Rubenson and Desjardins (2009), structural barriers which refer to institutional and situational obstructions, could cause dispositional barriers. The scholars shared the view "that barriers lower the extent of participation but may not entirely prohibit" it (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p.189). Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) further pointed out that structural conditions can "limit the alternatives" (p. 264) and impact on the ability of mature students to participate in adult learning. The data that I collected while doing this research, helped me to understand structural barriers, namely institutional, transport and financial, in the South African context and the way that it impacts on adult learning.

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When there are strikes, I don't feel safe. I live very far. I have to find other transport and I can't always afford it (Ester, Interview, September, 19, 2018).

Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) concluded that situational and institutional constraints are structurally based. Institutional barriers are more obvious but situational constraints are based on the relationship between the state and family and work. These researchers maintain that there are strong connections between these constraints and the decision by mature students to participate in learning.

Agency and overcoming institutional barriers

According to Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), institutional constraints are "practices and procedures that discourage or prevent participation" (p. 262). These scholars further illustrated

that public policy and institutional practices "can either alleviate or exacerbate constraints" (p. 64) of mature students. These constraints could have a positive or negative effect on the decision to participate in higher education.

When participants were asked what they found most difficult about attending lectures, they gave transport challenges as one of the greatest constraints when trying to get to the institution. One participants shared the constraints as well as the ways that she managed to overcome these limitations:

Transport to university is a huge problem because of taxi strikes and fuel prices that increase. So the taxi price increases too (Anele, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Agency and overcoming unreliable public transport services as a barrier

Participants experienced the public transport system as a barrier as it often proved to be unreliable, unsafe or expensive:

The petrol price affects everything. Transport costs go up (Jake, Interview, September, 26, 2018).

The public transport is so unreliable. The trains are always late. It makes me late for classes then I need to catch up (Nandi, Interview, September, 26, 2018).

Participants shared the way that they exercised agency so that they could overcome the unreliable transport issues. These participants exercised self-efficacy, referred to as "mastery" by Hitlin and Elder (2006) which is the "degree to which people feel they can control the forces that affect their own lives" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 41):

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There is no direct transport system from where I live. I had to take up to four taxis just to get to university. If you take a bus you must wait forever. I use a lift club now (Leila, Interview, July 12, 2018).

I don't feel safe in the taxi, I rather use my scooter. Petrol prices are a problem, but I must get to campus (Arnold, Interview, September, 9, 2018).

Participants highlighted the difficulty of the transport system in their responses below. They lived near the campus and chose to walk because it was more reliable and safer. Even though they had to leave home much earlier, they preferred that option and exercised "Self -efficacy"

which "is linked with the idea of 'personal control" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 41). This participant took control and walked. This response affirms this:

I prefer to walk with a group of students that live in the area. We leave home early. Our feet are more reliable than the taxis and buses (Cate, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Bandura (2006) refers to "proactive agents versus onlookers" (p. 168) and this participant in his response validates Bandura's (2006) claim that "people are contributors to their activities, not just onlooking hosts" (p. 168):

I walk to campus. It is better for me (Mike, Interview, September, 27, 2018).

The participants were all enrolled for a teaching degree. It emerged that they shared concerns about the way that transport issues impacted on their punctuality. As future teachers, they did not think that it reflected well on their future professionalism:

Transport is a problem. When there are strikes, I don't feel safe. I live very far. I don't like to miss classes. Imagine a teacher being late (Ester, Interview, September, 19, 2018).

I used public transport in the beginning. It was too unreliable. I use a scooter now. Petrol price is still my problem. I don't like being late (Danilo, September, 27, 2018).

Agency, capacity for self-efficacy and overcoming language-related barriers

The data revealed that language barriers were not only about the ability to understand the language of learning at the university. There were other factors at play. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) refer to unequal participation as a barrier and stated that it impacts on the "individual learner through institutional, contextual and ultimately also cultural factors" (p. 275). The ability to understand academic writing, as well as writing in a language that is not your own, are examples of unequal participation. These scholars also refer to socio-economic and cultural contexts and the way that it interconnects with the way that different groups arrange access to adult learning and participation in adult education.

Participants found the different accents of the lecturers difficult to understand. One of the participants revealed that he had never heard foreign accents before as he came from a small town:

I found the accent of the foreign tutors a very small challenge but a challenge though. I would like them to speak slower. I am sure that they would like me to speak slower too (Arnold, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Cate shared her way of exercising agency in order to overcome her difficulty with her level of language difficulties:

The foreign accents of the tutors were difficult to understand at first. The level of English was also difficult, but I used my dictionary a lot; then it became fine (Cate, Interview, September, 27, 2018).

Another participant shared that previously he had only Xhosa speaking teachers, so adapting to English was hard for him. This was evident from his response:

I had lots to overcome with my language. All lectures are in English and I was at Xhosa school. The tutors even had to teach me how to write (Lee, Interview, September 27, 2018).

A participant who spoke Afrikaans did not understand the "big words" used by the lecturers:

Language was a barrier in the beginning because I speak Afrikaans, but I used a dictionary all the time. The lecturers used very big words (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

Only one of the participants was an English first language speaker. Adapting during their first year of study proved to be the greatest challenge to first and second language participants alike. Academic writing and referencing were also tough on participants who were not taught this at school. They needed assistance from tutors and other students at first. Participants reflect what Hitlin and Elder (2006) stated when they cited Gecas's definition of self-efficacy "as having control over one's circumstances and being capable of carrying out actions to produce intended effects" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 41).

These responses of Bandura's (2006) research refers to the way that people act when faced with constraints and their understanding of "action causality to personal causality" (p. 169). Bandura (2006) states that the agent is capable of "self-directed actions" (p. 169) and the responses below relates how the participants were responsible for their own "self-produced outcomes" (p. 169) by taking action when faced with language barriers:

Language was a huge challenge. Lecturers made me very nervous in the beginning (Lee, Interview, September 27, 2018).

My English wasn't good; it affected my academic writing. Without my tutors I wouldn't cope. They even helped me with referencing (Mike, Interview, September, 27, 2018).

Agency, capacity for self-efficacy and overcoming disadvantaged backgrounds as a barrier

Hitlin and Elder (2006), cite Gecas when referring to self-efficacy as a driving force in developing self—concept. It "taps into the self-aspect that seeks to master and control its environment" and the ability to "reflect upon its actions" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 41). This is clear from the responses that I received when I interviewed Lee, a student from a disadvantaged background. He wanted this degree to enable him to master and change his environment. His response is evident of self-efficacy as stated by Bandura (1989).

This course will transform my financial status. I will be elevated socially. I can change all lives at home. I will have a degree and would be able to teach anywhere, even Saudi Arabia. I am passionate about teaching (Lee, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Anele shared that she took time to reflect on the impact that her mindset had on her ability to succeed in her studies. She realised that it was an additional barrier to her already disadvantaged circumstances. She decided to take steps to change the way that she saw herself and her environment. I share the way that Anele exercised her "personal capacity ... to deliberate about ... circumstances in order to plan his future actions" (Archer, 2003, p. 10):

I overcame my fears by opening up to my family. It helped me to change my mindset. I succeeded from that day. I became confident. I passed with flying colours. Family support played a huge role in my success (Anele, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Agency, capacity for resistance and protest action as a barrier to participation

Participants were questioned about institutional events that had a negative impact on successful participation in their course of study. As mentioned previously, the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which became the Fees Must Fall movement, gained traction, and Pillay (2016) wrote that "One wonders if the student from the University of Cape Town (UCT) knew that

his act of defiance would be the tipping point for an international movement calling for the decolonisation of higher education" (p. 155). The data collected showed that the Fees Must Fall, as an example of protest action movement, was not perceived as a barrier to participation among all students, but rather the impact of the protest action. Participants could not write the examination and had to receive CAM (continuous assessment marks) or had to write off-campus. The protest action proved to be challenging for one of the participants who was an employee who wanted better working conditions but was also a student with a goal in mind. This turned out to be a testing period for those who were directly affected by the protest action and adult students who had to make difficult decisions about access and participation in examinations:

Fees must fall was very scary, I was a student and a worker, and who do I support? I had an exam to write and my colleagues were striking. I want to be a professional. I couldn't give up. I couldn't strike. My aim was to improve the life of my family (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

I think the students were not serious about fees must fall. They only targeted exam venues, only protested exam time, they tore up our papers (Jake, Interview, September 26, 2018).

I didn't feel safe on campus during the protest action, we had to write at other venues. (Harry, Interview, October 1, 2018).

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Agency, capacity for resilience and accessing lectures as a barrier

Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) stated that social structures could influence the disposition of the adult learner and "governs how a person acts, thinks, and orients himself or herself in the social world" (p. 196). A minority of the participants had negative experiences. Most of the participants felt supported. I shared the responses, as I wanted the data to reveal the challenges faced by participants while also sharing the ways that they overcome these barriers when I discuss successes later in this research paper. When participants were asked more questions about institutional events that had a negative impact on successful participation in their course of study, these were some of the responses:

Our education faculty lecturers don't teach us everything. I am doing Science through the Science faculty, when we ask questions the lecturers make us feel stupid, when I want clarity for teaching practice purposes, they say that we must ask our lecturers.

Education students often feel excluded, and I feel very excluded in the science lectures (Cate, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Lecturers from other countries were hard to understand. Their accents were challenging. I had to listen carefully. They thought I was being funny when I asked them questions over and over. I'm not a racist; I just wanted to understand (Arnold, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Arnold shared his challenges with me and how with time and understanding he began to gain confidence and spoke to the lecturers about his concerns. He later discovered that the tutors found the different accents difficult to understand too. They agreed to slow down, and everyone benefitted from the change in pace. Here is an example of an agent showing the capacity to act with resilience. The participant wanted to complete the course, despite the barrier and was a "social actor as a self-reflexive agent making decisions about larger life projects within an understanding of their constrained, possible life choices" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 39). It also builds upon Shanahan and Hood as (cited in Hitlin & Elder, 2006) who wrote about the way that settings are measured which could facilitate goal pursuit. This participant-built relationships with tutors to achieve his goal, to graduate with a teaching degree, despite barriers that he had faced.

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Makoelle and Malindi (2015) both refer to resilience as "the individual's capacity to achieve positive outcomes despite the experience of adversity" (p. 3). Arnold shared his disappointment with me in his decision to drop out of his first course of study. He found that the course had been too difficult, but he was determined to have a degree and thus showed resilience by pursuing a second opportunity:

I applied to study by myself. I had to access education because I did not want to be a drop out again. I gave up on studying once before. I could not disappoint my parents and myself (Arnold, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Anele in turn chose to "achieve positive outcomes despite the experience of adversity" (Makeolle & Malindi, 2015, p. 3):

I failed my first year because of my grief and mindset. I lost my father and had no support in Cape Town. Even though I was an adult I needed support and I did not know how to reach out (Anele, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Agency, capacity for social- structural support and barriers to academic writing ability

Adult education could be contributory in furthering the abilities of the adult learner and play a crucial and supportive role in developing skills in the mature student., creating opportunities for the adult learner and improve their position in society, Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) referred to Sen's capability approach and states "that the interaction between habitus and social system ... regulates the perceived opportunities" of individuals "and hence their functioning" (p. 196).

From the data it emerged that academic writing ability was an obstacle for a few of the participants at the beginning of their study path. They were not only second language students; they were also adult learners who were never taught writing skills while at school:

Academic writing was my biggest challenge in my first year (Enver, Interview, September 27, 2018).

I was out of my depth with the essay writing. I never knew how to ask for help. In the military you just do (Harry, Interview, October 1, 2018).

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The participants were also mature students who had been out of the academic world for a while. They responded that without the support of lecturers and tutors they would not have overcome these obstacles successfully and progress academically over the three-year period. Hitlin and Elder (2006) refer to the way "that social support positively influences one's sense of agency" (p. 43). The responses revealed how the support of tutors helped the participants to exercise agency and to overcome the academic writing barriers that they were initially faced with:

The tutors helped me a lot. I had lots to overcome with my language. All lectures are in English. The tutors taught me how to write (Lee, Interview, September 27, 2018).

My English affected my academic writing. Without my tutors I wouldn't cope. They even helped me with referencing. It was very difficult (Mike, Interview, September, 27, 2018).

Agency, capacity for social support and administration as a barrier

When researching modes of human agency, Bandura's (2001) research distinguished between "personal, proxy and collective" agency (p. 13). These three modes of agency directly influence each other as people cannot "master every realm of everyday life" (p. 13) by themselves. The successful functioning of the agent "involves a blend of reliance on proxy agency" (p. 13) and the efforts of others whether the outcome is negative or positive. Although I did not explicitly ask about the administration of the university, a participant specifically referred to the attitude of the administration staff. The data showed that this was only one participant who experienced this challenge. The foreign national student who shared his experience, mentioned that he is part of a student organisation who assists other black foreign students that shared common concerns. He disclosed that without the "emotional support from a series of significant others" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 43), for him, the student organisation, he would not have overcome the hurdles that he experienced with the administration staff:

My biggest challenge was the attitude of the administration towards me. I am a foreigner and they treated me badly. I pay my fees cash and they said that I did not pay it. They were abrupt and dismissive when I asked too many questions. I am not sure why. I would like them to treat people better. I just wanted help (Danilo, Interview, 27 September, 2018).

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Agency, capacity to act, capacity for planfulness and financial assistance as a barrier

I once again refer to Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) who advocated that "liquidity constraints" is a complex barrier as it involves both situational and institutional constraints. The lack of money of the institution and a student impacts on adult learning. Economic factors were among the main reasons identified by the participants as a barrier to participation. A number of the participants revealed it to be the reason why they dropped out of their first course of study or the reason for not studying when they were younger. Family responsibilities were also given as reason for not pursuing or continuing their previous course of study:

My family had no money after my father's funeral to send me to the Cape before university started (Anele, Interview, September 19, 2018).

I am dependent on my parents' grant for transport and food. They send money to me because my fees are paid for by a community bursary (Nandi, Interview, September 26, 2018).

I had to work to support my family because my husband was an alcoholic. He never worked. I couldn't think of studying. I just had to work (Ester, Interview, September, 19, 2018).

Bandura (2001) argued "that people do not live their lives in isolation" (p. 13) and that they needed to work "with others to secure what they cannot accomplish on their own" (p. 13). Participants were asked about ways that they overcame the financial constraints that they were faced with even though some of them did receive financial assistance. The participants responded that the financial assistance they received was not enough to sustain them or their families while they were studying. Hitlin and Elder (2006) viewed planful competence as the individual's ability to "making (and sticking to) advantageous long-range plans" (p. 42). These participants showed, in their capacity to act and achieve a sense of success, that they were able to plan to overcome their barriers and constraints:

My main challenge was getting financial backup to finance my studies. I had to get a tutor job to buy food (Mike, Interview, September, 27, 2018).

Without my donor, I couldn't study. I cut grass to support myself and buy everything else (Danilo, Interview, September, 27, 2018).

I applied to study by myself. I had to access education because I did not want to be a drop out again. I gave up on studying once before. I could not disappoint my parents and myself (Arnold, interview, September 19, 2018).

Here Arnold tells us how he exercised the capacity to act because he did not want to disappoint his family and to pursue his goals of accessing education. This supports Hitlin and Elder (2006) who stated that when agents act, they deliberate through internal conversations and then make decisions about their responses and the way that they would later react to change their circumstances.

Financial assistance was also cited as a barrier. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) presented the argument that the institution has to see the "potential benefits" which is "crucial to any investment decision" (p. 264). One of my participants articulated her dissatisfaction with the way that financial assistance is allocated to students and wanted it to be based on merit:

Money and financial assistance is my greatest barrier. My mother is paying my fees even though she struggles. I work hard and I am on the dean's list, yet I do not

qualify. Financial assistance should be based on merit. Other students fail and get NSFAS anyway. It's not fair (Leila, Interview, July 12, 2018).

According to Hitlin and Elder (2006), agency is the capacity for meaningful and successful action. It gives the agent opportunities to exercise the capacity "through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances" (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015, p. 61)).

Ester shared that she needed to act so that her daughter did not become a statistic like her and many of the other women her in her community. Her constraints were derived from "structural and cultural emergent properties" (Archer, 2003, p. 7) within society. She needed to act so that history did not repeat itself for her daughter. Her capacity to act changed her life and gave new meaning to her and her family's lives:

I was in an abusive relationship for years, it impacted on my confidence. I had to confront my fears so that I could make a change for my daughter. I just look ahead when I feel challenged (Ester, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Capacity for agency and barriers created by institutional policies

Many of the participants were compelled to do Xhosa as a subject to qualify for financial assistance. This proved to be a constraint for them. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) hold the view that policies are aimed at creating constraints. They asked whether there was an imbalance in the "demand side policies and supply side policies" (p. 265) and if these policies impact on successful participation in learning:

Doing isiXhosa because of the bursary was my greatest challenge. Even the isiXhosa students struggled with the grammar. We never did this at school and had to do it at university level. I don't understand why they don't just do a communication course so that we understand the language (Harry, Interview, October 1, 2018).

I'm Xhosa but I went to English school. I don't know [Xhosa] grammar. It was very difficult (Mike, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Hitlin and Elder (2006) cite Shanahan and Mortimer when they refer to the way that the participants shared how they internalised their "constrained opportunities for agency" and the way that they were able to "exert influence on one's life" (p. 38) by overcoming obstacles.

Individual barriers

Situational barriers

Situational constraints depend on the various relationships between the state, family and work according to Desjardins and Rubenson (2013). Once again, I refer to these scholars' use of the term "liquidity constraints" (p. 264) which are the financial resources, or lack thereof, that are at the disposal of the participant. The cost of participating in adult learning is directly impacted by the financial means of a student. The data revealed that finance was one of the greatest barriers to participation for the participants. The other situational barriers experienced by the participants are also discussed below.

Capacity for agency and resilience and situational barriers created by liquidity constraints

Financial circumstances or "liquidity constraints", as mentioned by Desjardins and Rubenson (2013), are also situational barriers and it is an obstacle directly and personally associated with the individual. When participants were questioned about barriers to participation, finance was cited as the biggest barrier that the participants faced. Most of the participants selected this course because of the state funded bursaries available at the university. Studies done by Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) revealed that adult learners are "bounded by structures and contexts ... that constrain choices" (p. 192). The responses of participants reveal this:

I am dependent on my parents' grant for transport and food. They send money to me because my fees are paid for by a community bursary (Nandi, Interview, September 26, 2018).

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I had to leave school to support my siblings. I was the eldest. It was the thing to do at the time. The bursary got me this far. (Harry, Interview, October 1, 2018).

Ester chose teaching initially, because of the bursary. She wanted to alter her life's circumstances, be an agent of change for herself and her daughter. Her input into this research validated my earlier references to Makoelle and Malindi (2015) who both referred to resilience as one's ability to achieve a constructive result despite adversity and to forge ahead despite unfavourable conditions and to keep recovering after each continuous distress. This response supports the idea of Bandura (2001) who stated that humans can shape their social systems through personal agency and can be "producers as well as products of social systems" (p. 15).

I was in an abusive relationship for years. He took my money. I had to make a change for my daughter. I just look ahead when I feel challenged (Ester, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Capacity for agency, resilience and barriers created by attitudes of employers

I chose to share this data of one participant as I found her story to be of great value in understanding the resilience of someone exercising agency. It verifies the findings of Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) when they mentioned that "the individual interprets the world" (p. 194) and in this way acts with resilience.

My immediate supervisor was my biggest barrier. He would not let me use any of the resident facilities even though the students who live here can. He said here I am a cleaner and not a student (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

I had to work for no pay during teaching practice. I did not have enough leave that was very hard on me (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

Capacity for agency, social support and situational barriers created by departmental norms

The evidence from the data collected during the interview with Cate revealed that traditional teaching practice at the institution contributed to the situational constraints experienced by her. She did not feel at ease during some of her lectures because of the way that the different departments at the university operated. This response leads to the aspect of social support which Hitlin and Elder (2006) referred to when they wrote about "networks of social relations" and how one's sense of "agency, occurs through individuals' own actions and the feedback they receive" (p. 50). Despite the negative feedback from the faculty or lecturers, Cate had a strong support network from friends and family and the "social relationships that make up the life course" (p. 50):

The education faculty doesn't teach us everything. Education students often feel excluded in other faculties and I feel very excluded in the science lectures (Cate, Interview, September 27, 2018).

All my siblings are professionals with degrees. They encouraged me to pursue my teaching degree so that I can help my sons with the challenges that they face (Cate, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Dispositional barriers

Dispositional barriers mention perceptions and how there is "little to gain by participating" or "concerns about the ability to succeed" (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009, p. 192) and the belief that age impacts on returning to study and previous bad experiences with education and schooling.

In this theme, I discuss the dispositional barriers that emerged from the data. It shows the dispositional barriers that the individual participants displayed during their initial stages of study. Dispositional barriers were comparatively higher in the first year of the participants' studies, as shown in the data. Once the students experienced the supportive culture of the university, they overcame these barriers.

Capacity for self-perceived agency, dispositional barriers: mind-set and difference in age

Bandura (2001) argued that "consciousness is the very substance of mental life" (p. 3) and this "functional consciousness" involves different ways that people process and regulate courses of action when faced with barriers. One of these barriers are dispositional barriers and mindsets as an example. The data revealed that the mindset of the various age groups working together could impact on the way that groups worked and engaged with each other. The older participants felt left out in the beginning. Desjardins and Rubenson (2013) refer to the "internal resources of individuals" (p. 264) and the way that the individual's nature and personality impacts on whether his or her goals will be realised. They also mention the uncertainty of the individual as to whether there are benefits in learning skills. The data will reveal later in the research that with guidance, as mentioned by the scholars above, the demand and supply of learning can be mediated:

The younger students would not work with me. Group work was a huge challenge as well as lab work. I always felt left behind (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

Elkeen gaan sy eie pad in die begin. Die taal en ouderdom maak dat ons nie meng nie [Each person just followed their own path, initially our language and age made that we didn't interact] (Arnold, Interview, September 19, 2018).

I had to confront my fear of computers. I never touched one before I came to university. My son had to help me. I did not even know why there were so many red

lines under my work. I failed my first computer assignment (Ester, Interview, September 19, 2018).

I was in the navy for many years. I knew discipline and structure. Adapting to taking things slower at university was a challenge. Sitting in lectures with youngsters was very new to me. I thought that I was out of my depth with those computers. I never knew how to ask for help, In the military you just do (Harry, Interview, October 1, 2018).

The above responses were shared by the participants about their experiences in the first year of study. These feelings of inadequacy changed over time as they became closer to reaching their goals of completing their degree. This refers to the way that "the more agentic a person reports feeling, the higher their self-regard" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 54). These researchers cite Gecas and Schwabe who wrote that self-efficacy and self-esteem were related, and that this growing confidence was all part of a larger process of interpersonal progression.

Successes

My study found out that there is a solid relationship between support structures and overcoming barriers to participation in adult learning.

Here I refer to Ellen Boeren, Nicaise & Baert (2010) who wrote about Human Capital Theory, and the theory's idea that people invest in learning to increase their productivity and skills. Advanced skills not only elevate a person's work opportunities but expands the well-being of society in other arenas such as health, education and social participation.

Researchers, like Keller who is cited by Boeren et al. (2010), have shown that people have varied reasons for participation in adult learning, but motivation stood out as it influenced the value that people attached to the learning opportunities.

Nandi shared, in her response, how her constraints were overcome by being motivated by the community in which she lived. Once they saw her potential, they motivated her by supporting her financially and emotionally:

I worked hard, the community saw my results. I got a bursary from the community. I still work weekends at the fruit growers. This helped me to overcome my anxieties

about studying. Seeing the support of the community gave me a boost. I will have my own money. I don't want to be someone living off a grant. I can give to others now (Nandi, Interview, September 26, 2018).

Cate was motivated by her family and the knowledge that her teaching degree would help her to understand and manage her children. She felt the possibility of sharing her future degree and being an agent of change and inspiration to others. Enver in turn, lived in a community where not many people were professionals. He saw his success as a tool to show others the benefits of a tertiary qualification. These are their responses:

I can support my children. This degree will help me understand my children's condition. They are both autistic. (Cate, Interview, September 27, 2018).

I will play a role in showing my community the joys of being educated with this degree. I can prosper and show others how (Enver, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Danilo lived as a refugee in South Africa. His goal is to educate other refugees and to change their circumstances. He was motivated by his personal experiences and his intentions to create change for others like him:

This degree will be my foot into the academic world. I want a PhD. I came to South Africa to escape poverty in my country. I will be able to do better for others that come to study here at this university (Danilo, Interview, September 27, 2018).

Arnold shared being a "drop out" because of his previous failure as being his motivation to succeed:

This degree will help me to be a stable and independent person. I won't be a drop out. I already dropped out of one course of study. This will help me to take care of myself and my parents (Arnold, Interview, September 19, 2018).

Boeren et al. (2010) cites Blunt and Yang who found that attitude was another value in overcoming barriers to participation. This ties into agency and intentionality which speaks of the capability to act to create change in one's life, and not just the intention to do so.

Some participants shared the way that reaching their third year of study changed their attitude. They became confident because being a professional changed society's perception of them. The world would see them and their family, as a different person:

I can contribute to the development of society now. I can contribute to the education system now. It's my turn to give back and I can do that with this degree (Mike, Interview, September 27, 2018).

I am a final-year student. I won't just be a cleaner any longer. I am going to be a qualified teacher. The world will see me and my family differently (Nina, Interview, September 11, 2018).

I am in my final year. I made it. I am going to be someone. I can work on a computer by myself. I will have status in my community (Ester, Interview, September 19, 2018).

In Jake's response, he shared how his role has been reversed since starting this degree. His attitude to many things had changed while studying at this institution. He saw his success as not only academic, but societal too:

I don't have to feed off society. With this degree I can empower people. I have two degrees now. I have also learnt to make friends with all race groups at this university. We are friends (Jake, Interview, September 26, 2018).

Harry shared his insecurities at the start of the interview. He was an older student who started full-time studies at the age of 47. He felt insecure at the start of the course but the marks that he achieved changed his attitude and motivated him to continue his studies. His leadership role among his peers also gave him a feeling of success:

I saw the intake of cadets when I was in the navy and they were not a good calibre. I will be able to prepare the youth for something more than complacency and mediocrity. I am already doing that as an older student. I am an example to the younger students (Harry, Interview, October 1, 2018).

Confidence and self-efficacy are also acknowledged by Boeren et al. (2010) who cited Crossan et al.

when she referred to self-perception as a factor in overcoming barriers. This is evident in the response from Anele who started as a student filled with anxiety and is working as a tutor at the institution now. Lee is also a tutor who told me, in his interview, that he owes his success to becoming a confident student and achieving good results because of his growing confidence:

I overcame my fears by opening up to my family. It helped me to change my mindset. I succeeded from that day. I became confident. I passed with flying colours. Family support played a huge role in my success (Anele, Interview, September 19, 2018).

I will be an example to my community. I am no longer afraid to fail because I am a successful student. I can support my family with my salary (Lee, Interview, September 27, 2018).

One participant felt that her growing confidence impacted positively on her results. She was not an academic student while at high school. She even changed schools because of her academic challenges. This is a response from Leila as she shared her success story:

I will be able to make a difference in the lives of students. I will also be earning more money so that I can help my mom who has paid for my studies. I will be a giver, not a receiver any longer. I made the Dean's list twice (Leila, Interview, July 12, 2018).

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When researching Bandura's (1989) perspectives of social cognitive theories, it became clear that human agency and the exercise of self-influence go hand in hand. Looking at the background and social conditions of the participants it has become evident, from the data collected, that the adult participants experienced a range of barriers yet persisted by acting as agents when working to make a difference in his/her life. Support from family and the community contributed significantly to students' success. Many participants revealed that dispositional barriers were overcome once the structural and situational barriers that they faced were dealt with. Through the capacity of the participants to strengthen their resilience, and acting with intentionality, participants were able to work towards completing their studies. These agentic actions motivated and influenced agents to "realize valued futures" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1182) and to achieve their long-term goals.

SECTION 5 – SUMMARY, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This section contains a summary of the study and its findings and offers new theoretical insights and perspectives about access and barriers to participation. I also make recommendations and present my conclusion.

5.1 Summary

In this research study, I investigated access, barriers to participation and success among mature students at a university in the Western Cape.

Research problem

This study investigated mature students' agency when overcoming barriers to participation and the research problem aimed to provide insights into the mismatch between structure and agency. The South African government in its White Paper for Post School Education (2013), affords disadvantaged people the opportunity to access higher education. Institutional structures and resources have been allocated yet access to these institutions is still a challenge for many mature students. Luckett and Luckett (2009) propose that higher education students, despite their disadvantaged backgrounds, could exert agency in ways that enable them to succeed.

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Research questions

The main research question:

- 1. What are the relationships between access, barriers to participation and success among mature students' participation in the B. Ed programme?
- 2. What constraints / barriers did mature students experience while studying?
- 3. How did mature students overcome these constraints, barriers or inhibitors?

Research aims

The aims of the study are to:

- 1. Investigate the relationships between access, barriers to participation and success among mature students in a higher education institution.
- 2. Generate new theoretical insights about the relationships between access, barriers to participation and success.

The main theoretical components discussed in my conceptual framework were Archer's (2003) theory of agency and Giddens's (1984) theory of structure and agency. As a point of departure, I relied on Luckett and Luckett (2009) who suggests that students need to move away from the "victim of apartheid" attitude (p. 2). This prompted me to research the ways in which mature students did so, exercising agency when they first gained access to higher education and during the course of their studies.

I used a qualitative research approach because of the diverse ways in which this research technique may be applied. As mentioned earlier in this research paper, Bryman et al. (2014) stated that qualitative researchers employ a "substantial amount of interviewing with focus groups, discourse analysis, conversations and the collection of texts and documents as examples of research methods associated with qualitative research" (p. 295). The qualitative research style is thus appropriate when one intends to interview participants, particularly when the aim is to gain comprehensive and in-depth information, in this case, information on the ways that mature students overcome barriers to successfully participate in learning at a higher education institution. I selected 20 participants who were registered for the Bachelor's in Education Degree (B. Ed and the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).

For data-gathering I used an interview guide and semi-structured interview questions which allowed me to gather data to generate theoretical insights into the way that the participants experienced access, barriers to participation and success.

I analysed the data by using the qualitative social research method of coding, which involves classifying individual pieces of data. I also used Bryman et al.'s (2016) grounded theory which has been defined as the "theory that was derived from data, systemically gathered and analysed through the research process" (p. 345). This theory helps the researcher to recognise concepts and relate them to the experiences of the sample being interviewed.

5.2 Findings

Below I present a summary of the findings grouped according to the main research questions and two sub-questions

What constraints / barriers did mature students experience while studying?

• A few students perceived transport difficulties as a structural barrier preventing easy access to the institution. However, this aspect was experienced as a barrier to learning.

- Financial constraints were the greatest barrier to participation. Almost all the students had elected to do the B. Ed course because it was funded. Several students revealed that lack of finances was the main reason they had dropped out of their first course of study or the reason they had not studied when younger. A few of the students showed that university subject choices influenced their positive participation in the course, since these subject choices dictated whether the students received public funding or not.
- Some students found that the accents of some lecturers were difficult to understand.
 This difficulty may be related to the social divide that still exists in South Africa as a result of apartheid enforced separation of the races.
- The faculties shared lecturers, but the lecturers were not able or willing to assist with teaching practice guidance of the students because, according to the participants, they were more academically driven than interested in assisting student teachers with their practical teaching component of their studies.
- Some students were unprepared for the academic writing style, including referencing, that is expected at university.
- The mature students felt insecure because of the age gap and were concerned about fitting in with the younger students. Some experienced dispositional barriers such as low self-esteem, a lack of confidence, anxiety and a sense of unworthiness which affected them negatively in their first year of study. Academic writing and computer literacy were also challenging to these mature students as they had not used these skills in their places of work. The students shared that the student health and wellness centre played a strong role in helping them to overcome their dispositional barriers to participation.
- The "Fees must fall" protest action had a negative effect on the students who worked for the institution because colleagues were involved in the strike action and made the students feel intimidated and disloyal to the cause.

How did mature students overcome these constraints / barriers?

- The assistance of peer tutors enabled students to overcome their dispositional and academic barriers.
- The support of lecturers and tutors was critical to overcoming the challenges of academic writing.

- A key factor was that mature students were also more driven to succeed from the
 beginning of their study path. Their perception was that younger students sometimes
 take the first year as a transitional phase that takes them from high school to tertiarylevel education. Mature students, on the other hand, had experienced the hardships of
 life without a degree, and were highly motivated to overcome poverty both for
 themselves and for their families.
- For one student, the degree was a stepping-stone to teaching overseas. Her level of
 motivation enabled her to overcome barriers with inner resources. However, she would
 have liked the university to provide more exposure to overseas opportunities for
 students.
- Many students sensed that they were held in higher regard than previously in their families and communities because of their decision to study. They sensed that their social status would change again once they became teachers and were highly motivated by this. This growing sense of enhanced social standing and confidence helped them to overcome the barriers they faced.
- Students also reported being supported emotionally and financially by family and the broader community. This support was a strong enabler for participation and helped them overcome various barriers.
- Almost all the students had chosen the B. ED degree because of the various financial resources available to students in this course. The financial assistance they received was a huge enabler, helping them to overcome the financial barrier to further studies.
- Some students used the B.Ed. degree to access higher education but had no intention of teaching permanently. They wished to pursue further academic studies or follow a different career path.
- Most students intended to use their access to and success in the B. Ed degree to address
 social concerns in society. They wanted to change lives and have a positive impact on
 the challenges of the country. All of these factors were motivators to students.

5. 3 New theoretical insights and perspectives

The original intention for this study was to frame my insights through the lens of the sociological theorists such as Giddens (1984) and Archer (2003), using structure and agency. Upon further investigation I was led to the social psychological theories of Luckett and Luckett (2009) and Hitlin and Elder (2006), who through their research allowed me to understand how

students achieved success through agency, intention and the motivation to change their life's circumstances. The students, having acted as agents, had the intention of changing the course of their lives by acting "on the basis of their subjectively defined 'concerns'" (Luckett & Luckett, 2009, p. 3).

I refer to Archer (2003) who presented the idea that life courses can be changed and that people "design courses of action in order to achieve their own ends" (p. 6). Giddens (1984) indicated that the act of affecting change in one's life comes about through having clear intention to do so.

The data revealed how despite numerous social barriers experienced in their high school and post school years, all the students in this study were able to change their circumstances by individual action, and to work towards a set goal. They displayed "the ability to initiate self-change" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 35). The literature review makes it clear that participation in adult learning is motivated by varied concerns, and that agents "make decisions based on reflection and the internalization of our social realities" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006, p. 37). Each person responds differently to their circumstances and for some the decision to make agentic action may only be possible through support and encouragement of others. This became very clear in the case of the refugee student who was funded by a local church and by an elderly white South African couple for whom he did garden work. He now lives with this couple.

Considering my main research question about the relationship between access, barriers to participation and success, I would say that the data from this research confirmed my theoretical assumption that the participants displayed agency by responded to circumstances that were not of their own making by drawing on both their own acts of agency and on the support of others. They turned their intentions into action by accessing higher education and overcame barriers when faced with it. This ability to act confirms Giddens' (1984) findings in that acts of agency require not only the intention to do something to change one's circumstances, but also the ability to do so. Through agency, the mature students were able to overcome barriers to participation. Here I refer to a full-time general worker whom I interviewed, who was also a full-time student who felt validated when wearing her university jacket and the invisibility when wearing her cleaner's uniform. She was motivated by the desire to break the cycle of poverty in her family. Other students from underprivileged backgrounds who could not have afforded the fees to study, exercised agency by choosing a course of study that came with a bursary so that they could achieve their goal of earning a degree. For them the initial motivation

was simply to attain a degree and access further studies: their real interests, at first, were not necessarily in the B.Ed or PGCE course they had enrolled for. However, as students progressed in their studies, the content of their courses seemed to awaken in them a passion for what they were studying and spoke of now desiring to teach and to 'make a difference' in society. The course they were enrolled in still opened doors for further studies and some now saw a role for themselves as lecturers or as role-players in advancing education in South Africa. This feeling of being capable and learning new capabilities encouraged agency and in turn inspired success and purpose.

Most of the students were clearly motivated by a need to advance themselves and their families financially and to experience an improved sense of equality and standing in society. They saw a degree as an opportunity to improve their own lives and the lives of their families' lives. For these students had emancipatory benefits including an increase in income, job stability, career pathing, future promotions, increased levels of self-confidence, improved family life and enhanced sense of intrinsic self-worth. As mature students who had experienced the hardships of life without a qualification, they were highly motivated in their studies by the very clear rewards that they perceived to await at the end of the period of study.

The findings have confirmed that students are able to act as agents in their immediate environments and that if they act with self-efficacy, they exercise "control over their circumstances and" are "capable of carrying out actions to produce intended effects" (Hitlin & Elder, 2006. p. 41). An example is the one student who chose to study teaching so that he could train future game rangers. He worked with people who had a knowledge of the bush but no formal training. This concept of self-efficacy draws agents into new shared possibilities, setting new goals and finding ways to reach new heights.

Many students would not have had the courage to embark on a course of study without the necessary support. These included financial assistance from a funder, the support of family, and academic support in the form of skilled tutors, amongst other factors. These aspects were sufficient for them to turn vague hopes into concrete acts of agency and continue to make acts of agency that sustained them over the long term.

Reflecting on my main research question, this study supports the idea that through exercising agency, and when social, financial and academic support are in place, mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to overcome barriers to participation, access higher education and successfully complete their studies.

5.4 Recommendations

- The Faculty of Education should, as part of orientation for students, offer an awareness programme which sensitises students and academics to barriers created by apartheid that marginalise students, and undermine successful participation and the completion of the B.Ed. programme. Such a programme should also promote inclusivity and diversity.
- The Faculty of Education should increase peer tutoring as this it enabled mature students to overcome their academic writing barriers and participate successfully at a tertiary level.
- All faculties teaching B. Ed. students must assist mature students who are mistaken as
 experienced educators, to overcome barriers related to their limited teaching skills in
 respect of subjects such as science and maths.
- Some mature students referred to the role of the health and wellness centre in helping
 them to overcome dispositional barriers to participation but felt that services were
 limited due to staffing capacity. The university should consider allocating additional
 staff dedicated for mature students.
- Mature students showed that they were highly motivated to succeed, but experienced
 financial barriers. Therefore, mature students' applications for financial and social
 assistance to NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme) should be considered
 on the same grounds as younger students.

5.5 Conclusion

In my conceptual framework I focused on access, barriers to participation and success among mature students in relation to the theories framed by Archer (2003) and Giddens (1984). I also concentrated on South African scholars, such as Luckett and Luckett (2009), Hitlin and Elder (2006) and Powell and McGrath (2013) who have studied and analysed agency in post—school education.

The purpose of this study is to understand the existence of barriers to participation amongst mature students. It has also generated theoretical insights about the way that mature students exercise agency to overcome their barriers. The general aims of the research were to investigate

the factors that both hindered and promoted success in studies among mature students completing the B.Ed and PGCE course. While many factors contributed to the success of the participants, the purpose of this research was to identify the role of individual agency enabling students to thrive despite having experienced failure in earlier attempts to study.

The Bounded Agency model is "premised on the assumption" of Rubenson and Desjardins (2009, p. 187) who referred to welfare state regimes affecting the capability to participate in adult learning. However, Rubenson and Desjardins' study was located in a Nordic country. My research reveals a need for further study on agency among students in South Africa, as the barriers they experience can be experienced as too difficult to overcome. Disadvantaged students struggle with the lack of financial means to study, a factor which may seem as a legacy of apartheid which caused an unequal distribution of wealth and affected black families negatively. Currently the funding made available by the government to previously disadvantaged students to study at higher education institutions is insufficient to address these past inequalities on a large scale. The need for financial support is accompanied by a host of other needs, which include transport needs, accommodation needs and academic and social or emotional needs. When these factors are in place, previously disadvantaged mature students are well positioned to succeed, having higher than average levels of motivation to do so.

More research is needed to better understand the relationship between barriers and agency and the way that students overcome these barriers while exercising agency.

In conclusion, the goal of this study was to determine the role and value of agency in helping mature students in overcoming barriers to participation in higher education in South Africa. This goal has been achieved. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing body of research on barriers to student participation, agency and success in higher education in South Africa.

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APPENDIX A

Interview guide

Biographical information

Access, barriers to participation and success among mature students at a University in the Western Cape

PART A

2. 3. 4.	Age:		
Single	Married Divorced Widowed In a civil relationship		
	Number of dependants:		
8.	Area of residence:		
9.	Have you previously registered for any formal courses after leaving school? YES / NO		
10.	Did you complete the course YES / NO (please circle)		
11.	If no, what was your reason for not completing the course?		

PART B

- 1. What was your most important personal reason to apply for this course?
- 2. Has it changed over the past three years? If yes, tell me what these changes were.
- 3. What changes did you have to make within yourself in order to make a success of the programme thus far?
- 4. When you felt that your academic capabilities were challenged, what did you do to enable yourself to build your academic capabilities?
- 5. What personal attitudes enabled you to confront your challenges about your academic capabilities?
- 6. What is the most important personal gain that you would like to derive from your successful completion of this programme?
- 7. Did you experience any limitations while studying this course?
- 8. What are some of the personal limitations that have influenced your progress negatively since you started this programme?
- 9. How did you address these constraints?
- 10. What are some of the structural constraints that you had experienced during your study course? Transport, access to resources, financial aid?
- 11. How did you address these barriers?
- 12. Who assisted you to apply for this course or did you do it by yourself?
- 13. Can you tell me more about this assistance?
- 14. Did you receive support and assistance from members of your family or community?
- 15. Will the completion of this course be life changing for you? If yes, can you tell me how it will change matters for you?
- 16. Were the any events at this institution that impacted on your participation in this course? Please tell me about this.
- 17. Did these events have a positive or negative impact on your study programme?
- 18. When you felt yourself challenged in general, did you have a support network to refer to?
- 19. How did this support network/ lack of support network impact on your study program?
- 20. Are some of these constraints that you mentioned above related to overcoming 'disadvantage' or apartheid challenges?
- 21. How did you address these constraints related to overcoming 'apartheid related' or 'disadvantage' challenges?

22. What constraints related to overcoming 'apartheid related' or 'disadvantage' challenges, were you unable to address?

APPENDIX B

The Registrar

Re: Kind request for permission to conduct a research study

Dear Ms/ Mr

I am currently registered as a student in the Master's Degree in Adult Education and Global Change. I am required to conduct a research project this year.

My research topic focuses on access, participation and barriers to participation among mature adult students. I found this topic interesting and relevant because I have observed matured adult students, despite their background and circumstances, persevere and succeed during their study period.

Over the past two to three years, access has become a critical issue in higher education. The protests at universities by students have drawn national attention to this matter and this university has been among one of the higher education institutions where concerns about access have surfaced.

I am requesting permission to conduct an investigation into the access, participation and barriers to participation amongst mature adult students, who are enrolled in the Bachelors in Education degree and in their final year of study as well as the PGCE students. My intention is for this research to contribute new insights into access and barriers to participation at higher education institutions.

I will collect data by conducting interviews with 30 participants and I will be using an interview guide. All participants will be given a letter of consent informing them of the purpose of the study. They will be requested to sign the letter of consent at the start of the interview. I undertake to observe strict confidentiality.

I trust that this request will meet with your approval.

Yours in Education Gillian Williams

APPENDIX C – Information letter to participants

Dear	. (name to	be	inserted	later)
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My name is Gillian Williams and I am registered as a Master's student enrolled in the Adult Learning and Global Change course. The university requires me to conduct a research study, as a course requirement. I would like you to participate in this study.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the barriers to access and participation in adult learning within the Education faculty amongst final year mature students who have completed the first three years of the Bachelor's in Education Degree or the PGCE. This research will make a considerable contribution to understanding the factors that hinder participation by mature students. These issues play out against the historical and social backdrop of differentiated education and the systematic exclusion, poverty and political disempowerment of the majority of the population. Over the past two to three years, access has become a critical issue in higher education. The protests at universities by students have drawn national attention to this matter and this university has been among one of the higher education institutions where concerns about access have surfaced.

It is with these reasons that I am requesting an interview at a time that is convenient to you. This interview is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

I will provide you with an interview consent form and I request that you sign this form before I conduct this interview. I will treat the information that you share with the strictest confidentiality and maintain your anonymity. All data in this research will be securely stored for a period of five years.

If you have any questions about the research you may contact my supervisor, Professor Zelda Groener.

Researcher: Gillian Williams Contact number: +27 63 679 6297 Email: familiewill@yahoo.com

Course: Masters in Adult Learning and Global Change

APPENDIX D - Participation consent form

Research Project Title: Access, Participation and Barriers to participation in Adult learning.

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. By signing this form, you indicate consent for your participation in the research project. Please be assured that information given will be held in the strictest confidence and that in no way will you be compromised.

By signing this consent form, you agree that:

- You have read and understood the information letter and consent form provided.
- You freely consent to be interviewed by the researcher
- You consent that the interview can be audio recorded with an electronic recording device.
- You understand that your words may be quoted and used in publications, reports and in webpages but that your name will not be used.
- You understand that you can withdraw from the research project at any time and no reason will be expected for your withdrawal.

Please sign the form and return it to the person that gave it to you.

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Place of interview	
Date of interview	
Researcher's signature	