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IYUNIVESITHI YASEKAPA • UNIVERSITEIT VAN KAAPSTAD

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Social Development

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**Transition to university: Perceptions of First Year Humanities
Students from Impoverished Backgrounds at the University of
Cape Town**

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A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the award
of the degree of Master of Social Science in Clinical Social Work

COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the transitional experiences of students from a disadvantaged background at the University Cape Town (UCT). It set out to examine how students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds negotiated hardships stemming from their historically deprived backgrounds in their transition to university. Purposive sampling was employed in this study and seventeen first year humanities students from rural and township backgrounds were interviewed using a semi-structured interviewing schedule. Interviews were recorded on a digital recorder, transcribed and analysed using qualitative methods drawing on Tesch's eight step model, (cited in De Vos et al , Strydom, Fouche` and Delport, 2005).

While previous studies have indicated that language barriers play a critical role in limiting students' learning experiences, the data revealed that respondents from previously disadvantaged backgrounds experienced difficulties in their transition and that lack of cultural capital seemed to be at the centre of these difficulties. Learning was experienced as inherently different from school learning. The language barriers, both in and outside the classroom compounded respondents' difficulties at UCT. The respondents ended up with acquaintances as they could not easily find and establish friendships. They also lacked effective coping strategies such as time management and this added to their difficulties. From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that respondents experienced difficulties in their transition to university; some of which stem from their disadvantaged backgrounds.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	II
CHAPTER ONE	1
PROBLEM FORMULATION	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM	1
1.3 RATIONALE	2
1.4 TOPIC	3
1.5 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS	3
1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	4
1.7 MAIN ASSUMPTIONS	4
1.8 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS	4
1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	5
1.9.1 <i>Informed consent</i>	6
1.9.2 <i>Voluntary participation</i>	6
1.9.3 <i>Avoidance of harm to respondents</i>	6
1.9.4 <i>Deception of subjects</i>	7
1.9.5 <i>Violation of privacy and confidentiality</i>	7
1.9.6 <i>Action and competence of researcher</i>	7
1.9.7 <i>Debriefing of respondents</i>	8
1.9.8 <i>Reporting of findings</i>	8
1.10 REFLEXIVITY	8
1.11 OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH REPORT	9
1.12 CONCLUSION	9
CHAPTER TWO	10
LITERATURE REVIEW	10
2.1 INTRODUCTION	10
2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS	10
2.2.1 <i>Social Stratification Theory</i>	11
2.2.1.1 Social Class	11
2.2.1.2 Traditional versus non-traditional students	12
2.2.1.3 The digital divide	14
2.2.2 <i>Developmental Theory</i>	14

2.3 HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA	16
2.4 STRUCTURAL FACTORS	18
2.4.1 <i>Structural changes versus diverse student intake</i>	18
2.4.2 <i>Dominant culture in Higher education</i>	20
2.4.3 <i>Cultural differences between students and lecturers</i>	21
2.5 TRANSITION AND CHALLENGES AMONG NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS.....	22
2.6 STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE TRANSITION	27
2.7 CONCLUSION.....	29
CHAPTER THREE	30
METHODOLOGY	30
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	30
3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH	30
3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN.....	31
3.4 SAMPLING STRATEGY	31
3.5 METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION.....	32
3.5.1 <i>Data analysis</i>	33
3.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	34
3.6.1 <i>Research approach</i>	34
3.6.2 <i>Sample size</i>	34
3.6.3 <i>Data collection</i>	35
3.6.4 <i>Data collection apparatus</i>	35
3.6.5 <i>Data analysis</i>	35
3.7 CONCLUSION.....	36
CHAPTER FOUR	37
FINDINGS	37
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	37
4.2 PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS	37
4.3 FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS	39
4.4 OBJECTIVE 1: TO FIND OUT HOW FIRST YEAR RESPONDENTS FROM IMPOVERISHED BACKGROUNDS EXPERIENCED THEIR INITIAL TRANSITION TO UCT.	39
4.4.1 <i>The environment at UCT</i>	40
4.4.1.1 Size of the institution	40
4.4.1.2 Diversity	40
4.4.1.3 New cultural experiences.....	41
4.4.1.4 Language adjustment.....	43
4.4.2 <i>Feelings and reactions towards UCT</i>	44

4.4.3 Positive aspects of being at UCT	47
4.5 OBJECTIVE 2: TO EXPLORE RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT UCT.	50
4.5.1 Perceptions of university preparedness	50
4.5.2 Academic literacy.....	52
4.5.3 Size of lectures.....	56
4.5.4 Computer literacy.....	57
4.6 OBJECTIVE 3: TO IDENTIFY HOW FIRST YEAR RESPONDENTS IN THEIR FIRST SEMESTER OF STUDY AT UCT	
ESTABLISHED SOCIAL NETWORKS	59
4.6.1 Difficulties in establishing friendships	59
4.6.2 Preconceived notions of friendships.....	61
4.7 TO EXPLORE THE EXTENT OF RESPONDENTS' FEELINGS OF INTEGRATION INTO THE INSTITUTION BY THE END OF THE	
FIRST SEMESTER.....	62
4.7.1 Feeling at home at UCT.....	63
4.7.2 Belonging	64
4.7.3 Establishment of social networks.....	65
4.7.4 Participation in extra mural activities	66
4.7.5 Relationship with lecturers.....	67
4.7.6 Diverse friendships	68
4.7.7 Knowledge of support structures	68
4.8 TO EXPLORE HOW STUDENTS ARE COPING WITH THE TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY.	69
4.8.1 Support structures.....	69
4.8.2 Individual resources/agency	71
4.8.3 Effective and ineffective coping strategies	73
4.9 CONCLUSION.....	75
CHAPTER FIVE	76
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	76
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	76
5.2 CONCLUSIONS	76
5.2.1 Objective 1: To find out how first year students from impoverished backgrounds experience	
their initial transition to UCT.....	76
5.2.2 Objective 2: To explore students' perceptions of their learning experiences at UCT.	77
5.2.3 Objective 3: To identify how first year students in their first semester of study at UCT	
establish social networks.	78
5.2.4 Objective 4: To explore the extent of students' feelings of integration into the institution by	
the end of the first semester.	79
5.2.5 Objective 5: To explore how students are coping with the transition to university.	79
5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS	80

5.3.1 Recommendations for the Faculty of Humanities	80
5.3.2 Recommendations for the university	80
5.3.3 Recommendations for the Education Department	81
5.3.4 Recommendations for future research	81
5.4 CONCLUSION.....	82
REFERENCES.....	83
APPENDICES.....	89
APPENDIX A: RESEARCH CONSENT FORM	90
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.....	91

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM FORMULATION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background to the research followed by the rationale for the research. The topic, research questions, research objectives as well as assumptions will be outlined. Concepts underpinning this research will be clarified followed by an outline of the ethical considerations, which guided the research processes. The chapter also includes a discussion of the reflexivity of the researcher and the outline of the research report. Some concluding remarks will complete the chapter.

1.2 Background to the problem

South African education is a key issue for policy makers. Some of the problems in today's education system stem from the Apartheid regime. Through Bantu education, blacks (Africans, Coloureds and Indians) received inferior education that prepared them to be second-class citizens. Education was one of the tools used by the Apartheid government to maintain the status quo in the country where blacks were least educated, and remained inferior to white people. However, these inequalities in education were carried forward post 1994 into the democratic society. The former Department of Education and Training (DET) schools are under-resourced and students from these schools are still underperforming when compared to the students from former white schools (Van der Berg, 2007).

Today there are huge disparities in the South African education system, with some segments of the population receiving quality education while others receive a poor standard of education. The quality of education received is dependent on the school that one attends. The fact that some schools are still underperforming was taken into consideration when expanding access into higher education. Students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds are admitted into higher education with matriculation points slightly lower than others. Even though this initiative has resulted in increased

access into higher education, it has not increased the through-put of black students (Coughlan, 2006).

Fewer black students graduate from higher education compared to their white counterparts and they also take more years to graduate (Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007). In South Africa, for the 2000 cohort of students entering university, 33% black students in Engineering graduated at the end of their fifth year compared to 64% of white students (Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007). Lowering admissions points for black students ensures access but does not guarantee success at university. Many black students either dropout of university or are academically excluded in their first year of study (Yorke, 2000). Intensive intervention is needed to cater for the needs of students from previously disadvantaged schools especially during their initial transition into higher education. Student success or failure at university is usually determined by how the student experiences transition to university. The problem of few black students graduating from university can be traced back to their transitional experiences as there is a high dropout rate in the first year.

1.3 Rationale

A large body of research on how learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds experience learning has been generated in South Africa, especially in the context of English second language learners. Language is one of the main barriers to learning that students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds experience (Bangeni and Kapp, 2005). Most students from these backgrounds speak English as a second or third language (ESL). An extensive body of knowledge has been built around the challenges that ESL students encounter in learning at higher education. However, research into the social and psychosocial factors that affect students' experiences of the transition from high school to university is limited.

Students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds come from under resourced schools to well resourced, sometimes affluent, higher education institutions. This makes their transition difficult or more challenging in comparison to other students. In light of this, knowledge of how this transition is managed or how it can be facilitated

is crucial in developing support structures to increase the through-put of black students at higher education institutions. This research aims to explore how students from impoverished backgrounds experience the transition to university. This type of research is crucial when planning programs to increase the through-put of marginalised students in higher education.

This research will also provide invaluable insight to high school educators about how students, particularly those from poor schools are marginalised at tertiary institutions. Educators can use this information to ensure that future cohorts will not experience the same difficulties. They can therefore begin to address the challenges of the vast inequalities at grassroots level and reduce perpetuating these inequalities in the democratic society. The results of this study will be made available to the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town (UCT), The Department of Higher Education, the National Research Foundation and will be sent for publication in a journal to be accessed by the general public.

1.4 Topic

Transition to University: Perceptions of First Year Humanities Students from Impoverished Backgrounds at the University of Cape Town.

1.5 Main research questions

1. How are first year students from impoverished backgrounds experiencing their transition to UCT?
2. How are these students experiencing learning at UCT?
3. How are students establishing social networks in their first semester of study at UCT?
4. To what extent are students feeling integrated into the institution by the end of the first semester?
5. How are these students coping with the transition to university?

1.6 Research Objectives

1. To find out how first year students from impoverished backgrounds experience their initial transition to UCT.
2. To explore students' perceptions of their learning experiences at UCT.
3. To identify how first year students in their first semester of study at UCT establish social networks.
4. To explore the extent of students' feelings of integration into the institution by the end of the first semester.
5. To explore how students are coping with the transition to university.

1.7 Main assumptions

The main assumption of this research is that students from impoverished schools experienced difficulties in learning in high school, which result in them being under-prepared for tertiary education. Due to these difficulties, their transition from school to university is different from other students.

The other assumption is that these students overcame their difficulties in order to gain entrance to UCT. The institution however presents other difficulties for these students. The research is also based on the assumption that first year students in their first semester of study at UCT are experiencing numerous challenges in the initial phase of transition to university and that they can reflect on this experience.

1.8 Clarification of concepts

Impoverished backgrounds: The Oxford dictionary (2006) defines impoverished as reduced to poverty. In this research this term refers to both township and rural areas in South Africa where poverty is still rampant (Motlounge and Mears, 2002).

Poverty: Refers to the state of being poor or deficient in money or means of subsistence (Barker, 1995).

Students: Unless otherwise specified, students, in this research refer to university students registered for fulltime degree (Oxford dictionary, 2006).

First year students: This research focused on first year students between the ages of 17-21 years, who were in the adolescence and intimacy versus isolation stages of development according to Erikson (1968).

Humanities students: Students registered in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town.

Perceptions: According to Weiten (2004) this refers to the selection, organisation and interpretation of experiences.

Transition: Is a process or period in which a person undergoes a change and passes one stage to another (Perry and Allard, 2003).

Township: In South Africa refers to the (often underdeveloped) urban living areas that, from the late 19th century until the end of Apartheid were reserved for non-whites principally black Africans and Coloureds (Oxford dictionary, 2006).

Rural: Refers to a geographical area outside a city or town (Oxford dictionary, 2006). In South Africa, these areas are usually underdeveloped.

1.9 Ethical considerations

Ethics is typically associated with morality as it deals with matters of right and wrong. In Social Science research, there are general agreements among researchers about what is proper and improper in the conduct of scientific inquiry (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). When conducting research, there are ethical guidelines that should be followed. This research involved students as respondents and the researcher was bound by the UCT ethics committee to abide by the institution's regulations for conducting research. The following ethical considerations as outlined by De Vos, Strydom, Fouche` and Delpont (2005) were incorporated in this research:

1.9.1 Informed consent

According to De Vos *et al.* (2005) informed consent entails providing the following information to respondents and/or their legal representatives: the goal/purpose of the study, procedures which will be followed during the study, the possible advantages, disadvantages and dangers to which respondents may be exposed to, the credibility of the researcher and the nature of the research. The researcher communicated all of the above information about the research openly with the respondents and asked for their permission to include them in this research project.

1.9.2 Voluntary participation

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), respondents have a right to decide whether they want to participate in the study or not. This right ensures that those who participate in a research inquiry participate of their own free will. Respondents must not be compelled to participate in a research study or to continue with the study. The researcher ensured that the respondents knew that their participation was voluntary and the researcher informed them that should they be uncomfortable during the interview and wish to terminate the interview, they could do so.

1.9.3 Avoidance of harm to respondents

During a scientific inquiry subjects can be harmed in a physical and/or emotional manner. In Social Sciences research, harm to respondents will be mainly of an emotional nature (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). The researcher ensured that no harm came to the students when they participated in the research. As this study was about exploring beliefs and attitudes, careful consideration was given to the respondents' emotions, so as not to inflict harm by being judgemental. The researcher respected the respondents' point of view and their choices. Respondents were also informed that they were not obliged to respond to questions that they did not wish to answer.

1.9.4 Deception of subjects

Deception of subjects is described as deliberately misrepresenting facts in order to make another person believe what is not true, violating the respect to which every person is entitled to (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). All the necessary information about the study was shared with the respondents prior to the onset of the study. This was done so that there was no deliberate misrepresentation of facts and violation of respect by disguising the goal of the study to the respondents.

1.9.5 Violation of privacy and confidentiality

Violation of privacy, the right of self-determination and confidentiality can be viewed as synonymous. Privacy is defined as personal information which is not intended for others to observe or analyse (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). Each individual is entitled to the right of privacy. They then choose which aspects of their lives can be disclosed and which ones cannot be disclosed. In this research, violation of privacy was avoided. Firstly whatever the respondents shared in the interviews was not shared with others and secondly all manuscripts were treated with the strictest confidence. Confidentiality was communicated and emphasised to the respondents before the onset of the interviews. The respondents' names were not revealed in the reporting of the research findings.

1.9.6 Action and competence of researcher

The researcher is ethically obliged to ensure that they are competent and adequately skilled to undertake the proposed research (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). The researcher's training in Social Work allowed her to be sensitive when conducting interviews. The researcher utilised all her skills when conducting the interviews and was also sensitive to cultural boundaries. Sensitivity to cultural boundaries was ensured by holding back value judgements. A careful consideration was made also not to impress the values and beliefs of the researcher on the respondents.

1.9.7 Debriefing of respondents

Debriefing is the session after the study in which respondents get the opportunity to work through their experience of the study. It constitutes one possible way in which the researcher can assist respondents and minimise harm (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). The researcher made a referral for counselling to the Wellness Centre for one student who indicated that she had been emotionally affected by the interview. Referrals to the Writing Centre were also made for students who indicated that they were struggling academically.

1.9.8 Reporting of findings

The researcher has an obligation to report the findings of a research process scientifically without manipulating the findings to fit the objectives of the researcher (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). When reporting the findings of this study, the researcher did not manipulate the findings and they are reported accurately.

1.10 Reflexivity

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument of data analysis. It is therefore important for the researcher to be aware of her feelings towards the subject area of their study in order to be able to separate these from the research process (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). The researcher comes from an impoverished background and identified with the challenges that learners from this background experience during their transition to university (particularly at a historically white institution like UCT).

In doing this research, the researcher was reminded of her own experiences when she was a first year student. The researcher drew on these experiences, during the interview process as a guide and to enhance understanding of respondents. The researcher was careful not to let her own feelings and experiences cloud the research process especially during data analysis and she was able to separate her own experiences from the findings of the research and reported on the data objectively.

The researcher has also gained a more comprehensive understanding of higher education in South Africa and the state of the country's education system at large, by embarking on this research process. She was also made aware of many injustices that still pervade society today. This has resulted in enhancing the researcher's interests in the subject matter of this research.

1.11 Outline of the research report

Chapter one of this report is the introduction to the research and problem formulation to this research process. Chapter two will outline a discussion of the literature relevant to this study. Chapter three presents the methodology of the research and chapter four presents the findings of the study. The final chapter outlines the conclusions and recommendations.

1.12 Conclusion

This chapter presented the problem formulation, rationale, concept clarification, ethical considerations underpinning the research and reflexivity of the researcher. It provided an outline of the research report. The following chapter, the literature review, will discuss relevant literature pertaining to the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of literature relevant to this study. Firstly, the two theoretical frameworks that underpin this research will be outlined. A discussion of higher education in South Africa will then be presented. Structural factors that impact on transitional experiences in tertiary institutions particularly among non-traditional students will also be examined. Finally, strategies for managing transition will be discussed followed by some concluding remarks.

2.2 Theoretical frameworks

Access to university has changed in the past twenty years, previously it was for the few elite who could afford but now it is for all who can make use of it (Mann, 2008). Higher education institutions today are very different from institutions of the past. While in the past institutions were characterised by middle class values with middle class students, today although the student body is diverse, middle class values still dominate the intellectual landscape (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007). This study is based on two theoretical frameworks Social Stratification Theory (Macionis and Plummer, 2008) and Erikson's (1968) Theory of Human Development. The theoretical frameworks were chosen by the researcher as they affect how students experience the university. While social stratification theory on one hand explains how different groups of students experience university and outlines factors outside the individual that impact on this experience. The human development theory on the other hand explains individual factors that impact on the university experience. These two theoretical frameworks will now be reviewed.

2.2.1 Social Stratification Theory

Social stratification refers to a system by which a society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy. According to Macionis and Plummer (2008), social stratification is a characteristic of society not simply a reflection of individual differences and it persists over generations. Class is a form of social stratification. Karl Marx used ownership of the means of production to differentiate between social classes. The two distinct social classes are: The Capitalist (those who control the means of production) and The Working Class (those who do not own the means of production).

At university like in any other part of society, class distinctions manifest among students with traditional students coming from the upper/middle class and the non-traditional students coming from the working class. The term non-traditional university students refers to all those students, who prior to universities being opened to all social classes in the society, would not have been admitted to university (Heagney, 2008).

Another form of social stratification in today's society is the digital divide and will be discussed later. The following section commences with a general discussion of class followed by a discussion of traditional students versus non-traditional students.

2.2.1.1 Social Class

Even though class is not as rigid as it was in the 18th and 19th centuries, it is still present in today's societies however people are now more than ever able to move between the classes, it is more common for people to move from the lower, working class into the middle class (Macionis and Plummer, 2008). One way in which people are able to move between classes is through education especially higher education, a number of lower class citizens ascend into the middle class in this manner. The prospects of a higher education particularly for non-traditional students from the lower class and working class backgrounds are captured by Christie (2009). The author states that non-traditional students believe in the employment value of a degree

expressing the belief that it would lead to upward social mobility and lucrative employment opportunities.

Social class still determines people's opportunities in life. It is relatively easier for people who are in the middle class to go to university and be successful than for an individual coming from a lower class. Bourdieu (1984) in Nash (1990) introduces the notion of cultural capital to explain cultural advantage/disadvantages. For Bourdieu, class is not only defined in terms of the means of production, but, in terms of four forms of capital namely: economic capital, social capital, symbolic capital and cultural capital. Cultural capital is the capital that comes from being a member of a particular class and it gives one good chances to get ahead in life. Cultural capital is embedded in the knowledge of getting ahead and it is the knowledge that improves one's life chances (Nash, 1990). The following section looks at how class manifest at tertiary education among students.

2.2.1.2 Traditional versus non-traditional students

The profile of non-traditional students includes all students who come from backgrounds other than the upper/middle class background (Heagney, 2008). Non-traditional students are those students from the working class and/immigrant backgrounds who also tend to be much older than traditional students. They are sometimes referred to as mature students. Another group of non-traditional students are those students who are the first ones to go to university in their families, these are students whose parents did not go to college or university and they are sometimes referred to as first generation learners. International students also fall into the category of non-traditional students as some share the same characteristics such as working class background and also speak English as a second language (Heagney, 2008).

Schalkwyk (2007: 956) describes the cultural capital that higher education is based on as 'academic literacy'. Academic literacy can be summarised as: "culturally specific set of linguistic and discourse conventions, influenced by written forms utilised primarily in academic institutions". Simply put, these are reading, writing and critical thinking skills that are essential elements of learning in higher education. The author

argues that “knowing and understanding these conventions will enable a student to participate appropriately in a particular academic discourse”. Middle class students have inherited this cultural capital and are better able to survive in higher education compared to non-traditional students who lack this cultural capital.

Non-traditional students are referred to as underprepared students (Reay, 2001; Schalkwyk, 2007; Blunt, 2008). This is because they have often attended poor, under-resourced and/ overcrowded public schools that do not adequately prepare them for higher education. Reay (2001) plots out the development of working class education in England demonstrating that it was developed to maintain class differences in favour of the middle class. These elements Reay (2001) argues still persist and influence the quality of education for the working class. In South Africa, Bantu education was similar to that of the working class education in England as both were developed to service the needs of the middle class. The residue of the Bantu education system is continuing to alienate a segment of the population in higher education (Blunt, 2008).

McMurray and Sorrells (2008) found that first generation students generally enter university with limited knowledge and understanding of what higher education entails. They lack the cultural capital that middle class students come into university with. These students are also cited as unprepared for the drastic transformation from high school to the freedoms and responsibilities of university life. As a result they are more likely to dropout in the first semester compared to other students. They also generally lack self confidence which results in them performing badly in comparison to traditional students. According to McMurray and Sorrells (2008) first generation students generally tend to get lower marks compared to other students.

This section has discussed how class differences manifest and are propagated at tertiary institutions, the following section discusses the digital divide, another form of social stratification.

2.2.1.3 The digital divide

Closely linked to the notion of cultural capital is the concept of the digital divide. Harris (2009) states that, the digital divide does impact on learning in higher education. This divide is created by the difference between those who have easy access to technology and those without or with limited access. In the 21st century, according to Harris (2009) information technology literacy plays a vital role in American education. Similarly in the South African context, information technology literacy can either facilitate or inhibit learning. Lack of access to technology can have great impact on learning and the consequence of this is similar to lack of cultural capital highlighted above. Students, who come into higher education with lack of access to technology, can experience adjustment difficulties in institutions in which learning is technologically driven. Students from working class backgrounds are more likely to be affected by the digital divide compared to middle class students (Harris, 2009). This divide is magnified in the South African context where only a small portion of the population has access to the internet.

This section has highlighted how higher education institutions today are very different from institutions of the past. Where in the past institutions were characterised by middle class values with middle class students, today the student body is diverse but the institution retains its middle class values (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007). Social stratification plays a major role in how students experience higher education particularly among non-traditional students.

The following section will look at the second theoretical framework, Erikson's (1968) theory of human development.

2.2.2 Developmental Theory

According to Erikson (1968), adolescence forms part of the fifth stage of psychosocial development known as Identity Formation versus Role Confusion. This stage of development spans from the ages of 12-20 and development consists of an exploration of character in a bid to find a role that best fit one's identity. Stage six of development

is intimacy versus isolation and spans from 21-45. Once people have established their identities, they are ready to make long-term commitments to others. They become capable of forming intimate, reciprocal relationships (Weiten, 2004).

The adolescence developmental stage is divided into two, early adolescence and late adolescence. Early adolescence spans from the ages of 12-16 and is characterised by rapid body maturation. University students fall in the late adolescence stage of development, (16-20) years and the intimacy versus isolation stage (Weiten, 2004). In the late adolescence stage, the author states that there is more emotional stability. Adolescents in this stage think seriously about their future and establish their career goals. They demonstrate an emerging ability to make independent decisions, a clear sexual identity and sense of identity is developed and these adolescents are capable of having serious intimate relationships.

Identities are not static as they are constantly worked and reworked. Identity is a central concept to research on students in transition as universities provide late adolescents with a space in which they continue to shape and reshape their identities. Learning can provide students with the tools/resources to develop their sense of agency and to construct their identities (Lockett and Lockett, 2009). Learning equips students with tools such as exposure to ideologies to shape and reshape their identities. Identities are constructed in context and context provides identity stability. However, a change in environment provides individuals with a discontinuity of identity, as they have to form new identities in the new environment and this result in a sense of identity loss (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007). Students in transition often state that they experience a sense of loss.

Of importance when looking at identity development among students in transition is the extent to which higher education experiences impact on identity formation. Identity is central to students' transition as it is closely linked to the notion of integration (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007). The ability of students to forge new identities in their new environment determines the extent into which they are integrated to the new institution and has an impact on the success/failure of the transition process (Lockett and Lockett, 2009).

2.3 Higher education in South Africa

In South Africa, for centuries, race was used to rank people and it determined the type of job an individual could do, where they lived as well as the opportunities they had in life. Higher education in South Africa like everywhere else in the world is now open to more students from diverse backgrounds. In South Africa, the concern that some students are underprepared for higher education is due to the structural inequalities of the Apartheid past where learning resources were distributed to a white minority while the rest of the population suffered (Van der Berg, 2007). In the South African context, non-traditional students are mainly English Second Language students and the majority are black students.

In post Apartheid South Africa, universities are under pressure to perform as well to demonstrate that they valued social equality (Blunt, 2008). The disadvantages at the heart of the structural system of Apartheid were taken into consideration when increasing access to university. Black schools do not perform as well as white schools and therefore students from these schools are admitted to university with slightly lower points than their counterparts from affluent schools (Van der Berg, 2007). This has implications for the quality of students in higher education. In 2009, the National Bench Mark test indicated that 54% of the students admitted to South African higher education institutions lacked the basic reading and numeracy skills that are necessary to study at university (MacGregor, 2009).

A major debate in South African higher education today is whether higher education should be used to create economic equality or if it should be reserved for those students who have achieved the entrance requirements. The latter view argues that the government should find means of creating economic equality (Coughlan, 2006). The admission of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds has consequences for the successful graduation of students. At the heart of the debate is whether access should be widened at the expense of success or if access should be limited only to those who can succeed (Coughlan, 2006).

For lecturers it is extra work to have students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Blunt (2008) states that lecturers are under pressure in three folds due to the admission of underprepared students: lecturers are under pressure to accommodate non-traditional students in their classrooms; they have to restructure their courses to allow for inclusive curricula and they have to develop their programmes in a way that allows for quality as well as diversity.

The opposing side of this debate argues that these students should be admitted into higher education and that structures such as academic development programmes should be built in to help students succeed. Smith (2009), when evaluating the impact of an academic development course, found that there were long term benefits in this type of academic support. These benefits are long term and students from the intervention course outperformed their counterparts in the mainstream (Smith, 2009). This demonstrates that students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds can succeed with proper support as well as or even better than traditional students. Academic development and support is what is needed to increase through-put rates of students, especially those from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

A high dropout rate in first year has always been a problem in South African universities. It is not only associated with the increased enrolment of black students in higher education institutions in South Africa. As early as 1975 there were high dropout rates in first year, Erens (1977) conducted research in 1975 to obtain a profile and opinions of unsuccessful first year students in South African universities. The study's findings indicate that generally students who dropped out of University were not sufficiently prepared to study at university.

Today, high attrition rates in first year are problematic because the majority of these students are black students and black students did not have access to university in the past. High attrition rates of black students at university means that universities are failing to address inequalities in our society (Pityana, 2005). These inequalities are highlighted by Blunt (2008) through a concept he coins 'the revolving door syndrome' among black students. Few black students graduate in higher education, the majority take longer in the institution and eventually dropout after incurring a lot

of debt in student loans. These students go back to their communities as failures without any secure future prospects (Blunt, 2008).

Currently South African higher education is in the midst of transformation, so as to be inclusive and representative of the demographics of the country in both student and staff composition. Transformation has been on the agenda of many higher education institutions, however it is still a contested issue and there are problems with transformation. According to Pityana (2005), the heart of the problems with transformation in universities lies in the cultural practices of historically white institutions that continue to alienate black students. This alienation argues Pityana (2005) is the reason these students underperform.

This section has examined higher education in South Africa and the following section will discuss the structural factors that impact on students' transitional experiences to higher education.

2.4 Structural Factors

These factors will be discussed under the following headings: structural changes versus students' diverse intake, higher education culture and cultural differences between lecturers and students.

2.4.1 Structural changes versus diverse student intake

In the past higher education institutions primarily played a role of producing information, today they service the economic needs of their countries by producing a competent labour market. In this new global economy and information age higher education has to produce information that meets global demand as well as the economic and development needs of their countries. As a result, there are increasing numbers of students at a time when institutions are prioritising research versus teaching. Often educators have to minimise the time they spend with their students and spend more time doing research in order to meet their research obligations. In

addition, higher education institutions have to compete at a global level to keep up with the global market (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007).

Higher education institutions increased student enrolments in order to meet the demands of the economy (Lawrence, 2001). The demands of the economy are to produce a competitive labour force that can work in the in the new market economy and sustain the economy of the country. The management of universities has been transformed to meet these demands of the economy, to maximise the efficiency of institutions and increase profit. Lawrence (2001) further states that these changes are happening against the backdrop of decreased funding from governments and institutions having to source their own funding.

Higher education institutions underwent massive transformation to meet these new goals and global challenges. Perry and Allard (2003) state there has been a change in the role and function of academic staff. Lecturers must juggle teaching and research and as a result lecturers are spending less time teaching and more time doing research. Secondly a diverse student body means that students come from different levels of learning with some requiring more time with their teachers at a time when lecturers are spending less time with their students. This affects the transitional experience of first year students, particularly non-traditional students (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007).

The changes in the structure and management of higher institutions coupled with the change in the composition of the student body have created a new set of challenges for students who are in their first year of transition into university (Perry and Allard, 2003). Generally students spend less time on campus while lecturers spend less time with their students. Scanlon *et al.* (2007) report that between 1994 and 1999 there was a 95% increase in the number of students working full time in Australia.

These new dynamics in higher education have an impact on the transitional experiences of first year students. Of particular importance is the retention of students especially non-traditional students. Due to these changes in higher education, the dropout rates have increased dramatically and higher education institutions have to find ways of dealing with student retention (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007). The following

section will now look at the dominant culture in higher education and how it impacts on learning among non-traditional students.

2.4.2 Dominant culture in Higher education

Due to the diverse body of students in higher education, some students from working class backgrounds are coming to institutions that are characterised by middle class values (Lawrence, 2001). Research with non-traditional students has revealed that education is viewed as or becomes a way up the social ladder. Thus through education people move from the working class to the middle class. However, higher education institutions do not acknowledge the cultural values that students from the working class backgrounds have (Reay, 2001). The difficulties that students from the lower class face in higher education create an obstacle in that the means to an end becomes the challenge.

According to Lawrence (2001) higher education institutions promote one dominant discourse and have little regard for other discourses. Universities, like any other structure of society are characterised by power hierarchies. Students at university can be viewed as “subjects to a society in which they do not make or enforce the rules” but must follow them in order to be successful (Mann, 2008:6). More often than not, students from working class backgrounds have to undergo a process of acculturation in order to integrate into the institution. Thus learning becomes a process of acculturation for non-traditional students (Schalkwyk, 2007).

In South Africa non-traditional students do not have the cultural background that dominates higher education and favours white students. They come from environments that are burdened by poverty and crime (Silber and Geffen, 2009). The curriculum in higher education is still highly influenced by Western ideologies which in the South African context, white students identify with and black students are alienated from. Thus non-traditional students encounter a different culture at higher education than they have been raised in (Hay, 2008).

Soudien (2009) also argues that African adolescents in South Africa carry the double burden of poverty and cultural alienation in education as the dominant culture provides education. Silber and Geffen (2009) highlight the origins of the burden mentioned above when they state that crime is more prevalent in black communities. Transformation of higher education should include a curriculum design that is inclusive of all students' cultural backgrounds and not the dominant minority (Hay, 2008). The author further argues that if the curriculum is not designed to be inclusive, black students, are participating in a learning environment that is culturally unfamiliar. Thus the power relations in the institution will not be balanced.

Lawrence (2001) argues that as long as universities are dominated by one discourse, they are demonstrating unwillingness to change policies to accommodate a growing diverse body of students. Higher education institutions can therefore be viewed as not exercising their power in society to redress inequalities. By not changing their policies to accommodate diversity, institutions can be viewed as perpetuating inequalities in society.

Failure to conform to higher education discourses results in learners taking the blame for this failure. Lawrence (2002) states that students who do not master the mainstream discourse are blamed or labelled as under-prepared or intellectually deficient. Walker (2006) argues that learning experiences shape identity formation. When in actual fact, the blame does not necessarily lie with the individual but the inequalities which still dominate society today.

This section has highlighted the dominant culture in higher education and how it impacts learning among non-traditional students. The following section will discuss the cultural differences among lecturers and students and the impact of this on the transition of students.

2.4.3 Cultural differences between students and lecturers

Another factor that contributes to the misunderstandings between students and lecturers is the fact that lecturers have limited knowledge of what it entails to be a

student in these new times (Baer, 2008). The author highlights the fact that during the time that lecturers were students, universities were characterised by middle class values and students were predominantly from a middle class background and were prepared for higher education. In those days learning at university was limited to those who were prepared for it all their lives thus lecturers comment that students today are not willing to learn unlike in their days when they wanted to learn. These misunderstandings stem from the different kind of institutions that these two groups attended with lecturers having attended the traditional higher institutions while their students are attending more diversified and globalised institutions (Baer, 2008).

2.5 Transition and challenges among non-traditional students

According to Pittman and Richmond (2008), transition in itself is a stressful process. This was highlighted by the fact that a sample of students in transition was more psychologically distressed than the normal population. One of the facts that contribute to this distress is that, more often than not first year students have to leave home to attend university. They are in an unfamiliar environment that requires independent functioning to be successful (York, 2000). For non-traditional students, this process of transition is compounded by factors that are inherent in this group of students. Some students from working class backgrounds go to poor schools which do not prepare them adequately for higher education (Reay, 2001).

Tinto's (1993) model of transition theory as cited in Scanlon *et al.* (2007) provides an explanation of student retention. The model states that for students to stay in the university, they need to go through three stages of transition. These stages are outlined by (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007) as follows:

1. Separate from previous learning communities;
2. Go through a period of changing from being a high school student to university student and;
3. Fully incorporate into a new community of the university.

Students' ability to separate from previous learning experiences will enable them to embrace the new learning experiences. High school is very different from university

and those students who rely on their high school experiences to negotiate their university experience will experience hardships in their new learning experience. To achieve incorporation into the university, students must be socially and academically connected to the institution (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007).

Meyer, Spencer and French (2009) found that students whose parents went to college generally receive familial support. Students' interactions with faculty members have a positive relationship with personal growth as well as academic achievement and interpersonal connections with peers have the most impact on positive adjustment.

Enochs and Roland (2006) found that living environment, social support and making meaningful relationships are important for students' overall adjustment to the university environment. The process of adjustment can be difficult and overwhelming leading to maladjustment and depression which could negatively affect academic performance. The authors argue that social adjustment maybe as important as academic adjustment and involvement in campus life can therefore assist with adjustment.

Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) state that key influences on student retention include: the learning, teaching and assessment strategies employed; the quality of relationships between academic staff and students; and the process of establishing friendship networks. The authors also argue that social support is vital for successful adjustment to university. Early dropouts from university frequently resulted from a failure in social integration and students' new social networks often provided support to overcome such difficulties. In light of the above, the authors state that students need to start making friends in the early weeks at university as over time, these friends become more important as they form part of a surrogate family.

Woosley (2003) found that initial social adjustment was linked to higher probabilities of degree completion. The author contends that establishing friends has been found to be an important factor for first year students and that social adjustment is a critical factor in the early part of the university experience. Programs that focus on relationships and social activities early in the semester are important.

Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) suggest that the transition between home and university can result in students being between spaces. The authors coin the term ‘betwixt’ space to describe this position. The authors found that the betwixt space made students question and therefore redefine their identities and that these new identities allowed acculturation within university life as a sense of belonging was being established. Students’ perseverance and a ‘never-say-die’ attitude were central to coping as well as the relationships that were established.

Closely linked to this notion of transition is Schutz’s (1964) argument (cited in Scanlon *et al.*, 2007) that individuals use three sources of information to define new situations: previous experience, present goals, and interaction with others. When students come to university, they rely on their previous experiences of high school to define new experiences. Their present goals will enable them to manage this experience even during hardships. Interaction with others reinforces their new identity within the institution and enhances this new experience.

Difficulties in transition are due to the fact that students rely on past experiences to make the transition to university. Universities are structured differently from high school and they require more maturity and independent learning, qualities which are not prerequisites in high school. Students will encounter difficulties in their transition because they often rely on past experiences to make sense of new ones (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007). Transitional difficulties are magnified for non-traditional students as they are likely to have attended poor, under-resourced schools in which the majority of students do not go to universities.

Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) argue that transition to university is an emotional process that involves feelings of loss and dislocation. Learning at university is experienced as significant and engaging; this kind of learning leads to formation of new identities among students in transition. The culture shock of higher education affects the learning process. Non-traditional students who have no previous familial experiences of higher education develop learning identities that are complex and contradictory to their own culture. The authors found that students had to get to know the reality of their new learning environment to participate fully in it. This

required new ways of learning including taking the responsibility for finding learning materials and moving closer to being independent learners. Emotional gains of doing something positive and pride in being at a prestigious university were positive motivations and assisted in forming new identities. Some students formed study groups and these became a source of support as students realised that they were not alone. Students from impoverished schools had to develop new learning skills at university in order to cope as the learning skills they acquired at high school are no longer as useful in university.

Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) stipulate that students from non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged by institutional cultures that place them as the 'other' and this results in the isolation to the culture of the academy itself. For many non-traditional students, the cultures of grading, lectures, tutorials, essay writing and examinations were alien and unsettling. The culture of academia was seen as very different from high school experiences. One of the most difficult areas was essay writing where the skills are generally not explicitly taught.

English Language proficiency is a basic necessary skill that is needed to in order to do well at university. The lack of English Language proficiency puts students at risk of academic failure (Van Schalkwyk, 2007; Moore, 1994). Osman, Cockcroft and Kajee (2008) also argue that most non-traditional students in South Africa lack this skill both in speaking as well as in writing and psychologically this affects their confidence and self-esteem in learning situations. Students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds feel intimidated by other students when they speak English. The students feel that they do not speak English as well as those students who went to affluent schools even other black students. Their fear is that if they do not speak English well, they are perceived as less intelligent than other students and they also think that because they do not speak as well as other students, they are also not as intelligent as other students. These students equate proficiency in English to intelligence, which is not necessarily the case. Their lack of proficiency in English also tends to have an impact on their self-esteem. This affects learning, for example they will not say anything in lectures for fear of being perceived as stupid because they are not as eloquent as other students (Bangeni and Kapp, 2005).

In a study conducted with ESL students, Osman *et al.* (2008) found that students had difficulty in understanding essay feedback because they experienced it as unclear and contradictory. The students also had difficulty in integrating information from different sources in their essay writing and struggled with expressing their thoughts as they had to translate them from their mother tongue to English (Osman *et al.*, 2008). As a result of these difficulties encountered by ESL students, the focus of most academic development courses is on language development. Foundation courses such as English for Second Language Speakers (ESL) and Language in the Humanities (DOH) have been developed in many higher education institutions to help non-traditional students master the necessary academic skills.

Students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds also face the challenge of being labelled and classified at university just because of their backgrounds. Categories such as first generation students, or English second language speaker are used by universities to group students and plot their outcomes through higher education. Although these categories are used to develop extra support for the students, they are also used to label and classify students. The students can feel stigmatised and this can create a barrier in their learning. Bangeni and Kapp (2005) in their study of previously disadvantaged students cite an example of students who were accused of plagiarism because they submitted work that was well written. Categorising students into first generation students, or English second language speaker can shape lecturers' expectations of their students.

Closely linked to this notion of stigma are staff expectations of non-traditional students. Staff expectations can impact on students' performance at university as expectations of other people's behaviours can lead to "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968 in Baer, 2008). Students achieve less when their teachers expect less of them. Non-traditional students are at risk of being labelled as underperforming by virtue of being non-traditional students. Lecturers expect this group of students to experience more problems in transition as well as being underprepared. However this is a general trend of this group and there are individual variations within the group. Lecturers expect this group of students to perform badly and these expectations are then fulfilled (Baer, 2008).

In general, the transitional experience of students is that there is less support in higher education. Lecturers are perceived as being uncaring. Information is also not communicated well to students and as a result students complain that they had to find relevant information on their own (Baer, 2008). These experiences of university are due to the fact that students rely on past experiences in their transition to university (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007). In school, information was readily available to students and the teacher student ratio was much smaller compared to university. The extent to which the student is integrated to the institution determines whether they will stay or dropout. Therefore a sense of institutional integration is essential during transition period to university as it also facilitates the transition process.

This section has discussed transition among non-traditional students as well as the challenges that these students face during this process. The following section will examine the strategies that are adopted in higher education institutions to help smooth the transition for non-traditional students into higher education.

2.6 Strategies to facilitate transition

McMurray and Sorrells (2008) highlight the need for institutions to change so as to accommodate the diverse body of students. The authors emphasise that lecturers need to be cognisant of their learners' demography and adjust their engagements with students to meet the unique needs of first generation students. For instance, the examples that lecturers use in class should be inclusive of all students and should not be drawn only from the experiences of middle class students. Baer (2008) adds that lecturers also need to be aware of the transitional process that students have to go through before they are fully integrated into the institutions. Instead, the author argues that in the United Kingdom context, lecturers expect their students to undergo a sudden transformation when they come into higher education and this creates misunderstandings between them and their students. McMurray and Sorrells (2008) outline strategies that might help lecturers accommodate non-traditional students in their classrooms so as to help integrate them within the institution. Firstly lecturers need to be aware of the backgrounds of learners so as to be able to meet their different needs. Lecturers should communicate their availability to their students and they

should foster a sense of community learning. This is achieved by encouraging students to learn in groups. A sense of community learning facilitates development of confidence and self-esteem among non-traditional students as most are accustomed to a culture of collective existence. Confidence and low self-esteem are qualities which affect learning in this group of learners. Community learning can also foster identity formation as non-traditional student have to forge new identities in the new cultural settings that they find themselves in.

Halawah (2006) argues that support from academic staff is essential for students to integrate into a course. In addition to this, the author also found that friends on the course provided academic support. The notion of instrumental support from peers in the sharing of knowledge is also highlighted by Skyrme (2007) who states that peers can be instrumental in the circulation of knowledgeable skills to each other. In order to understand how student integration takes place, much greater attention needs to be paid to social aspects of student integration.

Educators need to be aware of the impact of failure among non-traditional students. They have to be careful that they do not instil an expectation of failure in them as this can have an impact on the success of these students (McMurray and Sorrells, 2008). Failure among non-traditional students fuels feelings of inadequacy and not belonging to the institution. Christie (2009) argues that for non-traditional students, their engagement with the university is often uncertain in nature and that progress is affected by emotional factors such as confidence and alienation. These are some of the reasons that lead non-traditional students dropping out of university.

Blunt (2008) outlines strategies for dealing with the challenges that stem from the Bantu education system in South Africa. These strategies are aimed at transforming higher education systems to meet the needs of a diverse student body. Improving communication between lecturers and students which can be achieved by ensuring transparency in learning objectives, content and tasks in courses is one such strategy. Critical thinking skills needs to be demonstrated to students in order to develop these skills so that students understand what is required of them when completing assignments and tasks at university. Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) argue that

students struggle with essay writing because these skills are not explicitly taught. The other strategy is to formulate programmes that meet the needs of a diverse student body and also maintain quality of higher education.

Extended degree programmes have been designed by higher education institutions to accommodate learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. These programmes offer more support structures to students to smooth their transition to university. Students in these programmes are generally happy with the extra support that they receive (Smith, 2008). However these programmes have limited spaces and being admitted to an intervention program or being placed in the mainstream has an impact between failure and success for some students. Students in the intervention programme have increased chances of being successful academically while those in the mainstream will struggle (Smith, 2008).

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the theoretical frameworks that underpin this study. An outline of higher education in South Africa was also presented. The structural changes in higher education, the challenges of non-traditional students at tertiary institutions and strategies of dealing with these challenges were also discussed. The following chapter will present the methodology used in the research.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology of this research. The research design and approach will be outlined followed by a discussion of the research population, sampling strategies, data collection and data analysis. Lastly, the limitations of this research will be noted.

3.2 Research approach

Qualitative research is research that strives to understand the meaning people attach to their lives (Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell, 1996). As a result of this, in qualitative research, objects are studied in their entirety and complexity and not reduced to single variables.

Although a qualitative approach will reduce the objectivity of the research, it allowed for the subjectivity of the respondents to emerge, as experiences are subjective. Qualitative research aims to gather in-depth understanding of human behaviour as real life experiences cannot be reduced to measurable variables (Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell, 1996). This extracts the subjective meaning that students attach to their experiences. A qualitative approach allowed for reality to be constructed through students' experiences. This approach allowed the researcher to explore the experiences of students at university and the meaning that they attach to these experiences.

A qualitative approach has the advantage of allowing for more diversity in responses as well as the capacity to adapt to new developments or issues during the research process itself (Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell, 1996). While qualitative research can be expensive and time-consuming to conduct, the researcher chose it in order to get a holistic picture of students' experiences in their transition.

3.3 Research design

According to (De Vos *et al.*, 2005) research design is a detailed plan for how a research study is to be conducted. The design of this research was an explorative one as it entailed investigating, exploring and interpreting students' experiences at university.

According to York (1998), an exploratory study is useful when the researcher has limited knowledge about the subject and he/she wants to get first hand information from people who are experiencing the subject under study. In this case first year students are experiencing the transition to university and the researcher sought to find out their experiences and meanings they attached to this process and to explore issues that concerned these students.

Exploratory research is also flexible and can address all kinds of questions (York, 1998). This allowed the researcher to ask a range of questions (such as: what, how, why). Due to the flexible nature of exploratory research, findings provide significant insight into a given situation in this instance previously disadvantaged students' transition into UCT.

This research followed the interpretive perspective. The interpretive position according to Bhana and Kanjee (2001: 142) is "based on the assumption that all human action is meaningful and has to be interpreted and understood in the context of social practice..." This research proposed to understand and interpret the experiences of learners from impoverished backgrounds at the University of Cape Town.

3.4 Sampling strategy

In this research, non-probability sampling was used. When using a non-probability sampling technique the odds of selecting a particular individual are not known (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). The researcher chose to use non-probability sampling because it allowed for purposive sampling in line with a qualitative research design. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which the sample is mostly selected

on ease of access and is based on the judgment of the researcher (De Vos *et al.*, 2005; York, 1998). In qualitative research, the sample is chosen because of its special knowledge of the study topic and importance to the research topic and thus non-probability sampling is used (York, 1998).

According to De Vos *et al.* (2005:193) 'population can be defined as a whole unit from which parts are chosen for the study'. The population of this study was University of Cape Town students and the focus of the study was on first year students from impoverished backgrounds. The research sample for this study was selected purposively of 2010 first year students doing a DOH course. The course is a preparation course for humanities students. The students in this class are a mix of mainstream students as well as students on the extended program. Students are placed in this class if they have demonstrated that they require help with academic writing, based on their matric results as well as consultation during registration. This class was chosen purposively because it has a high number of learners from the former DET schools and constitute the researcher's targeted sample.

Students who come from Rural/Township backgrounds were purposively selected. The sample only included students who grew up and schooled in these areas. Twenty students were interviewed, three were not suitable for the study as they were not part of the targeted sample. Seventeen research participants were used for this research, nine female respondents and eight male respondents. The age range of the respondents was 17-21 years.

3.5 Method of Data Collection

The data collection approach was semi-structured one-on-one interviews. De Vos *et al.* (2005) note that interviewing is the predominant mode of data collection in qualitative research. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews are used in order to gain a detailed picture of participants' beliefs about, or perceptions or accounts of a particular topic. Babbie and Mouton (2001) add that an interview is conducted because one is interested in other people's stories. The researcher and participants are given much flexibility and the participant is viewed as an expert on the subject. The

researcher chose this approach as it allowed for understanding of the experiences of students at university. One face to face interview was conducted with each respondent and each participant was interviewed for about an hour.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule (see appendix B). An interview schedule is a questionnaire written to guide interviews. It provides the researcher with a set of predetermined questions that might be used as an instrument to engage the respondent (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). The researcher opted to use an interview schedule because the construction of the interview schedule beforehand provided an important guideline, which covered all the themes that are important to the research. All the interviews were tape recorded.

Tape recording of interviews allows for a fuller record of the interview than note taking (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). A digital voice recorder was used to record all the interviews. The researcher asked respondents for permission to tape record the interviews. This apparatus was selected by the researcher because of the high quality of recordings and so that the researcher could pay more attention to the nonverbal cues during the interviews. The use of a digital voice recorder also permitted her to engage with the respondents without needing to worry about taking notes during the interview.

3.5.1 Data analysis

According to Chambliss and Schutt (2010) there are two approaches to qualitative data analysis and these are inductive (the exploratory approach) and deductive (the hypothesis testing approach). In this research data was analysed using the inductive approach, this entailed reading through the transcripts and identifying common themes (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). An adaptation of Tesh's (1990) approach in De Vos *et al.* (2005) was used to analyse the transcripts. The steps in this approach that the researcher followed are:

- i. Reading through all transcripts thoroughly.
- ii. Re-reading and making notes on the margins of the transcripts about what the data was saying.

- iii. Looking for themes as well as categories of those themes.
- iv. Re-reading and using colour pens to finally decide on broad themes and categories.
- v. Developing a conceptual framework, a three column table with themes, categories and sub-categories as headings.
- vi. Aligning broad themes with the objectives of the study.
- vii. Testing the emergent understandings and searching for alternative explanations.
- viii. This table was then used as a format for writing up the analysis of the data.

3.6 Limitations of the study

When conducting the research, the researcher was aware of the possible limitations in this research pertaining to the research approach, sampling, interviews, the data collection apparatus and data analysis. By being cognisant of these various limitations the researcher minimised their effect on the study. The limitations will now be discussed:

3.6.1 Research approach

Qualitative research focuses on human subjectivity and meanings that people attach to everyday events and to their lives. Due to the focus on subjectivity, qualitative research design lacks generalisability (Chambliss and Schutt, 2010). A qualitative approach was however chosen by the researcher because it allowed her to have an in-depth understanding of the individual respondents' experiences at UCT.

3.6.2 Sample size

A sample size of seventeen students does not allow for generalising of the findings. However, this sample size allowed the researcher to have a broader understanding of these students as well as have an in-depth understanding of each individual. A sample of seventeen permitted the researcher to use open and subjective data collection and analysis approaches, setting out to understand the personal experiences of students.

This sample size in qualitative research allowed the researcher to plot out common themes in the students' stories. Even though the results cannot be generalised to all the students who come from Township/Rural backgrounds in South Africa, this study sheds light on some of the challenges that these students face at university.

3.6.3 Data collection

Interviews rely on open ended questions to try and get to a comprehensive picture of respondents' feelings, attitudes and actions (Chambliss and Schutt, 2010). Interviews provide researchers with an opportunity to get an insider's view into the participants' lives. However they can also pose a weakness/threat to the validity of the research if the respondents give an account of what they think that the researcher wants to hear instead of a true account of their lives (De Vos *et al.*, 2005). In order to minimise the limitations, the researcher included several questions in the interview schedule which asked students about the same experiences but were phrased differently. During the interviews, the researcher also used interviewing skills such as probing, questioning, clarification and challenging to increase the accuracy of the students' accounts.

3.6.4 Data collection apparatus

The data collection apparatus for this research was a digital voice recorder. The recording of the interviews can be a limitation to this research if respondents withheld some of their thoughts and feelings in fear of having these on record. However respondents seemed to be able to talk freely in the interviews. The digital voice recorder was selected by the researcher as a data collection apparatus because it allowed for accuracy when collecting data and this was very valuable to the research process as a whole.

3.6.5 Data analysis

According to Chambliss and Schutt, (2010) interviews provide rich, complex and extensive data which can pose problems when it comes to analysing the data. In order to manage the analysis of data effectively in this research, the researcher worked on

the individual transcripts thoroughly and also listened to all recorded interviews. The researcher familiarised herself with the data and identified common themes and categories which allowed for in-depth analysis to be developed.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, the research design was discussed. Other methodological considerations namely; study population, sampling, data collection and data analyses of this research process were highlighted. The limitations of the research were also outlined. Chapter four will present the research findings.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present and discuss the findings of the research. Background information of the respondents and a table of the framework of analysis will be provided. The key findings will then be discussed in relation to the objectives of this study and some concluding remarks will complete the chapter.

4.2 Profile of the respondents

Respondent	Gender	Age	Province	Area
1	Male	20	Mpumalanga	Rural and Township
2	Female	18	KwaZulu Natal	Township
3	Female	18	Eastern Cape	Rural
4	Male	19	Mpumalanga	Township
5	Female	21	KwaZulu Natal	Township
6	Male	19	Eastern Cape	Rural and Township
7	Male	20	Limpopo	Rural
8	Female	20	KwaZulu Natal	Township
9	Male	18	Western Cape	Township
10	Male	17	Cape Town	Township
11	Female	19	Eastern Cape	Township
12	Female	18	Western Cape	Township
13	Female	18	Western Cape	Township
14	Male	18	Limpopo	Township
15	Female	19	KwaZulu Natal	Rural and Township
16	Male	18	Gauteng	Township
17	Female	20	Western Cape	Township

(Table 1)

The respondents all attended rural or township schools or both and they all lived in rural or township areas all their lives. Two respondents had lived in rural areas only all their life, nine lived in township areas only and the other six had lived both in rural and township areas and had attended both rural and township schools.

All respondents stated that they had been taught in their home languages at high school despite English being the medium of instruction in the schools they attended and that their high schools were under-resourced. Most respondents also stated that they had computer laboratories in their schools but these laboratories were either not utilised by respondents because there was no one qualified to teach or there were too few computers. Of the 17 respondents, only one was computer literate upon coming to UCT.

Only eight of the respondents were raised by both parents. The other nine respondents came from single parent or grand-parent headed households. Only three respondents had parents who are professionals. The other caregivers were either unemployed, labourers or relied on social pensions. Fifteen of the respondents are first ones in their families to attend university.

4.3 Framework of analysis

Themes	Categories/subcategories
Transitional experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UCT Environment • Feelings and reactions about UCT • Adjusting to difficult experiences • Positive aspects of being at UCT
Learning Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions of university preparedness • Academic literacy • Size of lectures • Computer literacy
Establishment of friendships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to establish friendships • Preconceived notions of friendships
Integration and belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling at home at UCT • Belonging • Establishment of social networks • Participation in extra mural activities • Diverse friendships • Knowledge of support structures
Coping strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support structure • Individual resources • Effective and ineffective strategies

(Table 2)

The findings will now be discussed using the research objectives as headings.

4.4 Objective 1: To find out how first year respondents from impoverished backgrounds experienced their initial transition to UCT.

The respondents' perceptions of their experiences at university can be categorised into four categories: the experiences of the UCT environment, the feelings evoked by being at UCT, adjusting to difficult experiences and the future prospects that studying at UCT provides. The following section will focus on the UCT environment.

4.4.1 The environment at UCT

UCT's environment, which refers to how respondents experienced UCT in general, will be discussed under four recurrent themes namely the size of the institution, encounter with diversity, new cultural experiences and language adjustments.

4.4.1.1 Size of the institution

The size of the institution was intimidating to most respondents. They were overwhelmed by the physical space of the environment and questioned their ability to find their way around the institution and adjust to living in such an environment. When asked about the most difficult thing to adapt to at UCT most respondents' responses can be summed up in the following quotes:

'Yeah it's the capacity of UCT, it's too big for me you know, sometimes it becomes intimidating...'

'The environment, like the huge environment and the worst thing was just you'd be told we have to be in a certain place and it's just this big place you didn't know where to start from and to like...'

This finding is similar to that of York (2008) who contends that respondents in transition often leave home and enter unfamiliar environments and this increases their difficulties at the new institution. As can be seen from the above quotes, respondents struggled to adjust to their new environment in particular the size of the institution. UCT is vast and highly developed compared to the school and home environments that respondents hail from.

4.4.1.2 Diversity

All the respondents had lived in homogenous environments all their lives and they attended mono-racial schools. Coming to UCT provided the respondents with their first close encounter with meeting people from diverse backgrounds and this

presented a challenge to them. The challenge was to find ways of dealing with different ways of living and adjust to living with people from different races, cultures and backgrounds.

‘...I got here like the first week when I was here after that I wanna go back home because it was lonely the people here were like different from the people that I come from, they were different from me, I did not see a group I could identify in because people were very different I mean I saw that eish they have got a very different way of living.’

‘The other thing that for me was like the hardest you know the first person that you always come across is a white person and something that I was just not used to. So even when I had to ask, I would first be reluctant thinking oh, what if somewhat comes wrong? What if they happens? Ya, but otherwise ya. Nothing... I just... everything was not... just not... was just something I was not used to.’

Universities are very diverse institutions as indicated by Scanlon, Rowling and Weber (2007) who state that today’s student body is diverse unlike in the past when institutions were characterised by a middle class student body. Students from other backgrounds other than the middle class will encounter difficulties in their transition to university because higher education institutions are characterised by middle class values, even though they are diverse (Lawrence, 2001).

4.4.1.3 New cultural experiences

The respondents also encountered unfamiliar cultural experiences at UCT that became difficult to manage. As stated earlier respondents came from lower class and working class backgrounds and were now immersed in an environment that is characterised by middle class values and way of life. This manifested in the difficulties that they encountered at UCT.

‘yah firstly it was very bad for me such that I even, such that I even thought of going back you see, because everything was new, you see its like it was an evolution to me, because everything was new...’

‘...here it’s another world, it’s like I died and rose in another world you see, because actually everything here is different from where I am from...’

Students from other backgrounds other than the middle class often have to go through a process of acculturation to fit in into the new environment (Schalkwyk, 2007). As the respondents said, everything at UCT was different and they had to learn to adjust to these different elements in their new environment. The above quotes capture the extent of the unfamiliarity of the UCT environment to respondents. Respondents were now exposed to a predominantly middle class environment at UCT which is still the dominant culture. This finding concurs with the writings of Lawrence (2001) that higher education promotes one dominant discourse and has no regard of other discourses.

This encounter with the dominant culture posed a challenge to the respondents. The participants also had to learn new ways of being in the new environment without having to lose their culture. So not only do respondents have to adapt academically but they have to adapt to a new way of living in this culturally unfamiliar environment. McMurray and Sorrells (2008) echo this when they state that first generation students have to formulate new identities at university as they are in a culturally new world.

In order to belong at university a student is pushed to assimilate into the new culture but is also aware of own cultural heritage in the process. This resonates with the finding of Lawrence (2001) who states that students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds have additional difficulties in their transition to university than other students. Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) state that academic culture is not uniformly accessed or experienced. Institutional cultures placed respondents from previously disadvantaged backgrounds as the ‘other’. This distinct position of the

'other' presented a conflict to respondents that was both at a conscious and unconscious level, where there is tension on what aspects of the new culture to take on and what aspects to leave in order to establish belonging. In addition to worrying about being a new university student, the respondents from previously disadvantaged backgrounds were constantly worried about evaluating themselves at various levels on whether they belonged in this new institution.

4.4.1.4 Language adjustment

One recurrent theme in the respondents' narrations was the difficulties they experienced in adjusting to speaking mainly English both inside and outside the classroom. This was a new experience for them as they were used to speaking their home languages in their communities. The respondents have had limited opportunities or reasons to speak English prior to being at UCT. In school they were taught in their first languages, concepts were explained in a language that they all understood. They spoke their home languages in the community and therefore the respondents had never been exposed to an environment where they had to communicate solely in English. At UCT speaking in English is required and it is widely used outside the classroom. The extent of language difficulties for all the respondents is captured by one respondent who said:

'The first day when I came here, I remember when like we got off the bus and we came, then they told us to wait outside there and then they going to take us to our rooms and all that. You know when you speak English and you so used to it you just talking it, you don't think that this person doesn't understand English or don't know. Sometimes you didn't even hear what they say and you go. Then you think what did that person say and you just see people going into a queue and you just go after them and you don't even know what's going on. It was just like that and then like you have to do all those things, you don't even know that. They telling you, you're going here. You don't even know where to go first. You know it was just confusing especially with the language problem. It was just really confusing. You don't know where to start what to do. Yes.'

The literature confirms that students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds generally struggle adjusting to the English language (Bangeni and Kapp, 2005). They become uncomfortable and have reduced self-esteem as they struggle to be heard and to communicate. Literature on language adjustments for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds focuses mainly in the classroom, (Moore, 1994; Bangeni and Kapp, 2005; Schalkwyk, 2007) however language is still a barrier for respondents even outside the classroom. Respondents struggled to communicate and participate in their environment and thus they were separated from the activities around them. This led to isolation, low self-esteem and loneliness which will be discussed in the following section.

4.4.2 Feelings and reactions towards UCT

Respondents revealed several feelings that were evoked in them by being at UCT. These include doubt, loneliness, intimidation and feelings of being overwhelmed.

All the respondents stated that they were high achievers in high school and they were all top of their classes. When they arrived at UCT, they became ordinary students in their classes as their marks dropped sharply. Respondents had to adjust to being average students unlike in high school when they topped their classes. This constitutes a significant shift in their identities as they have always identified as being top students. This identity shift created a disjuncture in the way respondents perceived their identities. The doubt respondents expressed is them questioning their identity now that they are not top achievers. This shift in their identity installs a sense of doubt in their abilities and a sense of loss which resulted in respondents questioning whether they belonged at UCT. This is reflected in the following statements:

‘I am struggling but now when I was at school I thought I was, I am used to be a competent student, even the teachers at school we got along because I was , back then very competent, but now it’s like no, something is wrong. Now I remember that time I cry, I used to cry, I used to pray crying, now where is* [puts his name there] I can’t find him, I am still trying to find him.’**

‘Sometimes on some days, some days I just feel like I wanna go home this is not what I want this is sort of the evil side of the world but it's get when it sort of gets too much I feel like you know what because there are those times there are those days where you feel like what am I doing here you know I'm not supposed to be here my mind is not good enough to be here because there are those times whereby ok you feel that as much as you think you are able but other courses just turn you down...’

This finding is similar to that of Christie *et al.* (2008) who found that first year students in transition to university did not feel competent as students and this resulted in a loss of the secure learning identity build up in high school. Walker (2006) argues that learning experiences shape identity so the respondents' encounter with negative learning experiences affected their identities. Luckett and Luckett (2009) further argue that identities are created in a context and context provides stability in identities and that a change in the environment challenges individuals with the discontinuity of identity. The respondents experienced this discontinuity of the achiever identity and it resulted in a loss, as they had to forge a new identity, where they were no longer top achievers. This finding is similar with that of Scanlon *et al.*, (2007) who posit that respondents in transition often experience a sense loss. There seems to be a shift in identity when there is a shift in the environment. In addition to adjusting to being a university student, respondents had to adjust their identities in this new environment as well.

The fact that respondents are in an unfamiliar environment also evoked feelings of loneliness. When asked what they found familiar at UCT, most respondents said nothing was familiar. One respondent said:

‘I can't say that I was happy, cause I felt alone. I felt different in a way, lost in a way cause now everyone is different from me like nobody, like nobody. Even the language they speak was different because I didn't speak English at all. So I felt outside or some, yah. It wasn't comfortable at all.’

Being in a culturally unfamiliar environment intensified feelings of confusion, feelings of being excluded and a state of not knowing what is in the surrounding areas. This state of exclusion intensified feelings of loneliness and being alienated in the new environment. Cultural capital, and lack of it, influences the way people experience knowledge communities, respondents from the working class lack the cultural capital to negotiate higher education institutions in which middle class values are dominant (Bourdieu, 1984) as cited in Nash (1990). Being in an unfamiliar environment added to the stressors that respondents had to deal with in their transition and left them overwhelmed.

Respondents also described their experience of UCT as overwhelming and depressing. They were in the midst of tremendous change in an unfamiliar environment. The environment was also described as demanding. Respondents mentioned that they had a lot of work to do in a short space of time and due to this, they felt constantly under pressure.

‘...But I never expected, I must say... I never expected that it would be this hectic and depressing. Yoh! Ha UCT it really knows how to work someone out...’

The fact that the respondents had limited knowledge of what to expect at university also adds to their stress as they are underprepared to deal with the demands of the institution. They find the demands of the institution overwhelming and this combined with being in a new environment made them feel like they are not coping. This finding resonates with that of Pitman and Richmond (2008) who found more psychological distress among students in transition compared to the general public. This distress is due to the fact that students in transition are often in an unfamiliar environment that requires a lot of independent functioning to be successful.

Enochs and Rowland (2006) echo this finding and state that the process of adjustment can be difficult and overwhelming, leading to maladjustment and depression which could negatively affect students’ academic performance. In case of previously disadvantaged students, they also lack the cultural capital to cope with university

(Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003). The cultural capital the respondents lacked is the forms of knowledge, skills and advantages needed to succeed at university. Due to the lack of cultural capital respondents felt intimidated at UCT.

Most of the respondents mentioned that they felt intimidated when they looked at the institution, the buildings and diversity. The respondents also questioned their ability to cope in this new environment.

‘...this is a huge place. Can you see that picture? [Areal picture of UCT] it's very intimidating. It makes you think of how will you get, how will you get uhm, how do I say this? It makes you think of the studies, of how will it be like, the friend you're going to make; how will they be uh, will I ever adapt because I... I haven't adapted at all...’

Due to all the difficulties the participants faced at UCT, they felt intimidated by their surrounding environment. As discussed above respondents were in an unfamiliar environment, they were placed as the ‘other’, and therefore they were intimidated and questioned their belonging. Respondents are vulnerable in this state and Blunt (2008) concurs and states that compared to other students, students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds are at high risk of dropping out. This vulnerability of being placed as the ‘other’ can contribute to the underlying factor why these students leave university.

Despite the challenges that respondents encountered at UCT, they were able to identify some positive aspects of being at UCT and these will now be discussed.

4.4.3 Positive aspects of being at UCT

Despite all the difficulties that respondents faced in their initial transition to UCT, the respondents perceived UCT as having the potential to positively change their lives. The institution was experienced as providing the respondents with a safe and secure environment and the prospect of obtaining a higher education qualification from one

of the most prestigious institutions in the country, has the potential to provide respondents with many career opportunities.

Most of the respondents expressed their wish to make a difference in their communities and in their families when they graduate from UCT. The brief experience of being at UCT has given respondents hopes and dreams of the possibilities of a future qualification from UCT.

“...I want to see myself as a psychologist one day, helping out at home. So I am determined to do anything if it means doing extra hours to work and to get my degree and make sure that I provide at home, yah...”

The prospects of a higher education particularly for respondents from the lower class and working class backgrounds are captured by Christie (2009). The author states that non-traditional students believe in the employment value of a degree and express that it would lead to upward social mobility and fulfilling employment opportunities. Going to university for the respondents was about avoiding a lifetime of the poverty that surrounds them.

Safety was also seen as another positive aspect to being at UCT. For most of the respondents, the UCT environment was experienced as a safer environment compared to their home environments. There is generally less crime at UCT than the communities that these respondents come from, where poverty, crime and violence are rampant. Thus UCT is experienced as safe and secure.

‘I stayed up in, in Khayelitsha for so long. I did everything in Khayelitsha and Khayelitsha, as it is a township and stuff. So, I was excited to be... I could say suburbs, because... it's totally different from Khayelitsha. Away from the crime and violence, it is safe here. So, ja.’

Although respondents are in a culturally alien environment, they noticed that it is different from their home environment as there was generally less crime and thus the UCT environment was perceived as safe. Silber and Geffen (2009) concur that crime

is more prevalent in black communities because in these communities people are poor and cannot afford to protect themselves from crime by having extra security measures. Poverty in the black communities stems from the apartheid system (Motlounge and Mears, 2002). In fact Soudien (2009) highlights that, African adolescents in South Africa carry the double burden of poverty and cultural alienation in education as the dominant culture provides education.

Respondents also expressed that they had grown as individuals from their experiences at UCT both inside and outside the classrooms. Some courses were stated as having enhanced the respondents' personal growth. Their views of life have been broadened and also being at UCT has also provided the respondents with opportunities to explore other forms of living, thinking and being. Simply being in a different environment was a life changing opportunity for some respondents.

'yah UCT for me now it's like, I don't know what I can say but it seems like, eehh I don't know what to say but UCT for me it has changed my life, you see such that the way I was thinking feeling back home it's not the way I am, you see I am feeling like a young adult now, self responsible, even the way I am thinking you see, its changed from where I was before, you see, so UCT really changed me, so I think it will continuously change me.'

The respondent further stated that:

'Like as I told you the way I'm thinking you see even the way I feel of myself I have changed you see, I feel like I am a most successful man in my life you see, although sometimes you see there are some things you want you don't get, but I really changed you see even my confidence I really changed.'

The respondents were proud that they are doing something positive for themselves by being at UCT. Christie *et, al.* (2008) confirm that there are emotional gains (pride and positive self-esteem) among students in transition attending a prestigious university.

These emotional gains became positive motivation and were central in helping students build new learning identities.

This section discussed the findings related to the first research objective. The findings revealed that respondents generally had difficulties adjusting to the UCT environment, respondents had feelings and reactions evoked by being at UCT and despite all the difficulties they faced they also had some positive perceptions of being at UCT. The following section will discuss respondents' perceptions of their learning experiences at UCT.

4.5 Objective 2: To explore respondents' perceptions of their learning experiences at UCT.

The respondents' perceptions of learning at UCT were centred on barriers to learning namely their lack of preparedness for university, lack of academic literacy, lecture size and computer illiteracy.

4.5.1 Perceptions of university preparedness

Respondents identified that their schooling experiences did not prepare them adequately for learning at UCT. The respondents also noted their lack of English proficiency as being central to how they experienced learning. The need for independent learning at UCT and use of learning resources was also noted as being crucial to learning at university. The respondents' main perception of their high school learning in light of their experiences of university learning is that they were not prepared for university. When asked if their high school had prepared them for university learning, all of the respondents answered in the negative.

'My schooling, I don't think that they prepared us, I mean the methods they used on learners, teaching methods, the school surroundings, they were in no way preparing us to come to university. It's like they expected us to just remain there at that school. No I don't think they prepared us well for university.'

‘Not even close because I think in township schools we are only prepared to pass matric. And that's all, just to pass matric...’

This finding is similar to that of Reay (2001); Schalkwyk (2007) and Blunt (2008) who contend that non-traditional students are underprepared for university learning because they go to poor under-resourced schools. All of the respondents went to rural/township schools that were poor compared to other schools. According to Blunt (2008) the residue of the Bantu education system is continuing to alienate students in higher education institutions. Most of the difficulties that the respondents are facing stem from the schools which they attended.

Respondents experienced teaching at university as very different from high school teaching. The respondents came to university without prior knowledge of how learning at university takes place, and this hampered their adjustment. Respondents also found that learning at university required more independent learning compared to high school. This is what two respondents said:

‘Well at school they taught us everything. At university, they don’t teach you everything, they expect you to go out there and study for yourself. And then you are required here also to consult the library too much.’

‘...what are tutorials and when you hear the word tutor you sort of think this tutorial I’m gonna take it to my tutor without having to do it first and then the tutor will do it for me and give me all the answers where as it’s not like that... it’s like the tutor is still the lecturer because you give him the work, the tutor has to mark it first and then return it to you and then maybe afterwards give you the answers or not give you the answers and will sort of require you to find the answers yourself...’

Christie *et al*, (2008) state that students in transition need to know the new reality of their new learning environment. In order to achieve this, students need to develop new

ways of learning including taking the responsibility for finding learning materials and moving closer to being independent learners.

4.5.2 Academic literacy

The respondents lacked the following academic literacy skills; English language proficiency, literacy skills and note taking skills. All the respondents stated that they were taught in their home languages in high school and they encountered difficulties in lectures at UCT. The respondents stated that they felt excluded in their learning as they did not benefit from lectures. Lack of English language proficiency also shaped the way respondents interacted in learning environments, they were afraid to participate (for instance, answering and asking questions in lectures).

‘...like this English you see the way people speak English here is not like where I come from you see, such that one day one of my tutors was asking me a question and had not been hearing her you see, so I felt intimidated and felt embarrassed, but I was struggling to get adapted you see, so but it was very bad for me...’

‘Language is the problem because when I see some other respondents speaking English properly I become intimidated, because it has never been my language I have always used Xhosa.’

Hay (2008) discusses the implications of language difficulties for some students in lectures and argues that even though lecturers are aware of these difficulties, they are not doing much to motivate respondents and to help them build self-esteem and learning identities. The author further argues that lecturers can build students’ learning identities through planning for their classes to accommodate diversity into this new learning environment. Respondents from previously disadvantaged backgrounds do not benefit fully in lectures due to language constrains. As the above quotes illustrates, respondents are scared to participate and thus the lack of English language proficiency has a great impact on student learning in the classroom. In addition, respondents also lacked the literacy skills and these will be discussed below.

The data revealed that the respondents came to UCT without mastering the basic literacy skills needed to participate fully at higher education. Literacy skills refer to the reading and writing skills that are a prerequisite for learning at university. Reading seems to be problematic for some respondents particularly those doing courses that required a lot of reading and the participants perceived the amount of reading required of them as a lot.

‘...it is too much difficult for me and not really too much if, if maybe I was not so pressure you know, like you know where you have to get in everything because there are quite long, long chapters, like each chapter has like a lot of pages and you have to sort of get all that information in your head at one time’

‘...in high school the teacher won’t pass a chapter until everyone understands a chapter. But here you ha, you have to, to catch up, on, on, on the chapter. You must read first the chapter before you go to the lecture. So I find it very hard for me to do that, because I have to read maybe a chapter more than once because its very hard for me to understand the kind of English that they are writing in, so I must read again and again until I understand it. So I go to the lecture not understanding the chapter...’

All the respondents complained that they were required to do a lot of readings and that they actually did not have time to go through all the readings. Moore (1994) makes a distinction between the acquisition of literacy skills and language skills. The problems for the respondents are two-fold, one, they do not know how to engage with the texts and, two, they lack the language to comprehend the texts. This affects the speed at which the respondents read texts and consequently the amount of work that the respondents have to get through at a particular time. For the respondents however the difficulties are perceived as the quantity of reading and not the lack of skill. Therefore their perception is that there is a lot to be done in a short space of time but actually the problem is greater than just quantity and time. MacGregor (2009) states that The National Benchmark Test results for 2009 yields similar findings where more

than half of the students entering South African higher education institutions during that year lacked the basic literacy skills necessary for university learning. Another skill that respondents lacked is note taking in lectures.

All the respondents highlighted note taking in lectures as problematic. The respondents said that the lecturers talked and respondents struggled to listen as well as to take notes at the same time. Thus they found out that they missed part of what the lecturer said and that their notes were incomplete. The struggle was to keep up note taking with the rate at which the lecturer delivered the lecture.

‘...here they don’t write on the board, you don’t write notes you are not asked whether you heard or not, you know, you had to take the notes the lecturer speaks, like speaks the notes she doesn’t or he doesn’t write them on the board whereby the teacher will have to write them and then wait for all of you to finish and then start explaining, here you have to do the notes yourself which is different from high school. When I got here it was very difficult. Sometimes you would write something that you feel is important and then the lecturer will move to another point that is important and then at the time that you finished writing the previous point you have already forgotten what the other point was, so it was kind of difficult taking down notes...’

In school respondents received notes from their teachers and sometimes these were put up on the board. Respondents had never had note taking skills developed. Moore (1994) highlights that literacy skills include the ability to engage with text and this includes summarising skills. The basic skill of note taking in lectures is to take down the main points, however the respondents struggled because they tried to write down everything that the lecturer said and they could not keep up. They have not yet developed the summarising skills needed and taking notes in point form. Even when the slides were used, the respondents tended to take everything down and they complained that the lecturers move too fast and they then ended up with incomplete, incoherent notes. Note taking in lectures was also compounded by the language difficulties that have been highlighted above.

Respondents also struggled to meet the writing requirements at UCT particularly with their assignments. The struggles were around the length of the assignments, the structure and language constraints.

‘Essay writing is difficult. I still can't cope with essay writing but I've managed to get through the referencing. Yeah, but the structuring for essay, yeah because they give us guidelines yeah, we do see the guidelines but it's sometimes difficult to understand what they mean’

‘...when it comes to writing I do have a problem because so far I'm not very happy with my essays like in almost all my courses and they all complain about the same thing that my sentence structure is too long and I still now, I try every time when I write an essay to sort of shorten my questions or put in the writing stuff the comma's and full stops and everything but still I still happen to get an average of 60 I don't know how it happens no matter how hard I try I just told myself that maybe all my essays I've been thinking that I do know how to write an essay but I actually don't I don't know whether it's the language or what I don't know but ya that's what I get. I try very hard, even when I think that in the essay I put like everything that I had you know much effort to writing it but still I just happen to get the same marks...’

This finding is similar to that of Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003), who found that non-traditional students cite essay writing as one of the most difficult areas in their experiences at university. Students struggle with essay writing because these skills are generally not explicitly taught. The respondents conceptualised their difficulties mainly in terms of language constraints. However when looking into their difficulties, it is sometimes lack of literacy skills highlighted above that impact on learning rather than just language. Schalkwyk (2007) discusses academic literacy and stipulates that non-traditional students lack these skills compared to traditional students who have these skills passed on to them through cultural capital. Although respondents perceived their essay writing difficulties in terms of language, structure, length and time, the problem of academic writing is compounded by other factors like culture.

Closely linked to the notions of writing at university is the way courses are assessed. All the respondents also struggled to grasp what was expected of them at university when being assessed and they failed assessments because of this and because they relied on ineffective old learning habits.

‘The questioning it’s, its tight like you move from being the top student in class from high school to being either neutral or low that was kind of difficult for me. Like economics for example I did economics in high school and I got very good marks for that because I was the highest in class, then when I got here the first test was like when the results came back I was like ok is this me you know, you actually think that you know something and then when you get to the test its completely different, it’s like something you have never seen before. It’s like they are asking you questions in Greek language or whatever to an extent that you actually do not understand, you are actually not confident enough even if you are thinking of an answer you can’t, you are not sure whether it is the correct one or not, yah the questioning is quite difficult...’

According to Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) key influences on student retention include assessment strategies employed. The respondents experienced difficulties with the assessment strategies at UCT and these negative experiences of assessments could impact on whether they stay or leave university. This section has highlighted the respondents’ perceptions of university learning and barriers to learning will now be discussed.

4.5.3 Size of lectures

Large lectures that have many students were stated as a barrier to learning. In terms of lectures one student stated that:

‘Yeah in the lecture class there are a lot lots and lots of us you can’t freely ask questions as much as you want to, to an extent that you actually feel that you know what I am clear on this I am confident that if I could be

given a question paper to answer let's say now I would be able to because the more you ask the more some people feel that you are wasting their time because they have already got the thing, then personally you feel ok if I ask too many questions I'm gonna look as the dumbest girl ever. So rather I just keep quiet and try to figure it out myself at home. Then you get home you still wrestle to get the thing...'

Respondents also preferred tutorials to lectures because they are smaller and resemble their classrooms.

'tutorials, yah things like workgroups, it is when you have the time to voice out your difficulties and get more attention, whereas in lectures you are even shy to raise up your hand and tell the lecturer, "no I didn't get what you said here" yah'

The large sized lectures created an environment that was not conducive for learning particularly for respondents who speak English as a second language. The respondents worried that their English was not good enough and that they would embarrass themselves when speaking in lectures. This finding resonates with that of Bangeni and Kapp (2005) who found that students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds often feel intimidated when they have to speak English. Christie *et, al.* (2008) also found that large and formal lectures hindered learning among students in transition as these are different from high school classes that are small and intimate.

4.5.4 Computer literacy

All the respondents but one were computer illiterate upon arrival at UCT. As highlighted earlier, respondents were not taught how to use computers in their schools and they struggled when they arrived at UCT because learning at UCT is technologically driven. For example communication of the various courses is through Vula (the University of Cape Town's official online learning system) and respondents have to have a basic understanding of computers in order access learning resources.

‘...I did not know how to use a computer, I even failed the first test that we do I failed it. Things like that and it’s very discouraging, the first thing you have at UCT is a fail, you think of how the future will be if I failed the first test at UCT you see...’

‘...so that gave me a very big challenge, and also, not to be exposed to things like computers. I was not using computers at school, so when I came here I had to type essays and that’s a lot of work and those things were very challenging. I was not exposed to these things. It was very challenging. It took me a long time to adjust. While at the same time you have to study, so it was very difficult.

Harris (2009) asserts that information technology plays a vital role in higher education. The author argues that students who come into higher education with lack of access to technology can experience adjustment difficulties in institutions which are technologically driven. The respondents failed tests and spent a lot of time typing their assignments, time which they could have used to study. This is a direct result of the digital divide that exists in society. Some segments of the population in South Africa have access to technology and these are people in the upper class and middle class backgrounds while the majority of the population from the working class backgrounds do not have access to technology. This manifests as a learning barrier to respondents from the working class backgrounds in higher education.

The respondents’ perception of learning included how university is different from school, experiences of reading and writing at university and the impact of English language proficiency on learning. Respondents also identified large lectures at UCT and computer illiteracy as barriers to learning. The following section will discuss how respondents established social networks at UCT.

4.6 Objective 3: To identify how first year respondents in their first semester of study at UCT established social networks

The findings revealed that the respondents initially had difficulties establishing friendships at UCT. Some of these difficulties stemmed from their preconceived notions of friendships.

4.6.1 Difficulties in establishing friendships

When talking about friends, respondents mentioned that it was difficult for them to establish friendships at UCT. Respondents talked about making artificial friendships and only befriending people of similar backgrounds. Some respondents expressed that it was difficult for them to make new friends at UCT. Most of the respondents do not have friends or colleagues from their schools at UCT so they had to make new friends.

‘So I'm a in a way very difficult for me to find friends and I'm very particular when it comes to friends because when I look for a friend I wanna find a person whose not different from who I am who don't do things differently like in a way that I do things whereby we don't necessarily have to be like the same but we gotta have the same values you know we gotta like the same personality in a way so that we speak the same language I don't wanna talk Jesus and you talk clubs or I talk clubs and you talk Jesus we have to be the same in a way’

The respondents highlighted an important dimension of friendship being that of compatibility. Respondents seemed to have difficulty in finding compatible friends at UCT. Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) claim that making compatible friends is essential to respondents' retention in institutions as this help with successful integration.

Another factor that contributed to difficulties in making friends is the fact that some respondents opted to form acquaintances rather than friendships. This was in contrast to friendships back home.

‘I have people that I socialise with... that I chat with now and again but I wouldn't like to call them friends because friendship for me has to go further than that, further than uhm, chatting casually and friendship for me... you have to know me personally, you have to know my experiences and by far most of the people that I socialise with don't know me on that level, yeah.’

One participant said:

‘...those people they understood me and they knew my parents they know me even here nobody like ... even the person I call a friend here, she doesn't understand me as my friends back home I can't open up to her like I did with the other friends at home. At times even when things were harder I had to cope on my own...’

Respondents were guarded about making new friends at UCT because they placed a value on friendship; they viewed friendship in a deeper way and thus were able to distinguish between true friends and acquaintances with acquaintances more easily made than friendships. Enochs and Roland (2006) argue that making meaningful relationship connections have importance for student's overall adjustment to university. For respondents making acquaintances instead of friends can be a contributing factor to their adjustment difficulties.

For those respondents who admitted to having friends, friends were made among people of similar backgrounds despite UCT being a very diverse institution. One respondent admitted that he was comfortable among people of the same background. He stated that:

‘I did, I did. From the same town, not the same township but they're from township KZN, so we are working together motivating each other. So our quality of life and background is almost the same. So we are able to adjust.’

Respondents found comfort in being with people from similar backgrounds as they identified with them more easily. As highlighted above, compatible friends are crucial during transition (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The authors further argue that during the early weeks at university, students need to start making friends because over time these friends become more important as they form part of a surrogate family. The respondents who made compatible friendships were able to cope with the transition with the help of their friends.

4.6.2 Preconceived notions of friendships

Respondents came to UCT with preconceived notions of friendships and these had an impact on how respondents established friendships. These notions are that friends will lead one astray, friends are ‘too much of a responsibility’ and that having too many friends affects academic performance.

‘...when I came here at UCT I told myself that I don’t want friends and actually I don’t believe in friends...’

For most respondents friendship was perceived in a bad light, for example “friends lead you astray”, “friends are too much of responsibility”. The benefits of friendships were often overlooked.

‘I wanted to make a friend not a friends because friends are... are uhm, too much of a responsibility. You see, and too much of friends is... I think it will result in me losing my focus of why I'm here in UCT, you see? Too much of socialisng... I will end up doing too much of socialising you see, than studying you see. Yeah, someone I could call a friend, others I would

just say hello, how are you? uhm, what's your name? What are you studying? Especially during orientation week. And it ends there'

The same notions were also shared about having a boyfriend or girlfriend particularly for male respondents they said having a girlfriend is too much of a responsibility.

I don't want a girlfriend. Uh-uh. They will stress me. I don't want the stress. Ah, well, just want the positive stress, yah my, my academics are stressing me too much and I enjoy that stress because it's a positive stress, so I don't want any negative stress because I have heard uh, gents uh, complaining outside there, so I don't want to find myself in those situations. I can only be friends with them and it will end there.

Erikson (1968) talks of the peer group becoming more important for adolescents. The majority of the respondents fall within this category and yet the findings seem contradictory to Erikson's theory. For the respondents, friendships are associated with peer pressure thus in a bid to avoid peer pressure respondents view friendship in a negative light. However friendship is one way of coping at higher education institutions as they become a source of support (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Those respondents, who have managed to establish deep friendships, claim that it has become a way of coping. The ability to make meaningful relationships forms the basis of the intimacy versus isolation stage of development according to Erikson (1968), thus respondents' inability to form meaningful friendships easily can impact on their future development and can also be linked to their state of loneliness at UCT.

The respondents' perceptions of integration into UCT will now be discussed next.

4.7 To explore the extent of respondents' feelings of integration into the institution by the end of the first semester.

The respondents' perceptions of integration at UCT were explored by the extent that they felt at home at UCT. The other dimensions of integration included, belonging, establishment of social networks, taking part in extra mural activities, relating to

lectures, friendships with other races and ethnic groups and knowledge and use of support structures (Pittman and Richmond, 2008).

4.7.1 Feeling at home at UCT

Most respondents clearly stated that they did not feel at home at UCT. Feeling at home is an indication of being integrated and connected in the new environment. Those respondents who felt at home could identify as part of the institution and those who do not feel at home placed themselves as the 'other' thus they felt that they do not fit in.

'I told you, I told you (laughs) before that this place is nothing like home, it's nothing like home. And it wouldn't be like home'

Of those respondents who felt at home, this is what they had to say:

'I feel at home. I feel at home. Like given the sort of there, I couldn't even call it my school. I would also say the UCT people, the UCT things, the UCT that. But nowadays, I hear myself like when I'm talking about UCT, I even include myself. So I feel like I'm part of the community now'

Scanlon *et al.* (2007) state that for students to achieve incorporation into the university they must be connected to the institution. The two quotes from respondents demonstrate that those respondents who felt at home were also part of the institution and those who did not remained on the outside of it. The extent of perceived integration to the institution in respondents in transition is an important dimension as it determines whether respondents will stay in the institution and complete their degree or they will dropout before they complete their studies. Integration plays a huge factor in respondents' retention particularly in their first year. Both academic and social integration describe the extent to which the respondents gain meaningful membership of the academic and social worlds at university (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The authors further argue that successful integration in both

academic and social spheres reduces the likelihood of respondents' withdrawal from the institution.

4.7.2 Belonging

One interesting contradiction in the findings is the students' perception of belonging. Despite their narration of the difficulties they encountered in their transitional experiences at UCT, when asked if they thought that they belonged at UCT, most respondents stated that they belonged.

I fit in very well, so in terms of fitting in everything that is happening on campus I know first of all my priority is to like excel academically and everything else will like comes be like after that.

This shows that respondents felt integrated to some extent into the institution. However, a few of the respondents clearly stated that they do not fit in. These respondents do not see themselves as being part of the institution; they see themselves as being outside. The following responses to the belonging question, demonstrates this:

'No, because I am still deciding whether I am coming back next semester or not, so no I don't fit in.'

There is also a contradiction in the respondents' responses, they stated that they did not feel at home at UCT and yet most of them clearly stated that they felt that they belonged. This could mean that their emotional ties were still at home. There is a struggle between letting go of their belonging at home and establishing belonging at UCT. This struggle of being in two different worlds is captured by Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) who coin the term 'betwixt space' to refer to the transitional process from one place to another. By fitting in, respondents mean that they have adapted to their environment, they are functioning in it but it is not home for them, because home is something that is different from UCT.

Enochs and Rowland (2006) highlight the importance of positive attachment to the institution when they recommend that lecturers must continue to foster positive attachment to the institution among first year students to enable them to continue with their studies. They reiterate that increased satisfaction, positive attachment and enthusiasm about the institution are essential elements in adjusting to university. The respondents' attachment to the university is not a positive one yet and this might influence their long term commitment to the institution (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

4.7.3 Establishment of social networks

By the end of the first semester, most respondents said that they had established some form of social networks. Even though they mentioned that time constraints limited their social activities they had some social activities that they engaged in. Some of these activities included spending time with friends in their rooms, going to the movies and shopping. This shows that respondents are being integrated to some extent into the institution.

'We just watch movies and listen to music that is what we do, I go to their room because they are four there and all of them are doing their second year. So when I am with them we are all using the same language. I feel good when I am with them.'

'We watch movies, watch movies or go out to restaurants uh, maybe go shopping together now and again.'

Woosley (2003) argues that initial social adjustment has an impact on degree completion in students first entering a tertiary institution. This highlights the importance of initial social networks for respondents in transition to university. Respondents' ability to establish social networks demonstrates the extent of their integration into the institution. Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, (2005) found that the presence or absence of social support was instrumental in deciding whether to stay or dropout for students in transition. Those students without social support left the

institutions and those with social support stayed. The authors further argue that to understand student retention at higher education, equal emphasis needs to be placed on successful integration into the social world of the university as into the academic world.

Meyer, Spencer and French (2009) also reiterate that interpersonal connections with peers have the most impact on positive adjustment. Thus respondents' ability to form social networks demonstrates their positive adjustments to the institution. Enochs and Roland (2006) further highlight that social adjustment may be as important as academic adjustment as it plays an important role in assisting respondents with their overall adjustment to the university environment.

4.7.4 Participation in extra mural activities

A total of fifteen respondents mentioned that they belonged to organisations on campus. The most cited social organisations that female respondents belonged to are Christian organisations like the Student Christian Fellowship (SCF), Kolbe House (Catholic Student Association) and Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) on campus. A total of eight female respondents belonged to Christian organisations. The most cited organisations for male respondents were soccer and Black Management Forum (BMF). It is interesting to note that only one male student belonged to a Christian organisation. Only one female student did not belong to any organisation.

'I belong to SCF, SCF. Ya, I enjoy it every Friday. I like it.'

'I'm more comfortable and the other thing that made me more comfortable is that I'm playing for UCT's soccer team now, so I'm more comfortable because if there's one thing I like its soccer.'

This shows that most respondents are participating in other non-academic aspects of the institution. Enochs and Roland (2006) argue that involvement in campus life can assist adjustment and the quotes above demonstrate this. The researcher was intrigued by female respondents' taking part in extra mural activities that are religious and

males taking on sport and management. She speculates that perhaps this finding demonstrates gender differences in upbringing. South Africa is still very much a patriarchal society despite the gains made in the new constitution (Macionis and Plumer, 2008). A girl child is still raised to be obedient and submissive while a boy child is raised to be strong and powerful demonstrating the role of gender in identity formation (Weiten, 2005).

4.7.5 Relationship with lecturers

The respondents' perceptions of their relationship with their lecturers yielded two dimensions. There are those who experienced a good relationship with their lecturers. While other respondents reported that they did not relate well with their lecturers and also that they felt that they were insignificant to them. The respondents cited that some lecturers were supportive compared to others and they felt that they learned more from them both academically and in their personal growth. The reason is that these lecturers were perceived as more caring compared to other lecturers, they also spent a lot of time with the respondents in consultation.

'with my lecturers because most of them communicate with emails and when I have problems I send them emails and at times I consult with them so I think with my lecturers I have a good relationship in general with them because I don't sense any attitudes and everything from them so we do have a good relationship...'

'With my lecturers, well I haven't been close with all my lecturers, they don't even know who you are because they have a lot of students...'

Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, (2005) argue that, the student's relationships with academic staff constitute an important part of their integration into academic life. Meyer, Spencer and French (2009) stipulate that students' interactions with faculty members have a positive relationship with personal growth as well as academic achievement.

4.7.6 Diverse friendships

Most of the respondents admitted that they do not have any friends from racial groups other than their own. Only a few male respondents mentioned that they have friends of other races they met through sport.

‘I do not have friends from other racial groups. Currently I don't have its not simple cos as I say it's their culture. When I'm with them I feel like I'm the outsider. Their style of ... they way the practise their friendship is totally different from where I come from. So those guys I am talking where they from townships so our language is almost the same. But if you can put me with other people whether they are blacks or white who are from overseas classes or schools. What are they going to talk about; I'm not going to fit.’

In reference to making friends with people from other races, one respondent said:

‘You see we still have this feeling like they are taking us in a different way you see, so I feel comfortable if like I'm with my own people you see’

It was difficult for respondents to establish social networks with students from other racial backgrounds. Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) argue that students from non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged with the institutional cultures that place them as the ‘other’. As previously mentioned, this position of the ‘other’ could be hindering respondents from freely integrating into the institution.

4.7.7 Knowledge of support structures

The university has support structures in place to help students during their transition. The Student Orientation and Advocacy Centre assist new students with their initial transition to UCT. They have maps and a walk in service for directions and helping respondents adjust to the UCT community. In addition to this centre, there are other support structures for respondents. These structures are: the Student Wellness Centre,

the Writing Centre, the Career Development Centre and a series of workshops that help with the transition provided by various departments. However, most of the respondents did not know of the many support structures available to them and thus they had not made use of any of them. The most cited support structure that respondents knew about is the Writing Centre but very few respondents made use of this service. Respondents cited that they do not have the time to complete their assignments in time to take them to the Writing Centre before they submit.

Despite struggling getting around the campus particularly in the early days, none of the respondents knew of the Student Orientation and Advocacy Centre. Yet this centre is dedicated to help respondents with their transition.

The following section is going to discuss how respondents coped with their transition.

4.8 To explore how students are coping with the transition to university.

Respondents relied on their families and friends' support to cope with the demands of being at UCT. Perceptions of support structures, individual resources and coping strategies will be outlined.

4.8.1 Support structures

The support structures that the respondents relied on were family, friends and some of the institution's structures. The participants cited their families as being instrumental in their managing their stay at UCT. Most of the respondents were the first ones in their families to go to university, their families were proud of them and were constantly encouraging them and supporting them.

'my parents' encouragement, their support I would say my parents because even when I knew I was coming here, for me I wasn't so keen you know that I am going to UCT but my parents, they were happier than me, my parents and my sister they were so happy for me.'

The fact that families were counting on them made the respondents persevere. They did not want to disappoint people who were counting on them to make a difference in the family, they therefore carried a responsibility to their families to do well. Most of the caregivers did not go to a tertiary institution. The support the respondents were getting was inherently different from that which other students whose caregivers had gone to university. Students whose parents went to university receive familial support and this is the support, which is in the form of cultural capital, insider knowledge of how to succeed at a tertiary institution (Meyer, Spencer and French, 2009).

Friends were also cited as being a source of support. There seem to have been comfort in knowing that one is not alone. They thus supported each other in carrying through the demands of academic work.

‘I can say to find myself with other people not isolating myself. When you see other people sharing common challenges and find myself not the only one facing these challenges. We have even challenges and we are a group so we together and we find solutions and we applied these solutions. So socialising or group friends has helped me a lot.’

‘Well, I was trying to get support from people who have been here. Like my friend who motivated me, so they were giving me moral support, so they helped me a lot to adjust.’

With friends in the same class the support is ‘we are in this together’ and most people in high school coped by being in study groups. Friends in the same class become a source of support and help with coping. With older peers an informal mentoring was formed and mentoring is a powerful tool in adjusting to university. Those with prior experience shared their experiences with new students who were facing the similar challenges and they were then more prepared to handle their experiences. This finding is the same as that of Wilcox, *et al* (2005) who state that compatible friends provide direct emotional support equivalent to family relationships and they also act as a buffering support in stressful situations. Course friendships, provide primary instrumental informational support (Halawah, 2006).

One of the coping strategies that a few of the respondents used at UCT is consulting lecturers. These respondents soon realised that the higher education environment is demanding and they had to devise coping strategies in order to realise their dreams despite the challenges that they encountered.

‘Um I use the books I use the lab the tutors email them everything the lecturers ask them questions go bug them in their offices every now and then and I also talk to other people the internet it's helping as well like I use everything I get my hands on that I think is gonna be useful towards me being able to do what I want to do’

‘also the lecturers, like almost all the lectures know me because I am always behind them asking what did you say, what is going on, you know.’

Learning at university is individually driven however only a small portion of respondents did this, and reported that they benefited from consultation with lecturers. The majority of the respondents felt that lectures were not approachable and they did not have the courage to approach them so they struggled on their own. Christie (2009) argues that for non-traditional students, their engagement with the university is often uncertain in nature and that progress is affected by emotional factors such as confidence and alienation.

4.8.2 Individual resources/agency

Respondents revealed that they drew on their individual strengths in order to manage difficult situations. These were: working hard, their faith and focusing on future goals. Respondents realised that in order to manage at UCT they had to keep up with the academic work demands of the institution. For most respondents this entailed working continuously to keep up with the work load.

‘...commitment and hard work is what works here, it doesn't matter what you have and what you don't have, what matters is what you can do...’

The realisation that hard work pays is something that the respondents were familiar with in their upbringing and their parents reinforced it. This realisation enabled respondents to manage their workload as they worked continuously. Their positive attitude towards work enabled them to keep working (Palmer, O’Kane and Owens, 2009).

Most of the respondents testified that their faith in God and prayer helped them get through difficult times. They said that they relied on God to help them through UCT and often they cited God as the reason that they were at UCT in the first place. This is not a surprising finding as most of the female respondents belonged to religious organizations on campus.

‘I, most of the time when I am struggling sometimes I just pray first, even when I gonna write a test even though I am gonna read, before I eat I just pray, that’s what I do, then I will be better, that’s what I do.’

Faith builds hope and this enabled and empowered the respondents to conquer their difficult experiences at UCT. Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) write that students attached themselves to familiar concepts that reminded them of home to cope and these became sacred. Faith in this instance can be viewed as such an element.

For the respondents, education is the opportunity to improve one’s life circumstances and they tolerated academic stress in order to realise their future dreams. Respondents used their long term goals to help them through difficult times in their studies. Focusing on long term goals enabled the respondents to conquer their immediate difficulties. By conquering these immediate difficulties respondents were able to realise their long term goals.

‘...in everything that I do it requires hardworking, putting in more effort in everything that I do and knowing what I want especially contributes a lot to me being able to keep pushing no matter how difficult it is...’

‘Where I come from I was in a lot of stress and that helped me, comparing to where I come from this [academic stress] tends to be weaker and I can simply deal with it. I told myself that I finally got this opportunity and I need to motivate myself to achieve my future goals...’

As stated earlier, respondents were motivated to do well at university as education was seen as a way to improve their life circumstances. Respondents were thus motivated by future prospects of higher education qualification, Christie (2009) found that non-traditional students were motivated by future prospects of a higher education qualification. Macionis and Plummer (2008) also state that people are now more than ever able to move between the classes, it is common for people to move from the lower, working class into the middle class or sometimes even the upper class. One way in which people are able to move within classes is through education especially higher education and a number of lower class citizens ascend into the middle class in this manner.

4.8.3 Effective and ineffective coping strategies

Other than seeking help, respondents did not have effective coping strategies. They relied on ineffective time management skills and unhelpful study methods. A lot of the respondents admit to seeking help in order to cope with their academic work. Most respondents consulted mostly with their peers and tutors, a few also consulted their lecturers when they struggled academically.

The respondents lacked effective time management skills. While a few said they used diaries to manage their time and work, the majority did not plan their work in advance and this led to working under pressure all the time.

‘The workload and everything, every time I just do maybe sometime I do it maybe it’s due maybe today is Thursday, maybe it’s due on Monday I just do it quick, I just I don’t give myself time I don’t know how it’s wrong, just do it do it, I am just focus on some other stuff, and then I, I

will find out that this thing is due on Monday, then I will have to quickly do it'

'...that is the part I've been struggling with, time management. I haven't found a rhythm, up to this far, eh, I've been just taking everything as it comes, yah. Each and every, course as it, is, but sometimes I've been under pressure, in a sense that I will wait, do some things and not concentrate to others, and, and at times this course is due tomorrow, and I haven't started it, and it requires some research and stuff, so I will do that in a smaller period of time, of which it, may need to struggle to some extent. Eh, spending some nights without sleeping, it wasn't good at all, and yeah, it wasn't healthy.

All the respondents mentioned that they were struggling at UCT. They all said that they worked hard but they seemed to have abandoned the study methods that worked in high school. While in school, the respondents formed study groups and worked hard to be accepted at university. At UCT very few of the respondents were using the same strategy, working with their peers in addition to studying on their own. Most respondents worked alone and all of them stated that they worked all the time.

'You could say, from the lectures, my life is here. Everything that, I don't have a life because from my lectures and my, my tuts I will go to, to, to, back to res, then I will eat, after eating, back to, to, to, to, to school work, until I sleep. So sometimes I sleep at one o' clock, or two o' clock, so every time that I've got, I just study.'

However contrary to the rest, one respondent admitted that:

'Here in UCT, honestly I usually study if I am going to write a test you see'

Those few respondents who continued to work in groups found it to be beneficial. A male student who struggled with one of his courses stated:

‘Fortunately where I’m staying, there are students there that are doing their second years, some of them are repeating course so we sort of get together and decided on how we are going to tackle it and I think that we are doing very well. We’ve got a study group, that’s how we are tackling it.’

This finding is similar to that of Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) who state that students in transition adopted a persevering attitude in order to cope at university. Respondents who studied in groups formed a support for one another and helped each other through difficult concepts. Christie *et, al* (2008) also found that students who formed study groups became more active talking to their peers and that these groups bolstered students’ confidence as they realised that they are not alone. The notion of instrumental support from peers in the sharing of knowledge is also highlighted by Skyrme (2007) who states that peers can be instrumental in the circulation of knowledgeable skills to each other.

4.9 Conclusion

The findings in this study revealed that respondents from previously disadvantaged backgrounds encountered several difficulties in their transition to university and that the transition to university is a complex process. They were exposed to a different culture at university and had to re-negotiate their identities. Respondents also managed to form social networks with their peers and these also acted as a support system in addition to family and faith in God. Respondents were in the process of being integrated into the institution and have developed some coping mechanisms even though they struggled with time management. The final chapter presents the main conclusions of this study and proposed recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The final chapter highlights the main conclusions reached based on the research findings. Recommendations to the faculty of Humanities, the university, Department of Higher Education and for future research will be offered in line with the conclusions.

5.2 Conclusions

The conclusions of the research will be discussed using the research objectives as headings.

5.2.1 Objective 1: To find out how first year students from impoverished backgrounds experience their initial transition to UCT.

- The spatial environment at UCT is vast and it was experienced as stressful by the respondents upon arrival as they struggled to find their way around campus.
- Respondents experienced UCT as being diverse and had difficulty dealing with diversity; it was highlighted as a source of stress as they had to adjust to new ways of living.
- The participants encountered a new culture at UCT, they were exposed to a middle class culture and this increased their feelings of alienation as they became aware that they are not part of the dominant culture at university.
- Language difficulties resulted in the respondents having difficulties in the University community and these difficulties impacted on their experiences of the institution.

- Transition itself was experienced as stressful as respondents had to learn new ways of being in a different environment away from their friends and families; they had to adjust in a new environment by themselves.
- The participants had difficulties adjusting to UCT due to the fact that they had to deal with an identity loss. In high school, the participants identified themselves as high achievers, this identity which they carried from high school was lost at UCT as their marks dropped and they became average students and therefore had to redefine their identity in this new learning environment.
- UCT was also experienced as a positive place to be at due to the future prospects of obtaining a qualification from one of the most prestigious institutions in the country.

5.2.2 Objective 2: To explore students' perceptions of their learning experiences at UCT.

- Participants found learning at UCT very demanding because they felt that their schooling did not prepare them for university.
- Respondents also experienced learning in English as being demanding and it affected their learning process as they were used to learning in their home language. Due to language constraints, students were not participating fully in their learning. They were afraid to ask questions and respond in lectures.
- Respondents also lacked the basic literacy skills to manage learning at UCT such as reading, writing and critical thinking skills.
- Participants experienced the marking practices at UCT as very strict and this posed as a challenge to their learning as they struggled to do well in assessments.
- Learning at UCT was experienced as requiring independent learning which participants battled with as they came from high school where they were 'spoon fed'. At UCT they were required to take ownership of their learning needs and direct their own learning and this was very frightening for the participants.
- Learning at UCT was experienced as technologically driven and the participants battled with this especially in the beginning as they were not computer literate.

- The workload was experienced as overwhelming and the respondents felt that they were overworked.
- Respondents relied on inadequate learning resources such as lecture slides and did not conduct extra research to enhance their learning. This resulted in them finding learning difficult especially for assessments where they underperformed.
- Learning at university was also experienced as meaningful and relevant by the respondents as they could relate to and apply the concepts they were learning. Thus learning was insight provoking and could be applied to respondents' life circumstances and experiences.

5.2.3 Objective 3: To identify how first year students in their first semester of study at UCT establish social networks.

- Respondents had difficulties in making friends as they looked for friends who were similar to them. They compared friends at UCT to the friends that they had left at home.
- Participants arrived at UCT with preconceived negative notions of friendships for example, that friends will lead one astray or that friends will take up a lot of time. These notions affected how they established friendships as they avoided making such friendships and thereby compounded their feelings of isolation.
- Due to the nature of the environment, the academic demands at UCT, participants established artificial friendships, as they did not have time to invest in friendships.
- Friendships were established with people from similar backgrounds as this was less threatening in light of cultural and language constraints that the respondents had to negotiate in the institution.

5.2.4 Objective 4: To explore the extent of students' feelings of integration into the institution by the end of the first semester.

- The research participants were not aware of the wider institutional services that are geared towards helping first year students with their transition and they struggled initially.
- Participants managed to create some form of social networks and they thus were integrated into the institution to some extent.
- Participants perceived themselves as not belonging in the UCT environment as they were still emotionally invested in their home environments.
- There was a contradiction in their perceptions as they also perceived that they fit in at UCT despite not belonging. The respondents made a distinction between functioning at UCT and being attached to the institution. They fit in because they can function at UCT but they do not belong at UCT because they are still attached to their home environments.

5.2.5 Objective 5: To explore how students are coping with the transition to university.

- Respondents were coping with their transition to UCT but they found the process very demanding.
- Participants made use of family, friends/peers and institutional support structures in a bid to manage their transition.
- Participants drew from their inner strength and resilience to adjust to UCT and they persevered despite the difficulties they encountered.
- Faith also played a powerful role in the respondents' transition as it enabled them to manage difficult circumstances.
- The participants focused on their long term goals as a means of coping with their immediate academic challenges.
- Respondents used both effective and ineffective coping strategies. The effective strategies used include asking help, consulting with lecturers and the most ineffective coping strategy was lack of time management skills. The lack

of effective time management skills affected their working habits as they rushed some tasks.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings and the main conclusions of this study the following recommendations are proposed.

5.3.1 Recommendations for the Faculty of Humanities

- It is suggested that students be made aware of effective coping strategies through a mentor program. Such programs are only running in residences where some of the students live but they are not available to the rest of the students. These can be designed at departmental levels.
- The workshops for coping strategies should be conducted at a faculty level and should be made available to all students. This should be communicated to all students as these workshops will help ease students into their transition.
- Information and guides for new students should be readily available in all departments.
- Ongoing faculty orientation is also suggested as this will ensure students have relevant source of information that will ease them into their transition.

5.3.2 Recommendations for the university

- A buddy mentoring system which allows prospective students from Rural and Township areas to come and spend time on Campus and experience the culture of the campus before registration is recommended. Life orientation classes looking at life at university are also recommended.
- It is suggested that prospective students be informed and encouraged to do an introductory computer course prior to coming to UCT. The institution can offer these courses to the prospective learners by partnering with the local schools. This program can be run in January before the students come to UCT.

- Orientation needs to be continued after lectures have begun. Students are only oriented to the UCT environment before lectures commence and then they really do not know where their lectures and tutorials will be at so they do not benefit from this orientation.
- The university has a lot of resources and students need to be encouraged to use them in order to cope. Lecturers also need to be encouraged to consult with most of their students because those respondents who approached their lectures benefited from the consultation.
- Programs that allow cultural exchange and interaction need to be developed in the institution so that there is a meeting point for the different cultures.

5.3.3 Recommendations for the Education Department

- The Department of Education needs to consider putting in place monitoring programs to ensure that all students are prepared for higher education regardless of where their school is placed by ensuring that the quality of education is the same in South Africa. It is suggested that assessments be conducted uniformly and gaps in schools performances be narrowed.
- The language policy in both primary and high schools needs to be monitored to ensure that students whose first language is not English are able to learn this language effectively at school so that they are able to learn at university.
- It is proposed that the needs of students from impoverished backgrounds be highlighted and that the transformation of the education system be focused particularly the implementation of policies at the classroom level.

5.3.4 Recommendations for future research

- A comparative study between students from previously disadvantaged students and students from better resourced schools could be done to shed light on the extent of the difficulties these student faces at UCT.
- The relationship between religion/faith and academic learning could be further researched.

5.4 Conclusion

This research explored the perceptions of first year students from Township/Rural backgrounds regarding their transition to UCT. It has found that these students experience difficulties in their transition and it was evident that the students have adopted some strategies in order to cope and they also rely on their spirituality to negotiate this process. Recommendations were proposed to the faculty, the university and Department of Education to help prepare students for their transition at university. Future research recommendations were also noted.

University of Cape Town

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Consent form

I agree to participate in the Masters research Project titled: **Transition to University: Perceptions of First Year Humanities Students from Impoverished Backgrounds at the University of Cape Town.**

The aim of the project has been explained to me. I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary
- The data I will provide will be used for research purposes only
- My name will not be used in any seminars or publications arising from the research

Respondent: _____ Researcher: Bonani Dube

Signature: _____ Signature: _____

Date: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: Interview schedule

Family background and social background

- Where did you grow up? Establish urban/rural/township/suburb (probe living conditions)
- Were you raised by both of your parents? If not probe on primary caregiver and where parents are.
- How many are you in your family? Probe on family relationships.
- What kind of work do your primary caregivers do? Probe on caregivers' and siblings' highest level of education.
- Where did you go to school?
- What was the medium of instruction?
- How were the learning conditions and general environment of school?
- Do you think you were a successful student at school? Probe why/why not.
- What was the atmosphere like in your school classrooms?
- Were you part of a study group?
- How many of your friends have gone onto tertiary education? How many have come to UCT?
- Were you popular in school?
- Did you play any sport?
- Did you have a steady girlfriend or boyfriend?
- When did you decide to apply to UCT?

University experience

- What were your expectations of UCT before you came?
- Was it a good decision to come to UCT – why?
- When you arrived here, what felt most familiar?
- How are you experiencing UCT culture/atmosphere?
- Have you experienced any racial/ethnic or gender tensions at UCT?
- Do you feel that you fit in?
- What are your majors/ or what programme are you registered for? Probe academic development and if it's original choice if not why change.
- Do you think you have made a good choice of degree? Why?
- Which courses are you doing this semester?
- How are you finding your courses?
- Which course(s) do you enjoy the most? And the least? Why?
- Which learning situations do you enjoy most – lectures? Tutorials? Work groups? Why?
- Do you participate in tutorials and workgroups? In which courses? Why?
- Are there any readings/lectures/topics that have been especially interesting or meaningful to you this semester? Why?

- What is the major resource in your learning process? Lectures? Textbooks? Workshops/tutorials? Peers?
- Do you consult textbooks for any of your courses, and if you do where do you get these from? Are they prescribed or do you get them from elsewhere?
- How are you finding the writing requirements in your first year?
- Are you struggling academically in any way?
- If yes, what do you think is preventing you from performing well?
- What do you do when you struggle with something? [Trying to work out whether they struggle on their own, approach peers or lecturers)?
- Do you consult your lecturers at all? If not, then why not?
- How do you experience your consultations with your lectures?
- How do your work habits here compare to school? How many hours? When? Studying with peers/on your own?
- Is learning here at university different from school? Probe how
- Did your schooling prepare you adequately for study at UCT? Why/ not?
- How have you experienced marking practices at UCT compared to school marking?
- Have lecturers' and tutors' comments on essays/tests assisted you in improving academically?
- Do you feel you are a competent student?

Individual experiences

- Have you managed to make good/close friendships at UCT?
- Who do you hang out with? Probe if there is time spent with girlfriend/boyfriend? If yes, probe how is it spent.
- Are your closest friends on or off campus?
- Are you friends with people from other racial/ethnic and social class groups?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- Do you belong to any organizations/church groups on campus?
- Do you think you've changed since you've come here? How?
- How is your social life at UCT compared to when you are at home?
- Are there any issues in your personal life that influence your academic performance?
- Do you relate well with other students/lectures?
- How have you found the level of English compared to school?
- Do you feel comfortable speaking in English?
- When (in what situations) do you use English and when do you use your home language?
- Which language do you use most of the time speaking to fellow students?
- What are your current career plans? What has influenced these plans?

Transitional experiences

- Why did you come to UCT?
- Did you know anyone else here?
- What did it feel like to be finally at UCT?
- What was your initial experience of UCT like?
- What are the highlights/good things that happened in when you got here?
- Did you experience any challenges at UCT? (Probe academically and socially)
- If so what were these challenges?
- How did you address these challenges?
- What has been the most difficult thing for you to adapt to at UCT?
- Looking back on your transition from school to UCT, what do you think has most enabled you to manage this transition effectively?
- Was there any aspect of schooling/school curriculum that enabled you to manage your first year at university?
- How do you go about managing your time? How different is this approach from high school? How many hours do you work outside of class?
- And what helped to get you where you are now in terms of your academic and social development?
- When things get very hard how do you manage?
- How do you deal with stress?
- Do finances influence your studies/are they a source of stress?
- Are there any changes in the way you perceive UCT now when compared to the way you did before coming here? (race, culture etc)
- Do you feel at home at UCT?
- Are there any other comments about your transition?
- Do you know that UCT provides support for first year students?
- What support structures or services for first years have you made use of?
- Finally (if not mentioned, ask of UCT support structures for first years that they know of e.g. counselling services etc and if they have made use of them)