

**Peer group interaction, academic integration and persistence in a
foundation programme at a university in the Western Cape**

Rodrique E. George

2322632

Supervisor: Prof Z. Groener

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Abstract:

This research paper is based on an investigation of the factors that enabled final year students to persist in a four-year degree programme (Foundation Programme). This study is important given that students who generally enrol for this programme terminate their studies before completion. This is a qualitative study in which interviewing was employed to collect the data. The conceptual framework is underpinned by Tinto's model of student persistence with specific focus on student involvement through peer group interaction in the formal structure of the classroom. It also hones in on informal engagement which goes beyond the nature of the classroom. It further explores the relevance of academic integration, which encompasses a student's ability to become well-grounded intellectually in the sphere of the institution in order to respond in a critical and systematic way to its educational demands. In addition, it further interrogates how peer group interaction and academic integration impact students' ability to persist with their studies. Thus, the findings confirm that relationships exist between peer group interaction, academic integration, and persistence.

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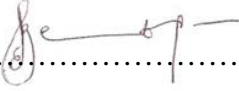
I am also very grateful to all the participants who contributed to this study. Without your contribution, this study would have been meaningless.

Lastly, to the countless students who continue to motivate me daily to become a better version of myself, I thank you.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the prerequisite for the Degree of Master in Adult Education and Global Change at the University of the Western Cape. It has not been submitted before for any examination or degree in any institution of higher learning. All the sources I have quoted or used have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Rodrique E. George

Signed:

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Background and context

The motivation for my research stems from my experience as a lecturer currently employed in an undergraduate Foundation Programme in the Western Cape. Given the current challenges in basic education in South Africa, the Foundation Programme, also referred to as the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP), was designed to afford students from previously disadvantaged communities, who do not meet the minimum requirements, the opportunity to enrol for the Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Commerce Accounting degrees, respectively. This means that they are required to do a four-year degree and they are provided with academic support to address some of their academic needs and challenges as well as to complete their degrees within record time.

The intentions conveyed by the South African government in its White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) create the background and context for my research. The government articulates its intention to broaden access to post-school opportunities which exceeds that which currently exists, and also to ensure the improvement of the quality of education.

The objectives outlined in the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013), however, also clearly articulates the need to ensure that people participate fully within the context of post-school education. A further objective is to improve participation and success rates in all higher education programmes. A key aspect highlighted in the White Paper (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) pertains to meaningful access, and it is therefore my quest to explore how this could lead to participation in meaningful learning, which could ultimately result in students becoming better integrated into post-school education and training, and in this case, a university.

Data collected through regular tracking of students in the Foundation Programme shows that there are more than 60 different modules across the Foundation and mainstream programmes, in which students most often have to repeat modules. These modules are referred to as High Impact Modules. Many of the Foundation modules serve as pre-requisites for mainstream modules. Thus, should a student fail a module he/she would have to repeat the module before he/she is promoted. In some cases, students fail the pre-requisites more than once. This

ultimately leads to 39% of students dropping out (Foundation Programme Tracking Statistics, 2017).

A need exists to establish the motivation behind the decision by the minority of students who persist with their studies. In addition, the Foundation Programme has the potential to ensure that students persist and that the intention for further studies be expressed way before the completion of the first degree. Furthermore, it also expands the students' understanding of collaborative learning, which extends beyond the confines of the institution into the future workplace.

Rationale

In the Foundation Programme, at least 39% of students dropped out of the Programme over a four-year period (2010 – 2013). It is significant to note that in 2010 at least 22% of students dropped out of the Programme during their first year. In 2011, a total of 33% dropped out of the Programme. Then in 2012, a further 54% dropped out of the Programme. In the final year, 2013, there was further attrition of 48% (See Table 1). The overall success rate of students who graduated and completed the Foundation Programme at the end of the four years was 42%. 58% of students who did not complete their studies on time, further persisted with their studies (Foundation Programme Tracking Statistics, 2017).

As I have been working with the students in this Programme for nearly a decade, I considered it imperative to explore the reasons why 42% of students, over a period of four years, persisted with their studies, opposed to 39% of students who dropped out (Foundation Programme Tracking Statistics, 2017).

Research problem

Research shows that in some higher education institutions' programmes the percentage of student persistence is low. A study of the literature reveals that factors like peer group interaction and academic integration can sustain a student's persistence in higher education. In its White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) government articulates the need to improve participation and success rates in higher education programmes. This research responds to the need to increase student persistence and success in a specific higher education programme. Tinto's (1997) model proposes that several factors among others, peer group interaction and academic integration, can sustain student persistence. To explore ways in which student persistence can be improved,

this study investigates the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence in a specific programme offered by a university in the Western Cape.

Research aims

- 1) To investigate the factors that influence student persistence in higher education.
- 2) To develop new theoretical insights about student persistence in higher education.

Research questions

Main research question

What are the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence?

Sub-questions

How does peer group interaction contribute to student persistence?

What are the relationships between peer group interaction and academic integration?

How does academic integration contribute to student persistence?

Overview of research paper

In Section 2, I present a conceptual framework, which frames the investigation into this study.

In Section 3, I outline the research methodology and design.

In Section 4, I present the data analysis.

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

Table 1: Student attrition, retention and completion in the Foundation Programme**(2010 – 2013)**

| Year | Class size | Attrition | % Attrition | Retention | % Retention | On time completion (students who graduated) (OTC) | % On time completion (students who graduated) (OTC) |
|----------------|-------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|--|--|
| 2010 | 423 | 97 | 22% | 326 | 78% | | |
| 2011 | 326 | 106 | 33% | 220 | 67% | | |
| 2012 | 220 | 118 | 54% | 118 | 46% | | |
| 2013 | 118 | 82 | 69% | 36 | 52% | 15 | 42% |
| Average | 272 | 101 | 39% | 175 | 61% | | |
| | | | | | | Total: | |
| | | | | | | 15 | 42% |

SECTION 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Tinto's Model of Student Persistence

Introduction

In this section, I present my conceptual framework by drawing on the relevant academic literature. For the purposes of my study, I derived my conceptual framework from Tinto's Model of Student Persistence (Tinto, 1997) which he modified from his Model of Student Departure (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). From the Model of Student Persistence (Tinto, 1997), I have selected the following components: pre-entry attributes, goal commitments (T1), institutional experience, personal/normative integration, student effort, educational outcomes and, goal commitments (T2) and outcome as the basis of this study. These components frame my study, which investigates relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence.

Tinto developed his inceptive theory of student departure with Cullen in 1973. In terms of this theoretical model, the focus was primarily on attrition and it highlighted components, such as pre-entry characteristics, the student's goals/commitments, institutional experiences, academic and social integration, intentions and external commitments, as well as the decision to depart from the institution (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Tinto's Student Departure Theory included six components (Tinto, 1975). Firstly, according to the assertions in this theory, a student arrives at college with pre-determined expectations. Secondly, the integration, or lack of attainment of these aspirations, has an influence on the student. Thirdly, institutional variables play a crucial part as well. Furthermore, he asserts that the engagement between faculty and students is vital. In addition, there is the importance of peer group interaction in the student's academic life. Lastly, a student's extramural activities also play a significant role in determining whether or not a student will depart from college. In 1987, Tinto adapted his Student Departure Theory in an effort to understand the changing nature of student persistence research. This new model includes factors such as psychological, societal, economical, organisational, and included interaction imperatives.

In 1993, Tinto further adapted this model into the Integration Framework. According to the Integration Framework model, an individual's persistence at institutions can be seen as emerging from a longitudinal activity between an individual's given characteristics, such as skills, financial assets, prior educational experiences and temperament, and other members of the academic and social structures of the institution (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) suggests in this model that there are critical relationships, on the one hand, between the educational exercise systems of the classroom, student engagement (including the quality of student effort) and, on the other hand, between quality of student effort, learning and persistence. He further motivates that these relationships are likely to be vital in contexts where engagement is not easily attainable, especially when you have non-residential students or those who are commuting and working. All of these components contribute to an enhanced quality of effort as initiated by the student. In turn, this contributes to an enhanced learning experience, which, in many ways, increases student persistence.

This study investigates the enabling factors which contribute to student persistence. In his longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure, Tinto (1993) emphasises, among others, the role peer group interactions play in ensuring that an individual becomes academically integrated. Thus, the paper examines the role peer group interactions play in the quest for an individual to become academically integrated, which, ultimately, has the potential to enhance student persistence.

Despite the remarkable advances in innovations, most students experience university as a very lonely journey, which often leads students to feel completely disconnected from others and their context. Thus, this results in students feeling like inactive participants. This, in effect, means that students show little involvement in terms of their learning (Tinto, 1993). It further results in inadequate integration. The lack of community membership may emanate from one possessing values which are incongruent from others within the same society, and due to insufficient personal engagement between the individual and other members within a similar society (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's Model of Student Departure (1993) eventually gave rise to his Model of Student Persistence (Tinto, 1997). In his Model of Student Persistence (Tinto, 1997), Tinto highlights the role a student's background plays when entering a tertiary institution. These pre-entry attributes determine how a student's goal commitment is shaped and whether it will lay the foundation for an intention to persist with his/her studies. In addition, he emphasizes how a

student's institutional experiences further shape the willingness by the student to persist. Tinto (1997) also asserts that it is crucial for the student to be well integrated into the life of the institution, both academically and socially, in order for the student to persist as this contributes to the level of student effort. The quality of the student effort fosters learning and further advances the ability of the student to increase his/her commitment to persist with his/her studies.

Pre-entry attributes

Direct and indirect influences

Tinto (1997) explains that often students experience challenges which have a direct impact on their studies. These factors Tinto (1997) dubs as "attributes". Tinto (1997) highlights the role that pre-entry attributes (like family background, prior schooling, skills and abilities) of a student play in affecting the student's overall institutional involvement, educational results as well as the student's ability to persist with his/her studies. He thus explains that a student naturally tends to derive a set of values, intentions and commitments which ultimately influences the way in which the student is socialised into the institutional context.

Tinto (1997) further provides insight by explaining that students who gain access to higher education who come from a lower-income group often struggle to make progress and fail to capitalise on the opportunities provided for them at university. Longden (2004) describes this as the student not possessing the same "cultural capital" (p.121) as the rest of their peers. Yet, he explains that "cultural capital" is not something which can be directly measured. He does however credit Tinto's (1997) pre-entry attributes which provide valuable insights such as a student's prior schooling and family life, which directly influences a student's cultural capital (Longden, 2004, p.134). Thus, a student whose cultural capital stands in conflict with the prevailing institutional culture runs a higher risk of potentially dropping out and not completing their studies.

This lack of cultural capital means that a student would therefore be unlikely to seek support when it is needed (Thomas, Quinn, Slack & Casey, 2002). Thus, it means that a greater responsibility rests on institutions to ensure that they employ effective strategies to impact such students, given that they would be reluctant to seek assistance when struggling academically.

Tinto (1997) indicates that pre-entry attributes has a direct and indirect impact on student persistence. One sees the direct influence when observing a student's academic performance.

The indirect influence is seen in the student's intentions and commitments, including a student's decisions and behaviour. He further asserts that pre-entry attributes therefore play an important predisposing role in preparing students for the challenges they will face once they have entered the institution of higher education. In addition, pre-entry attributes also hold a further influence of impacting on a student's decision to make the necessary goal and institutional commitments.

Tinto (1997) posits that a student who enjoys the support from his/her family, especially his/her parents, is most likely to persist with his/her studies. Thus, when a student experiences undue pressure from his/her family it is likely to impact the way they will engage with their studies and in particular the institution. It also becomes even more challenging for those who are first-generation students when their families do not understand their academic challenges and therefore do not know how to support them. This idea is supported by Christie, Munro & Fisher (2004, p. 618) who argue that when students do not feel supported by their families, they will mostly feel alienated and are likely not to persist with their studies.

Tinto (1997) further explains that a student's skills and abilities are important factors to consider as pre-entry attributes. He especially refers to skills and abilities the student acquired through active learning. Active learning, according to Tinto (1997), would be the student's perception of the knowledge and experience they have gained through their respective courses. In this regard, Milem and Berger (1997) agree that active learning enables a student to better comprehend the course content as well as gain knowledge. Active learning of course content also affords students the ability to forge meaningful engagements with their peers and maximise their own ability for learning.

In addition, Tinto (1997) highlights the role prior schooling plays in the life of a student. Here he especially refers to academic responsibility of a student in terms of regular school attendance as well as how regularly the individual submitted his/her homework. He asserts that these factors are crucial as they point to the confidence the student had in their own ability as well as their academic self-image. This also impacted on how well a student felt they were able to communicate in writing, as well as their intellectual self-image and their own perception of how **competent** they were at problem-solving, creativity and mathematical abilities. On the other hand, the social factors which were considered pertained to social integration and personal agency. Under social integration, social self-image was considered as well as teacher-student engagement outside of the classroom. In addition, teamwork was also considered,

especially how the student was able to work independently, but more importantly, how he/she engaged with his/her peers and how they worked together on group assignments.

Institutional Experiences

‘Shared learning experiences’

For the purpose of constructing this conceptual framework, I focus on peer group interaction (Tinto, 1975) which comes as a result of creating classrooms as learning communities (Tinto, 1997), academic integration and competent membership/student persistence/intention to persist from Tinto’s Model of Student Persistence (Tinto, 1997). This is done in an effort to ascertain whether these variables are congruent with the reasons for student persistence within my own context.

Some of the key concepts I shall be focusing on in my study pertain to peer group interaction (Tinto, 1975), which encompasses working together with other students, offering support to each other, gleaning from others and dealing with challenges. This lays the foundation for collaborative learning which simply means that this educational approach to teaching and learning aims to encourage students to work together with others in order to solve a problem jointly, complete a task within the allocated time or be responsible for creating something.

In addition, Tinto (1997) explains how this type of learning fosters opportunities in which the student is an active participant in the formulation of knowledge and encourages students to take responsibility of the learning process. Furthermore, students also feel a great sense of personal involvement and they are able to compare it with previous educational experiences. Tinto (1997) also highlights how the shared learning experience allows for students who come from different backgrounds to engage with a myriad of different views and experiences which they get to know through new friendships. A key aspect which he raises is that students are often torn between the social and academic world, thus they tend to feel the need to choose between the two. Yet, through their shared learning experience, they learn how to draw these two worlds together comfortably (Tinto, 1997).

Thus, Tinto (1997) stresses the importance of “shared learning experiences” (p. 615), which link students with their peers - the more they engage both academically and socially with each other, the better engaged they will be in the classroom. Tinto (1997) highlights that many students who enter into institutions of higher learning have not developed the ability to engage properly with others. Instead, they grow accustomed to portraying learning as a “spectator

sport” (Tinto, 1997, p. 601). Thus, one finds very few students who are active in the learning process, and there seems to be a complete disconnect between the academic and social coherence of the student’s learning experience. It is however when they engage in “shared learning experiences” (Tinto, 1997, p. 615; Tinto, 2012) that these experiences link them with their peers. These shared experiences make them responsible in peer group work and foster collaborative learning experiences among them. While both peer group interaction and collaborative learning are not prominent in Tinto’s Model of Student Persistence (1997), it comes as a result of creating ‘shared learning experiences’ for students (Tinto, 1997, p.615; Tinto, 2012). However, this ability to weave the various aspects into the fabric of learning also enables students to take ownership of the learning process and to gain a distinct voice in how knowledge is constructed. This enables students to see learning as significantly richer and more empowering (Tinto, 1997).

In this study, I have decided to adopt the position taken by Tinto (1997) which advocates the importance of restructuring the context of the classroom in an effort to enhance peer group interaction. It is imperative to highlight that Tinto (1997) asserts clearly that peer group interaction does not necessarily guarantee student persistence, but that peer group interaction encompasses a vital socialising agent, which makes educational persistence and, ultimately, degree completion all the more possible.

He therefore outlines the path which leads to the realisation of peer group interaction and thus lays the foundation for collaborative learning. These, inter alia, include (a) the need for the classroom to be transformed or restructured; (b) to allow students to take the plunge by introducing what they have learnt from their peers; and (c) to see students implement the knowledge gained, or in other words, “how to” (Tinto, 1997, p. 602).

Following the foundational research done by Tinto, several researchers have also explored the role peer group interaction plays in the Integration Framework developed by Tinto (1997). One such example is the study conducted by Conyne, Wilson and Ward (1997) which focused on collaborative learning. In this study, Conyne et al. (1997) describe a group as an influential interaction network where each individual’s character and behaviour can be viewed as an activity of the entire group, as well as the singular characteristics of the individual members. Hence, it is important to understand that group work is the constant interplay between the cognitive and emotional feelings people bring to the group.

Chiefly, collaborative learning enables students to experience a shift in their intellectual development and this enables them to express their personal point of view while also listening to the opinion of others. Yet, collaborative learning should be understood as that which is much more carefully constructed than small-group work on the continuum of what is merely known as group work (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). In addition, collaborative learning should also be understood as that which tends to facilitate the development of cognitive skills, as well as intellectual development, and thus enhances a student's ability to reason in terms of higher-order learning (Karabenick & Collins-Eaglin, 1996).

A further understanding of collaborative learning suggests that it improves classroom learning by transforming students from mere passive beneficiaries of information to active agents in the construction of knowledge (Goodsell, Maher, Tinto, Smith & MacGregor, 1992). This affirms the position expressed by Tinto (1993) who argues for the need to restructure the learning environment. It is through collaborative learning that a lecturer gains insight into the growth of a student in the process of learning as the student gains better thinking skills, communication skills and competence to master the content of the work (Bitzer, 1999).

Furthermore, one should also understand the complexities associated with group interaction as it should be viewed as an interlinked combination of internal and external factors (Cartney, 2000). It is therefore important to understand the stages in the life cycle of groups, namely, forming, storming, norming and performing (Argyle, 1975). In terms of this life cycle, students go through a process of forming groups. Once the group has formed, it typically goes through teething challenges until it reaches a stage where values are set, and they learn to operate as a cohesive group. This further leads to a group performing or functioning according to the different strengths present in the group. Mourning is a further component which forces the group to potentially split and this is the cause of emotional distress (Heron, 1989).

Usually when one enters into a new group, one enters with preconceived notions, expectations and responses, which are akin to the previous group experiences one has had (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry & Osbourne, 1983). It is therefore important to be aware of the risks associated with group interaction as it could leave some students feeling isolated and alone given their previous group experiences (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003).

However, Barnett and Caffarella (1992) argue that when students organise themselves in such a closed-cohort format, there is a great probability for group-cohesiveness to occur. They describe group-cohesiveness as shared solidarity or agreement that enables a group to forge

stronger bonds. In addition to this, Barnett and Caffarella (1992) are of the opinion that adult students display affiliation needs, which mean that they want to form an association and play a supportive role in each other's learning.

This should be viewed from the perspective of Johnson and Johnson (2001) where they define collaborative learning as learning which occurs when a group works together in order to achieve a shared goal. Once the group has a shared goal, it results in higher levels of shared trust and, ultimately, contributes to increased knowledge sharing among group members (Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974). Moreover, the likelihood of increased shared trust may result in the probability of knowledge being better absorbed and understood (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995).

As a result of this shared objective, the possibility exists to enhance the chances for collaborative learning and increase the levels of trust among group members (Bohm, 1996). It further makes concrete the notion that learning which occurs within a collaborative setting is better than learning alone (Nokes-Malach, Meade & Morrow, 2015). Similarly, it affirms the outcome of a study conducted by Spalding, Ferguson, Garrigan and Stewart (1999) on how effective group work was in augmenting work-based learning. They concluded that when students work in socially cohesive groups, the learning process is greatly enhanced.

In terms of collaborative learning, Astin (1993) found an increase in the frequency of students working together in groups with their peers. It also increased the student's development and academic self-concept. Similarly, the frequency of a student's interaction with peers also shows a significant increase in their interpersonal skills (Grayson, 1999).

It is, however, vital to take heed to the caution from Bonwell and Eison (1991) that for students to be successful, they need to constantly engage in problem-solving and thus be constantly engaged in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis and evaluation. It is easy for a student to become unsuccessful, and one way to measure this is to observe if a student performs worse in a group than he/she would have if he/she had worked alone. This is called collaborative inhibition, and when the individual exceeds what he or she would have achieved had he/she worked alone, it is called collaborative facilitation (Wright & Lawson, 2010).

One cannot deny the fact that small-group work plays an integral part in academic learning (Gillies & Ashman, 2003). It is therefore imperative that those who wish to use group work as a means to a particular goal need to be keenly aware of the theoretical underpinnings of such action (Doel & Sawson, 1999). This validates the position taken by Tinto (1993), which seeks

to motivate institutions of higher learning to see the world through the eyes of students and not to exist on two different extremes.

One way to understand the world of the student differently is to comprehend that collaborative learning is not merely isolated to face-to-face interaction. Technology plays a pivotal role in the twenty-first century and it serves as an important mode of learning (Williams, 2011). Thus, students today are technologically advanced and find ways to access various learning resources online as a way to circumvent having to always engage face-to-face with other students - their peers (Daniel, 2009). While face-to-face engagement is often viewed as the best way for peer group interaction, students, however, make use of technology to work together formally and informally, often long after leaving the classroom.

Institutional Experiences

Classrooms as learning communities

In his study on Classrooms as Communities, Tinto (1997) indicates that membership in the community of the classroom creates a distinct link with membership in communities which are external to the classroom. He therefore makes the observation that students who have to commute from home to the environment of the campus, who are unable to make the connection in the classroom, often struggle to make the connections with others beyond the realm of the classroom. He therefore argues that important relationships hinge on the educational activity of the curriculum, student participation, the quality of the student effort, learning and persistence. Thus, an increase in terms of the effort leads to an increase in student persistence (Endo & Harpel, 1982). Yet, not all learning necessarily leads to persistence in the same fashion. It greatly depends on the measure of strides students make in becoming academically integrated and it depends largely on their engagement within the classroom.

Tinto (1997) views the classroom as a central point in the life of the student. He believes that, especially for students who commute to campus from outside, the classroom serves as a platform where the student and faculty meet, where education is experienced in a formal context. Thus, the classroom serves as a crossroad where social and academic integration converge.

Through his research, Tinto (1997) made some important conclusions about learning communities. He asserts that students who are actively engaged in learning communities typically formed their own supporting structures among themselves and that these connections

extended beyond the life of the classroom. He also expresses the fact that students who engage in learning communities have increased levels of time together out of the classroom than students who are associated with more traditional forms of learning. Furthermore, he acknowledges that students in learning communities managed to make friends easily while also learning together. This leads to a significant increase in the intellectual progress students makes. In short, students from learning communities were more engaged, both academically and socially, compared to their counterparts from traditional settings.

According to McKeachnie (as cited in Tinto, 1997) there is an important link between student participation in the classroom, student learning and, ultimately, student persistence. Astin (1987) further explains that there is greater student involvement when students are actively engaged in the classroom. A student who is less involved and engaged in the classroom will feel less connected academically in the setting of the given institution and shows low levels of satisfaction in terms of his/her involvement in the academic environment (Bean & Bradley, 1986).

Of course, the opposite perspective is also true, that students who generally persist are the ones who report greater levels of interaction with their peers and faculty. High levels of involvement prove to be a recurring indicator of learning (Endo & Harpel, 1982).

The classroom community should be understood as a community which exists when its members feels a sense of belonging or individual connectedness and thus the community has a mutual and emotional feeling of togetherness (Osterman, 2000). This perspective is supported by Rovai and Lucking (2003) when they describe a classroom community as a sense of belonging where individuals are important to each another and to the larger group, where each person has commitments and responsibilities to each other and the school, and they possess mutual expectations that each person's educational demands will be met through their common commitment to shared objectives.

Yet, a "sense of community" (Unger & Wandesman, 1985, p.145) can also be framed as feelings of membership and belongingness with mutual emotional connections. Similarly, the classroom denotes a sense of community with others, coupled with a willingness to maintain this sense of interdependence (Sarason, 1974). The classroom community facilitates feelings of belonging and a belief that they actually matter to one another (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

In relation to community, Kuh, Pace and Vesper (1997) comment that an environment which is helpful, meaningful and which facilitates the conditions where students can engage with their peers, is most helpful for students.

Remarkably similar perspectives are shared by Strike (2004), who is of the opinion that community finds its genesis in learning the norms of those we care for and of those who care for us. Community comes to a culmination in caring for and about those whose norms we share. This means that individuals begin to attach great value to the norms of communities they are associated with because someone is authentic enough with them to share something they value. Caring and belonging thus lead to normation, not rationale and not nature. This means that normation does not occur because of reason or natural inclination (i.e. a logical basis for a course of action or a logical disposition towards a certain characteristic), albeit that both may sometimes be involved. It is the result of an individual feeling a great sense of belonging and acceptance (Strike, 2004).

Building on the research by Tinto (1997) on the effect of learning communities, a number of scholars have also entrenched their positions regarding this. The need for belonging forms one of the five essential needs which have been grafted into the inherent human design, which also include the need for self-actualization, esteem needs, safety needs as well as physiological needs. This means that these needs are akin to every individual and forms an integral part of human existence. Thus, a sense of community promotes “a sense of belonging, identity, emotional connection, and wellbeing” (Glasser, 1986, p. 121). A psychological sense of community can further be described as a feeling of belonging that individuals have; a sense that members ultimately matter to each other and to the group at large, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be fulfilled through their commitment to get together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Additionally, McMillan and Chavis (1986) define the classroom community as comprising of two important elements, namely connectedness and learning. Connectedness facilitates a sense of belonging and acceptance and forms the basis of ensuring relationships. The second element, namely learning, creates the conditions for feelings and knowledge to find meaning and is actively constructed within the context of the classroom. Furthermore, people feeling a sense of community enjoy the advantage of being better accommodated, feeling supported, having a strong connection to others and to intensions that they may have above their own constrained ambitions, and thus enjoy enhanced levels of social agency (Fisher, Sonn & Bishop, 2002).

While these studies sketch a picture of connectedness and belonging, Bronfenbrenner (1979) warns of the alienation students often experience, which leads to a lack of a sense of belonging and thus conjures a feeling of being estranged from family, friends or school. Alienation within the school environment is often associated with negative student behaviours, which include self-isolation, cultural alienation, absenteeism and attrition (Mau, 1992). Seaman (2003) therefore describes alienation as the disparity between personal expectation and reward in the conditions of the current society. He frames alienation in six spheres, namely “social isolation, cultural alienation, self-isolation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness” (p. 13).

Dean (1961) formulated alienation as comprising of only three spheres, namely “social isolation, powerlessness and normlessness” (p. 755). Thus, Dean (1961) describes social alienation as the feeling of loneliness, despite being in the company of others, due to a perceived lack of meaningful, authentic relationships with peers, family members and the greater community. Powerlessness, the second sphere, is defined as the failure to control one’s choices and an inherent conviction that one has limited control over the outcome of events related to one’s life. He believes that such students who feel powerless often concede defeat when encountering struggle or failure. Finally, normlessness entails a rejection of the dominant societal rules and values or that of the majority cultural formations. Normless students in the school context often tend to feel a disconnection to classroom or school norms; and therefore, find it challenging to adhere to school rules, and thus their goals and values stand in opposition to that of the school, teachers, and peers. Yet, Dean (1961) considers alienation as a situational composite involving the autonomous relationship which exists between an individual and his or her setting. Thus, situational factors would explain why students may feel alienated in one setting, such as school, but not in other situations.

Allen (2000) believes it is important to create non-competitive environments that minimise the distance between students in an effort to create a sense of community among them. As a result of this, Graham and Donaldson (1999) reported that this creates the right platform to intensify learning and to enhance peer group interaction with peers and even with instructors within the learning environment. In such a setting, the teacher plays the role of the facilitator and thus creates an environment for experiential learning. The teacher thus becomes less of a ‘dispenser of information’, and this facilitates a process where students organise themselves to engage with the content (Kasworm, 1990).

For Tucker (1999), the establishment of a sense of community makes students feel a deep sense of belonging to the respective learning communities. In addition, this further enhances a type of shared community and that solidarity leads to a greater sense of unity among students (Ridgeway, 1983).

On the basis of this research perspective, Garn and Ort (1991) found that cohesiveness and family-like bonds develop when students share a sense of belonging. Therefore, it should not be surprising when such cohorts of students develop 'in-class cliques' over time. Thus, students who tend to form such in-class cliques have a greater chance of remaining in the institution than students who are isolated and alone (Vann & Hinton, 1994).

Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith (1990) advocate that several learning communities do more than merely register students around a topic. They are actively engaged at changing the way in which students experience the curriculum and the way it is taught. They are geared at promoting shared, collaborative learning experiences among students across the linked classroom. This requires students to work together in groups and to develop into engaged and responsible individuals for the benefit of classroom peers.

Learning communities thus have three objectives in common. The first is shared knowledge. The requirement is that students engage in similar courses and thus organise courses around a theme. These learning communities seek to formulate a mutual, systematic, curricular experience that facilitates connected and related courses. The objective is to encourage greater levels of cognitive complexity that cannot easily be achieved through participation in irrelevant courses.

The second commonality is shared learning. By enrolling the same students in multiple classes, it allows for students to get to know each other in a shorter timeframe and on a personal level. Consequently, learning communities require students to formulate knowledge in sync, and thus seek to involve students on a social and intellectual dimension. This facilitates cognitive development and it cultivates an acknowledgment of the many ways one's own knowing is advanced when one is exposed to other voices in the learning experience.

The third commonality for learning communities is expressed through shared responsibility. Learning communities require students to develop into taking responsibility for each other in the process of attempting to know. This fosters student participation in collaborative groups, which in turn requires them to be collectively dependent on one another. This dependency

ensures that the learning of the group does not progress unless each person contributes (Gablenick et al., 1990).

Research conducted on learning communities and the collective culture, which enhances student persistence, suggests that, firstly, learning community students tend to organise their own autonomous groups that expand further than the classroom (Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1994; Tinto, 1997). Secondly, students in learning communities are exposed to one another, both inside and outside of the classroom. Thirdly, engagement in the learning community significantly enhances the quality of student learning. Fourthly, student learning is enhanced socially and academically in comparison to the traditional curriculum. Finally, student participation stories foster what is referred to as the “norms of educational citizenship”, which develop the idea that individual educational wellbeing is linked to the educational welfare of the greater learning community. This forms the basis of the position taken by Gurin (2006), who indicates that students who usually engage in activities during college have a greater propensity to be active in communities well after they have left the institution.

Tinto (1975, 1987) concludes that social agency and connecting with classmates are some of the strong motivations of increased rates of successful achievement of academic programmes. Similarly, Wales and Stager (1978), Astin (1984), and Noel, Levitz and Saluri (1985) have asserted that student persistence and achievement depend heavily on social involvement. Likewise, Sarason, Levine and Basham (1983) have maintained that social support is a contributing factor to academic completion and persistence when students are faced with challenging tasks. In addition, student expectation for peer involvement academically is a key contributor to student satisfaction and ultimately student persistence (Endo & Harpel, 1992).

Personal / Normative Recognition

Academic integration

Tinto (1997) describes academic integration as a student’s academic performance, academic and intellectual growth, and faculty concern for student development and teaching. Furthermore, Tinto and Cullen (1973) describe academic integration as “a measure of the general expansion of the individual’s intellectual breadth and scope, of the person’s ability to think systematically and critically, and of his stimulation in his academic coursework” (p. 56). They ultimately believe that academic integration occurs when a student becomes attached to the intellectual sphere of the college. They assert that the greater the level of attachment to college life – referring to those who develop deep connections with others such as friends, as

well as those who participate in the extramural activities of the institution – the more likely they are to persist with their studies. This in effect also means that depending on how well the student is connected to the academic system, the better the chances are for the student's academic performance as well as their engagement with members of the faculty.

Despite the remarkable advances in innovations, most students experience university as a very lonely journey which often leads students to feel completely disconnected from others and their context. This results in students feeling like inactive participants. This means that students show little involvement in terms of their learning (Tinto, 1997). It further results in insufficient integration and the absence of community membership may arise from one holding values which are incongruent with those of other members of society. It could also be as a result of insufficient individual engagement between the individual and other individuals in society (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto (1997) eventually also asserts that there is a need to potentially consider that social and academic integration might not be two separate entities, but that they may “appear as two nested spheres, where the academic occurs within the broader social system that pervades the campus” (p. 619). This point is similarly expressed by a number of scholars.

Krause (2001) defines integration as the ability to bring different parts together which serves as a collective whole. This entails merging the different ‘parts’ associated with a student, such as their social and academic needs, their aspirations, various abilities, background experiences with a myriad of other parts associated with the learning community. Hence, Nora (1990) stresses the importance of students in their first year of study to develop a strong sense of affiliation to their learning environment in order to become academically integrated.

It is therefore not surprising that Hartup (1989) believes that interaction with others within the learning community contributes significantly to the development of a student's knowledge, attitude and values. This notion is directly linked to the views of Vygotsky (1978) who stresses that human activities and interactions need to take place in a cultural setting and cannot be fathomed in isolation of such a context.

Some argue that there is a strong resemblance between Tinto's model and Astin's model of involvement. Astin (1982) described student involvement as the amount of physical and emotional energy a student invests in the academic context. Tinto (1993) adds that a definite connection exists between student involvement in learning and how much that effort contributes to student persistence.

Yet, Tinto (1997) highlights that in order for a student to become integrated into the academic and social constructs of the university, it greatly depends on how they successfully navigate their way through levels of separation, transition and, ultimately, incorporation. He describes separation as a student's ability to put distance between themselves and the norms associated with past communities, including their families, friends and other ties. Transition only occurs once a student has successfully navigated their way through separation. This means that while a student potentially separated themselves from the norms of the past, they have not necessarily connected themselves to the norms and behaviours of their new environment. Incorporation then occurs when a student has successfully implemented the new norms and behaviours of the university into their lives. However, this does not necessarily ensure student persistence.

Yet, in all likelihood, if students are academically integrated, they are probably more interested in the course they are studying towards and this might result in high faculty satisfaction from the student's perspective (Bean & Bradley, 1986).

MacKeracher, Stuart and Potter (2006) sketch a picture of the pedagogical barriers which students experience and the inability of teaching staff to understand the complexities related to student participation. As a point of departure, she highlights an inability on the part of teaching staff to understand how learners learn (Angelo, 1993). In addition to this, academics seem to have a disconnect in understanding that the most effective teaching is done when one creates an environment which is learner centred. There also seems to be a lack of comprehending adult learning styles (Molinari, Blad & Martinez, 2005). A key barrier to learning is not taking into account a learner's prior knowledge and experiences (Polson, 1993). This gives rise to a lack of responsiveness to interests due to their backgrounds and the lack of demonstration of the current skills of learners (Cummings, 2000). At the same time, the research reveals a lack of understanding that learning is embedded in social relationships (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). In addition, there seems to be a lack of support for using instructional technologies (Furst-Bowe, 1992) and a lack of creating a user-friendly environment for students to use instructional technologies (Jessome, Parks & MacLellan, 2001). The research further reveals the absence of communication and feedback between the instructor and the learner.

Thus, Betancourt and Lopez (1993) insist that in order for one to plan integration, it is imperative to understand the context in which the academic and social interactions occur. The university offers a unique context which comprises of an interwoven tapestry of knowledge,

traditions, attitudes and values, which serves to guide the behaviour of those within that learning community.

In teaching and learning theory, Candy (1991) suggests that becoming knowledgeable involves achieving the symbolic meaning designs associated with one's society. Since knowledge is socially constructed, individuals within a particular society may be able to add or change the general pool of knowledge. Consequently, teaching and learning is considered a process of negotiation, involving the establishment and transfer of personally applicable and possible meanings.

This perspective is shared by Weiner (2006), who theorises that when students believed they had control over situations, they were more likely to achieve more and feel greater motivation. Similarly, students who felt that they had less control over situations were less likely to feel motivated to produce extraordinary results in terms of their studies. Rotter (1966) thus frames locus of control as a person's competence to provide an internal or external innovative mindset based on past outcomes and experiences. An individual who therefore aligns him/herself to an internal locus of control has the ability to discern between personal characteristics, such as aptitude or skills, and is thus responsible for a particular outcome. On the other hand, an individual with an external locus of control tends to see their attributes as stemming from factors which are outside of their control and would refer to things such as fate or luck.

Perry (1993) argues that there is a connection between the student's attribution and the constant interconnectedness between the attributions and the particular educational context. A further consideration would be to acknowledge the influence it has on a student's academic performance. Bentler and Speckart (1979) also make the argument that an individual's efficacy for various tasks is lodged in their assessment of their skills and tasks of the past. Hence, if an individual experienced a stressful situation in the past, then the probability is strong that they would develop a coping mechanism if they perceive that their current reality mirrors that of the past. Thus, on this basis, students react to new academic interactions by choosing strategies to negotiate their academic environment. These coping strategies will assist students in dealing more effectively with the stress related to their academic environment.

Berger and Milem (1999) interrogated the sources of a student's academic and social integration. They believe that academic and social integration come as a direct result of a student's home conditions; that is, the type of high school they attended and the grades they achieved, as well as the socio-economic status of the student.

One cannot curtail the importance of engaging in crucial dialogue with students during their first year of study and creating the conditions for later years of study (Krause & Coates, 2008). This is especially vital when one considers that there is a 'dynamic interplay' (Krause & Coates, 2008, p.349) between what is considered student involvement, the quality of student learning and what occurs within the teaching and learning context (Bryson & Hand, 2007).

Tinto (1997) cites 'academic difficulty' as a key challenge to student retention, and often a first assignment can be rather daunting to students. Hence, Rubin and Williams-James (1997) argue that the task of completing the first academic assignment can be crucial to how a student becomes academically integrated. Writing is a social process and it brings with it several challenges, like new writing conventions and literacy skills which could be unfamiliar to the student. It therefore becomes vital for students to be supported in this new environment. Consequently, Tinto (1997) believes that academic writing provides many insights into integration if one is able to read the reflections of students about their experiences of their first major assignment.

Tinto (1997, 2012) therefore argues that feedback about academic performance is crucial for academic success and in becoming academically integrated. Kezar and Kinzie (2005) add that, in recent years, there has been a move in higher education to a mass system where there are fewer resources, which has resulted in a concern about the development of students in the classroom. It is therefore vital in understanding that student success cannot be achieved through a single stand-alone initiative or through an individual group (McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005).

In fact, despite the various modes of delivery, the curriculum remains the most important component in which various strategies can be implemented to reach students (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2007). Thus, integration and induction processes into the various disciplines provide students with a secure footing into the learning context (Ward, Crosling & Marangos, 2010).

Marton and Saaljo (1976) bring into focus a crucial factor that the manner in which students receive the instruction has a direct bearing on how they approach their studies. Thus, Berger and Braxton (1998) believe that relevant links between the curriculum and the students' future aspirations need to be established.

The need therefore exists for a student-centred, active learning environment (Tight, 2002). Thus, Tinto (1997, 2012) highlights the benefits of creating an environment which facilitates a 'learning community' to foster learning inside and outside of the classroom, as the manner in

which teaching and learning practices are presented plays an important role in retaining students.

At the heart of this lies the pivotal role that academic integration and social integration play in student persistence (Fox, 1986). Moreover, the emphasis of student intention (to remain or to leave) is a crucial predictor in assessing enrolment behaviour (Bean & Bradley, 1984).

Goals/ Commitments (T1)

In his model on student attrition (Tinto, 1993) as well as his model on student persistence, Tinto (1997) includes Goals and Commitments. Tinto (1997) defines goal commitment as a student's ability to commit to his own personal goals and the dedication to pursue, and ultimately achieve, the educational goals. He indicates that while a student's indecision at the beginning of his/her tertiary career may not be indicative of a problem, it could potentially form the basis of a developmental process which could, over a prolonged period, become a challenge in terms of the student's vocational identity. The more a student is committed to his/her goals, the stronger the possibility that he/she will persist in being successful at an institution. Thus, Tinto (1997) links a student's failure to make a commitment to their studies as the beginning of a cycle which could ultimately contribute to a student's departure from the institution. He also stresses the way external commitments impact a student's willingness to either persist with his/her studies or to depart. Such external commitments could include the responsibility a student has to dependents, a part-time job or any other commitment which requires his/her attention. Tinto (1997) therefore recommends that institutions assist students through support programmes which could be helpful to them to deal better with external commitments and their studies.

Tinto (1997) asserts that a student may have a desire to complete a bachelor's degree, but not quite certain of the field he/she should study. He thus differentiates between a student's commitment to pursue a particular degree and career goals and the motivation to complete these goals at a particular institution. Hence, a student's commitment extends beyond the decision to follow a particular course of study, but that commitment also touches on the student's decision to study at a particular institution. It is therefore imperative to understand that a student's commitment to follow a particular degree, or to study at a specific institution, may ultimately contribute to a student's commitment to persist with his/her studies.

Tinto (1997) considers institutional commitment as vital in determining a student's decision to persist. He therefore stresses that institutional commitment requires more than mere words,

or a mere mission statement or impressive brochures; it requires the willingness from an institution to invest in the resources as well as the rewards to ensure that a student attains success in tertiary education. Thus, unless a student shows proper commitment to their studies, it diminishes his/her chances to attain success. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) argue that, in order to comprehend student success, it is crucial to understand institutional action. Such institutional action means that the institution ought to be concerned about the student's success in the classroom. In addition, Smith, MacGregor, Matthews and Gabelnick (2009) argue that a learning community requires the commitment (from faculties) to work across professional lines in order to develop materials which could be beneficial to those in this classroom. However, without proper incentives and rewards learning programmes are often short-lived or they fail to function properly (Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

Tinto (1997) further explains that classrooms are the foundation on which all efforts of the institution hinges. Classrooms, therefore, in the first year of tertiary education, form the focal point on which both academic and social commitments are built. It's here that Tinto (1997) cautions institutions not to underestimate the initial experiences students have in the classroom and at institutions as it lays the foundation for future commitment in their attitude and in their commitment to their studies. This is part of what Tinto (1997) refers to as the institutional "social system" and which contributes to student persistence. The more the student engages academically and becomes socially integrated at the institution, the more he/she will develop organisational goals, but will, according to Tinto (1997), constantly re-evaluate his/her goal and institutional commitment.

Goal commitments (T2)

Competent membership/Student persistence/Intention to persist

Tinto (1975, 1987) defines student persistence as a long-term process of engagement between the student and academic and social structures of the institution to which they are connected.

It is very interesting how Tinto (1987) asserts that both student departure and student persistence are nestled in the same roots of "intention" and "commitment" (p.120). He posits that these are the very dispositions with which individuals enter the realm of higher education. In addition, from the perspective on an institutional level, for the individual experience which either influences individual departure or persistence, the terms "adjustment", "difficulty", "incongruence/congruence" and "isolation" are used (pp.122-123). Each of these signifies important aspects which hold together a student's desire to persist or to depart from the

institution. Tinto (1997) thus defines student persistence as students' meeting clearly defined educational objectives whether they are course credits, career improvement or the development of additional skills.

Tinto (1997) expands the meaning of student involvement by taking a sociological and interactionist approach to persistence; thus, meaning that in order to maximise persistence, academic and social integration is an imperative. He thus posits that a student's academic and social integration into the formal and informal academic and social structures of the institution contributes to student persistence.

In an attempt to expand on the discussion of student persistence as developed by Tino (1997), Hagedorn (1999) asserts that persistence is an individual or a student-level measure of success. This affirms the position articulated by Noel, Levitz and Saluri (1985) that persistence is the headcount of one cohort compared to the headcount at the inception date. Thus, the objective is to measure the number of students who have persisted from one term to another until completion of the respective programme. In addition, Noel, Levitz and Saluri (1985) frame student persistence as the extent to which an individual has been wholly integrated in the academic and non-academic context of the academic institution.

Astin (1984) is also known for contributing to one of the first models of persistence in which he highlights the importance of student engagement. He posits that students generally are more likely to persist if they are involved in various aspects of the educational involvement. The theory highlights a blend of personal and contextual influences that determined student involvement, and hence persistence (Astin, 1984). The theory further explains how personal influences included academic background and lineage, as well as student ambitions. Environmental influences comprised of residence, employment and college features. Faculty-student interaction was thus important; those who had more positive engagement were likely to express a comprehensive and greater satisfaction with the institution.

One should also consider the amount of effort a student places in their educational practices that ultimately contributes to their learning and development (Kuh, 2009). In addition, Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie (2009) agree that engagement is premised on two aspects; namely what the student would do and what the institution would do. Thus, engagement is framed in the understanding that two parties enter into an agreement regarding the educational experience.

Bean and Metzner (1985) made great strides in developing the theory of persistence in which they focused primarily on non-traditional students. They claim that external factors have a more influential role on non-traditional students. In essence, this means that such non-traditional students have the tendency to live off campus and they have limited exposure to the demands often associated with those who live on campus such as employment and the execution of everyday tasks.

Metzner and Bean (1987) further contributed to the development of a model which postulated four spheres which were imperatives for persistence. The model highlighted the specific role ones' background variables play in terms of persistence. In addition, they honed-in on factors which were directly linked to academic success. The model also looked at the factors which described the intention of a student to suspend studies and eventually drop-out, thus bringing into focus a student's upbringing, academic success and psychological factors. The final sphere included environmental influences such as financial factors and family responsibilities which led Metzner and Bean (1987) to conclude that environmental factors among non-traditional students were more significant than social integration variables.

The Theory of Student Persistence is additionally advanced through Seidman (2012), who developed a comprehensive model detailing persistence for various types of students, including traditional and non-traditional subgroups, and those who attend physical universities as well as virtual institutions. The model focuses on early discovery of challenges with the aim of early intervention in order to address the array of problems experienced by students. It is therefore incumbent on the institution to evaluate students for possible discrepancies at an early phase and to create the conditions to acquire the necessary abilities in order to make a success of their first year at university.

Seidman (2012) recommends that these abilities need to be provided in a non-traditional, module configuration as students interact in these modules, both face-to-face and in the online domain. It is therefore important for a student to be successful in the various courses to ensure that they persist with their studies. Yet, a student's motivation to persist with their studies is edged by their impression of the value of what they are expected to learn in a specific course (Frick, Chadha, Watson, Wang & Green, 2009).

Panos and Astin (1968) highlight how individual intentions are important indicators of the likelihood of whether a person would persist in completing their studies. In addition to this, Astin, Hemond and Richardson (1982) are of the belief that change equally plays an important

role in the individual's intention to persist. This means that while the individual is going through several aspects of change, they may gradually gravitate towards persisting in their studies. Similarly, Tinto (1993) believes that individual commitment, referring to an individual's motivation, effort or drive, could also be described as an individual's willingness to persevere and work towards making this important component of persistence a reality.

Barnett, Gardner and Bragg (2004), in an effort to determine the validity of the argument between the relationship of the intent to persist and actual persistence, found that there was a fair to moderate relationship between the intent to persist and actual persistence especially when a student has not been fully integrated. She goes further by shedding light on the suggestion that academic integration is considered to be 'competent membership' in the college community (Tinto, 1997; Barnett, Gardner & Bragg, 2004). Barnett, Gardner and Bragg (2004) therefore explain that a sense of membership should be seen in the light that it is a sense of membership and belonging, and that it denotes competence in terms of academic self-efficacy and illustrates that one is able to master the individual tasks given to one.

Tinto (1997) himself asserts that the involvement in and around the classroom is most crucial to academic integration. Thus, a college needs to use its classrooms as gateways to assist students to become more engaged in their respective programmes. He emphasises the importance of understanding that students are not solely responsible for their learning, but that institutions have an equally important role to play in this regard.

People must display what they know (Mead, 1954). Competence is assembled by people in concert with each other. Therefore, there is a need for social situations, not individual persons. It is therefore imperative to make social situations about socially assembled situations and not about individual persons. Competent membership in the classroom should be viewed as interactional work in the display of academic knowledge (Mehan, 1980). A society's culture therefore consists of whatever one knows or believes in in order to function in a manner appropriate to the members of that society, and in any role that they may acquire for themselves. Thus, a person's competence is indicated by his or her ability to interact effectively in its terms with others who are already competent (Goodenough, 1976).

Dollard (1935) therefore denotes socialisation as the process where culture is transmitted from one generation to another. Thus, when culture is viewed as a competent membership, a different perspective of socialisation surfaces. Richards (1974) details that this facilitates a process for people to become competent members of their respective communities, concerned with the

development of human attributes of speech, social communication, self-reflection, thought, and, ultimately, one's own consciousness.

Bandura (1986) describes self-efficacy as a person's determination to thrive in their competence when given a particular task or when lodged in a particular situation. Thus, according to Gore (2006), self-efficacy influences the manner in which an individual addresses goals, tasks and challenges. It is needless to say that when a person illustrates a strong sense of efficacy, the greater the chances are of them persisting in their studies.

A sense of belonging also reflects the experiences which shape a student's perception of what occurs in the academic sphere of the institution, in particular, the classroom of the university, and, ultimately, the sense of belonging which emanates from those experiences (Lizzio, Wilson & Simons, 2002). In addition, Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that a desire to belong is framed by a need for routine contact and the understanding that the interpersonal relationship has balance, authentic concern and that it is something ongoing. Thus, an absence of a sense of belonging may potentially lead to a sense of isolation and, ultimately, alienation.

This idea is shared by Hagerty (1999), who is of the opinion that proper and timely satisfaction regarding the need for belongingness could have a severe impact on the physical, emotional and greater psychological dimensions of an individual. It is therefore fair to say that a sense of belonging refers to a student's deep sense of being acknowledged, valued, incorporated and emboldened by significant others in the classroom, which leads to the individual feeling as an integral part of the class activity (Goodenow, 1993).

It is therefore not surprising that key work regarding Tinto's (1997) model hinges on the interactive effects identified with both academic and social experiences of a student. Thus, Tinto (1997) is of the opinion that the more a student engages in a formal and an informal academic setting, the less likely they are to leave the academic institution. As a result of positive integrative experiences, a student's commitment to his/her studies will be reinforced.

Tinto's model therefore takes into consideration three groups of variables, namely:

- Pre-college characteristics, which include a person's family background, skills and other competencies including experiences related to their formative years;
- College experiences, which include academic performance and the level of academic engagement a student experiences related to the college setting;

- Students' out-of-class experiences, such as a student's involvement in extra-mural activities within the college.

In recent times, Tinto (2012), based on the Tinto (1997) model, notes that a sense of belonging results from the myriad of interactions a student has with various communities within the college setting, and how supportive these experiences are perceived by the student. This means that students either feel welcomed into those communities or they are seen as being marginalised.

The importance of a sense of belonging in persistence models cannot be ignored. Researchers such as Hurtado and Carter (2007) believe that a sense of belonging for a student should be measured by the attachment the student develops to the campus community in general. Thus, Zea, Reisen, Beil and Kaplan (1995) highlight how a student's academic and social experiences shape their persistence at the institution.

For Comings (2007), persistence is a process of continuous learning that lasts until a student meets his or her educational goals and culminates when a student decides to stop learning. He also asserts that persistence should be seen as a phenomenon in learning, inside and outside of a particular programme, until students have achieved their respective objectives. Thus, Comings (2007) believes that persistence comprises of two parts: intensity, which refers to the hours of teaching per month, and duration, which highlights the months of interaction during the time of instruction. In addition to this, Sticht (1982) and Darkenwald (1986) highlight the relationship which exists between persistence and learning. They identify how 100 hours of teaching serve as the minimum amount required by adults in order to increase their one-grade level (on a standardised test of reading comprehension) (Comings, Sum & Uvin, 2000).

Tinto (1997) asserts that there are five conditions known to promote persistence; namely expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning. Firstly, students are more likely to persist if there is an expectation for them to succeed. Secondly, students are likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social and personal support. This is particularly true of students who are in their first year of college, who will require a great measure of support. Support may be provided in a structured form such as a mentorship programme or student clubs or it may arise from the daily operation of the institution such as a student interacting with the staff or with the faculty (Tinto, 1997).

Thirdly, students are likely to persist in settings that provide frequent and early feedback about their performance as they are attempting to learn and persist. The utilisation of early warning

systems, classroom assessment techniques, and frequent mini exams all contribute in keeping students informed so that they are able to adjust in order to persist (Tinto, 1993).

A fourth aspect which enables students to persist would be settings that involve them as valued members of the institution (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1997). The frequency with which students engage with faculty, staff members and other students largely contributes to student persistence. Lastly, Tinto (2012) believes that students are likely to persist and graduate in settings that promote learning. Thus, students who learn are the students who stay. Students, therefore, who are actively engaged in learning are more likely to stay (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto (1975), in his Model of Student Departure, explains that there are three stages a student must pass to persist to graduation. The first stage requires a student to separate from past communities (in other words, high school, or place of residence). This will enable students to experience separation from former communities and certain patterns of affiliation (Tinto, 1987). This means that if students are successfully able to depart from their past norms, there is a greater chance for them to establish membership in the new communities that exist at college (Tinto, 1986).

The second stage is student transition to college, and this most likely occurs in the first year of study (Tinto, 1975). In this stage, a student transitions into their college environment by coping and adjusting to educational goals and commitments (Tinto, 1987). He posits that students who were able to persist through this stage to graduation are able to commit to their educational goals or to the institution (Tinto, 1987).

The third stage includes formal and informal practices such as establishing contact with faculty and peers as well as becoming members of one of the student organisations. Thus, integration in this context means the extent to which the individual shares the normative structural requirements for membership in that community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980).

Further research conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggests that a student's intention to persist, tracked at a time when the student is still enrolled at the institution, is highly indicative of a student's retention/attrition behaviour.

Student effort

Tinto (1997) asserts that the more students work together collaboratively with their peers, the more it enables them to gain a voice through the creation of knowledge. Furthermore, it contributes significantly to the way in which students assume responsibility for their own

learning. This further enables the student to critically reflect on his/her own learning and, especially, to think about the feedback often given to them by their peers. Thus, this makes it possible for the students to increase the quality of their learning and could also be seen as a way in which students have been empowered. The empowerment experienced by students further allows them to not only enrich their own learning, but it also enables them to enhance the learning of their peers.

Tinto (1997) further explains that there is a distinct link between a student's persistence and the manner in which he/she is engaged in learning as well as student effort. The manner in which a student is involved in and outside of the classroom with his/her peers enhances the quality of a student's effort and therefore contributes towards student persistence.

Student effort is often viewed as contributing positively to a student's decision to persist with their studies. However, Tinto (1997) posits that while student effort is often viewed as a combination of the academic and intellectual commitment in relation to the student's interpersonal experiences, he cautions that student effort and involvement should be viewed as distinctly different. Thus, he believes that student effort points towards the measure in which the student is engaged in the academic sphere, while involvement refers to the multiple interpersonal and institutional activities in which the student may voluntarily decide to interact in.

Cross (1998) is of the opinion that knowledge is not "discovered", but that it is socially constructed. Thus, knowledge is constructed and processed through the engagement with peers and meaning therefore results in deeper learning. The learning process becomes personally rewarding and becomes part of who the student is, not merely what they have learnt. The result of this is an increase in student effort and continued engagement.

Kuh et al. (1997) explains that a student is prone to increase the quality of his/her effort when lecturers increase their active learning techniques. Active learning techniques include allowing students to search for online references, writing academic papers, summarising texts or highlighting important concepts from class notes. Results from the study conducted by Kuh et al. (1997) suggest that a student's involvement in active learning increased students' ability to work better independently, increased their ability to synthesize information and increased their knowledge. It also contributed significantly to student effort and student engagement. In this regard, Kuh (2009) therefore views student engagement as the time and effort a student devotes to the activities presented by the institution.

Similarly, Tinto (1997) asserts that the quality of student effort is enhanced and promotes greater academic involvement in the classroom. He highlights the vital role the space of the classroom plays in exposing the student to interaction with others. This provides students the opportunity to engage with their peers. As a result of this, students are able to increase the quality of effort, enhance learning and further increase their own development. This affirms the view expressed previously by Tinto (1993) that students are not solely responsible for their effort, but that institutions play an integral part in influencing the quality of student effort by ensuring that students are involved with their peers and others in the learning process (p. 132). He also stresses the way external commitments impact a student's willingness to either persist with his/her studies or to depart. Tinto (1997) therefore recommends that institutions assist students through support programmes which could be helpful to them in dealing better with external commitments and their studies.

Educational outcomes

Tinto (1997) considers the attributes of a successful classroom to be locked up in the ability to provide holistic student support, providing timeous feedback on assessments and creating opportunities for student involvement in order to enhance student success. Thus, he considers a key educational outcome to be the expectations that academic staff have of their students and that which students have for themselves. He further asserts that having high expectations hold very little value unless it is coupled by academic support. This is especially critical as students navigate their way through their first year. A key indicator to ascertain whether the academic support is yielding the proper results is to gauge whether students are able to use academic support to their advantage which translates into academic success. Such academic support might include one-on-one support, study groups which could include tutorials, academic support programmes or anywhere where students are able to engage with their peers. Tinto (1997) highlights the importance of social support, which could include counselling, mentoring and providing cultural programmes which would result in student success and persistence.

Tinto (1997) posits that students are more likely to succeed in classrooms where their performance is regularly assessed, and they are provided with timeous feedback. The strategies employed in the classroom will ultimately result in enhanced student success. Thus, Tinto (1997) argues that the success of the classroom hinges on the ability for academic staff to not merely collect academic assessments, but to provide feedback, which would result in enhanced success. At the same time, he recommends providing early warning systems, establishing

assessment frameworks and techniques in order for students to make the necessary performance adjustments in view of academic success.

Archer (2010) defines feedback as a “supported sequential process rather than a series of unrelated events” (p.101). Knight and Yorke (2003) explain that feedback can serve a variety of functions depending on the learning context, the needs of the student, the purpose of the particular task and feedback provided or adopted. Thus, the purpose of feedback is seen as a process where comments are provided to the student in order for the student to make the necessary revisions and thus assisting students to increase their understanding of the curriculum. In this regard, Ferguson (2011) views feedback as an important medium to facilitate a student’s development and provide the student with opportunities to monitor their own progress and evaluate their successes.

Black and McCormick (2010) believe that a greater emphasis should be placed on oral feedback than written feedback. In addition, Sadler (2010) posits that in order to provide effective feedback students need to understand the meaning of the feedback provided. They should also, as a result of the feedback, know how to make the necessary revisions. Carless, Salter, Yang and Lam (2011) further argue that the purpose of feedback is to ensure that students are empowered to become self-regulated learners. Thus, Tinto (1997) explains that feedback results in a student having to “think, rethink and even re-re-think”.

Critiques of Tinto’s Model of Student Persistence

Research done by scholars such as Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) address some of the weaknesses found in Tinto’s earlier Model of Persistence. These criticisms, levelled against his 1975 study, led Tinto to emphasise the applicability of his model, which encompass the stages of separation, transition and incorporation, and highlight that these factors are crucial in understanding the reasons why students leave college.

Thus, Tinto’s 1987 revision of his previous contributions facilitated five major theoretical shifts in understanding student persistence. These areas, inter alia, include psychological, societal, economic, organisational and interaction factors (Metz, 2004). Yet, criticism of Tinto’s model continued when Tierney (1992) accused Tinto’s model of relying on information concerned with traditionally aged students. He, furthermore, believes that Tinto’s academic and social integration theory misinterpreted Van Gennep’s (1975) anthropological rites of passages and that this could be extremely problematic for racial and ethnic minorities.

A key challenge to Tinto's theory was that he felt that Tinto's treatment of social integration was too broad and lacked the ability to merely focus on specific examples, which one could relate to non-traditional contexts in higher education (Tierney, 1992).

Another key criticism towards Tinto's research of student persistence emerged in the 1990's when Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengler (as cited in Metz, 2004) argued that Tinto's model excludes external factors on college persistence, such as parental involvement, support from peers and finances, as possible influences on student persistence.

Grosset (as cited in Woosley, Slabaugh, Sadler & Mason, 2005) also investigated students who are always identified in traditional research – stop-outs (those who no longer attend college and who were not awarded a degree or certificate). This contribution by Grosset (as cited in Woosley et al., 2005) highlights the necessity for an additional variable to be added to persistence studies, especially with regard to the number of credits per term to be added to current persistence investigations.

In 1993, in response to the criticism he received from Tierney in 1992, Tinto cited the importance of institution-specific studies and conceded that they provided a better understanding of the individual student than the national studies. Tinto (1993) therefore asserted that only institution-specific studies can provide insight into circumstances.

This resulted in a revised look at institutional data in the 1990s, especially at data which was reflective of the community college. It was during this time that Sturtz and McCarrol (1993) discovered two basic reasons that explained why students left college, namely time and money.

In 1991, Pascarella and Terenzini raised concern about the limited research which existed regarding two-year colleges and the impact it had on attending, persisting and graduating from such two-year colleges. This affected the subsequent research done to shed light on this area, with regards to factors concerning persistence, goal attainment and, ultimately, degree completion.

Thus, in 1994 this once again led to Tinto revising his model of student persistence. He argued that the findings from emerging research regarding student persistence created fresh opportunities for researchers to incorporate those findings into other areas, namely the two-year college context in the higher education sector.

In addition, Tinto (1997) mentions that a college has multiple levels and it does not necessarily have to be concerned with persistence. He, therefore, suggests that the educational character of

persistence, its relationship to institutional research and student development, be investigated. Furthermore, he acknowledges that academic integration does not always emanate from the classroom and is not restricted to faculty interaction. Tinto, however, emphasises that in traditional four-year colleges, it is possible for academic and social integration to occur, yet such opportunities exist in limitation at two-year colleges.

In summary, the literature supports the pivotal role peer group interaction plays within the classroom of a learning community. The significance of progress made in the classroom facilitates the natural progression of formal and informal peer engagement outside of the classroom. Yet, peer group interaction also becomes a conduit which contributes to academic integration. Academic integration is also further enhanced through the students' engagement with the curriculum and the feedback they receive in return from their lecturers. Consequently, the probability for student persistence becomes realistic when there is intent to pursue future studies.

SECTION 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The following section details the research design and methodology employed in my investigation. I decided on a university as a research site as I have been working as a lecturer for the past nine years and working with the students has fuelled my interest to investigate the factors which contribute to student persistence.

Research site

My research site was the Foundation Programme (four-year-degree programme) at a university in the Western Cape. The university offers a four-year Foundation Programme for the BCom degree, which is aimed at offering additional support for historically disadvantaged students.

The research site, according to Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, and Bezuidenhout (2014), should be seen as the particular context in which the research is conducted.

Research approach

Van Maanen (1979) describes qualitative research as an umbrella term which covers a range of interpretative techniques which culminate in the quest to describe, decode, interpret and explore other means of coming to terms with the various complexities akin to the social world.

The advantages of qualitative research, according to Hardy and Bryman (2004), allow the researcher to delve into the detailed description of the participant's opinions, feelings and daily experiences. This allows the researcher to interpret the meaning of the action taken by the participants. It further allows for researchers to explore the inner experiences of participants and to understand how meaning is shaped within a given culture.

Research instrument

I used an interview guide as a research instrument. An interview guide has a logical, but flexible order of topical questions which aim to assist the researcher to ask questions of participants which will provide relevant information (Hardy & Bryman, 2004). According to Bryman (2012, p.134), it affords the researcher an opportunity to gain insight into the way in which the participants view their social world and thus provides the interviewer with flexibility when probing questions. The interview guide served as a framework to work from, yet it also allowed me the opportunity to clarify any answers which required specific clarification.

Bryman (2012, p.134) explains that an interview guide allows one to see things through the eyes of others. In addition, the use of an interview guide brings one in contact with experiences which are unexpected and ensures that one becomes more flexible. It, furthermore, ensures that the researcher becomes more sensitive to the context of others.

Sampling strategies

I used the purposive sampling technique to select my participants. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), the research participants are the ones the researcher has selected to form the basis of his/her study – those who will provide the researcher with the necessary data. In addition, Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) describes purposive sampling as the technique to identify the characteristics of participants.

Hardy and Bryman (2004) explain purposive sampling as a non-probability form of sampling where the researcher does not seek to sample participants randomly. The objective with purposive sampling entails selecting participants in a strategic manner to ensure that those sampled are suitable for the study. Hardy and Bryman (2004) further propose that a fixed purposive sampling strategy means that the sample is more or less decided at the outset of the research project, and that there is little to no adding of participants to the sample as the research proceeds.

In addition, Hood (as cited in Bryman, 2012) distinguishes between priori and contingent sampling approaches. A purposive sampling approach is therefore contingent when the criteria for sampling units of analysis evolve over the course of the research. Thus, the research questions again serve to guide the sampling of participants, but the relevant sampling criteria shift over the course of the research as the research questions change or multiply. With a priori

purposive sample, the criteria for selecting participants are established at the beginning of the research.

Sample description

My research participants were 20 fourth-year (final-year) students registered in the Extended Curriculum Program at a university in the Western Cape. I decided to concentrate on final-year students for the purpose of my investigation as it allowed me to gather data about peer group interaction and academic integration from students who have persisted in their studies. As someone who has lectured this cohort of students in their second-year, I acknowledge that, as an insider, the possibility of bias is higher. Hardy and Bryman (2004) are of the opinion that researchers as insiders may lose objectivity by over-identifying themselves with the research participants and setting. This could result in researchers gathering and interpreting data only from an insider point of view, if researchers take an insiders' perspective. On the other hand, researchers may use an outsider perspective to describe the objective research questions and to find answers to specific questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Data collection methods

I conducted semi-structured interviews, using an interview guide. All interviews were conducted in English. The reason for using the semi-structured interview is that it is flexible and thus allows me to change some of the questions. At the same time, it creates opportunities for the participants to share their insights more broadly. Hardy and Bryman (2004) describe a semi-structured interview as one in which the researcher has a list of questions with specific topics which he/she wishes to cover. The interviewee, however, is afforded great leeway on how they wish to answer the questions. Yet, questions may or may not follow exactly in the way the interviewer initially sets out to ask them.

Bryman, Bresnan, Beardsworth and Keil (1988) state that the open-ended, yet flexible nature of the semi-structured interview provides the opportunity to reflect on questions asked of earlier participants, and thus to present them to those interviewed much later. In addition to this, Bryman (2012, p.134) describes semi-structured interviews as being synonymous to life history and oral history interviewing.

Data reduction strategies

I used a thematic analysis to analyse my data. I also used a framework approach to my thematic analysis. I made use of coding to analyse the data. Coding is a step towards thematic analysis. I therefore coded data in transcripts. I read the transcripts in order to make sense of similarities, observe differences, see what is unexpected or highlight answers which did not relate to questions.

Often when doing qualitative research, one has to deal with many complexities such as field notes, visual images, published texts, transcripts of conversations as well as historical documents, which will all contribute to the overall study (Bryman, 2012). Thus, coding schemes are to be seen as the creative beginnings of the particular insights which the researcher aims to gain by investigating the social world (Seale, 2004). Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) consider coding as the act of making, or the practice of marking, different areas of data as being instances of, or appropriate to, one or more of one's themes. In my opinion, Maree (as cited in Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2004) aptly captures this when he says that coding data refers to the careful scrutiny of the data and taking note of all the relevant and meaningful sections including items. Thus, one would either highlight those relevant sections with

symbols, definitive words or codes that would order the information into sections that one could cite when it comes to analysing one's data.

Hardy and Bryman (2004) refer to three types of coding, namely Open coding, Axial coding and Selective coding. For the purposes of this study, I used Axial coding. Axial coding is understood as a set of procedures in which data is put together in novel ways once Open coding has taken place. This means that connections between categories can be made. The way this is done is to link codes to contexts, consequences, patterns of interaction, as well as to causes. I initially employed open coding in which I examined the data on a line-by-line basis to gain a basic understanding of the data. This further allowed me to employ Axial coding which allowed me the opportunity to examine the open codes. This afforded me the opportunity to link these Axial codes to the larger codes(themes) in the selective coding step.

Ritchie, Spencer and O'Connor (as cited in Hardy & Bryman, 2004) describe the Framework Approach to thematic analysis as a grid-based method for ordering and synthesising data. This means that one would construct an index of central themes and subthemes, which is then eventually represented in a matrix that closely resembles a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences spreadsheet with its display of cases and variables. This means that the themes and subthemes are recurring motifs that are applied to the data, but it requires continuous reading and rereading of the transcripts or field notes which form part of the data.

Research ethics considerations

Any person wishing to do research is confronted by ethical challenges which need to be overcome, and provision ought to be made for them to ensure that such ethical dilemmas are addressed.

Diener and Crandall (as cited in Hardy & Bryman, 2004) mention that the four main areas in which ethical norms can be transgressed are:

- a) Whether harm has been done to participants;
- b) Whether there is a lack of receiving informed consent;
- c) Whether an invasion of privacy has occurred; and
- d) Whether deception is involved.

I, therefore, first of all obtained permission from the relevant institution which I selected as my research site on whether I could conduct research, (See Appendix B and C). In addition to this, I asked consent from my colleagues to do the research as the findings of this study would also have a direct bearing on them. It could have potentially affected them as the students I interviewed might refer to them in the study. I also ensured that their identities and those of the participants were protected and their trust respected.

In light of this, I ensured that I was sensitive to the participants by ensuring that I did no harm to them through my engagement with them.

I also provided a consent form (See Appendix D) which the participants had to sign to give me permission to record the interview with a mobile device. The form indicated the participants' signature, the date of interview, as well as the place of interview.

I designed an information sheet (See Appendix E) in which I explained the aim of the research, what the research questions were and how the information would be used.

I also chose a venue to ensure confidentiality. I ensured not to ask questions on sensitive matters which could potentially offend the participants. As a researcher, I am subjective, but I tried to be as objective as I possible. I also ensured that I guarded myself against bias and did not allow my personal feelings to interfere with the information presented to me by the participants. In addition, as a researcher, it was of utmost importance that I maintained trust between myself and the participants and thus I shall not divulge any information shared with me with any person. I also ensured that the identities of participants are protected and thus I used pseudonyms in an effort to safeguard anonymity. At the same time, I shall also protect the name of the institution by not making the name known in the study.

I protected the records of my study and will further protect any other material on my database for a period of five years.

I abided by the ethics which govern any study at the University and ensured that I followed every procedure required of me.

SECTION 4: DATA ANALYSIS

The following section outlines the data I have collected and analysed for the purpose of this study.

The objectives of the study were to establish whether peer group interaction and academic integration lead to student persistence. Thus, the study aimed at investigating the enabling factors which enhance peer group interaction, understanding the intricacies which lead to academic integration and factors which ultimately result in students persisting with their studies.

The main research question for this study was:

- “What are the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence?”

The sub-questions were,

- “How does peer group interaction contribute to student persistence?”
- as well as, “What are the relationships between peer group interaction and academic integrations?”
- and “How does academic integration contribute to student persistence?”

A key component, which Tinto (1997) highlights in his model when he refers to Learning Communities, is that students who are registered for the same courses and who ultimately share the same spaces tend to create ‘living learning communities’.

Biographical information of participants

The participants of this study were young adult learners who were enrolled for the BCom 4-year degree programme. There were seven females and 13 males who were selected through purposive sampling to participate in this study. Their ages ranged from between the ages of 21 and 23 years, respectively. Of the 20 participants interviewed, nine were Black, ten were Coloured and one was White.

While the interviews were all conducted in English, there was a mix of home languages represented among the participants. English was the home language of ten of the participants;

seven spoke Xhosa, one spoke Afrikaans, another one spoke Tswana, and another spoke Portuguese.

Seven of the participants lived at home with their respective families, while 13 were residents on campus.

Eighteen of the participants were South African, one was from Botswana and another was born in Angola but had permanent residency in South Africa.

Of the 18 South African participants, 12 were from the Western Cape, four from the Eastern Cape, one from Gauteng and another was from Kwazulu-Natal.

Ten participants were bursary holders, while the other ten were totally dependent on their families to pay for their tuition at the university.

The two students from Botswana and Angola were required to pay their tuition fees upfront and provide proof of medical aid to the university, while this was not a requirement for the 18 South African students.

13 of the participants were academically promoted during each year of their studies. Seven of the participants failed one or more modules in previous years, which caused a delay in their academic progress.

A brief synopsis of each participant

In order to protect the identity of the participants, I have given pseudonyms to each of them.

Cassidy is a 22-year-old coloured woman who is from the Western Cape. Her home language is English, and she also speaks, writes and understands Afrikaans. She is single and is a resident on campus. She is a bursary holder and it covers her tuition, books and stationery, as well as provides her with a stipend of R4000 for food and clothes. Cassidy has a sister who was registered for the same course and who graduated two years ago.

Tiffany is 22-years-old and is a coloured woman residing in the Western Cape. Her home language is English, and she is also well-versed in spoken and written Afrikaans, as well as understanding it well. She lives as a resident on campus and has been in a committed relationship for the past two years. She currently receives a bursary which covers her tuition,

books and stationery needs. She receives a monthly stipend of R4000 for food and clothes. She is the first of her family who has been privileged to study at university.

Herschel is a 22-year-old coloured man from the Western Cape. His home language is English, but he is also able to speak, write and understand Afrikaans well. He is single and lives in residence. He is a bursary holder and receives a monthly stipend of R4000 for food and clothes. He is the second in his family to study at university as his brother also studied BCom.

Edward is a 23-year-old black man from Gauteng. His home language is Xhosa and he is also fluent in English in speech, written ability and understanding. He lives in residence and he is single. He is dependent on his single mother, a medical doctor, to pay for his tuition and education needs. She also provides him with a monthly stipend of R2000.

Bongo is a 23-year-old black man from Botswana. His home language is Tswana. He also speaks, writes and understands English and Xhosa. He has been in a committed relationship for the past two years while studying. His tuition fees, other educational needs and medical expenses are paid for by his father. He also works as a tutor and receives an amount of R7000 per month to cover his other living expenses.

Mohammed is a 23-year-old coloured man from the Western Cape. He lives with his parents and sister at home. His first language is English, and he is also able to speak, write and understand Afrikaans well. His parents and sister have taken responsibility to pay for his tuition fees and other expenses. He is fully dependent on them financially. Kirsten is a 22-year-old coloured woman from the Western Cape. She is a resident on campus. Her first language is English, although she also speaks, writes and understands Afrikaans well. She is a bursary recipient and it covers her tuition and other educational expenses. She receives a monthly stipend which takes care of her food and clothing needs. She is single.

Primrose is a 21-year-old black woman from the Eastern Cape. She lives on residence at the university. Her first language is Xhosa and she also speaks, writes and understands English very well. She is single. She receives a bursary which takes care of her tuition and educational expenses. She receives a monthly stipend of R5000 which takes care of her other living expenses.

Xhanti is a 22-year-old black man from the Eastern Cape. He lives in residence and is single. His first language is Xhosa, but he also speaks, writes and understands English well. He also

receives a bursary which takes care of his tuition and other educational needs. He also receives a monthly stipend of R5000 which covers his other living expenses.

Vera is a 23-year-old white woman from the Western Cape. She is single and lives with her parents. Her first language is English. She speaks, writes and understands minimal Afrikaans. Her parents are responsible for her tuition fees and other educational expenses. She works part-time and receives an amount of R4500 which covers her living expenses.

Mia is a 22-year-old coloured woman from the Western Cape. She has been in a relationship for the past year and lives with her single mother and sister. Her first language is English. She also speaks, writes and understands Afrikaans well. Her mother is responsible for her tuition fees and other educational expenses. She works part-time as a tutor and receives an amount of R5000 which covers her living expenses.

Zakes is a 23-year-old black man from the Eastern Cape. He is single and lives in residence. His first language is Xhosa and he is well-versed in speaking, writing and understanding English. He receives a bursary which covers the tuition and other educational requirements. He receives a stipend of R4000 per month which takes care of his other living expenses.

Neo is a 23-year-old black man from the Eastern Cape. He is single and lives in residence. His first language is Xhosa and he speaks, writes and understands English very well. His parents are responsible for paying for his tuition and other educational expenses. He receives an amount of R2500 per month from a relative to take care of his living expenses.

Siya is a 23-year-old black man from the Western Cape. He is single and lives with his mother and younger sister. His first language is Xhosa and he speaks, writes and understands English very well. His mother is responsible for his tuition fees and all other expenses.

Fazlin is a 22-year-old coloured woman from the Western Cape. She is single and lives in residence. Her first language is English, and she speaks, writes and understands Afrikaans very well. She is a bursary holder and it covers her tuition fees and other educational expenses. She receives a stipend of R4000 to cover her other living expenses like food and clothing.

Colin is a 23-year-old black man from Kwazulu-Natal. He is single and lives in residence. His first language is Zulu. He speaks, writes and understands English and Xhosa very well. He works part-time as a tutor and receives a monthly income of R7000. This affords him the opportunity to pay for his own tuition fees, educational expenses and other living expenses.

Raphael is a 23-year-old black man from Angola. He lives at home with his parents and 3 siblings. His first language is Portuguese, but he also speaks, writes and understands English and Afrikaans very well. His parents are responsible for his tuition and educational expenses. He works part-time and earns R4500 which takes care of his other living expenses.

Darren is a 23-year-old coloured man from the Western Cape. He is single and lives in residence. His first language is English, and he speaks, writes and understands Afrikaans very well. He is a bursary recipient and it covers his tuition and other educational expenses. He receives a stipend of R4000 per month which makes provision for his food and clothing needs.

Mornay is a 23-year-old coloured man from the Western Cape. He is single and lives with his parents and sister. His first language is Afrikaans, but he speaks, writes and understands English very well. His parents are responsible for his tuition and other educational expenses. He works part-time as a tutor and receives an amount of R5000 which takes care of his other living expenses.

Roger is a 22-year-old coloured man from the Western Cape. He is single and lives with his parents. His parents are responsible for his tuition fees. He works part-time at a retail store and earns R5000 per month. This allows him to take care of his other educational expenses and general living expenses.

Pre-entry attributes

Contemplating 'dropping out'

Tinto (1997) notes that a student's decision to drop-out or persist is lodged in the same root, namely 'decision' and 'commitment'. He suggests that the level at which a student adjusts and transitions within the first year of study plays a significant role in whether the student will either drop out or persist.

As stated earlier in this paper, rates of attrition, also known as 'drop out' rates, in a Foundation programme at a university in the Western Cape. Therefore, it is not unusual that participants revealed that they considered 'dropping out'.

The data revealed that some of the participants contemplated dropping out during the course of their studies. This affirms that students often experience feelings of self-isolation, loneliness and thoughts of dropping out (Mau, 1992; Dean, 1961; Calabrese & Seldin, 1987).

Edward was the first to point out that he considered dropping out during the course of his studies:

I thought about dropping out last year when I went through a personal crisis. I also failed my first semester very badly. In addition, one of the curriculum advisers gave me the wrong advice when I had to choose my modules. All of these matters made me feel very frustrated. My mother, however, gave me the greatest mental support and encouraged me to persevere (Interview, Edward, August 29, 2017).

I initially felt that the course I am doing was maybe not for me. I did not enjoy the course and therefore seriously thought of dropping out, but this was merely a passing thought (Interview, Bongo, August 25, 2017).

The thought crossed my mind the first time I failed. At the time it felt like I was receiving my biggest knock. I decided that I would find myself a job and study part-time. My mom, however, motivated me to persevere (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

In the beginning it was very hard for me as I was never away from my mother for longer than a day. I cried myself to sleep at night for weeks on end and it affected my marks at school. I thought of dropping out and going back home. Then my mother encouraged me that she couldn't afford paying for my studies and that I should persevere as I had a bursary. It wasn't easy for me, but I managed to pull myself together. Eish... it is difficult when your family is so far away, but I am stronger now (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

Yes, I definitely thought of dropping out a couple of times. It was especially difficult when you have members of your family who studied with ease and you are put under enormous pressure. My dad would never have allowed me to drop out and therefore it just remained a thought. As the only son I know he has high expectations of me (Interview, Mornay, July 5, 2017).

The aforementioned data affirm the position held by Tinto (1997); Noel, Levitz and Saluri (1985) that a student who contemplates 'dropping out' would only remain when the environment offers them an exciting learning context which also facilitates an opportunity for personal development. Yet, students would also remain in the context of the learning environment when they have the encouragement of family members as well as where they have established strong community relationships with others.

Institutional Experiences

Classrooms as communities and integration

Tinto (1997) mentions that engagement in the community of the classroom creates a doorway for student engagement in the academic sphere. Kuh, Vesper and Pace (1997) support the notion of the community of the classroom by commenting that an environment which is friendly, helpful and which fosters meaningful engagement with peers tends to have positive results on students.

Surprisingly, the data also revealed that ten of the participants seemed more likely to approach fellow students when missing classes than speaking to their lecturers as revealed through their responses:

I might have mentioned this before, but for me friends eventually become like family members and therefore I trust them. It goes without saying that I am more prone to approach them than any other person when I need assistance in lectures or when I possibly missed one (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

I am very comfortable asking my friends to bring me up to speed when missing lectures. I think I would approach them first before approaching any lecturer (Interview, Kirsten, July 3, 2017).

Anyone who wants to make a success at being at university has to have a strong support network. For me my friends offer that in the absence of my family. So yes, I depend on them to assist me as far as possible (Interview, Siya, July 3, 2017).

I have a unique bond with my friends hence I feel very comfortable asking for their assistance when it matters most (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

I have only missed one lecture during my entire university career. And it was easier for me to ask my tutor than my lecturer as the tutor's work is to simplify things (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

Since my first year, I have had a group of friends who would record the lectures for me when missing out. It has always just been easier that way. Classes are huge, and it is often difficult receiving the lecturer's attention (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

I think I am more prone to ask my friends for help when I can't make it to lectures. They speak a language I better understand (Interview, Roger, July 5, 2017).

Friends become the cornerstone when studying. I have some friends who I know have my back. I therefore know that I can rely on them at any time. I know I can depend on them to provide me with information which I potentially missed out on (Interview, Zakes, August 28, 2017).

I am more likely to ask one of my peers about work missed as they speak a language I understand much better (Interview, Edward, August 29, 2017).

My friends are my lifeline while on campus. When I cannot make it for lectures, I know I can approach any of them for help (Interview, Fazlin, August 29, 2017).

The aforementioned responses from participants correlate with the perspectives held by Tinto (1997) who argue that unless the learning environment is felt to be learner-centred by students, they are likely to gravitate towards those who would offer them the necessary support and assistance.

The data further revealed the perception some of the participants had when approaching lecturers and tutors outside of the classroom. The following responses are indicative of this:

I am more likely to engage with my peers as my past experience with a lecturer put me off completely (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

Approaching a lecturer during class often feels like you have killed someone and that they need to interrogate you. They forget they too were students (Interview, Neo, June 29, 2017).

I am terrified to speak to lecturers. Peers are much easier to approach (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

I think the worse thing for me is when approaching a tutor and for some reason they dislike you and you feel like you are threatened by the tutor. The threat of giving you low marks if you are not in their good graces (Interview, Siya, July 3, 2017).

I have no real issue approaching lecturers as they are human beings. Yet, it becomes rather challenging at times to consult with lecturers and then only to find out that they are not in their offices during consultation slots. It also becomes a problem when a lecturer is unable to remember that you sit right in front in class. So, they accuse one of not being present. I guess the question remains whether you think it in order to remain

going back for that? I would therefore not easily go back for more of the same (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

There are days when I feel alienated from lecturers. I feel inadequate, because they have degrees and I don't. My questions therefore feel rather stupid and I try avoiding them (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

I sometimes think that little is done within the classroom to facilitate unity. It truly feels as if the lecturer stands on one end and we are on the other. Yet, even as students we are also divided into various groups along racial lines, different cultures and many other boxes. Some of us at least manage to find each other (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

The aforementioned data affirms the argument that by creating the proper environment students would be more open to engage with their lecturers (Tinto, 1997). The challenges highlighted suggest that there is potential for further exploration regarding this matter.

Formal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence

Tinto (1997) argued that when students form supportive peer groups it creates a “more knowable place” (p. 610) in which students deal with the larger challenges associated with the institution in a smaller, manageable environment. In addition, it also enables students to ‘gain a voice in the construction of knowledge’ (p. 610).

I sought clarity from students to ascertain whether they believed that working formally with other students were crucial determinants for failing or succeeding. The data revealed that all the students considered working together formally with others as an imperative, and affirmed the position expressed by Tinto (1997) that students who learn together formally, show greater intellectual progress which enhances the probability of academic engagement. This is proven by the following responses:

Now that we are in our final year, we work together far less formally than we did before. Yet, working together formally with others has made a significant difference in my performance at university (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

Uhm.... I think the real benefit of working in teams in a formal setting is that it exposes one to the lecturer as well. This is especially important when the team hits a wall and

they need the input of someone like the lecturer or tutor (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

Working together with others has certainly made a huge impact on my life. It has helped me to become more focused and taught me to ask more questions (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

I have probably been one of the fortunate people to have pleasant experiences when working formally with others. I think I have used it to my advantage (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

Working together with others can never be bad as it enriches the way one learns and also how one learns from others. Even when something negative happens in a group, it means that one has been enriched by learning something new. The fact that we are expected to work in groups forces us to do it or else we would probably end up doing things on our own (Interview, Kirsten, July 3, 2017).

The challenge one has to overcome is to identify problems in your group well in advance in order for you to make progress. Otherwise you will simply move in circles. I therefore try to be very assertive in groups in order to be authentic. It helps for people to know where they stand with you (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

I was a bit apprehensive in my first year to work in groups as I usually have no problem working on my own. Yet, I learned that it is so much easier when one is able to grapple together with an issue and one is also able to learn about the strengths of others (Interview, Mornay, July 5, 2017).

It is often frustrating working together with others especially when one has someone in your group who doesn't fully contribute to the task at hand. Yet, it exposes one to various different personalities and almost gives one an idea of the future challenges one might have in dealing with others (Interview, Roger, July 5, 2017).

At first, I thought that working with others were not for me. Then I started to notice small improvements in my results. I can only attribute this to working together with others (Interview, Tiffany, July 3, 2017).

One of the ways in which it has helped me is through critical thinking. Because I engage with others formally, it stretches me on every level (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

Definitely for the better. It makes one realise that you have a voice and that your voice has meaning. I therefore think it has helped me to develop a stronger voice in terms of academia (Interview, Siya, July 3, 2017).

It has been very rewarding for me. It ultimately means that one day I will be working with others – this now is training ground (Interview, Colin, July 4, 2017).

It takes a while to get used to other people and the way they work. Yet, I have also realised that others must find it just as frustrating when working with me. I can only say that it has much more positives than negatives (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

I have had the privilege to see formal group work from the perspective of a student and of a tutor. In both cases I think it makes me realise the great benefits it holds (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

I have realised that working together with others over time allows you to see each other's strengths. There are some people who I have been working with for the past few years. I must say that we organise ourselves in such a way to complement our various strengths. It has most definitely been beneficial for me (Interview, Mohammed, July 6, 2017).

The benefit for me is that I live in residence. My friends and I can therefore take our conversation from the classroom to the library and later to our residence. So, it makes it easier to deal with complex concepts and other components (Interview, Bongo, August 25, 2017).

I think of the graduate attributes we are exposed to in every module. A part of that has to do with working together with others. I really enjoy working in groups and therefore it works for me (Interview, Zakes, August 28, 2017).

Most of the times when we don't get to finish the formal work in class, we tend to do it after hours. This means that the work happening in the class is not isolated to that setting. We can then interact with each other even more freely. I prefer working together with other people than to try something alone (Interview, Fazlin, August 29, 2017).

This, once again, affirms the notion held by Tinto (1997) that 'the shared learning experience' (p. 610) enables students to become engaged with their peers and to become actively involved in their studies. It also affirms that participants felt that by collaborating

with their peers they were better equipped to deal with complex components of their courses as well as understand difficult concepts. It also affirms the view expressed by

Tinto (1997) that peer group interaction within the formal context of the classroom enables students to implement what they have learned from each other. The contribution made by the participants as well as the reviewed literature of Bitzer (1999), Cartney (2000) and Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) affirm that an increase in participation with their peers allow students to flourish.

Furthermore, Tinto (1997) argues that students who are actively engaged within a learning community also have the tendency to establish friendship networks with other students which transcends the confines of the classroom. This perspective resonates with the views held by Osterman (2000) and Rovai and Lucking (2003) about the importance that formal peer interaction plays within the classroom. It further underpins the view held by Tinto (1997) when he mentions that academic and social integration intersects in the classroom. For him, a student has truly become academically integrated when he/she grows an attachment to the college. This perspective is shared by Krause (2001).

Informal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence

Tinto (1997) explains that when students engage with each other informally, it enables them to solidify friendships and further helps “to bridge the academic-social divide” (p. 610) and thus merge these respective worlds.

I posed the question to the participants about how exactly they organise themselves informally in terms of assignments and what role technology plays within their engagement.

The data **indicated** that all the students made use of technology and in particular social media to engage with each other regarding module content.

Vera mentioned how she and her friends organised themselves informally when approaching assignments:

My friends and I make use of WhatsApp to discuss assignments and especially after hours. In that way you don't feel like you are alone as you have your group members together in one chat room (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

No two people share the same experience. I therefore think being connected to a diverse group of people enriches my understanding of the work. I mostly interact with others

via WhatsApp and via email. It also allows one to communicate at any time and more in detail without having to be with each other in the same location (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

Social media has become a very big part of our way of learning. We mostly use WhatsApp and even Zoom when dealing with assignments. It almost serves like an extension to what we do in class or in tutorials, but this is more informal (Interview, Neo, 29 June 2017).

It is always good to engage with others who have similar experiences as you do and who fits into your study schedule. Yet, there are times when the best way to keep moving is to connect via social media (Interview, Tiffany, July 3, 2017).

Uhm...for me working alone is not an option. It helps when you make irrational decisions to have someone who will shed some light on an area you find to be a struggle. What I like about WhatsApp is that it allows for one to send voice notes and even pictures of the work (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

I find it reassuring that there is someone or people on the other side of WhatsApp whom I trust (Interview, Kirsten, July 3, 2017).

I am trying to imagine life without social media, because it is what keeps our studies going after we have left campus or the classroom. I mostly use WhatsApp and also Viber (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

Smart phones and social media apps compliment studies. It is great to include technology in studies. It makes it so much simpler (Interview, Siya, July 3, 2017).

I mostly use WhatsApp. I like the fact that it allows you to take pictures, share it, leave voice notes and chatting in real time (Interview, Mornay, July 5, 2017).

Yeah... I usually work very late at night and while some people would not necessarily be online, it is useful to ask for a lifeline when one is stuck on a particular part of the work. This therefore helps to know help is just a message away (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

No two people share the same experience. I therefore think being connected to a diverse group of people enriches my understanding of the work. I mostly interact with others via WhatsApp and via email. It also allows one to communicate at any time and more

in detail without having to be with each other in the same location (Interview, Cassidy, July 3, 2017).

The great thing about making use of social media is that I can remain connected to my group even if I go away for a weekend or on holiday. A good data connection allows me to WhatsApp my group or to speak to them via Skype (Interview, Colin, July 4, 2017).

I usually work much better late at night when things are quiet. My friends and I usually have a Skype meeting at 23h00 during the week and we also make use of WhatsApp (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

My friends and I have been engaged on WhatsApp for many years to discuss assignments. Quite frankly, what would life be like without it? But we use other forms of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Hangouts on Google and, of course, iKamva as well (Interview, Roger, July 5, 2017).

The most popular forms of social media engagement happen when my team mates and I make use of WhatsApp and Google Docs (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

I think people underestimate the importance of social media today. My generation loves technology. We make use of most platforms, but WhatsApp is the most popular (Interview, Mohammed, July 6, 2017).

I usually have to travel home to Botswana for family emergencies. It is so helpful to connect with other students via WhatsApp and social media so that I don't lag behind (Interview, Bongo, August 25, 2017).

Yes, my friends and I make use of WhatsApp, Google Docs and Facebook to discuss assignments (Interview, Zakes, August 28, 2017).

We make use of WhatsApp. It helps us to keep each other motivated (Interview, Edward, August 29, 2017).

WhatsApp changed my life as it means that I can engage with my peers at any given time. This is the way students have learnt to communicate with each other and I am certain that over time things will evolve within the institution as my generation loves technology (Interview, Fazlin, August 29, 2017).

In this regard, Tinto (1997) argues that students working together with others learn to take responsibility for their own learning and meaningfully contribute to group work. The data correlates with the assertion by Williams (2011) that technology plays a pivotal role in the twenty-first century and it serves as an important mode of learning. Daniel (2009) agrees that students today are technologically advanced and find ways to access various learning resources online as a way to circumvent having to always engage face-to-face with other students. The participants mentioned the role that technology plays within the realm of their informal peer group interaction. This is evident from their responses as it seems as if most of them utilise WhatsApp, email, Facebook, Skype and other forms of social media to remain connected. Thus, the key words which emanate from their responses suggest that it promotes feelings of ‘trust’, ‘motivation’ and a sense of ‘togetherness’.

Student organisations, integration and student persistence

Tinto (1997) asserts that social support and bonding with classmates are some of the strong determinants resulting in high rates of completion of studies. He therefore argues that positive institutional experiences within the academic and social systems allow students to become better integrated, thus creating a sense of belonging. As a result, one’s sense of belonging should be seen as preceding social connectedness and increasing the chances of student persistence.

I probed the participants on how involved they were with student organisations at the university.

The data showed that 11 of the students were involved in student organisations and that it gave them a sense of purpose at the institution. As such, it affirms the view held by Tinto (1997) that, because the students felt they had a sense of purpose, they also felt a sense of belonging.

I am involved in student structures at the university. I am not quite ready to run for the SRC yet but being actively involved in matters concerning students gives me a great sense of satisfaction (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

I am part of an organisation called the Chamber of Legal Students. We assist high school learners with subjects like Management and the importance of how to work with finance (Interview, Raphael, June 29, 2017).

I was invited to a meeting recently to become part of a project in the faculty. We do cake sales, sell raffles and other fundraisers. The money is used to help needy students with travelling money, books and to buy food. I haven't been doing this for a long time, but I feel very motivated as it takes the attention off my own needs (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

I joined a Christian NGO on campus. We raise funds to help students from disadvantaged communities. We give food parcels to needy students and do soup kitchens during winter. I feel like I am making a meaningful contribution to other people's lives (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

I started getting involved with the ABISA programme here at campus a while ago. They tend to reach out to disadvantaged communities. This helps me to focus on something positive as it makes me feel like I am part of something more than merely studying here (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

I have been involved with an NGO, Monzi Tobatsu, this semester. I love children and it has been great working with underprivileged kids in the community. It makes one appreciate what you have (Interview, Roger, July 5, 2017).

I belong to a Christian student organisation on campus. We assist students with food parcels and I also assist one of the lecturers in the faculty with her project, Making a Difference. I feel that it is important to make a difference (Interview, Mornay, July 5, 2017).

I am involved with ABISA. The opportunities I am given allow me to develop my leadership abilities and create confidence (Interview, Mohammed, July 6, 2017).

I am part of the House Committee at my residence on campus. We often arrange for weekly debates about topical issues. We also arrange sports days in order to make first year students feel a sense of community. Personally, my involvement in all of this gives me a great sense of purpose (Interview, Bongo, August 25, 2017).

Yes, I am the deputy chairperson of ABISA. We make resources available to high school learners from previously disadvantaged communities. We assist them by providing past exam papers in order for them to succeed (Interview, Edward, August 29, 2017).

I serve as the secretary for ABISA. I am very good at administration and it is a great way to use my skills to serve others (Interview, Fazlin, August 29, 2017).

The data therefore supports the view expressed by Tinto (1997) that peer group engagement in the social dimension often creates ‘a developmental precondition for addressing the need for intellectual engagement’ (p. 618). At the same time, the data affirms that through meaningful engagement in the social sphere of the institution, students feel a greater sense of integration into the institution and contributes to student persistence.

Financial support and student persistence

A key contributor to student persistence hinges on the type of financial support an academic institution is able to provide students (Tinto, 1997). This type of support falls within the ambit of institutional commitment to student success and persistence.

The data revealed that nine of the participants were bursary recipients, while others were dependent on their parents to pay for their studies and only one of them was self-funded. The following responses came from those who are bursary recipients:

My motivation to study is driven by the bursary I am currently receiving as it provides me with extra classes, lightens the financial burden of having to pay for my own studies, the moral support which comes from my parents, the peer tutoring which has become my bedrock, the fact that my lecturers are often also my tutors and the food allowance I receive makes the world of a difference. It also feels as if they are paying me to study (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

The bursary is a key driver behind my motivation. As a recipient of the bursary I don’t live at home and it helps being in an environment where there are likeminded people. In many ways receiving the bursary makes me feel as if I am being paid to study (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

I am not quite sure whether it would have been possible for me to study if I did not receive the bursary. I realise that should I fail and lose my bursary it could have devastating consequences. I therefore work very hard to ensure that I don’t lose it (Interview, Kirsten, July 3, 2017).

My mother is a domestic worker and with her wages it would have been almost impossible to be here. The bursary keeps me motivated to do my best for myself, my mother and for the sake of the bursary (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

It feels good knowing that I don't have the burden of having to pay exorbitant study fees. The bursary helps me to remain focused and I am truly grateful that I have resources for the successful completion of my studies (Interview, Tiffany, July 3, 2017).

I don't know what I will do without this bursary. It is truly the reason why I am reluctant to miss classes as I get up every morning realising what is at stake (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

I realise that I am very privileged to have a bursary. It has made so many things possible for me. The additional tutorials and additional academic support make a huge difference (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

My family constantly reminds me that I should not take things for granted. I don't, as I know that I am truly blessed. So, it makes it all the more possible for me to complete my studies (Interview, Zakes, August 28, 2017).

I often look at my friends who are not as privileged to have a bursary and I see their struggle having to do part-time jobs in order to have access to resources needed for their studies. This bursary has changed my life (Interview, Fazlin, August 29, 2017).

The responses provided by the students resonated with the assertion that financial support is a fundamental contributor to a student's motivation to persist with studies (Tinto, 1997).

Faculty support and student persistence

In his Model of Student Persistence, Tinto (1997) emphasises that academic relationships are rooted in the type of academic engagements students have at the institution, in particular, the faculty.

I engaged the participants on the role the faculty played in their daily engagement within the academic environment.

I found it very interesting when the data revealed that half of the students were reluctant to engage any of the staff at their institution because they believed that the staff was not interested in their well-being:

Nope, I would not easily confide or approach any of the staff members at the university. I feel much more comfortable speaking to my friends about my struggles and to follow their advice. Perhaps they should consider providing proper training to their staff members (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

I have no problem in asking for help when I need it, yet my experience has been that those who provide administrative support on campus are usually mostly unfriendly and seemingly unhelpful. I therefore would not easily ask them for help. There is a need for the faculty to train the staff on how to be more client-centred (Interview, Tiffany, July 3, 2017).

You know, it is not that I won't ask for help. I just find it frustrating when you sit for hours in a queue to receive information; you later discover that it was wrong information. The processes at university are unnecessarily complicated (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

I had a situation where someone who has been working for the university for a long time gave me wrong information. If I didn't find out soon enough it would have meant repeating another year. I guess you have your answer. Once bitten, twice shy. I don't feel comfortable going to that particular person for help (Interview, Neo, June 29, 2017).

What is the worth of going to see people who give you inaccurate information? I am not sure whether the faculty is serious about providing excellent service. More than that, I am not sure whether they are as concerned about my future as they profess. I think there is a need for the faculty to make their process more user-friendly and less complicated (Interview, Edward, August 29, 2017).

I have actually spoken to someone once at the Centre for Student Support. The frustrating thing is that because they have so many students they have to service, it is often impossible to see the same counsellor you saw initially. This means that one has to repeat much of what you shared initially, and this can be very demotivating, and this caused me to lose interest to go back. So yes, I actually tried speaking to someone when I had a low moment, but it didn't work out for me (Interview, Kirsten, July, 3, 2017).

My friends and I already know who to avoid when going to seek for help. I think, generally, we are reluctant to seek help from staff in the faculty (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

I really can't say whether I feel completely comfortable approaching staff members at my institution, let alone confide in them. I guess it's a case of once bitten twice shy. I have had a few bad experiences with both administrative and academic staff. I therefore try to avoid them at all costs (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

My simply answer is NO! I don't feel comfortable engaging staff (Interview, Fazlin, August 29, 2017).

I don't speak to staff. I try to find the information online if I have to (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

This correlates with the position held by Tinto (1997) that faculty lays the foundation for student-faculty engagement. Faculty is also vital in facilitating a student's desire to seek assistance outside of the classroom in times of crises. Tinto (1997) also explains the importance of Faculty engagement and how it contributes to student persistence.

Faculty engagement and student persistence

Tinto (1997) further argues in his Model of Student Persistence that students who are engaged with Faculty will in all likelihood be better engaged in terms of student learning. It will contribute to a quality experience and ultimately lead to student persistence.

The data therefore showed that half of the participants felt comfortable seeking assistance from staff members:

I usually get along well with people and while academics can be intimidating at times, I would much rather ask for assistance than to suffer in silence. Yes, I would confide in a few of my lecturers, especially the ones who are genuinely interested in my well-being (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

As a tutor, I developed confidence to speak to my lecturers. They are human beings after all. I therefore find it easy to engage staff members and this helps to find clarity about unanswered questions or helps to allay fears (Interview, Mornay, July 5, 2017).

I actually struggled with ill-health when I started at university. After being discharged from hospital, I confided in two of my lecturers about my health challenges. They gave me so much support and up till today I feel very comfortable speaking to them about anything without feeling judged (Interview, Mohammed, July 6, 2017).

Generally, I ask my friends for help when I miss any classes and they are the ones who provide me with notes. I have possibly approached one lecturer in total as he is usually very understanding (Interview, Siya, July 3, 2017).

I was a student assistant during the registration process for two years. This exposed me to the faculty members and also gave me the opportunity to speak to the lecturers. I think this helped me to know that I could speak to the staff members and that I had nothing to be afraid of (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

Yes, I actually believe that there are some of the faculty staff members who are very good at what they do. I would gladly approach several of them (Interview, Colin, July 4, 2017).

The mere fact that I am still here should tell you that I had to speak to some staff members to assist me (Interview, Roger, July 5, 2017).

Nobody is perfect and while I sometimes think I am too perfect for words (laughing), I am really not. I therefore cannot judge others. I therefore have no problem seeking for help (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

I have definitely approached my lecturers in the past when missing key classes and most of them have been most helpful (Interview, Bongo, August 25, 2017).

How can anyone not engage staff members when they are so important to make things easier on campus for people like myself? I really have no issue with this as my family is far away from this province and I need all the help I can get (Interview, Zakes, August 28, 2017).

Tinto (1997) emphasises the importance of faculty-student interaction as a key motivator to student persistence. Thus, the aforementioned data clearly shows the impact faculty support plays in ensuring that a student feels connected to their academic environment as well as persist with their studies.

Goal commitments (T1)

Institutional challenges to academic and social integration

Tinto (1997) argues that a student's initial goals and institutional commitments greatly influence the manner in which they will become engaged in the academic and social systems. In addition, this will contribute to how integrated they become academically and socially, which in turn contributes to the quality of the student effort. Tinto (1997) points out that cooperative learning ought not to be seen as a magic bullet as it comes with its own range of challenges. Not all students embrace cooperative learning and are open to forging relationships with their peers.

The data revealed that some of the students experienced a form of hostility from other students at some point during the course of their studies. This affirms the position held by Tinto (1997) that negative experiences have the ability to inhibit the relationship students forge with each other and thus pose a challenge to cooperative learning among students. The data thus shows how hostility had a direct bearing on how they engaged with other students:

...yes, I have experienced hostility from other students, especially from those who were unsuccessful in securing bursaries. They look at me as a coloured girl and feel that I am undeserving to be a bursary recipient because I am not Black (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

One of my parents' greatest worries was that I would receive hostility from other students because of my race. In the beginning I felt very conscious of my white face and accent. On two occasions, I got some attitude from a group of girls, but they soon understood that I was very assertive (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

People are generally hostile towards me when I achieve higher marks than them. I have learned to live with it (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

Perhaps hostile is a strong word. I have mostly experienced a strong sense of competition from others in terms of our studies (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

...people tend to form an opinion of you even when they don't know enough about you (Interview, Tiffany, July 3, 2017).

I have had people be confrontational at the hostel about silly things. I think sometimes it could be because they think I am quiet, and they consider me a walkover. I don't think

it was race related as I have experienced hostility before when I was at school. I therefore think it is as a result of me being so quiet most of the time (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

As a Zulu male I have often experienced hostility from Xhosa males when they felt that Xhosa girls showed an interest in me (Interview, Colin, July 4, 2017).

I have experienced hostility from other students who are aware that I am a foreign student. There are moments when I have to wonder what the reason for their hostility is. I don't wish to jump to conclusions and think that it could be as a result of my status as a foreigner (Interview, Bongo, August 25, 2017).

The data affirmed the view of Tinto (1997) that students' experiences are key in determining how those experiences shape their attitude towards learning over time and in particular towards persisting with their studies. It also affirms the stance held by Tinto (1997) that cooperative learning comes with its own set of challenges. However, it seems as if the hostility some received did not have an adverse effect in the manner they engaged with their peers.

Personal / Normative Recognition

Academic and social integration, learning and student persistence

Not only does interaction with peers enable students to engage in formal learning, but informal learning is also being shaped. In addition, research from the National Study of Student Learning (as cited in Tinto, 1997) suggests that interaction among peers actually promotes a student's critical thinking skills as well as their ability to comprehend discussions. Of significant importance here is that Tinto (1997) mentions that students are often torn between the academic and social world. However, when they engage in groups they manage to merge the two dimensions comfortably. Groups enable students to weave these worlds together and thus create the conditions for students to take ownership of their learning and become empowered in the process. Examples of this can be seen through the responses from students regarding their relationship with their peers and informal learning:

The data showed that fifteen of the students considered academic and social engagements with their peers to be vital to persist at university. I therefore probed whether students socialise with other students:

Friends are important. They assist you to gain a better grasp of the work you have to deal with. So, I do socialise with them whenever I am able to (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

I definitely socialise with friends. I am usually liked by all and I spend time with friends and at the local bar. Sadly, there was something which happened last year which made me weary of engaging with others. I retreated into myself and I have to admit that I soon realised that I could not build walls around myself. Being so far from home and living on res means I need people (Interview, Edward, August 29, 2017).

Knowing that I have the support of my friends, even if there are few of them, helps me to persevere. I have days when it feels like the world wants to cave in on me and then, when I share a laugh outside smoking with my friends, it makes me want to go back into the classroom to tackle my assignments again (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

I love shooting pool. I have learned to use those opportunities to pick the brains of my friends when I am struggling with understanding components of my work. Once I have the answers, I am more driven to continue with my work (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

If I did not have the support of my friends, I would probably have left long ago. I learn at best when I am relaxed. It is therefore important for me to socialise with my friends and talk about our common struggles with our studies. That is enough for me to know that I am not alone and that others are going through similar experiences (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

One of the things that my friends taught me was in order to remain sane and complete your studies is to ensure that learning is fun. The only reason why I think I made it thus far is because I make time for fun with my friends in order to deal with the complexities of my studies (Interview, Fazlin, August 29, 2017).

Social gatherings create the opportunity to focus your attention on something positive and to develop the courage to deal with what awaits you in lectures. Without it I would not be here talking to you (Interview, Mohammed, July 6, 2017).

Sometimes people see me playing dominoes in the student centre and they judge me. What they don't understand is that if it had not been for those moments then I would

have been lost here. Of course, we laugh and joke around, but it also creates moments to ask important questions about studies (Interview, Colin, July 4, 2017).

Have you ever felt like one thing can't do without the other? For me, even when I am talking to my friends about church, I also find the time to talk about lecturers and the workload. On a social level, I feel relaxed and on an academic level, I feel recharged when I interact with my friends (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

My mother sometimes calls to hear how I am doing. Then she hears the laughter in the background, and she asks whether I am wasting her money here. But that laughter is what keeps me going from one day to another (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

Yes, I do socialise with my friends. Often when I don't attend, they call to find out where I am. Just by calling, it makes me feel that I am important to someone and that someone cares. That is enough to not give up hope for studies (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

I call it 'girl power'. My girlfriends keep me going. We are very driven and so even when talking about make-up, it always creates moments for reflection on academic work and it inspires me to do better (Interview, Tiffany, July 3, 2017).

My friends and I like to go out over weekends. Yet, we usually have a working breakfast on Saturdays and that is the highlight of my week as it really helps knowing I am together with others in this (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

I highly recommend socialising with friends. I recently shared this when I spoke to a group of first-year students. It somehow helps you to remain focused and not to operate like an island. I can say that now, because I have seen the value of allowing others to pour into you (Interview, Kirsten, July 3, 2017).

The more I think about it, I realise that there is a time when you don't merely come together to party. You learn to make the most of every situation. I therefore socialise with a purpose. I want to use it to become connected to likeminded people who have a willingness to learn and who are serious about completing their degree (Interview, Roger, July 5, 2017).

The data affirms the idea raised by Tinto (1997) that student learning is enriched through peer interaction and that it serves as a strong motivator for student persistence. It also affirms

the notion that knowledge is best acquired through social and/or group interaction which contributes to learning and enhances the probability for student persistence (Palinscar, Stevens, & Gavelek, cited in Tinto, 1997; Conyne, Wilson & Ward, 1997; Grayson, 1999; Bohm, 1996; Gillies & Ashman, 2003).

Student effort

Tinto (1997) asserts that the more students work together collaboratively with their peers, it enables them to gain a voice through the creation of knowledge. Furthermore, it contributes significantly to the way in which students assume responsibility for their own learning. This further enables the student to critically reflect on his/her own learning and, especially, to think about the feedback often given to them by their peers. Thus, this makes it possible for the students to increase the quality of their learning.

Tinto (1993) makes reference to the fact that students who learn together find that their own learning has become greatly enriched. It also provides them with the conditions to not merely learn together, but also to foster meaningful relationships with fellow students. The insights learned from the data and theory affirm that the interactions of peers provide fertile ground where they are 'learning to learn' (Tinto, 1993, p. 102). At the same time, Tinto (1997) highlights that the more a student is engaged in the academic and social sphere of an institution, coupled by the extent to which they are invested in a shared learning experience with their peers, the greater the quality of the effort will be from the individual. This is affirmed through the data when Cassidy and Herschel respond in the following way:

I have never had a problem in forging friendships with people. Yet, I never thought that I would develop such a meaningful relationship with someone. My friendship with Herschel has morphed into something special. When we work together on projects for our different modules, I really feel that he has my best interest at heart. I trust him completely and because of that trust I am able to reveal my insecurities, my strengths and my naivety to him when working together on assignments (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

There are many things that I know today which have not only come from books, but as a result of my engagement with my close friends. If I struggled to understand concepts before, it is now so much easier because I have been exposed to the different views of others. It means that I have attached new learning to old information (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

We are overloaded daily by a lot of information when doing our different modules. There are days when I tell my friends that I just can't concentrate any longer. Then we take a break and do coffee together in the student centre. It is amazing what that does, because we often spend moments rolling with laughter and then someone says something about the work we are grappling with in lectures. It is as if the lights just automatically come switching on. It really helps when one is in a different head space and when something like laughter can defuse tension (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

I must admit that there are days when I just don't feel like being on campus. Those are the days when I feel less productive. Then one of my friends would invite me to take a smoke break and, while standing outside blowing smoke, we end up talking about school work. I think just a break, a few moments, enables me to get right back into the right perspective. Maybe it has to do with the ease one experiences in the company of your peers which just makes such a big difference (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

My family is very religious, and the interesting thing is that my friends here at the university are also very grounded in faith. It is funny how my friends and I would be walking from prayer meeting and be sharing about difficulty regarding something dealt with in class. In the beginning, I would hate those discussions, but I must admit that it is while we are walking and talking that I get these deep insights. When I return to my room, I immediately make notes for myself. It truly helps (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

Educational outcomes

Academic feedback and student persistence

Tinto (1997) also highlights the importance of a student receiving regular and proper feedback regarding their progress in order to persist. In addition, Tinto (1997) also argues that feedback about academic performance is crucial for academic success and in becoming academically integrated. This is affirmed through the feedback received from students in the following responses.

The data indicated that more than half of the participants felt that they received proper feedback from lecturers regarding assessments. The participants provided the following responses:

The vast majority of my lecturers give very good feedback. It helps to know where to improve and what one's progress looks like (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

They say bad habits die hard. I guess when one has established a network for oneself with your friends then there is little reason to approach lecturers. Yet, I usually approach lecturers once I receive feedback from them regarding my tests and assignments. It is important for me to fully understand where I need to improve (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

I possibly have a better relationship with my tutors than with my lecturers. It could be that I see them also still as students and that the feedback they provide is more simplistic and easier for me to understand (Interview, Neo, June 29, 2017).

I do receive proper feedback from my lecturers regarding my progress. Often if something is unclear to me, I would email them or ask them at the end of lectures to clarify a comment on my assignment (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

I am generally happy with the feedback I receive from my lecturers. I have seen the difference it makes when the feedback is clear, especially when I am studying and the lecturers are not with me (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

My lecturers usually provide proper feedback regarding the quality of my work and even my tutors are mostly engaged. I am therefore not afraid to consult with them (Interview, Kirsten, July 3, 2017).

I can't complain about the feedback received from my lecturers. They are really very detailed and clear (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

Yes, the feedback is sometimes delayed, but it's generally good enough. I can't complain there (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

I have a general good relationship with my lecturers and, while they usually give very good feedback, I have no problem in asking for additional feedback and consultation (Interview, Mohammed, July 6, 2017).

Both tutors and lecturers usually give very good feedback. There are times when it doesn't happen timeously, but there are never moments when it never occurs (Interview, Bongo, August 25, 2017).

I tend to be very assertive and would ask my lecturers in class for assistance when I fail to grasp difficult concepts and also make time to consult with them. I prefer honesty when it comes to my progress and I have had no problem in receiving proper feedback from my lecturers to date (Interview, Zakes, August 28, 2017).

The data confirmed the position held by Tinto (1997) that when students receive proper academic feedback it increases the possibility for students to persist with their studies. This enables students to know exactly how to improve in areas where they find it more challenging.

'Competent membership' and student persistence

Effective programmes create suitable conditions in which students thrive and if students are uninvolved within the sphere of the academic environment, they will remain uninvolved and unable to deal with complex situations (Tinto, 1997). Yet, Tinto (1998), based on Tinto (1997), asserts that students who are integrated within an academic institution are most likely to show commitment to their context and thus become “competent members” (p. 168).

The data revealed that thirteen participants believed that their studies enabled them to become competent to deal with complex situations at the university and in other contexts.

I cannot believe that I am in my final year of my studies. It wasn't easy, but it was worth it. I am definitely not the same person who arrived at this institution years ago. I can do much more than before (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

Yes, I have been stretched and I am definitely able to deal with more complicated matters than before. I have grown (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

I guess the real test will come once I start working, whether I have managed to internalise my learning. I am however sure that I am able to apply my critical thinking skills and make wise decisions (Interview, Vera, June 29, 2017).

I know my friends and I often speak of the loads of money we are going to earn, but for me it is important to know that we would want to use our resources to make a difference. That is evidence enough that we are much more confident to deal with complex situations (Interview, Tiffany, July 3, 2017).

I am not the same person you met in my first year. I have changed and with that change came my ability to embrace change. I am ready for anything (Interview, Kirsten, July 3, 2017).

I have learned to own my voice. I am confident and I am much more assertive (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

I am very grateful for this journey. I am definitely much more confident than I was when arriving here. I am not afraid to deal with whatever life throws my way (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

Yes, my time at this university had made me a stronger person. I am sure that things will become even better. I tried very hard to make me a better version of myself over the past four years (Interview, Siya, July 3, 2017).

I certainly feel like I am much more competent than I was before. My family says I have matured (Interview, Colin, July 4, 2017).

I arrived here a boy and I will leave here a man. Does that answer your question? (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

I have learned great skills here at the university and I am ready to apply it (Interview, Roger, July 5, 2017).

I have spent the past four years of my life at this institution. I have thus overcome many obstacles and feel much more confident than I did in the beginning. What gives me the confidence is that I have become acquainted with processes at the university, I have developed a relationship with most of my lecturers and I have friends who support me (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

I have to thank my Creator, because I never thought that I would make it this far. I however know that I am much more capable than before. It makes me excited about the future (Interview, Mohammed, July 6, 2017).

The data clearly showed the validity in the argument by Tinto (1997) that the greater the degree of involvement by the individual, the more connected the individual will feel to the institution and be able to deal with complex situations. It further confirms that “competent membership” (p. 168) in the classroom contributes to student persistence (Tinto, 1998).

Goal commitments (T2)

Social support and student persistence

Tinto (1997) considers the external factors of a student's life as equally important to the internal factors which could ultimately lead to either drop out or persistence. Thus, the social support students receive from family should be viewed in relation to the internal factors of the academic environment – not in isolation.

During the interviews, I focused my attention on establishing what the main driving force was behind the participants' motivation to study. They provided me with various responses, which were definitely linked:

Both Cassidy and Herschel have siblings who studied in the same field who provided them with an added advantage as they could turn to them for help and advice.

I was lucky to have an older sister who would provide me with the motivation and support with my studies as my sister also studied in the same field. She frustrated me at times as I felt she was hard on me. I guess she had the advantage of learning from her own mistakes and wanted to save me from doing the same (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

My brother has always been a model student. My parents often used him as an example when referring to my own studies. I feel blessed to have my brother in my life. He gave me really good advice and I have great confidence in the tips he has given me (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

For me, family comes first regardless. They are the ones who provide me with the most support. Friends and lecturers are also understanding and offer moral support (Interview, Neo, June 29, 2017).

My first year at varsity gave me lots of freedom. I think that freedom can be intoxicating at times and one can easily get carried away. If it had not been for my Mom who constantly supported me and who sometimes kept checking on me, I would have drowned in my new-found freedom (Interview, Edward, August 29, 2017).

I pride myself that I have a very close-knit family. I can recall how my parents would quiz me during dinner during my first year of being a university student. It was important to them to hear about my day and whether I was coping with the workload. If

it had not been for their consistent support, which felt like nagging at times, I would have folded long time ago (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

The mere thought of how I made it thus far makes me want to cry. I remember how my Mom would sit up with me as I would prepare for tests. She would not only encourage me, but there were moments when she would drop by my room to bring me hot chocolate and cookies while I was studying. It made me feel like I just could not disappoint her as it was evident that she wanted to see me succeed (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

At the time when I started studying, we were a group of seven guys who came from KZN. While three of us were from the same high school and knew each other, we met the other four guys here. So, while our families were far away, we were this band of brothers who leaned on each other for support. We did everything together. Knowing that they were with me, kept me going (Interview, Colin, July 4, 2017).

My mother is my greatest motivation and also my faith. I grew up in a very religious home and my faith carried me. I think without the love of my mother and her prayers, I would not have made it (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

Tinto (1997) explains that the journey for a student is often defined by moments of extreme loneliness and this can easily result in the student's lack of motivation to persist. The data however affirms Tinto's view that with proper support from family members, peers and of course lecturers, students are more likely to persist with their studies (Tinto, 1997).

Goal commitment (T2), outcome

Intention to persist and student persistence

Tinto (1998), based on Tinto (1997), articulates that students' intentions to persist with their studies is greatly influenced by a goal commitment. Once this goal commitment has been achieved, it makes persistence more plausible.

I therefore asked students whether they had any intention to further their studies. The data revealed that twelve of the participants had the intention to persist with their studies and to eventually do post-graduate studies. The following captures their responses:

I have already decided to continue doing my honours next year (Interview, Cassidy, June 29, 2017).

I would have to continue with my studies in order to qualify myself as a CA. My parents are both retired, and I have to do my bit to contribute to the household. I will therefore register for honours next year. I really want to do BCom Law (Interview, Herschel, June 29, 2017).

The manager at the shop where I work part-time has offered me a full-time position, but I much rather want to study next year and work part-time while I am still young and there is a desire to study (Vera, June 29, 2017).

I want to do my honours. I know that the temptation is there to first go and work for a while, but my mother is against the idea. So, I will definitely be doing my honours (Interview, Primrose, July 3, 2017).

Yes, I have every intention to do my honours in Finance (Interview, Raphael, July 3, 2017).

I would like to do a Diploma in Education at CPUT and possibly go teach abroad (Interview, Roger, July 5, 2017).

I plan to do my honours and ultimately do my master's in TAX. I am still young and really want to do as much studying as I can (Interview, Mia, July 4, 2017).

I would like to work for a few years and mature before I start studying again. But there is definitely a desire to improve my qualification in future (Interview, Darren, July 5, 2017).

In all honesty, I want to do religious studies as much as I want to ultimately work in the financial sector (Interview, Mohammed, July 6, 2017).

In spite of the challenge I experience on campus, I think I am addicted to studying. I will most definitely study honours next year (Interview, Xhanti, July 5, 2017).

I wanted to find myself a job first and study part-time, but I decided to get my honours sorted and, in that way, I have a stronger chance of being employable. So, I definitely plan to do my honours next year (Interview, Mornay, July 5, 2017).

I have already applied for honours as I would like a qualification in Business Management (Interview, Zakes, August 28, 2017).

The outcome of the data in terms of student persistence, underpins the notion by Tinto (1997) that an individual's commitment and motivation to persevere makes the attainment of their degree a reality. In Tinto's view, this reality is made possible through a change in the balance of how students have been able to engage successfully within the academic and social spheres and followed a process over a prolonged period to persist with their studies (Tinto, 1997).

SECTION 5: SUMMARY, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

For the purposes of this paper, I addressed the following research problem. Research shows that in some higher education institutions' programmes the percentage of student persistence is low. A study of the literature reveals that factors like peer group interaction and academic integration can sustain a student's persistence in higher education. In its White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) government articulates the need to improve participation and success rates in higher education programmes. This research responds to the need to increase student persistence and success in a specific higher education programme. Tinto's (1997) model proposes that several factors among others, peer group interaction and academic integration, can sustain student persistence. To explore ways in which student persistence can be improved, this study investigates the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence in a specific programme offered by a university in the Western Cape.

The aim of this study was to investigate the factors that influence student persistence in higher education. In addition, it was further aimed at generating new theoretical insights about student persistence in higher education.

I investigated the following research question: What are the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence? I also probed the following sub-questions: How does peer group interaction contribute to student persistence? What are the relationships between peer group interaction and academic integration? How does academic integration contribute to student persistence?

As my conceptual framework for this study, I used Tinto's Model of Student Persistence, which he modified from the Model on Student Departure.

I adopted a qualitative approach as it was important to investigate students' experiences and perceptions about peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence. Thus, a qualitative approach enabled me to elicit the appropriate information from the participants.

As a research instrument I used an interview guide (See Appendix A) to conduct a semi-structured interview. Due to the nature of the qualitative study, the research instrument enabled me to probe deeper and interrogate answers which were vague and ambiguous in nature. Thus, the research question and sub-questions served as a guide to ask questions which were divided

into the following sections: dropping out; support and student persistence; relationships with peers and integration; formal peer group interaction, integration, and student persistence; informal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence; student organisations, integration and student persistence; student persistence and intent to persist.

I analysed the data and drawing on research studies conducted by Tinto (1997), Tinto, Goodsell and Russo (1994); Barnett, Gardner and Bragg (2004) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) helped me to gain insight into how peer group interaction and academic integration sustains student persistence. In addition, the data provided me with an understanding of how students interacted and collaborated with each other and how this enabled them to develop learning communities, internal and external to the classroom.

The data further revealed how students developed supporting social networks among each other and how leaning was facilitated through both formal and informal learning. The data revealed how peer group collaboration and the use of various social media platforms as a means of engaging in the process of learning, assisted students to persist with their studies.

The data also revealed the value that academic integration as well as social integration played in sustained persistence among students. This was particularly meaningful to me as it expanded my own understanding of learning and the contribution that academic integration plays in the realm of a learning community.

Findings

What are the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence?

How does peer group interaction contribute to student persistence?

What are the relationships between peer group interaction and academic integration?

How does academic integration contribute to student persistence?

I extrapolate the following findings about the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence:

Peer group interaction and student persistence

How does peer group interaction contribute to student persistence?

- Peer group interaction contributed significantly to student persistence.
- The majority of students considered peer group interaction – in particular the support received from peers and the accountability to each other – as contributing factors for persisting with their studies.
- Some students viewed peer group interaction as a nuisance initially but believe that it is necessary in order to persist.
- A few students considered dropping out at some stage, but the motivation of peers motivated them to persist with their studies.
- A support network built among students enhanced the probability of student persistence.

Formal and informal peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence

What are the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence?

What are the relationships between peer group interaction and academic integration?

- Academic integration was achieved through both formal and informal interaction with peers. It also contributed to student persistence.
- Peer group interaction contributed significantly to their success in their respective modules.
- Students relied heavily on social media, such as Facebook, WhatsApp and even email, to organise themselves informally and formally in an effort to persist with their studies.
- The majority of the students are currently involved in student organisations and consider it important to focus on more than merely their studies.
- The study further demonstrated that students who were academically integrated were not merely engaged in the “learning community” of the classroom, but that their engagement with their peers extended beyond it.

Formal peer group interaction, social and academic integration and student persistence

What are the relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence?

- Formal peer group interaction facilitated a process of academic and social integration and strengthened the possibility for student persistence.
- Students agreed that, in order to complete their studies successfully, there was a great need for them to collaborate with their peers in order to become academically and socially integrated.
- Students relied greatly upon each other to achieve academic success and to persist with their studies.
- Students also considered that engagement, both academically and socially, with their peers enabled them to become better integrated at the university.

Faculty support and academic integration

- Students expressed that academic feedback received from lecturers and tutors were useful in assisting them in becoming academically integrated into the Programme.
- In addition, some students expressed that their engagement with lecturers academically served as a motivation for them to persist with their studies.

Unexpected Findings

The findings of the investigation were generally congruent with the literature surveyed in this study in terms of peer group interaction and academic integration, and yielded similar results as described by the research conducted by Tinto (1997) in terms of peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence.

1) Through the findings, there was a distinct variation in the way in which students, who were bursary recipients, responded to questions compared to the component of students without bursaries, who were self-funded or assisted financially by their parents. While those with bursaries were better enabled financially, all of the students were strongly motivated to work together with their peers and to become better grounded in the academic sphere. They were convinced that this ultimately led them to persist with their studies.

2) While academic integration and peer group interaction featured equally in the conceptual framework, the latter contributed more significantly to student persistence.

New theoretical perspectives and insights

My study is underpinned by Tinto's (1997) theoretical perspectives on the factors which enable student persistence. My conceptual framework encompassed elements of Tinto's (1997) theory, such as the role of peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence. Thus, my conceptual framework and findings enabled me to develop the following important theoretical insights:

1) Tinto's concept of 'learning communities', in particular, the ability for students to extend that which is learnt in the classroom beyond the boundaries of the classroom, is appropriate to explain and interpret the importance of how peer group interaction contributes to student persistence. This was confirmed through this study, in the manner in which students organised themselves formally and informally, building peer support networks which enabled them to persist with their studies;

2) Tinto's concept of 'learning communities' is appropriate to explain and interpret the importance of how academic integration contributes to student persistence. The study revealed that the support students received from their lecturers, contributed to their academic persistence.

This is of great significance when reflecting on this within a South African context, given that the ambitions expressed through the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013) are to ensure that students not merely gain access to higher education, but also participate fully within the framework of tertiary education.

Through my research, I have set myself on a course of action to engage with various theories and learning perspectives, to comprehend fully the enabling factors which prompt students to participate in learning, and to explore favourable conditions for student persistence.

Implications for further study

The aim of this study was to investigate relationships between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence. This study, however, revealed a more sophisticated nuance in the manner in which students organised themselves in terms of peer group activities. While the participants did not disavow the importance of academic integration, the data, however, revealed a discrepancy between peer group interaction and academic integration as a result of students depending more on their own peers, than they did on their lecturers. Thus, it is imperative to interrogate further, from the perspective of Tinto, exactly why this discrepancy exists between these two important variables. While this study investigated the relationships between the aforementioned variables, it did not provide sufficient understanding as to why students were ambivalent to academic support from their lecturers compared to their preference for peer group interaction. This therefore requires further investigation in order to explain these inconsistencies.

Of course, this is a mammoth task considering that the perception is created by critics of higher education in South Africa, that those of us at work in higher education have reached an impasse, where we are struggling to overcome the complexities of the current system. This, therefore, makes the larger scope of the intended vision seem very ambitious. An example of one of the challenges is reflected in the student protests which started in 2015 and shook the foundations of higher education in South Africa. Thus, for two years, there was a struggle to move beyond the issues raised by students and to seek a viable solution which would be beneficial to all.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research conducted, I wish to offer the following recommendations for the future implementation of the Extended Curriculum Programme:

- 1) The Programme Coordinator and the respective academics understand the importance of peer group interaction within the entire curriculum to increase student integration and the possibility of student persistence;
- 2) The Teaching & Learning Specialist implements strategies, like arranging workshops, colloquia and training within the entire faculty for lecturers to ensure that all students become better academically integrated in order to enhance student persistence;

3) Aspects which facilitate academic integration, such as the importance of academics understanding the role of the ‘classroom as a learning community’ and the transition into ensuring that students become ‘competent members’ in the learning community, are distinct imperatives to be adopted into this Programme, and

4) The Faculty and university at large should find additional bursaries from sources outside the institution in order for more students to benefit from receiving such bursary funding. This could enable more students to be motivated to become academically integrated and, ultimately, persist with their studies.

Conclusions

This study shows that there is a clear relationship between peer group interaction, academic integration and student persistence, as described in Tinto’s model. Given that this study revealed that peer group interaction contributed more to student persistence, it would be helpful if further study would explore the reason(s) for the discrepancy between peer group interaction and academic integration.

Furthermore, while the study focused on the vital role of the ‘classroom as a learning community’ in the context of a university, the study was limited by not exploring the role of tutors and the other forms of student support provided to those in the Foundation Programme. Hence, this is an imperative, should further study be considered.

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APPENDIX A - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Name:
2. Surname:
3. Gender:
4. Age: 18-20 21 – 23 24-26
5. Address:
6. Telephone number:
7. Marital status:
8. Race: Black White Coloured Other

‘Dropping out’, support and student persistence

9. What is the main driving force that motivates you to complete your studies?
10. Who provides the most support to your success as a student – your family, friends, lecturers, friends at college?
11. What kind of support do they provide?
12. Have you ever thought about ‘dropping out’ of the Extended Curriculum programme?
13. If yes, what were the reasons?
14. If you considered ‘dropping out’, would you seek advice from any person at UWC?
15. If no, why would you not seek advice from any person at UWC?
16. If yes, why do you think that she/he would be able to provide you with good advice?
17. Have you ever missed classes because of a personal crisis, and were helped by a lecturer to ‘catch up’ with your academic work?

Relationships with peers, and integration

18. Do you socialise with your friends on campus?
19. What kinds of social activities do you and your friends enjoy?
20. Have you ever experienced hostility from other students?
21. If yes, why do you think it is?
22. Do you ever feel judged unfairly by other students?
23. If yes, why is it so?
24. Have you ever missed classes because of a personal crisis, and were helped by a student friend to 'catch up' with your academic work?

Informal peer group interaction, integration and student persistence

25. Do you meet informally with other students to work on assignments or projects?
26. How often do you work together?
27. Has this group work made a critical difference between succeeding and failing?
28. In which ways has this group work contributed to your success?
29. Do you ever make use of social media to work with other students on assignments or projects?
30. What types of social media platforms do you use?
31. Does this mode contribute more effectively to your success?
32. If yes, why do you think that this is the case?

Formal peer group interaction, integration, and student persistence

33. Does your course require you to work in groups with students in your class?
34. If so, what kind of groups are these?
35. Has this group work made a critical difference between succeeding and failing?

36. Have you ever missed classes because of a personal crisis, and were helped by students in your group to 'catch up' with your academic work?

Student organisations, integration and student persistence

37. Do you belong to any student organisations?
38. If so, what do you enjoy most about this organisation(s)?
39. Have you made friends who are members of these organisations?
40. Do you socialise with friends who are members of these organisations?
41. Have you ever missed classes because of a personal crisis, and were helped by student friends in these organisations to 'catch up' with your academic work?

Student persistence and intent to persist

42. Is it your intention to complete your studies within the required time?
43. What gives you the most confidence that you will complete your studies successfully?
44. What other kinds of support can UWC provide that would make you feel that your success is important to lecturers and administrative staff?
45. Would you like to continue studying after completing the Extended Curriculum Programme?
46. If yes, what would you like to study?

APPENDIX B - LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I am currently enrolled for the Master's in Adult Learning and Global Change (MALGC) programme.

As a requirement for the completion of my degree I must write a research paper. For the research paper, I would like to focus on student persistence in higher education.

I have observed that a significant number of students depart from the program before completion. This concerns me and it prompts me to conduct a research study to address this problem.

The research aims to establish how students organise themselves through peer group interaction and support in order to become academically integrated in order to lead to student persistence. The findings could provide the Faculty and the university with valuable insights on the factors that could enable and enhance student persistence.

For the purposes of this study, I wish to select 20 students in the fourth (final) year of the Extended Curriculum Program of the Bachelor of Commerce degree. I wish to conduct a qualitative study and interview students. I will provide the participants with an Information Letter as well as a Participant Consent Form before conducting the interviews. I will also ensure that the information I receive from all participants is treated with confidentiality, and that I make them aware that they are able to withdraw from the research at any time.

I am therefore requesting permission to conduct this research which would enable me to complete my master's degree successfully.

Your favourable consideration will be highly appreciated.

I thank you.

Yours faithfully

Rodrique E. George

APPENDIX C - LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I am currently enrolled for the Master's in Adult Learning and Global Change (MALGC) programme.

As a requirement for the completion of my degree, I must write a research paper. For the research paper, I would like to focus on student persistence in higher education.

I have observed that a significant number of students depart from the program before completion. This concerns me and it prompts me to conduct a research study to address this problem. The research aims to establish how students organise themselves through peer group interaction and support in order to become academically integrated in order to lead to student persistence. The findings could provide the Faculty and the university with valuable insights on the factors that could enable and enhance student persistence.

For the purposes of this study, I wish to select 20 students in the second year of the Extended Curriculum Programme of the Bachelor of Commerce degree. I wish to conduct a qualitative study and interview students. I will provide the participants with an Information Letter as well as a Participant Consent Form before conducting the interviews. I will also ensure that the information I receive from all participants is treated with confidentiality, and that I make them aware that they are able to withdraw from the research at any time.

I am therefore requesting permission to conduct this research which would enable me to complete my master's degree successfully.

Your favourable consideration will be highly appreciated.

I thank you.

Yours faithfully

Rodrique E. George

APPENDIX D - LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I have been given information about peer group interaction and academic integration at a university in the Western Cape and discussed the nature of the study with Rodrique E. George. He is currently conducting research as part of his Master's in Adult Learning and Global Change.

I have been made aware of the potential risks involved in becoming a participant in this research project and I was afforded an opportunity to ask Rodrique E. George important questions regarding my participation in this study.

I am well aware that my participation in this research project is completely voluntary and that I may, at any time, withdraw my participation without any feeling of obligation. I also understand that my refusal to participate in this study will not negatively affect my relationship with Rodrique E. George or any member of staff within the Faculty.

By signing the document below, I am granting consent to Rodrique E. George to:

- Interview me and record my responses to his questions;
- Utilise the information for the purposes of his research paper.

My understanding is that he will protect my identity and treat any information I share with him with the strictest of confidence.

I also understand that the data received will be used to complete his research paper and I give my consent in this regard.

Name of participant:

Participant signature:

Place of interview:

Date of interview:

Researcher signature:

APPENDIX E - INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANT

REQUEST FOR AN INTERVIEW

Dear Participant

I am currently enrolled for the Master's in Adult Learning and Global Change (MALGC) programme.

As a requirement to complete my degree, I am expected to write a research paper. For my research paper, I will focus on the ways in which peer group interaction and academic integration shape student persistence. As a lecturer, I have observed a number of students who often complete their studies successfully. This piques my interest and I would like to ascertain what the reason is for this.

The nature of my study requires that I conduct interviews with students who are in their final year of study in the Extended Curriculum Programme. For this reason, I would like to interview you. I would also like to request permission to record your interview with an electronic recording device.

Your participation in this study will benefit you as you will assist the Faculty to make the necessary changes in ensuring that students receive the best support in order to complete their degrees successfully.

In addition, it will benefit all students as this could affect policies and allow academics to affect the appropriate teaching and learning strategies in the Extended Curriculum Programme.

Should you grant your consent to become a participant in this study, I will ensure that your identity remains completely anonymous and also treat any information shared with me with the strictest of confidence.

As a participant, you may, at any time, withdraw from this study and you may also refrain from answering any question which makes you feel uncomfortable.

If you wish to contact me, I include the following contact details:

Researcher Name: Rodrique E. George

Researcher e-mail: rogeorge@uwc.ac.za

Researcher contact number: 0219592208

Academic Supervisor: Professor Zelda Groener

Supervisor e-mail: zgroener@uwc.ac.za

Supervisor contact number: 0219592801

I thank you.

Yours sincerely

Rodrique E. George