

**Some Factors which Contribute to Poor Academic Achievement among Undergraduate Students at a Tertiary Institution**

**By**

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## DECLARATION

I Xolani S Fakude, declare that this dissertation represents my own work, both in conception and in execution. All sources that have been used or cited have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Xolani S Fakude

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Date

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my parents Mr. Bonginkosi Mhlawumbe Fakude and Mrs. Nelisiwe Zonele Fakude, who instill in their children clear rules of proper behaviour. Without their invaluable support, I would not be where I am today.

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## ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions in South Africa report dismal student graduation rates as a norm. The South African survey 2002-2003 revealed that South Africa has the highest number of higher education students in sub-Saharan Africa, but that less than two students in every ten actually graduate (Page, Loots & Toit, 2005). A similar trend is evident in American universities. The Times Higher Education Supplement reported that one in every four students drops out in the first year, and that only 54% of low income students actually graduate in six years (Marcus, 2004). There is a paucity of research on the determinants of academic success among undergraduate students at South African universities, for the present study the researcher intended to determine some factors which contribute to poor academic achievement among undergraduate students at a tertiary institution, particularly at the University of Zululand.

This study used a qualitative methodology to identify the factors that contribute to students' poor academic performance. Ten students of the University of Zululand took part in the study. A semi-structured interview was used with each participant to collect rich and reliable data and content analysis was employed for data analysis purposes. The findings indicated that most participants were affected by external factors as compared to their internal locus of control. Some of the factors that were found to be negatively related to academic achievement are: Financial difficulties, enrolment, political affiliation, and unavailability of lecturers to students. However, help-seeking has been shown to have positive impact on students' performance. The study concluded with suggestions for practice and for further research. Further research on students' performance could be conducted on a larger scale to obtain better results.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

When the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001) in South Africa was adopted by the cabinet in February 2001, one of its long-term goals was to expand admission of students at the university by increasing the enrolment rate, that is, the percentage of 20-24 year olds enrolled in higher education, from 15 % to 20% over the next ten to fifteen years. The short-term goal was to increase the throughput rate of graduates. This was because the graduation rate was far below that expected in respect of enrolled students yearly (Department of Education, 2002). The department of education embarked on the programme of reducing higher education institutions from 36 to 21. The subsidy formula was changed from the one that is based only on student enrolment to one that incorporated success, throughput and graduation rates as well as capping on the number of students that were admitted by higher education institutions (Department of Education, 2005). This was an attempt to attain the short-term goal of the National Plan for Higher Education, but the low graduation rate problem might not be solved in the short-term.

According to Bargate (1999) the long-term goal to increase enrolment rate in higher education in South Africa while the graduation rate is low indicates that universities should take a closer look at all the factors that determine whether or not students are successful. Killen and Fraiser (2002) support this view. They state that it is important because although some attempts have been made to facilitate access for previously disadvantaged students, the traditional practice of using matriculation is still dominant. However, Bargate (1999) argues that school achievement does not have significant effect in predicting students' success in higher education.

“Students are main assets of universities. The students' performance plays an important role in producing the best quality graduates who will become great leaders and manpower for the country thus becoming responsible for the country's economic and social development. The poor performance of students in universities should be a concern not only to the administrators and educators, but also to corporations in the labour market. Academic

achievement is one of the main factors considered by the employer in recruiting workers especially the new graduates. Thus, students have to place the greatest effort in their studies to obtain a good grade in order to fulfil the employer's demands" (Yadav, Bharadwaj, & Pal, 2011, P. 13). The study was aimed at determining the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement especially at undergraduate level at the University of Zululand.

## **1.2 Motivation for the study**

There are robust discussions on student retention issues resulting in universities seeking knowledge on the factors associated with students' persistence or dropout from the university (Berge & Huang, 2004). Lau (2003) alluded that since 1980s, American tertiary institutions have experienced difficulties retaining students. This is especially with students from underrepresented groups. The dropout rate of students from the university results in financial loss and decreased graduation rate of students. This might have a negative effect in terms of how stakeholders, legislators, parents, and students view the institution (Lau, 2003). Thomas, Quinn, Slack and Casey (2002) reported that England experiences concerns within higher education policy pertaining to enrolment of students, enhancing diversity of students admitted in higher education and improving retention rates. Furthermore, in Australia, the reforms of higher education in 1980's have been a shift from elite to mass education, and access with success has been a primary focus in that country (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

In South Africa, the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997) states that there should be a correlation between improved success and throughput rates, especially for Black and female students. Contrary to expectation, in the year 2002 the Department of Education in South Africa raised concerns pertaining to the decreased level of students' retention and increased level of dropout in higher education institutions (Department of Education, 2002). The speech delivered by the Minister of Education in South Africa on 15 May 2005 pointed out that 50% of the group of students admitted in the year 2000 had dropped out by the year 2003 (Department of Education, 2005). In his address in a seminar on higher education transformation held at the University of Free State in September 2005, the Chief Executive Officer of the Council on Higher Education in South Africa also reported that higher education system experiences difficulties improving efficiency by decreasing the level of dropout and enhancing throughput and graduation rates (Built, 2005).

Student enrolment at South African universities increased by 193, 000 between 1993 and 2004 (Cloete & Moja, 2005), placing some strain on the sector. Many of these students were economically and educationally disadvantaged, which further challenged the universities in terms of retaining and graduating their students' intake. Hendry cited by Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) states that the South African government in its White Paper 3 had placed strong emphasis on equity and access to higher education.

Higher education institutions in South Africa have been successful in meeting the goal of equity of success, but less successful in attaining equity in graduate output (Department of Education, 2001). The national plan for higher education reports on average graduation rate of 17% for universities in the period 1993 to 1998. This average dropped to 15% in the period 2000 to 2005 for undergraduate students at university level (Department of Education, 2001). The national plan has emphasised the importance of taking the South African context into account when addressing the underlying factors contributing to retention and graduate output, and highlights the need for universities to re-examine the factors that determine students' academic success and failure (Fraiser & Killen, 2005). There is a paucity of research on the determinants of academic success among undergraduate students at South African universities, and the current study was an attempt to address the gap at the University of Zululand. For the study the researcher intended to determine some factors which contributed to poor academic achievement among undergraduate students at the University of Zululand.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

Studies on factors influencing academic performance of students at a university in South Africa were conducted at historically White universities (Killen & Fraiser, 2002). The University of Pretoria and the University of South Africa where the previous studies have been conducted, have much different students profile than the University of Zululand where the present study was conducted. The University of South Africa, which is a distance university with most of its students studying part-time and working, accommodates most of the foreign students 55% studying in South Africa (University of South Africa, 2005). In 2005 at the University of Pretoria, there were 60% White students and 40% Black students with more than 2200 international students, representing 60 countries at the university (University of Pretoria, 2005). On the other hand, for the year 2005 the University of Zululand, which is rural in location, had student enrolment made up of 92% Blacks, 6%

Indians, 2% Whites and Coloureds (University of Zululand, 2005). There were only about 200 foreign students, all from African countries. There are few if any studies that have been conducted at the University of Zululand pertaining to the students' academic performance.

The researcher has observed a number of students at the University of Zululand who spend more years than expected to complete their studies. This raises questions as to what causes this problem. Every university has an academic learning centre where students can receive peer and faculty tutoring, without a charge. The study was aimed at addressing the following questions:

- 1.3.1 What were specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?
- 1.3.2 Did students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?

#### **1.4 Objectives of the study**

Many studies have been conducted to explore factors affecting students' academic achievement in South Africa at large. The study had the following objectives particularly at the University of Zululand:

- 1.4.1 To determine factors that affected undergraduate students' performance at the University of Zululand.
- 1.4.2 To find out if students had an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material.

#### **1.5 Definition of terms**

##### **1.5.1 Undergraduate students**

Undergraduate students are students who are enrolled in a tertiary institution prior to obtaining a first degree. In this study undergraduate students shall refer to university students who have not yet completed their Bachelors degrees.

### **1.5.2 Academic achievement**

Academic achievement in the context of this study refers to the level at which undergraduate students perform in their course of study at the University of Zululand. This accomplishment is measured through tests, assignments, and examinations conducted in every module taught at the university. These assessments are conducted as continuous assessments during the course of the semester or term. At the end of the semester or term the subject lecturer constructs a comprehensive examination questions which cover the whole syllabus. Therefore, by passing these final examinations, students would have progressed academically; hence the study discusses this process as academic achievement.

## **1.6 Research methodology**

### **1.6.1. Target population**

Target population is a group of potential participants to whom the researcher wants to generalise the results of a study. Population encompasses the total collection of all units of analysis about which the researcher wishes to make specific conclusions (Colligan, 2005). A sample of 10 male and female students was selected from different fields of study at the University of Zululand. The researcher targeted undergraduate students with the hope that they had experiences or had observed others with the experience of poor academic performance.

### **1.6.2. Research design**

A research design is a plan for conducting research which is implemented to attempt to find answers to the researcher's questions and, therefore, a response to a series of decisions about how best to answer focused questions (Gall, Borg & Gall, 2003). A qualitative case study method was used in this study. This method was used with an attempt to understand the issues from the viewpoints of the participants. The study used a purposeful sampling method which involves selecting a small sample. This method was used in order to get in-depth data which is not amenable to generalisation of findings to other institutions.

### **1.6.3 Sample**

A sample of 10 students from different disciplines was requested to participate in this study. The sample of the study constituted males and females in order to acquire different views from sexes about the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement.

### **1.6.4 Data collection**

The information was obtained by means of unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Unstructured interviews do not have schedules of questions. The interviewer adapts, generates, and develops questions as the interview progresses. The assumption is that the interviewer does not know in advance what questions should be asked. Appropriate questions are asked as the interview progresses. Semi-structured interviews include pre-determined questions that are presented to all interviews systematically and consistently. The interviews enable the researcher to probe and deviate from these questions (Struwig & Stead, 2007). However, the interviews were unstructured at first and semi-structured at the end of the interview if those questions have not been addressed. The interviews were conducted individually with each participant. The researcher took notes of his feelings and observations about interviewees during the interviews.

### **1.6.5 Data analysis**

The study used content analysis technique to analyse data. Content analysis refers to the gathering and analysis of textual content (Struwig & Stead, 2007). The researcher looked at the common themes from different interviewees. This information gave the common factors that affect academic achievement experienced by many students at the University of Zululand. The central idea in content analysis is that the many words of the text are classified into considerably fewer content categories. The assumption made is that the words that are mentioned most often are the words that reflect the greatest concerns.

## **1.7 Procedures and ethical considerations**

The researcher wrote a letter to the Chair of the Higher Degrees Committee of the University of Zululand seeking permission to use students as subjects for the study. The subjects were

informed about the purpose of the study. The subjects' information was kept confidential and the findings were reported anonymously. Consent to participate was obtained from the subjects. The subjects were informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any stage of the study. The research findings were reported accurately. High standard of ethical behaviour was maintained throughout the study.

### **1.8 Value of the study**

The study is valuable in that it will bring about insight into understanding factors which contribute to poor academic achievement of students; therefore, by understanding their situation the subjects are likely to take initiative to improve their academic performance. The findings will give valuable information with regard to the common problems experienced by students at a tertiary institution particularly at the University of Zululand.

### **1.9 Summary**

In this chapter, the study under investigation has been highlighted. The key concepts in the research topic have been defined and their relatedness to one another has been described. Furthermore, the problem under investigation has been stated and discussed. The next chapter will present the relevant literature that has been reviewed.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

According to the CEPRI (2002), studying in tertiary institutions and graduating with a university degree or a post-secondary professional diploma after leaving school is not an obvious pathway for all students. In 1993-1994, for example, Florida produced over 90, 000 secondary school graduates of which only 47% was enrolled in tertiary education institutions by the following year; 6 years later just 58% of this tertiary-enrolled cohort graduated with a Bachelor's degree (CEPRI, 2002). Shulruf, Hattie and Tumen (2008) alluded that in New Zealand and Australia, only about 50% of the secondary year group (age 16) was still enrolled between ages of 18 and 19 years.

According to Shulruf, Hattie and Tumen (2008), students' characteristics, such as socio-demography, aptitudes and previous achievements, have thus been shown to affect individuals' pathways to and through tertiary education. They further indicated that the way schools prepare their students may also have a significant effect on pathways to higher education (Shulruf, Hattie & Tumen, 2008). The prediction and explanation of academic performance and the investigation of the factors relating to the academic success and persistence of students are topics of utmost importance in higher education (Fenollar, Roma'n & Cuestas, 2007). Academic performance is an important predictor of performance at other levels of education and of other important job outcomes, such as job performance and salary. One of the most relevant perspectives in understanding academic performance is social-cognitive theory of motivation. The main premise is that student behaviours are a function of desires to achieve particular goals, and research has focused primarily upon the two dominant goals of learning; namely, learning (also called mastery or task-oriented) and performance (also called ego-oriented) (Fenollar, Roma'n & Cuestas, 2007). Focusing on academic institutions in higher education as the research context, this chapter attempts to present relevant existing literature which has been reviewed to develop an integrative understanding based on relations of key factors affecting students' academic performance at the university.

## 2.2 Background

Page, Loots and du Toit (2005) state that higher education institutions in South Africa report dismal student graduation rates as a norm. Anstey cited by Page, Loots and du Toit (2005) state that an article in *The Sunday Times* reported perspectives on a South African tutor or mentor programme that South Africa has the highest number of higher education students in sub-Saharan Africa, but that less than two students in every ten actually graduate. These statistics are derived from *The South African Survey 2002-2003* on issues such as economy, crime, security and education. According to these figures, about one in five undergraduates and postgraduates drop out every year, costing South Africa R1.3 billion in subsidies, apart from the devastating effect on student lives, families and work opportunities. A similar situation is reported in American universities. *The Times Higher Education Supplement* reported that one in every four students drops out in the first year, and that only 54% of low income students actually graduate in six years (Marcus, 2004).

“Universities in South Africa are often classified into two broad categories: historically Black universities (HBUs) and historically White universities (HWUs). Student profiles generally reflect this historical character of the institution and although much progress is being made by HWUs to recruit students from historically disadvantaged scholastic backgrounds and groups, the changes in the demographic profile of student populations have done little, positive or negative, to change pass rates. Low graduation rates (below 40%) impact negatively on the government subsidy funding formulae for universities. The teaching and learning interface is currently the highest priority for quality assurance at South African universities, according to South African Universities Vice Chancellors Association’s (SAUVCA) National Quality Assurance Forum in April 2002” (Page, Loots & du Toit, 2005, p. 2).

The eight key points that were isolated all focus on staff and student support to facilitate success, access and equity. In April 2004 the Council on Higher Education published its latest revised and condensed 19 Criteria for Institutional Audits, of which especially Criteria 2 and 3 have direct impact on the core activities of teaching and learning, research and community engagement, which are in line with a worldwide consciousness. “Institutions of higher education have found it increasingly important to articulate their mission and to have a strategy to manage change” (Beaty & Cousin, 2003, p. 141).

### **2.3 Selectivity, expenditure and retention**

As the costs and price of higher education continue to outpace inflation, the public is scrutinising the financial decisions of institutional leaders more closely. Although the public considers a university education a smart investment for students (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998), parents and legislatures are placing higher expectations on institutions to verify that they are using their resources effectively and efficiently (Alexander, 2000). Two common measures of institutional effectiveness are first-year retention and 6-year graduation rates (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006). Burke cited by Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2006) assert that first-year retention and 6-year graduation rates are important because they assess an outcome that is valued by students and the general public, namely, pursuing and completing a degree. Research focusing on the impact of university experiences on students generally ignores organisational behaviour as a source of influence (Berger, 2000).

Little research has examined how an organisational financial strategy such as resource allocation may provide insight into improving undergraduate retention and graduation rates. Ironically, this is the question that institutional stakeholders (students, parents and legislators) are pressing institutions to answer: How can 4-year institutions allocate limited resources effectively and still maintain or increase productivity as measured in terms of retention and graduation rates (Alexander, 2000)? Within the context of this dilemma lies another critical element that affects the relationship between resource allocation and retention and graduation rates: institutional selectivity. Institutional selectivity is a measure of admissions competitiveness (Barron's Educational Series, 2000). Selectivity scores provide information on the general academic qualities needed for admittance into a specific institution. Universities with high selectivity ratings enrol students with higher standardised scores, high school grade point averages and high school rank than institutions with lower selectivity ratings and as a result, may have higher retention and graduation rates regardless of how they allocate their resources (Mayer-Foulker, 2002) Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between institutional expenditures and retention and graduation only can be achieved by accounting for institutional selectivity.

## **2.4 Boredom amongst students**

Boredom in class has been found to have a negative effect on students' academic achievement. A study conducted by Mann and Robinson (2009) indicates that boredom in education has been associated with poor academic achievement. The findings suggest that 59% of students find at least half their lectures boring with 30% who find most or all of their classes boring. The results of the study indicate that lecture boredom has significant outcomes of academic results. As a result students miss classes and not willing to attend in future. This study gave some factors contributing to students' boredom. "The results suggest that an individual's propensity towards the personality traits of boredom proneness has a large effect on their experience of boredom. High BP students rated more time in lectures more boring than low boring lectures, suggesting boredom proneness is a significant predictor of experiencing boredom in lectures (Mann & Robinson, 2009).

## **2.5 Affective factors**

Most of the research done on factors which influence academic achievement has concentrated more on cognitive factors, while affective factors have been ignored. Intelligence, for example, is regarded as a prerequisite for academic achievement and it is believed that an intelligent child is more likely to be successful in learning than a less intelligent child. Intelligence is, however, just one of the important factors which can influence academic achievement. McCoach (2002) argues that the reasons for differences among students with regards to their academic performance at the university remain mystery. It is well known that ability is the best predictor of academic performance; however, it explains less than 50% of the assets in students (McCoach, 2002). On the basis of McCoach's argument, one can conclude that, besides intellectual ability, there are other factors which play crucial roles in students' learning and academic achievement. Students' interests and their involvement in various academic tasks, how they perceive their interactions with their lecturers and what they feel and think about themselves with regard to execution of academic tasks are important factors in learning. Affective factors such as motivation, attitude, self-concept and self-esteem also play an important role in academic achievement. According to Rice (1996), students who are confident have positive self-concepts and they are, therefore, motivated to achieve better in academic work. Students who have negative attitudes about themselves impose limitations on their own achievement.

### **2.5.1 Self-concept**

According to Drew and Watkins cited by Sikhwari (2007), self-concept is a psychological construct which refers to a cluster of ideas and attitudes an individual holds about himself or herself. Based on this definition and description, one may view self-concept as the way an individual regards himself or herself and as a psychological concept which forms an integral part of a person's personality. It is never static, as it can change from positive to negative, depending on the perceptions an individual has about himself or herself due to the prevailing circumstance or situation. One should always strive toward developing a positive self-concept as it can lead to success rather than a negative self-concept which can make one feel inadequate and worthless, thus leading to failure. Rice (1996) indicates that literature is deluged with reports indicating that learning increases when self-concept increases positively.

### **2.5.2 Motivation**

Van der Aardweg and Van der Aardweg (2006) define motivation as the driving force, the impetus of the personality, which is put into effect by an act of the will in accordance with what a learner wants to do. It energises behaviour and can be an intrinsic and extrinsic force. According to Mellet (2000), motivation has to do with a set of independent or dependent variable relationships that explain the direction, and persistence of an individual's behaviour, holding constant the effects of aptitude, skills, and understanding of the task, and the constraints operating on the environment. Deducing from what has been indicated by these authors, motivation can be defined as a driving force or an urge behind what an individual does. The driving force can be, for example, a desire to do well in a task. A highly motivated person tries to achieve to the best of his or her abilities and to be consistent in that achievement. It is indicated that motivation is an important factor in academic achievement (Sikhwari, 2007).

Motivation has been referred to as one of the most important psychological concepts in education. The reviewed literature on the effects of academic motivation on educational outcomes shows that it is linked to academic performance at university (Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009). Eccles and Wigfield cited by Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) in their review of modern theories of motivation indicate that the motivational theories focusing on individuals' beliefs do not deal with the reasons why individuals engage in the different

activities (Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009). This is, however, dealt with by the motivational theories focusing on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Self determination theory (SDT) is one such theory describing behaviour as intrinsically motivated, extrinsically motivated, or demotivated. Intrinsically motivated behaviour is associated with competence and self determination (Fallis & Optotow, 2003). People who are intrinsically motivated engage in activities that interest them, and they do so freely, with a full sense of volition and without the necessity of material rewards or constraints. Intrinsically motivated behaviour includes curiosity, exploration, manipulation, spontaneity, and interest. Literature on SDT indicates that high levels of intrinsic motivation have been linked to better academic performance at university (Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009).

### **2.5.3 Attitude**

An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related. In the learning context an attitude can be described as a general tendency or state of preparedness to behave in a particular way with regard to a learning task. In a study conducted by Sikhwari (2007) attitude was found to be significantly related to self-concept and motivation.

### **2.5.4 Self-esteem**

Self-esteem has been referred to as a personal resource necessary for positive psychological adjustment to stressful life transitions. A study conducted by Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) indicates that individuals with high levels of self-esteem perceive themselves to have the ability to complete certain tasks adequately, and thus employ effective coping strategies and manage their resources well in completing those tasks. It further indicates that self-esteem is associated with adjustment and academic performance. This positive association would indicate that students who show a high level of self-esteem were able to adjust to the university and performed very well academically (Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009). Malefo (2000) stresses the importance of two more factors, academic overload and perceived stress, on university experiences and the outcomes of disadvantaged students.

## 2.6 Stress

A study conducted by Kennett and Reed (2009) examined psycho-social factors predicting performance and retention of students at the university. Amongst other things the study examined variables that are determinants of academic resourcefulness and grades. The results of this study indicates that students who were more academically resourceful at follow-up were likely to be more generally resourceful, have higher academic self-efficacy beliefs, and be less inattentive, hyperactive, and anxious. Moreover, students showing the greatest improvements in academic resourcefulness over the time were more generally resourceful at pre-test (Kennett & Reed, 2009). These findings give an impression that there is a need certain holistic courses that would be aimed at helping students.

Malefo (2000) also conducted a study on the psycho-social factors among African women in a predominantly white university. The study was aimed at investigating the relationship between family contexts, experiences of stress and coping strategies. Furthermore, the study explored the impact these factors have on academic performance of woman students in the residences in the historically white university in South Africa. The results of the study indicate that students who experience less stressful life events will demonstrate problem-focused coping mechanisms. Students with a higher negative life change will show maladaptive coping strategies. Thus, students whose scores on the stress index were lower tended to use problem-focused efforts which include seeking other people's help dealing with stressful life events (Malefo, 2000).

Malefo (2000) stresses the importance of two more factors, academic overload and perceived stress, on university experiences and the outcomes of undergraduate students. Individuals experiencing high levels of stress may experience difficulty in coping with the new social, personal, and academic demands of university, which may adversely affect their academic achievement (Barron's Educational Series, 2000). Disadvantaged students attending historically 'White' universities face unique challenges not experienced by traditional students, such as under-preparedness due to inadequate schooling, which have been linked to increased levels of stress. The evidence is given by the study conducted by Prillerman, Myers, Smedley and Malefo cited by Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009), which indicate that students on financial aid have higher levels of stress than non-recipients of financial aid. However, studies of the effect of stress on academic performance have had contradictory results; some studies have found a significant negative association between stress and

academic performance, whereas others have found that stress did not have a significant impact on academic performance (Malefo, 2000).

## **2.7 Workload**

McClusky's theory of margin cited by Malefo (2000) is grounded on the notion that adulthood is a time of growth, change, and integration where an individual is in constant search for balance between energy needed to accomplish certain tasks and the load required to achieve those tasks. This balance is conceptualised as a ratio between the load (L) of life, which dissipates energy, and the power (P) of life, which allow one to deal with the load. Margin in life is the ratio of load to power. More power means a greater margin to participate in learning (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007).

Based on the margin theory, it is indicated that an imbalance between load and energy to perform a particular work leads to poor performance of a task to be achieved. In respect of this, the study conducted by Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) suggests that adjustment mediates the effects of students' help-seeking behaviours, academic motivation, self-esteem, perceived level of stress, and perceived academic overload on their academic performance. Difficulties with managing academic workload have been shown to have a negative impact on academic adjustment to university and academic performance (Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009).

## **2.8 Active learning**

Of many factors determining students' academic achievement at the university environment, active learning has received considerable attention. In a study conducted by Ali, Jusoff, Mokhtar and Salamat (2009) on the factors influencing students' performance at a diploma level at the university, active learning was found to have significant role on students' academic achievement. The findings of this study indicate that students who were actively engaged in the learning activities did well academically. These findings were supported by the study conducted by Fenollar, Roma'n and Cuestas (2007) on developing and testing a conceptual framework of the factors that play a significant role in academic performance at the university context. They found that active engagement in learning activities such as deep-



processing strategies and effort were linked with higher academic achievement (Fenollar, Roma'n & Cuestas, 2007).

## **2.9 Attendance**

A literature reviewed on whether attending lectures has a contributing effect to students' academic performance shows that there is a causal effect of attending lectures. Attending lectures is linked with high academic achievement. A study conducted by Ali, Jusoff, Mokhtar and Salamat (2009) shows that attending lectures plays an important role in improving students' academic performance. They found that students who avail themselves in lecture theatres regularly obtained greater symbols in comparison with those who did not attend lectures (Ali, Jusoff, Mokhtar & Salamat, 2009).

Consistent with these results, Marburger (2001) found that students who did not attend lectures were likely to give incorrect answers to question regarding a lesson taught in a particular day than students who attended. These findings were further supported by the findings of Moore (2006). The aim of the study was to determine how students' attitudes about attending lectures are related to their academic performance in an introductory science class. The results suggest that attending lectures increases students' ability to learn. It is further indicated that students who attended lectures received good grades (Moore, 2006).

## **2.10 Time spent on task**

Nickerson and Kritsonis (2006) conducted a study on the determinants of academic performance. This study was aimed at analysing the factors that impact academic achievement among Asian American, African-American and Hispanic students. This revealed among other things that time spent on work determine how students perform (Nickerson & Kritsonis, 2006). It is further indicated that time spent on task involves reading textbooks, watching movies or participating on extracurricular activities. Among minorities, though all groups spend time studying or doing class assignments, Asian-Americans spend most of the time on school assignments and studying. Other minority students spend time watching television, playing a sport or on the phone. If minority and low-economic students come to school with less ability to concentrate and put forth less effort on schoolwork, this alone could account for their making less academic progress during the year. Some ethnic students

endure curfews in terms of time spent on the phone and going out on the weekends. Nonetheless, these curfews do not impose much influence on the academic success of African American and Hispanic students (Nickerson & Kritsonis, 2006).

### **2.11 Extracurricular activities**

There is a significant relationship between extracurricular activities and academic performance of students at a university. A positive relationship between students' involvement in extracurricular activities and academic performance has been indicated (Ali, Jusoff, Mokhtar & Salamat, 2009). Their study was conducted to determine factors that influence students' performance at the university. The results indicated that students who actively participated in extracurricular activities were found to do well on their academic work. "Even though the correlations of involvement in extracurricular activities with academic performance have not been found to be statistically significant, there is strong evidence showing that positive relationship does exist between the two" (Ali, Jusoff, Mokhtar & Salamat, 2009, p. 81-90). Similar findings were found in a study conducted by Darling, Caldwell and Smith (2005) on adolescents and extracurricular activities. In their study they found that adolescents who were actively engaged in extracurricular activities received higher grades on academic work and were interested in attending school classes (Darling, Caldwell & Smith, 2005).

### **2.12 Peer influence**

Among other things, peer influence is one of the factors that have either positive or negative effect on academic performance. In a study conducted by Gibson (2005) on the factors that promote or impede success in school work, the results suggest that students were aware that in some situations peers could be a negative influence. However, there was support that students received from their peers. One of the participants in the study indicated that if you are a student that is associated with people who do well in academic work, you also stand a good chance to excel academically (Gibson, 2005). "The respondents explained how they counted on their friends to motivate them, to provide help when needed with homework, to share information on what classes they needed to get into college, and to help one another with much needed emotional and social support" (Gibson, 2005, p. 594).

### **2.13 Adjustment**

De Villiers cited by Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) indicates that there has been a lack of success in predicting the academic success of undergraduate students because of the static view taken of the determinants of academic success. Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) asserted that various authors suggest that psychosocial factors play a key role in predicting the academic success of undergraduate students, considering their social and educational backgrounds. Much effort has been expended on investigating the role of adjustment to university experiences as a factor in predicting university outcomes. Adjustment is typically defined as a multi-dimensional process of interaction between an individual and his or her environment, in an attempt to bring about harmony between the demands and needs of the individual and his or her environment.

Academic performance has been identified as a major determinant of retention and graduation, and has been referred to as the single most revealing indicator that a student is coping with the academic demands of the university and is thus likely to graduate (Barron's Educational Series, 2000). There is much evidence to indicate that adjustment in turn is a key determinant of academic performance.

### **2.14 Help-seeking**

A literature taken from Robbins's (2004) meta-analysis, which identified the key determinants of academic performance from the existing literature, is given below. Apart from adjustment to university life, help-seeking, academic motivation, and self-esteem were identified by Robbins (2004) as possible contributors to the academic success of undergraduate students. Help-seeking via informal student-faculty interactions has been associated with better socialisation at university. Students experience and learn institutional values and requirements through their interaction with academics, other university staff, and their peers. Student-faculty contact and the utilisation of student support services and intervention programmes have been shown to have a positive impact on academic performance (Robbins, 2004).

In a study conducted by Petersen Louw and Dumont (2009), one of the hypotheses that were tested was help-seeking as a mediating behaviour in academic performance. There was a link found between help-seeking and students' academic performance. This positive association

significantly indicated that those students who experienced difficulties and sought help in relation to the problems they faced during the course of the year showed higher level of self-determined academic motivation. They also displayed a high level of self motivation. These students were better adjusted at the university and as a result achieved a higher level of academic performance. These findings were further supported by conducted by Lowis and Casley (2008) on the factors affecting progression and achievement, help-seeking was found to have positive outcomes on students' performance. Their results show that students would like instant contact with tutors. Students needed more assistance advice and encouragement in managing their time. The respondents also indicated that they found it helpful to work in a group (Lowis & Casley, 2008).

### **2.15 Grades improvement and retention**

In a study conducted by Fenollar, Romaín and Cuestas (2007), which was aimed at developing and testing a conceptual framework of the factors that play a significant role in academic performance at the university context. One of its goals was to determine the role played by goal motivation and self-efficacy on academic performance. The results of the study indicated that there was a positive relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance. "Self-efficacy was positively related to deep processing and negatively related to surface processing. Furthermore, self-efficacy had the strongest indirect positive effect on academic performance through deep processing" (Fenollar, Romaín & Cuestas, 2007, p. 885). Looking at the university context which demands a lot of effort, it appears that in order for students to succeed academically they need to develop strong beliefs pertaining to their capability to perform academic work given in class. According to Fenollar, Romaín and Cuestas (2007), one way to increase self-efficacy is to provide feedback to students with an aim of helping them develop reasonable efficacy beliefs. Pointing out areas that need improvement and then providing scaffolding and opportunities for students to improve should help develop and maintain accurate efficacy judgments (Fenollar, Romaín & Cuestas, 2007). When students put more effort to their academic work, they are likely to improve their grades and as a result they continue with their studies.

## **2.16 Effective time management tools**

At a tertiary institution students are expected to have some degree of time management skills. This is because each module taught either in a term or semester system has assessments that students need to complete in order to determine whether they pass or fail a particular module. These assessments have deadlines that students need to meet. Looking at this commitment that is required of a student, one needs to balance time required to do activities at the university context. A study conducted by Swart, Lombard and Jager (2010) indicated that there is no significant link between students' time management skills and academic performance. This study was aimed at exploring the relationship between time management skills and academic achievement of African engineering students (Swart, Lombard & Jager, 2010). In their study most of the students did not experience problems with managing their time. There were only few Black participants who showed a lack of time management skill. The relationship between time management skills and academic performance of students was not statistically significant. "This was confirmed by the regression analysis test for the individual grades of the respondents in test 1" (Swart, Lombard & Jager, 2010, p. 86).

The following time management tools may help students living more productive lives, recognising that time is ripe to complete their academic work successfully. "Students may find it helpful to survey and maintain schedule, maintain a time planner organised according to priority, keep a checklist of tasks completed and outstanding, implement an effective filing system, create a routine time and place for studying, study in sixty minutes time blocks and take regular breaks, and begin working on long-term assignment in advance" (Swart, Lombard & Jager, 2010, p. 87.).

## **2.17 Factors predicting academic performance**

There are three factors predicting academic performance discussed below.

### **1.17.1 Self-efficacy as a predictor of achievement goals, study strategies and academic performance**

In Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory, the concept 'perceived self-efficacy' is defined as people's judgement of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to

attain designated types of performances. These capabilities are determinants of academic motivation, choice and performance. For example, earlier research has shown that self-efficacy has a positive influence on mastery of goals (Bong, 2001). High self-efficacy will encourage someone to pursue challenging personal goals and spend much effort to realise them, and show high academic performance, and low self-efficacy will result in pursuing a less high level of performance (Bong, 2001). It is asserted that self-efficacy has a positive influence on performance avoidance goals and work avoidance (Fenollar, Roma'n & Cuestas, 2007).

Students who believe they are able and that can and will do well are much more likely to be motivated in terms of effort, persistence and behaviour than those who believe they are less able and do not expect to succeed (Bong, 2001). There is also evidence to suggest that these confident students will also be more cognitively engaged in learning and thinking than those who doubt their capabilities to do well. Findings from Greene (2004) reveal how important self-efficacy is for successful learning. In this context, research has reliably shown that self-efficacy is positively correlated with measures of meaningful (deep) cognitive strategy use. According to Bandura (1986), students who are not confident or perceive themselves incapable may avoid behaviours that are seen as challenging or difficult. Based on the aforementioned empirical findings and Bandura's theorising, we expect self-efficacy to have a positive influence on deep processing and effort, and a negative influence on surface processing. It has been argued that self-efficacy is an antecedent to outcome expectations and earlier research has shown empirical evidence for such proposition (Greene, 2004). Apparently, self-efficacy perceptions consistently come out as a strong predictor of academic performance.

### **2.17.2 Study strategies as predictors of academic performance**

The study conducted by Fenollar, Roma'n and Cuestas (2007) shows a positive influence of deep processing on academic performance. However, empirical evidence is mixed regarding the relationship between surface processing and performance. For example, Watkins (2001) meta-analysed 55 correlations and found a statistically analytical negative correlation of 2.11 between surface processing and performance. Yet 27 of these correlations (49% of them) were not statistically significant. Interestingly, according to Lizzio, Wilson and Simons's study cited by Fenollar, Roma'n and Cuestas (2007), when compared with science students,

commerce students showed a clear positive relationship (.35) between a reported surface approach and a higher grade point average (GPA). A plausible explanation is that memorisation and rote rehearsal seem well-suited for some types of material and some types of exam formats. In the light of inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between surface processing and performance, it is expected that surface processing is unrelated to academic performance. Finally, prior research has consistently documented a positive influence of effort on academic performance (Fenollar, Roma'n & Cuestas, 2007).

### **2.17.3 Class size as predictor of effort and academic performance**

Small classes in the elementary grades have been found to boost students' academic performance. For instance, Finn, Pannozzo and Achilles (2003) argue that smaller classes have a positive impact on students' learning behaviour such as attentiveness, participation in learning activities and taking initiative in the classroom. They further indicated that children in large classes are more distracted from work and more often off the task.

In smaller classes at the university level, interactive discussions may be used more than lectures, facilitating better 'delayed recall' learning and critical thinking. A smaller class allows for more personalised instruction by which students are given a clear understanding of what is expected of them and how to achieve such goals (Fenollar, Roma'n & Cuestas, 2007). It is expected that students' effort to achieve such academic performance will be greater in larger classes. The negative effect of a large class size on student performance has been supported in previous research. Large classes are presumed to reduce the likelihood that lecturers can adapt their instructional style to individual students. Students may feel lost in a crowd or may lose interest in the class because of the number of classmates within a particular course (Finn, Pannozzo & Achilles, 2003). Then, we expect class size to have a negative influence on students' academic performance.

### **2.18 Factors outside the university environment**

Epstein (2001) examined the effects of parental involvement on various academic outcomes. He found that in both quantitative and qualitative studies, parental involvement has been found to positively affect students' educational experience. Students benefit academically when there is a close relationship between parents and schools, and partnership effects cover

a variety of positive outcomes, such as improved homework and study habits, better attitudes toward schools, low absenteeism and dropping out (Bodovski, 2010). The importance of habitual factors upon students in further education was stated by Palmer (2001), who highlighted the complexity of linking such issues to student poor academic achievement. He found that family support has been cited as a key factor in the achievement of students by various authors.

The study conducted by May, Bidgood and Saebi (2006) reports that staff at the college suggested that ethnic minority students may tend to be from less worthy families and be less well supported at home and that they may be under more pressure to get a job and, therefore, more likely to drop out. This view concurs with recent findings (Palmer, 2001) in a study of dropout from post-compulsory education, that ethnic minority students were, on average, more likely to come from poorer families, and with the student feelings in the study of getting no help from parents and of it being difficult to find somewhere to study outside the university. In addition, they felt that the goals that parents set for their children vary with culture, so that motivation and thus achievement are closely linked to parental attitudes. They also agreed that the cultures of ethnic groups may lead to different approaches to discipline and that these differed between the sexes, parents being generally stricter with females (May, Bidgood & Saebi, 2006).

## **2.19 Social class and parental practices**

Family social class is reproduced across generations through various cultural and social resources and practices. Cultural resources refer to family-based cultural traits such as work habits and basic learning orientations, prevailing cultural norms, values and attitudes, and parenting styles and practices (Bodovski, 2010).

Predominantly quantitative studies of educational stratification have addressed the question of reproduction of parental social class using survey data. In a survey of Wisconsin high school seniors, Sewell and Hauser cited by Bodovski (2010) examined the social-psychological mechanism of status attainment. They discovered that although parental education, father's occupation, and family income affect children's attainment directly, part of the effect is mediated by the child's own educational and occupational aspirations, peer influence, and the perceived encouragement of parents (Bodovski, 2010).



A further step towards an understanding of the mechanisms of social class reproduction has been taken by Farkas, Farkas and Jencks cited by Bodovski (2010) that focused on habits and non-cognitive traits and behaviours that play a significant role in school (Bodovski, 2010). The findings from these quantitative studies showed that effort, organisation, enthusiasm, and discipline contributed to students' success in school above and beyond their objective knowledge.

### **2.20 Parents' income level**

Malefo (2000) conducted a study on psycho-social factors and academic achievement among African women students at a predominately white university in South Africa. The findings of this study indicate that there is no statistical significant relationship between parents' economic status and students' academic performance (Malefo, 2000). Beblo and Lauer (2004) found similar results. In their findings it is indicated that there is poor link between student academic performance and parents' income. They further indicated that

A study conducted by Ermisch and Francesconi (2001) suggests that there is positive relationship between parents' level of education and their children's academic achievement. This study revealed that mother's level of education as compared to father's education was strongly associated with the child's academic achievement.

### **2.21 Parental attitudes and expectations**

The importance of attitude and expectations to achievement has been investigated previously in a study by Keeves cited by Jacobs and Harvey (2005) of Australian students in their final year of primary school and last year of secondary school. He found a moderate to strong association between students' mathematics and science achievement and parents' attitudes towards their children's education and ambitions for their future education and occupation. Children internalize their parents' demands and use them even at the university level.

Marjoribanks cited by Jacobs and Harvey (2005) discussed the importance of parental interest, expectations, attitudes and aspirations on children's academic achievement. He proposed that these mediate the negative effect of other variables, such as socio-economic status, single-parent families, uninvolved parents, and contribute significantly to academic

achievement. Other researchers such as Jacobs and Harvey (2005) have demonstrated significant relationships between parental expectations and student academic performance, both directly as well as indirectly, through student, peer and classroom variables. The importance of parental attitude and expectations was further supported by Ma's (2001) study of student participation in advanced mathematics. She found that the most important predictors of student participation were parents' expectations and plans for their children's future tertiary studies. A further point of interest is the extent to which certain schools regularly rank high in terms of external criteria for success of students at the end-of-year examinations that are used as entry scores for tertiary programmes. This is a university accepted criterion for evidence of good teaching and schools often quote the proportion of students who enter university directly from their schools in advertising for students (Ma, 2001).

## **2.22 Summary**

This chapter began by looking at issues surrounding students' academic lives in South African universities. It has been indicated that there is a high rate of undergraduate dropout every year, costing South Africa billions of rand in subsidies. Apart from the devastating effect on students' lives the dropout rate also affects families. A further look has focused on existing literature pertaining to some social, organisational and individual factors that impact negatively or positively on students' academic achievement. The following chapter will present the methodology used to conduct the study.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Introduction

“Entering university is a challenge for all students. The culture of learning at tertiary level is quite different from that encountered at secondary school level. For instance, students are expected to already be self-motivated, autonomous students, and course content is often presented in large group lectures. Moreover, academic subjects and their literacy requirements can differ across disciplines so that, for example, expectations for science students can vary in straight forward or subtle ways, from those for history students” (Johnson, 2008, p. 243). Carkin cited by Johnson (2008) indicates that such variation could include written or oral conventions for how to structure an argument or report research findings.

Wenger (1999) alluded that academic differences are the social changes that students encounter; he further states that they often live on their own for the first time, away from friends, family or other familiar support networks. Thus, when students begin tertiary study, they enter not just one but often several new, and potentially contrasting communities.

The high failure rate at university has raised a great concern to the community and the researcher. According to Garcia and Pintrich (1994) this, both in social and financial terms, can be quite high and there is an imperative to better understand the factors that affect students' academic performance. Garcia and Pintrich (1994) state that educational research into student achievement has broadly focused on two major areas; namely, cognition and motivation. In the area of cognition, researchers have found that factors such as prior knowledge and the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies will influence the type of learning undertaken and consequently student achievement. In the area of motivation, research has concentrated on why students display certain behaviours and how these in turn affect their achievement. Ironsmith, Marva, Harju and Eppler cited by Carmichael and Taylor (2005) suggest that motivational factors may in fact play a more important role in the prediction of academic achievement than cognitive factors.

In this study, the researcher is concerned with the unsatisfactory academic achievement of undergraduate students at a tertiary level of education. This situation has caused great concern to the department of education (Department of Education, 2001). It is also a great worry to parents. This chapter constitutes an essential part of any research process. Thus it sets out the research methodology that was used to achieve the objectives of the study and will, therefore, describe the approach, procedure, methods and sampling used in the research. Furthermore, it describes the data collection method and analysis technique used.

### **3.2. Research approaches**

There are two approaches to research, namely the qualitative and the quantitative approaches (Fouche & Delpont, 2005). Qualitative research is largely based on interpretive, holistic approach and aims to understand reality and meaning. It is a non-numerical examination and interpretation of observations for which the purpose is discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships (Berg, 2007). The product of qualitative research is descriptive data, as understanding is the researcher's main concern (Fouche & Delpont, 2005). On the other hand, quantitative research is a scientific explanation that aims to measure the social world objectively, to test hypothesis and to predict and control human behaviour (Fouche & Delpont, 2005). Furthermore, it refers to the numerical representation and manipulation of observations, used to describe and explain the phenomenon that such observation reflects (Berg, 2007).

For purposes of this study a qualitative approach was used as the research was directed at understanding the factors that contribute to poor academic performance among students particularly at the University of Zululand. This approach was chosen, using semi-structured face-to-face interviews lasting up to one hour. For this in-depth qualitative investigation of students' learning experiences at the university, ten participants were recruited.

### **3.3. Type of research**

The type of research depends on the purpose the research has and the practical application, thereof (Gall, Borg & Gall, 2003). The motivation for the research would determine whether it is applied research or basic research. According to Neuman and Wiegand (2000), applied research is the scientific planning of induced change in a troublesome situation with the focus

on a problem in practice. Applied research is designed to solve practical problems of the modern world rather than to acquire knowledge for knowledge's sake (Neuman & Wiegand, 2000). One might say that the goal of the applied scientists is to improve the human condition. Thus, the current study took the form of applied research, since the main concern was to determine the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement among undergraduate students at the University of Zululand. The findings will be valuable in improving the students' academic performance.

### **3.4. Research methodology**

There are a number of research methods that are employed in qualitative approach to research. The present study used a case study method to successfully explain the phenomenon under investigation. According to Thomas (2011), case studies are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods. They are in depth studies of particular situation rather than a sweeping statistical survey. It is a method used to narrow down a very broad field of research into one easily researchable topic. Whilst they will not answer questions completely, they will give some indications and allow further elaboration and hypothesis creation on subjects. A case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame, an object, within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates.

Instead of using samples and following a fixed procedure to examine limited number of variables, case study methods involve an in-depth, and sometimes longitudinal (over a long period of time) examination of a single instance or event. They provide a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analyzing information, and reporting the results. Therefore, the researcher may gain a sharpened understanding of why the instance happened as it did, and what might become important to look at more extensively in future research. The case study research design is also useful for testing whether scientific theories and models actually work in the real world. You may come out with a great computer model for describing how the ecosystem of a rock pool works but it is only by trying it out on a real life pool that you can see if it is a realistic simulation (Thomas, 2011).

### **3.5 Target population**

Since the goal of qualitative research is enriching the understanding of experience, it needs to select fertile exemplars of the experience of the study. Such selections are purposeful and sought out. The concern is not how data were gathered or from how many sources but whether the data that were collected are sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to understanding an experience. The ten participants were selected using the purposive sampling method.

The population was identified as the community of the University of Zululand students. This population was chosen because it was an available population with a distinct culture of learning as university students. The sample matched the University of Zululand's international student profile with Black students being the dominant group.

### **3.6 Sampling method**

Purposive sampling (due to time and monetary constraints) was employed to solicit participants according to the format explicated in Berg (2007). This sampling technique is useful for obtaining subjects in studies of this nature with monetary constraints.

The participants were drawn from the whole student body of the University of Zululand. The criteria for participant selection were as follows: participants were registered undergraduate students at the University of Zululand who had studied at the university for at least one semester of the year. There is an assumption that students experience adjustment difficulties in the initial period at institutions of higher learning, especially in the first semester (Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Cultural adaptation is a continuing process, and many of these difficulties may disappear during the process of cultural transition. The researcher presumed that after a semester as a student at the university, one would have adapted to and familiar with the university academic culture, the manner in which students interact with lectures, and the university learning environment, and thus had adapted academically, socio-culturally, and psychologically by developing the coping mechanisms and intercultural and interpersonal communication skills. This study examined their academic performance issues by drawing on their past and present learning experiences at the university through their own narrative stories, with a particular focus on their views towards factors that contribute to poor academic performance among University of Zululand students.

### **3.7 Data collection technique**

This study utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews to identify the factors that are most relevant to poor academic achievement of undergraduate students who are enrolled at the University of Zululand. The semi-structured interview questions involved students' personal profiling, their views, reflections and perceptions of the factors that contribute to poor academic performance they had experienced at the university. The use of qualitative interviews was necessary to examine the topic thoroughly and to tap into the rich textual meanings of the students' responses. The interview questions addressed the major factors related to poor academic achievement of students. Examining data from more than one source is an important way to triangulate qualitative research data, and with multi-method data collection, insights gained from individual sources can be used to complement and enrich overall research findings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

According to Kadushin (1990), an interview is a verbal interaction between people during which ideas, attitudes and feelings are exchanged. It is a specialised form of communication in which people interact for a purpose. The participants were informed about the purpose of the interview and there was mutual acceptance and understanding of the procedure. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to supplement data. Hoy and Gregg (1994) note that interviews are the oldest; most widely used and most valued assessment techniques for evaluating social and affective functioning. Subjects were purposefully selected to identify and gather their underlying feelings and thoughts on factors contributing to poor academic performance. A total of 10 interviews were conducted over the period of study. Questions were phrased in a manner that encouraged participants to share their experiences or their observation about the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement at the University of Zululand and how this was impacting on their practice and their lives in general.

Students were first asked background questions about the number of years they had studied at the university, the nature of the subjects they completed before entering university, what they had imagined about studying at the university, and their reflections about what they had encountered. During this initial section of the interview, the researcher established rapport with the students and put them at ease before posing more probing questions about their study experiences. The remaining questions were concerned with courses (i.e. instructional techniques, teaching effectiveness, what the student did when content was not understood),

assignments (i.e. consistency of marks and feedback, wording of assignment instructions, and what the student did when assignments were not understood), and support structures that were or were not in place for students. Thus, the research was guided by a set of open ended questions formulated from the following group of categorical information:

- Degree of preparedness to study at tertiary level (including English language skills, academic literacy skills and background knowledge).
- Difficulties coping with higher degree studies and tertiary environment (including degree of comprehension of course material, perceived reasons why comprehension and coping strategies were lacking).
- Academic literacy skills in practice (including difficulties understanding assignment requirements, feedback and coping strategies).

### **3.7.1 Advantages of interview method**

Struwig and Stead (2007) maintain that discussion is allowed about the causes of problems or solutions to problems. The discussion allows maximum opportunity for free expression by the respondent. This was true with students who were suspicious and to whom the researcher was not familiar. It allowed the researcher to clarify questions. This enhanced the validity of the responses as the respondents answered without misinterpretation of questions.

Struwig and Stead (2007) assert that in an interview, the interviewer is present to observe non-verbal behaviour as well as to assess the validity of the interviewee's answers. This is true in this study because when the answers went off the point, the researcher could give clues and lead to the questions.

The researcher was quite cognisant of the disadvantages attributed to the interview as a tool of data collection, but effort was made to overcome flaws. In order to enhance the interest and concentration of the respondent, a coding system was designed to record the responses of the respondents. Consequently, interruption of the communication flow between respondents and interviewer was reduced. Struwig and Stead (2007) maintain that for the interview to be successful, the interviewer schedule should start with non-threatening questions to enable the respondent to loosen up. After the initial items, more pressing or feeling type questions are to be asked. A similar pattern was applied in the present study.



### **3.8 Data analysis technique**

Content analysis is an unobtrusive and cost-effective method used across disciplines. It involves “a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings” (Berg, 2007, p. 303-304). Researchers examine previously recorded messages or communications (oral, written, videotaped) primarily using classing and categorical coding.

All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and analysed according to the emergent themes. The data were analysed using content analysis according to the schemata explicated by Berg (2007), who contends that content analysis is the most obvious way to analyse interview data. In the present study, the researcher employed latent content analysis which allows one to discern the “deep structural meaning conveyed by the message” (Berg, 2007, p. 308).

Consistent with qualitative research, a ‘constant comparison’ approach to analysing data was followed in this study. As data are collected, they are read and re-read, and through a process of inductive reasoning the researcher identifies emergent themes (Johnson, 2008). In this study the researcher employed a similar procedure. Then, as new data were collected, social phenomena were coded, their properties noted and they were compared with incidents already identified. Consistent themes were integrated into existing categories and new themes were organised into new categories. Eventually, categories were synthesised into more global descriptive perspectives.

### **3.9 Reflection on the quality and trustworthiness of analysis**

Generally, the validity of the findings of qualitative research emerges from the application of the concepts of indexicality, inconcludability and reflexivity (Parker, 1994). Indexicality and inconcludability refer to the acknowledgement by the researcher that human experience changes with the changing conditions of life (indexicality) and that there is always a gap between actual human experience and interpretations of that experience (reflexivity). The study acknowledged that the emerging model of the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement among undergraduate students at a tertiary institution was applicable to the experiences of the participants in the study and, by extension, to other people with similar

experiences. Trustworthiness can be assured by the consistency, stability and repeatability of the informant's accounts as well as the investigators' ability to collect and record information accurately. The model further, requires that the researcher should have developed consistent responses or habits in using methods and scoring or rating its results and factors related to subjects and testing procedures should have managed to reduce measurement errors. It can be argued that quality has been maintained through a rigorous and transparent analytic process.

### **3.10 Biographical information of respondents**

The sample comprised both males and females representing undergraduate students of the University of Zululand. The choice of the level of study was essential because it was where the phenomenon under investigation was being observed on a daily basis. It was also significant because researcher biases and assumptions were always likely to emerge. Some of the students were from rural areas, while others were from urban areas. Johnson (2008) defines urban area as a city area considered as inner city plus built-up environs, irrespective of local administrative boundaries. According to this study, urban area refers to any place, township or suburb, located nearest to cities and rural areas refers to a place distant from the cities and accustomed to the country or country life. The subjects' ages range from 20 years to 32 years old.

### **3.11 Timing of the study**

The study was undertaken just after the half-yearly examinations commenced. The researcher considered this the most suitable time for conducting interviews to students because almost all students, including first year students, were still relaxed; they were not under pressure of writing examinations. They also had some experience of the university life.

### **3.12 Ethical consideration**

Ethics are described as a set of moral principles that offer rules and behavioural expectations about the most correct conduct (Strydom, 2005). Ethics provide a researcher with a guideline to moral conduct and to prevent scientific misconduct. The ethical considerations and guidelines directed this research. Permission was granted by the ethics committee of higher

education of the University of Zululand for access to the facilities and use students as subjects of the study. Individually signed informed consent was obtained from each of the participants.

The participants were not deceived or misled by any means, and all information was laid out clearly to them. Participants were also not harmed in any manner. However, debriefing was made available to them, in a manner that they felt the need to discuss issues that came up during the interview processes. The participants were not coerced to take part in the study and they were assured the right to withdraw at any point during the interviews, without the fear of being penalised, since participation in the research was voluntary. Furthermore, confidentiality was ensured at all times.

Researchers are obliged to ensure that they have necessary skills to conduct research in an ethically acceptable manner (Strydom, 2005). The researcher was considered to be qualified and competent, having a postgraduate knowledge-base in psychology, and was, therefore, familiar with the concepts and theories in the discipline. Recognition of the boundaries of the researcher's experience was acknowledged, and the researcher thus did not venture further than the qualifications allowed. Furthermore, the supervisor of the research also had broad research expertise to ensure that the researcher undertook ethically sound research.

Methodological reflexivity, reflection on the process of conducting the research, and personal reflexivity, enabling the researchers to evaluate their own performance, formed vital links between the interview sessions of the study in order to reduce the potential problem of subjectivity by enhancing ethical and methodological rigour. The data and documents pertaining to this research were stored on a compact disk by the researcher, and would be kept for a minimum of 5 years from the commencement of the study. Data and documents were stored for archival purposes only.

### **3.12 Summary**

This chapter began with the explication of the approach that was employed to conduct the research. The type of research and the methodology was further elaborated. It further indicated the target population, the sampling method, and data collection and analysis techniques were explicated. It also dealt with the biographical information of the respondents,

timing of the study and ethical practices that were considered in conducting the study. The next chapter will report information on data analysis and discussion of the findings.

## CHAPTER 4

### PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### 4.1 Introduction

Chapter three gave a detailed account of the research design and methodology. This chapter concerns the detailed field work of the study. The purpose of this chapter is to present and provide analysis of data gathered. The questions the study aimed to answer are reiterated in each and every participant and the emerging themes thereafter are identified. The researcher makes sense out of, and learns similar themes from, the individuals' raw data that was collected.

#### 4.2 Characteristics of the respondents

The participants in the study consisted of nine African students and one Indian student of the University of Zululand main campus. One of the African students was a foreign national. The sample included students from various faculties: from the Faculty of Education they were 4 (40%), from Faculty of Arts they were 3 (30%), from Faculty of Science and Agriculture they were 2 (20%) and from Faculty of Commerce, Administration and Law there was 1 (10%). The respondents' ages ranged between 20 years and 32 years old. The large age group was from 20-25 year olds (60%), then they were 26-30 year olds (30%) and lastly there were 30 and above year olds (10%). All students who participated in the study consented and consistent with the study each of the 10 students of the University of Zululand had undergone the experience of life in the tertiary institution.

The distribution between the different year levels was 30% on first year level, 10% on second year level, 30% on level three and 30% on level four (only the faculty of Arts had fourth year level undergraduate students). The table below provides the total number of participants according to gender and percentage:

**Table: Gender of participants**

Gender	Number of participants	Percentage
Male	5	50%
Female	5	50%

### **4.3 Qualitative data**

Each participant's views are presented below and the themes that emerged from the responses are identified in this section.

#### **Participant 1 (Male)**

##### **What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“There are many things that contribute to poor academic performance but the first and the most important contributing factor is political affiliation. Students who are politically active tend to stay long at the university because they want their political parties to win elections and they also want positions in their political parties, so they end up not completing their degrees on record time. Another problem is substance consumption; sometimes it contributes because when you are under the influence of alcohol you are easily influenced by others then you cannot manage your time as you may have planned. My current problem is that when I want to consult my supervisor for cases, he is hardly available for me so the unavailability of lecturers makes things difficult for students in their academic work. Students' negative attitudes towards some lecturers play a detrimental role in their academic performance because they end up not putting much effort to their work. I never thought of quitting the university. The last thing is the issue of money. It affects a lot of students in this university, for instance, I was unlikely to come back this year due to financial difficulties; however, I managed to pay some amount of my debt”.

**Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“Yes we do have an interest in getting high grades because we have that passion to pass our degrees with first class or distinction. Some of us do not care about that as long as they pass the module. Ok yes I do like challenging work, as I engaged myself in many extra curricular activities such as students peer education, students’ society and am a student assistant. In the case if I do not understand a particular task I discuss with my colleagues, Masters Students as well as the lecturer of that particular work”.

**Themes elicited from Participant 1**

**Question 1**

- Political affiliation
- Substance use
- Unavailability of lecturers
- Students’ attitudes towards lecturers
- Financial difficulties

**Question 2**

- Interested in getting high grades
- Likes challenging work
- Consult colleagues, Masters Students and lecturers

**Participant 2 (Female)**

**What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“In this university there are a number of students that attend each module which leads to difficulties in terms of accommodation, so there are a number of disturbances that occur in lecture halls. Another thing is the issue of books, we cannot get books. The library cannot be easily accessed because of the number of students. Another thing is the lecturers, as much as they are there to help us but the number of students they assist has a negative impact because

when you go to consult a lecturer you find that there is another student and end up not assisted. Lecturers are not available for students when they need them. Some of the students stay off campus, so they cannot manage to do their work in the library. The things we have to do during the course of the day like standing long queues in the dining halls affect us so much. The information in the library, the books there are outdated. Another thing is the shortage of computers in the computer labs; we find that students wait for a long time to get a computer. I really experience difficulties with the library and the shortage of computers in the computer laboratories”.

**Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“No I don’t like to engage difficult tasks but I like interesting things. I am motivated in getting high grades and I always try to do all my best. If I did not reach what I wanted I then look at what was exactly the problem to ensure that in future I will not experience a similar problem”.

**Themes elicited from Participant 2**

**Question 1**

- Overcrowded lecture halls
- Shortage of and outdated books
- Huge enrolment
- Unavailability of lecturers
- Access to the library
- Long queues in the dining halls
- Shortage of computers

**Question 2**

- Does not like challenging tasks
- Interested in getting high grades



### **Participant 3 (Female)**

#### **What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“Most students in this university are enrolled in faculties that they are not supposed to be in or they did not choose at the beginning, like me I was not here for psychology but ended up studying it. Another thing is the unavailability of lecturers, we do not find lecturers if we need them, they do not respond to us accordingly. When I am seeking help they just highlight the book, they are not helpful. Parents do not give us enough money; you cannot attend with other students wearing the same clothes for the whole month. I once experience difficulties when four of my modules were not registered and I even thought of quitting the university. Another difficulty I experienced was the financial problem. Last year I was owing the university the amount of R10 000, 00 and I was told to pay 50% of this amount. Fortunately I managed to pay but it was not easy”.

#### **Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“Yes I am because I have enough time to study. The books that are prescribed are best when compared to other universities. Our editions are changing whereas in other universities they are using outdated books. With the library books, they are outdated you find the books of 1960s. I love challenging work when I am going to get guidance from the lecturers. I also like to participate in extra curricular activities but in this university there are few students who like to participate in extramural activities. When there is something I do not understand I firstly consult my class mate and seek help from them. I consult the lecturer of that particular module. I also consult other lecturers from other departments”.

### **Themes elicited from Participant 3**

#### **Question 1**

- Wrong choice of the degree
- Unavailability of lecturers
- Financial difficulties

## **Question 2**

- Likes challenging work
- Likes getting good grades
- Consult classmates and lecturers

## **Participant 4 (Female)**

### **What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“For me the influence of people you are living with has a negative impact to your academic work. It depends on what kind of them and what do they like to do, for example, some friends might want to go out with you for movies. Secondly, financial issue plays a detrimental impact to academic work because you find that as a student instead of studying you tend to think about your debts. I am currently experiencing financial difficulties”.

### **Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“I am the kind of a person who likes things that are challenging. I like to find out the outset of a particular thing. When I am given a task to do I like if I am instructed to do it but not how because I want to be challenged. I like to keep my mind busy, and you can see how much I am capable of thinking. I really like participating in extracurricular activities such as Black Management Forum (BMF). When I do not understand a particular work given I normally go straight to the lecturer that gave us the work. Sometimes I ask my colleagues for help before consulting a lecturer”.

## **Themes elicited from Participant 4**

### **Question 1**

- Peer pressure
- Financial difficulties

## **Question 2**

- Likes challenging work
- Consult colleagues and lecturers

## **Participant 5 (Female)**

### **What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“The most problematic issue in our university is the language usage; we normally use IsiZulu instead of English on campus. This makes it difficult for students to adapt in academic work because it is presented in English. You find that a student cannot construct even a single sentence and this affects them academically. When you speak English on campus you are perceived as putting yourself at a higher level. Another thing is that students come to the university with their issues from home; some are even heads of their families. Another thing is that we come to the university for different purposes; we are easily influenced by others. Most of the students are affected by politics in our university. They are involved in it more than in their books. So, political affiliation is the major problem on campus. Some are affected by their excitement of being at a university because they are too young. I am currently not experiencing any difficulties but I had financial problems before but I sorted out everything. When I first came to the university I experienced difficulties with residences to an extent that I ended up staying off campus. It was so difficult to pay for the rent because I am coming from a poor family”.

### **Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“I like challenging things because they enable me to see myself in terms of mental capacity. I want to see myself where I am. Like when I am involved in complicated things I feel comfortable because I see myself as improving and I really like to pass modules with good marks. When I do not understand a particular task given I consult lecturers and I also consult friends who are at a higher level”.

## **Themes elicited from Participant 5**

### **Question 1**

- Language barrier
- Dual roles (home and university responsibilities)
- Peer pressure
- Political affiliation
- Financial difficulties

### **Question 2**

- Likes challenging work
- Likes getting good grades
- Consult lecturers and students

## **Participant 6 (Male)**

### **What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“I think there is a lot, first of all is that when students come to the university for the first time they just have the perception of living a free life. There is no one to guide you; you can engage yourself in alcohol. You can call your girlfriend and spend a lot of time with her instead of studying. I am not experiencing any difficulties, however, I once thought of quitting the university just because of laziness. Sometimes as students we find ourselves packed with a lot of work and we cannot manage”.

### **Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“No, I don't like engaging challenging work. Actually I know myself, I am a bit lazy but I can do it by force. If it is something I can choose I would not, but due to the fact that we are at a university definitely I will experience challenges. I am interested in scoring high marks because when you get high marks you are recognised and it opens a lot of opportunities. I am motivated to participate in extracurricular activities and am participating. When I encounter

something that I do not understand I normally consult the lecturer of that module or some senior students”.

### **Themes elicited from Participant 6**

#### **Question 1**

- Autonomy or independence
- Alcohol
- Relationships
- Laziness
- Workload

#### **Question 2**

- Does not like engaging challenging work
- Likes scoring high marks
- Consult lecturers and senior students

### **Participant 7 (Male)**

#### **What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“The things that are affecting us as students academically are that many students come to the university for different purposes. Students are more involved in politics than everything. With their involvement in politics they make a lot of noise. Attitudes of lecturers, they demand higher performance whilst they provide nothing. Sometimes they call us stupid. Another thing that affects students like me when I came to the university is adaptation, it took time for me to adapt and the language was an issue. Speaking English was a problem and most problematic thing is that all modules are presented in English. Language barrier has a negative impact. I experienced difficulties with financial issues as well”.

**Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“I like scoring high grades and I also like engaging myself in challenging work. When I do not understand a particular work I go to Google for further information and if I do not get it I consult the lecturer of that module”.

**Themes elicited from Participant 7**

**Question 1**

- Political affiliation
- Lecturers attitudes towards students
- Adaptation
- Language barrier
- Financial difficulties

**Question 2**

- Likes challenging work
- Like getting high marks
- Internet and consult lecturers

**Participant 8 (Female)**

**What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“In this university there are a number of factors that contribute to poor academic achievement. Firstly, lecture halls are small and you find that there are more than three hundred students attending; some are standing and it is difficult to concentrate to the lecturer if you are standing. When students are standing it is very disturbing, some students are making noise some are laughing in most cases at the back. Another problem is the issue of the library. Our library is very small it cannot accommodate students of this institution. Another problem is that we have few computer laboratories and in those that are working you find that out of 50 computers only 20 computers are working. This makes us work over night trying to get access to computers. As a student you need to sleep 8 hours a day so if you have

been working over night and in the morning you have to attend a lecture it becomes so difficult. In the faculty of education we have a problem with our resource centre; it is very small to accommodate education students. If you go there and find that it is full you need to go to lecture halls and again when you are there all of a sudden there is a lecture and then you get disturbed. I once thought of quitting the university but it was my personal problem, I have a heart attack”.

**Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“I like challenging work because it keeps my mind broad. Due to my illness I cannot participate in sports or extracurricular activities. I can say that if you are a student you know that some students are more capable than you. So if there is a particular portion that I do not understand I consult students and if they do not understand as well I then consult a lecturer of the module”.

**Themes elicited from Participant 8**

**Question 1**

- Overcrowded Lecture halls
- Huge enrolment
- Access to the Library
- Shortage of computers
- Small Resources centre in the faculty of education

**Question 2**

- Likes challenging work
- Consult students and lecturers

**Participant 9 (Male)**

**What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“There are a lot of things that affects students at the university. Firstly, we have to queue long horrifying lines all day to get food in dining halls. Secondly, lecturers style of lecturing, especially at level one of the course, it takes time to adapt to university style of lecturing. Another thing is that sometimes lecturers use Zulu when making examples and they are also too fast for me. My problem is that I do not understand Zulu. I experience a problem of communication even in residences. The number of students per lecture is too much to control. Overcrowding of lecture halls really affects students because we do not participate in a lesson even if you have a question it is difficult to ask the lecturer”.

**Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“It seems as if most of the students do not care about their performance. As long as they pass a module they are satisfied with that, but I really like to pass with high grades. I like challenging work because it makes me engaged with all my mental effort to academic work. When I do not understand a certain thing I normally ask friends or consult lecturers for help. I like extracurricular activities and I participate on one of the activities. It really helps because you learn a lot and it makes one’s mind active.

**Themes elicited from Participant 9**

**Question 1**

- Long queues
- adaptation
- Language barrier
- Huge enrolment
- Lecturing style

**Question 2**

- Likes challenging work and passing with high grades
- Consult students and lecturers
- Participation in extracurricular activities



## **Participant 10 (Male)**

### **What are specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?**

“The first and the most problematic issue in our university is political affiliation. Students are politically affiliated in such a manner that they disturb those who are at the university for studying. They are corrupt and make a lot of noise. Another thing that frustrated me is financial problem. I hardly got registered this year because of my debt of last year studies. I think another thing that affects us is that we are too many. We experience difficulties with access to library, computer laboratories and dining halls as a result of the number of students in this institution. We also experience problems in lecture halls because of the number of students on campus. Some students affect themselves with the things they do. These include engaging themselves in alcohol and drug use. The workload is also an issue. Then come module, assignments and the pressure that come with them in a very short period of time”.

### **Do students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?**

“It frustrates me to pass a module with 50%. I am always targeting first class pass or more. I can say I like difficult things like challenging work. I do not like to be engaged in extracurricular activities because they exhaust a lot of time. When I am given assignment or if I am studying and find something that I do not understand I consult lecturers, but sometimes they are hardly to be found”.

## **Themes elicited from Participant 10**

### **Question 1**

- Political affiliation
- Financial difficulties
- Huge enrolment
- Substance use
- workload

## Question 2

- Likes challenging work
- Consult lecturers

## 4.4 Discussion of the findings

### 4.4.1 Emergent themes

This section looks at common themes that were extracted from participants in respect of their views and experiences on the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement of students at a tertiary institution. The identified themes from the stories of the respondents will be discussed in detail in relation to the literature already presented. Many themes overlap but for the sake of the study they will be discussed separately. The researcher used content analysis to analyse responses from the vignettes.

#### 4.4.1.1 Financial difficulties

Little research has examined how an organizational financial strategy such as resource allocation may provide insight into improving undergraduate retention and graduation rates. The literature consulted did not give some indication of the impact of financial support to students' academic achievement. Although students showed confidence in their internal academic capital, they expressed lack of confidence in their possible external financial sources of support which in turn can obstruct their ability to complete their studies. Most respondents (60%) revealed that financial difficulties significantly affect them academically, and this is an institution-wide problem. Respondents were either experiencing financial problems or they once experienced it before. *“The issue of money has a negative effect on students, for instance I was unlikely to come back this year due to financial difficulties; however, I managed to pay some of the amount of my debt”*.

The study indicated that the lack of students' financial support had detrimental effect on their academic achievement. The results showed a need for financial planning which could be achieved by providing financial advice. This had implications for establishing strategies to improve academic quality through financial support in order to increase retention and progression at a tertiary institution. Perhaps introducing a university course on student

financial planning could assist those students in need of such advice. The study could also be of assistance to universities trying to improve their student retention rate in regard to financial issues.

#### **4.4.1.2 Unavailability of lecturers**

The respondents found it challenging to consult lecturers when they needed their assistance. Thirty per cent (30%) of the total sample experienced challenges with the availability of lecturers to their needs. It was further noted that the students were all registered in the Faculty of Arts. Of the total number of students in the sample who came from the Faculty of Arts, 75% had experienced challenges with the availability of lecturers to them compared to 25% who never experienced the problem. They indicated that lecturers were not available to students. They found the experience to be a bit inhuman, as lecturers seemed more interested in covering a certain amount of workload more than being interested in students' well being. As far as help was concerned the responsibility of contact lied with students. This meant that they were the ones who had to initiate the trip to go and consult their lecturers. They also indicated that even if they had set appointments with lecturers, they found those lecturers busy with other things. One example where this theme was deducted was when: *“My experience currently is that when I want to consult my supervisor for cases, he is hardly available for me so the unavailability of lecturers makes things difficult for students in their academic work”*.

Looking at students' concerns about the unavailability of lecturers to them, it gave an impression that the quality of lecturers and the degree of individual support given was a major factor in raising their level of achievement. The extra support some of the staff members provide was thought to be very helpful and students suggested that having more of these from others would improve achievement.

#### **4.4.1.3 Political activities**

The most important thing for students to further their education at a tertiary institution was to obtain a degree that would prepare them for the type of jobs they had chosen. This implied that students' first priority at the university should be dedicating themselves to their academic work. Academic achievement was one of the main factors considered by the employer in

recruiting workers especially the fresh graduates. Thus, students had to place the greatest effort in their studies to obtain a good grade in order to fulfil the employer's demand. However, at the University of Zululand it appeared as though it was a different case. Forty per cent (40%) of the respondents asserted that students came to the university for different purposes. One of the troublesome activities at the University of Zululand was political affiliation. Students devoted most of their time and energy to political gatherings more than to their academic work. *"Students are more involved in politics than everything. With their involvement in politics they make a lot of noise"*. The extract illustrates the observed students' experiences. It was important to note that this theme was not found in any literature available to the current researcher.

#### **4.4.1.4 Substance use**

The theme of substance use did not appear in many stories, but was equally important. Substance use was one of the themes emerged from the respondents. The University of Zululand stipulated rules that students had to adhere to. One of these rules stated that alcohol consumption within the university's premises was prohibited; hence, the Campus Tavern was closed. Students were not expected to be found drinking alcohol in residences. Even though the rules prohibit the use of substances on campus, the participants (20%) revealed that students were affected by the consumption of alcohol at the university. They brought alcohol outside the campus and came with it to their residences. They often drunk when there were some entertainments on campus. Those include bashes, fresher's ball, car wash, and magic tour. *"When you are under the influence of alcohol you are easily tempted by others then you cannot manage your time as you would have planned"*. The extract indicated that some students spent their time enjoying themselves instead of studying.

#### **4.4.1.5 Enrolment**

The intake of students at the University of Zululand increased yearly. Based on the respondents' views the number of students increased whereas the facilities were not considered. For instance, lecture halls were too small to accommodate students for most of the modules especially in the faculty of education, and core modules also took a number of students. Crowded lecture halls might be intimidating and students might encounter a degree

of impersonality. This theme was deduced from many participants (60%) and one example was as follows: *“Firstly, lecture halls are small and you find that there are more than three hundred students attending; some are standing and it is difficult to concentrate to the lecturer if you are standing. When students are standing it is very disturbing, some students are making noise some are laughing in most cases at the back”*. The negative effect of a large class size on student performance has been supported in previous research (Finn, Pannozzo & Achilles, 2003). Large classes are presumed to reduce the likelihood that lecturers can adapt their instructional style to individual students. Students may feel lost in a crowd or may lose interest in the class because of the number of classmates within a particular course. Then, we expect class size to have a negative influence on students’ academic performance. In smaller classes at the university level, interactive discussions may be used more than lectures, facilitating better ‘delayed recall’ learning and critical thinking (Finn, Pannozzo & Achilles, 2003).

Due to the increase of the number of students on campus, the access to facilities becomes a problem. Access to the library and computer laboratories was mentioned by the participants as a serious problem that needed urgent attention. One respondent stated that students did not sleep trying to access computers so that they could do their academic work. Students reported that working over night without sleeping affected them a great deal because in the morning they were also expected to attend lectures which consequently impaired their concentration.

*“The things we have to do during the course of the day like standing long queues in the dinning halls affect us so much”*. This theme indicated that the increase of the intake of students with the stagnant infrastructure development had a detrimental effect on their academic work. Students spent a lot of time standing long queues instead of devoting their time to academic work. Some students were even absent themselves from their lectures due to these long queues. The experience of standing in long queues was described as unpleasant. The participants put more emphasis on the stress of having to join long queues to get food. Notably, although perseverance and patience were coping mechanisms used to deal with the problem at hand, students were affected by these long queues. That was more likely to be psychologically impacting on the participants’ lives.

#### **4.4.1.6 Language**

Communication is the process involved with the exchange of any kind of information. Languages of any kind are used in order to exchange information. The University of Zululand uses English language as a medium of instruction because it consists of people from different cultural backgrounds. Based on the respondents' views it is worth noting that some students (20%) were experiencing difficulties with the use of English in the lecture halls. *“Another thing that affects students like me when I came to the university is adaptation, it took time for me to adapt and the language was an issue. Speaking English was a problem and most problematic thing is that all modules are presented in English”*.

University of Zululand is dominated by Zulu speaking individuals. Students come from different backgrounds. Some students come from the schools where IsiZulu language is used as a language of communication. They did not have an opportunity to learn and practice English. When they enter into the tertiary institution they experience challenges with regard to the language used in presenting academic work. In this regard students have to struggle to understand the language before they understand what is expected of them in the particular task given to them. One student indicated that language on campus is problematic in that University of Zululand was dominated by Zulu speaking individuals as a result IsiZulu was the often used language for communication. Therefore, those who did not understand the language sometimes felt discriminated against in social gatherings and academic meetings. Communication was highlighted as a theme that seemed to be a tool that was needed to effectively survive socially and academically. Merki (1996) refers to communication as the exchange of thoughts and feelings between two or more people. People are linked to each other through the process of communication. Furthermore, effective communication is often a critical component in developing interpersonal relationships, establishing a positive self image and achieving desired results in the world.

#### **4.4.1.7 Autonomy or independence**

Independence is the absolute freedom to do what one wants, and not to be held back by any rules or laws of government or man. Ten per cent (10%) of the respondents indicated that independence is one of the challenges that negatively affect them academically. The absence

of parents and their authoritative guidance on what to or not to do was mentioned by some respondents, and once parents were removed from the scene, one was left with himself and his choices. The following extract illustrates their experiences. *“I think there is a lot, first of all is that when students come to the university for the first time they just have the perception of living a free life. There is no one to guide you; you can engage yourself in alcohol”*. The idea behind this extract is that due to independence, students did whatever they liked to do at any time of the day. When they felt like drinking alcohol, they just did it. When they felt like having a quality time with their partners, they just did that. The problem was that they engaged themselves in all such activities exactly at a time when they were supposed to be doing their academic work or attending lectures. This factor was not revealed to have a detrimental effect to students’ academic achievement in the reviewed literature.

#### **4.4.1.8 Library**

The concern that students had about the library was that it was too small to accommodate students of the University of Zululand. Especially, during examination times most students used the library for studying. Students ended up not having spaces to sit because the library was normally full at those times. Another concern with the university library was that it contained outdated books. Students needed to acquire updated information relevant to current situations. Lecturers also demanded updated information when giving assignments to students. Due to the outdated books in the library students experienced challenges with their academic work. The following two extracts are the examples of students’ experiences with the university library. *“The information in the library, the books there are outdated”*. *“With the library books, they are outdated you find the books of 1960s”*.

#### **4.4.1.9 Peer pressure**

Peer influence does have an impact on students’ academic achievement. In a study conducted by Gibson (2005) on the factors that promote or impede success in school work, the results suggest that students were aware that in some situations peers could be a negative influence. The findings of this study also indicated that students received support from their peers. This

was also a theme that came up in the responses from the participants. Of the total number of students in the sample, 20% had experienced problems with peer pressure. Students needed one another in order to integrate themselves into the university life. Sometimes in so doing they might end up having to compromise their values in order to get along with their peers. Some students were just not disciplined and lacked good organizational skills. They often felt under pressure of their peers. Rather than using good discretion, they felt compelled to follow others, when they really should be attending to their studies. The following extracts give an example of students' experiences of pressure from their mates. *"For me the influence of people you are living with has a negative impact to your academic work. It depends on what kind of them and what do they like to do, for example, some friends might want to go out with you for movies". "Another thing is that we come to the university for different purposes; we are easily influenced by others"*. The idea behind these views is that students at the University of Zululand came to the university for different purposes or they forgot about what they initially came for. These students were so influential to others which significantly cause problems to those who were taking education as their first priority.

#### **4.4.1.10 Students' and lecturers' attitudes towards each other**

The issue of attitudes of students and lecturers was revealed by two participants. One participant indicated that students came with negative attitudes towards certain lecturers. Consequently, that made them not to devote their effort to academic work in order to pass the module presented by that lecturer. Another participant indicated that some lecturers had negative attitudes towards students which also affected students psychologically. Students ended up having negative attitudes towards these lecturers, which again affected them academically. *"Attitudes of lecturers, they demand higher performance whilst they provide nothing. Sometimes they call us stupid"*. Noteworthy was that this theme was extracted from a student who was registered in the Faculty of Education.

#### **4.4.1.11 Adjustment**

Previous studies conducted by Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) have revealed that adjustment to the university life is the significant predictor of academic success. Students



who experience problems with adjusting to the university also experience a great deal of academic difficulties. In the study it also emerged that some students (20%) at the University of Zululand experienced challenges with adjustment. They experienced problems with adapting to the lecturers' style of lecturing especially the first year students.

#### **4.4.1.12 Internal locus of control**

Based on the informants information it was noted that students did not talk about their capabilities as the contributing factor to poor academic achievement. There was only one respondent who indicated that he was lazy. Due to his laziness he saw the academic work as an overload. Difficulties with managing academic workload have been shown to have a negative impact on academic adjustment to university and academic performance (Petersen, Louw & Dumont, 2009). Furthermore, Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009) in their study found that internal factors such as self esteem have negative impact in individuals' academic achievement. Notably was that in this study such factors were not shown to have a detrimental effect on students' academic achievement.

#### **4.4.1.13 Help-seeking**

A literature reviewed from Robbins's (2004) meta-analysis identified the key determinants of academic performance. The results found indicated that help-seeking, academic motivation and self-esteem were identified as possible contributors to the academic success of undergraduate students. Help-seeking via informal student-faculty interactions has been associated with better socialisation at university. Students experience and learn institutional values and requirements through their interaction with academics, other university staff, and their peers. Student-faculty contact and the utilisation of student support services and intervention programmes have been shown to have a positive impact on academic performance (Robbins, 2004). Similar results were found in the study. Students felt that one-to-one interaction with lecturers who showed an interest in individual students' work was important, but also felt that support was very much dependent on the students asking for help.

Almost all respondents (90%) indicated that when they did not understand a particular task given by their lecturers they consulted their classmates or senior students for help. They also consulted the lecturer of that particular module. *“When I encounter something that I do not understand I normally consult the lecturer of that module or some senior students”*. One respondent stated that she also consulted lecturers in other departments. Another student indicated that he also surfed the internet for further information.

#### **4.4.1.14 Hard working**

Most of the respondents (80%) indicated that they liked engaging challenging intellectual material. *“I am the kind of a person who likes things that are challenging. I like to find out the outset of a particular thing. When I am given a task to do I like if I am instructed to do it but not how because I want to be challenged. I like to keep my mind busy, and you can see how much I am capable of thinking.* Two (20%) of the participants in the total sample reported that they did not like challenging tasks. One said that he did not like complicated things because he was lazy. This indicated that even though most students experienced problems with external factors, it was also important to note that to a lesser extent students’ academic performance was affected by their internal locus of control.

#### **4.4.1.15 High Grades**

The respondents indicated that they are well motivated to get high grades in their academic work. They found it appealing to pass a degree with first class or distinction. They also liked scoring high grades for recognition. It also emerged that some students did not consider scoring high marks on academic work as important. They just wanted to pass the module. *“Yes we do have an interest in getting high Grades because we have that passion to pass our degrees with first class or distinction. Some of us do not care about that as long as they pass the module”*.

## **4.5 Summary**

This chapter entailed a detailed discussion on the results of the study. The main themes were identified and discussed. The interpretation of the findings was also done. It can be concluded that the study yielded positive results. The respondents were able to identify the challenges that had negative effect to their academic work. The researcher provided participants with the safe environment to share their experiences. The next chapter will discuss the conclusions that were drawn from the findings of the study followed by the limitations of the study and avenues for further studies.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapter four gave a detailed field work of the study. Data collected were presented and analysed. In this chapter, the researcher discusses data collected on the factors that contribute to undergraduate students at a tertiary institution, particularly at the University of Zululand. This chapter concludes the study on the basis of data collected and the literature reviewed. Implications of the findings including recommendations, limitations and avenues for further research are also provided.

#### **5.2 Discussion of results**

The study was conducted to identify some factors that contribute to poor academic achievement among undergraduate students at a tertiary institution. The results of the study were summarised and discussed in the following paragraphs, and were interpreted in the light of qualitative data obtained. The study was aimed at addressing the following questions:

- (i) What were specific factors contributing to poor academic performance of undergraduate students at the University of Zululand?
- (ii) Did students have an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material?

#### **5.3 The aims of the study**

- (i) To determine factors that affected undergraduate students' performance at the University of Zululand.
- (ii) To find out if students had an interest in working hard, getting good grades, and engaging challenging intellectual material.

### **5.3.1 Findings with regard to objective number one**

During the analysis of the findings of the study it was worth noting that there were many factors that contributed to poor academic performance. Among these some factors depended on others whereas other factors were independent on others. The following section will provide a detailed discussion of those factors as primary and secondary ones.

#### **(i) Primary factors**

The results indicated that at the University of Zululand students were affected by environmental factors than internal factors such as motivation, self-esteem, stress and their capabilities. This gives an indication that students had more confidence in their internal locus of control. As a result the confidence students had in their own capabilities helped determine what they did with the knowledge and skills they possessed. However, one respondent indicated that he was lazy; as a result he saw the academic work as an overload. Most importantly, at a higher institution, student autonomy and independence required a high degree of self-directed learning as well as perceived competence from themselves. Because of this demanding context, it was even more important for students' academic success that they developed strong beliefs concerning their capabilities to perform given academic tasks at designated levels.

In a study conducted by Ali, Jusoff, Mokhtar and Salamat (2009), extracurricular activities have been shown to play a significant role in enhancing students' academic performance. The researcher in the study found that students at the University of Zululand were more engaged in political activities. The results indicated that political affiliation had a negative impact on students' academic achievement. Some respondents reported that they liked to participate in other extracurricular activities, but they did not elaborate on the impact they had on their academic performance. On extracurricular activities the concern was solely based on political activities as a major contributing factor on poor academic performance.

The findings of the study conducted by Malefo (2000) indicate that there is no statistical significant relationship between parents' economic status and students' academic

performance. These findings were supported by the findings of the study conducted by Beblo and Lauer (2004), who found that there was negative relationship between student performance and student family income. They assert that parents' income had weak impact on students' academic performance. The present study found correlations between financial difficulties and poor academic achievement. This also had implications for drop out and graduation rate. One respondent reported that she was unlikely to get registered in one year due to financial problems. The other respondent reported that she experienced problems when it came to paying rent for residence. As a result she was faced with a great deal of difficulties with studying at her optimal level.

The literature reviewed did not take into account financial considerations, which the present study had subsequently identified as a major explanation for student poor academic achievement, and in turn failure to complete their degrees, especially among students from low-income families. The study gave some insight into the significance of the university to plan for students in terms of financial aid in order to sustain students and improve graduation rate. Simply, if the university succeeded in retaining students, they would eventually obtain their degrees.

## **(ii) Secondary factors**

During the analysis of data of this study, interestingly, the researcher noted that there were factors that were dependant on others. These factors had adverse contribution to students' academic achievement. For instance, the number of students enrolled at the university led to various difficulties. Due to the number of students it would appear that lecture halls end up being overcrowded. There were many difficulties students experience as a result of overcrowded lecture halls. These included standing during lectures and some students made noise, which consequently had a negative effect to their studies. Secondly, students experience difficulties with accessing library and computers in the computer laboratories due to the number of students on campus. One respondent indicated that when students were going for consultation they stood outside the lecturers' offices waiting for other students who were busy with those lecturers. As a result they ended up not being assisted. This point

implied that even if lecturers were willing to help students they could not manage due to the number of students.

Another interesting factor noted was that autonomy might lead to a number of maladaptive behaviours. At a tertiary institution no one is looking over the students' shoulder, they need to be independent. The personal freedom of university students can take its toll on some students. It is reportedly indicated by some respondents that due to their autonomy they engaged themselves in alcohol. They also spent time with their intimate partners insensibly. Consequently, this might had a negative impact on their academic work.

### **5.3.2 Findings with regard to objective number two**

In regard to whether students had interests in working hard, getting good grades and engaging challenging intellectual material, there were indications that students liked working hard and challenging work. 90% of the responses indicated that students liked challenging academic work. However, 10% of the responses indicated that they did not like challenging work. It also appeared that students like getting high grades in their academic work. This was because they wanted recognition and self-satisfaction. Help-seeking has been identified by Robbins (2004) as possible contributors to the academic success of undergraduate students. Consistent with the results of the study, it was evident that help-seeking had a positive impact on students' academic achievement. The researcher found that when students encounter problems with certain academic work, they sought help from their classmates, senior students as well as lecturers. This was identified as a way of improving their academic performance.

Students revealed that many of their number were somewhat reliant on the university to provide academic support and expressed frustration that their lecturers on some courses were unavailable, thereby reducing its effectiveness. They indicated that the quality of lecturers and the degree of individual support given may be major factors in raising their level of achievement; the extra support staff present in some classes were thought to be very helpful. Students felt that one-to-one interaction with lecturers who showed an interest in individual students' work was important, but also felt that support was very much dependent on the students asking for help.

## **5.4 Limitations**

The study had some limitations, some were inherent to the design of the study and others were independent of this.

- The study was limited in terms of generalisability of the sample included. The sample was very small as it consisted of 10 participants. Qualitative research methods can use a small sample of the population investigated. The confidence in the results could be strengthened by increasing the sample size and gathering information from students that are representative of all faculties.
- The researcher wished to spread it over in as many South African Universities as possible. However, because of the time and cost involved, the research had to concentrate on students of the University of Zululand.
- While the attempts were made to minimise any biases, it was not possible to ensure that it was completely achieved. Therefore, the researcher's biases might have influenced the findings of the study.

## **5.5 Recommendations**

Based on the findings and the discussion of the study, the researcher has come up with some recommendations in order to overcome the limitations and obtain better results for further research. These recommendations would also be useful to administrators and lecturers.

- For future research, the researcher suggests that the research should be extended to the majority of students for better generalization of the findings based on the factors that contribute to poor academic achievement at a tertiary institution.
- The researcher suggests that the research based on testing specific variables on factors contributing to poor academic performance among undergraduate students should be conducted. For instance, to see relationship between absenteeism and performance, research should select sample size from students who have full attendance and students with most absence and make comparison of their performance. A similar procedure may be employed on other factors as well.
- The study gives some information pertaining to the issue of students' involvement in extracurricular activities, particularly political affiliation, and whether it benefits or hinders their academic performance. Further investigation can be done on



extracurricular activities such as sports, drama and student societies since each may have different impact on students' achievement.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter began with the discussion of the findings of the study. The objectives of the study were achieved. The limitations of the study were identified and avenues for further research were provided. In spite of the identified limitations the study has managed to document some factors which contribute to poor academic achievement among undergraduate students at a tertiary institution, particularly at the University of Zululand.

In the study the value of the university community to participate in enhancing students' academic performance was evident. It was crucial to note that not only the students, but also lecturers and administrators needed to work collaboratively to improve students' academic lives. All stakeholders involved had to be accountable for any practices that might jeopardise students' academic achievement and work in an effort to eliminate them. Effectively managing the conditions present in the university could be seen as a critical factor to enable and enhance the learning experience of students at undergraduate level.

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## APPENDIX A

Department of Educational  
Psychology and special education



UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND

Tel: 035 902 6240/33/37

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30 May 2011

The University Ethics Committee

Dear Sir/Madam

### Re: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I write this letter to request for the permission to conduct research within the University. The target population for this study is undergraduate students from different fields of study, and therefore, I am also seeking permission to use students as subjects of the study. My research study is entitled: *'Some factors which contribute to poor academic achievement among undergraduate students at a tertiary institution'*.

I am currently enrolled with the University of Zululand doing M ED (Educational Psychology). This study is part of the requirements for the completion of my degree. It is supervised in the Department of Educational Psychology and special education at the University of Zululand by a qualified Psychologist.

Your support will be highly appreciated.

Yours Sincerely

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Mr. XS Fakude (Student Psychologist)

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Prof. DR Nzima (Supervisor)

## APPENDIX B

### *INFORMED CONSENT*

Dear student

I am currently enrolled with the University of Zululand doing M ED (Educational Psychology). I am conducting a study entitled: *'Some factors which contribute to poor academic achievement among undergraduate students at a tertiary institution'*. This study is part of the requirements for the completion of my degree. It is supervised in the Department of Educational Psychology and special education at the University of Zululand by a qualified Psychologist.

You are requested to participate in the study and participation is entirely voluntary, and the information gathered will only be used for the purposes of this dissertation. You are free to choose not to participate and that decision will have no negative effect in your studies. Should you choose to participate after carefully reading this information sheet, please sign it to indicate your consent to participate in the study, and hand in the form. Please ask if you require any further information or clarification. Your support will be highly appreciated.

### DECLARATION

I..... (Full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participate in the research project. I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.