

**NON-TRADITIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENT  
SUCCESS:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INSTITUTIONAL  
FRAMEWORK**

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SUCCESS:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INSTITUTIONAL  
FRAMEWORK**

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## Declaration of authenticity

I declare that the research project *Non-Traditional Postgraduate Student Success: The Development of an Institutional Framework* is my own work and that each source of information used has been acknowledged by means of a complete reference. This thesis has not been submitted before for any other research project, degree or examination at any university.



Carin Stoltz-Urban

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## **Abstract**

The study *Non-Traditional Postgraduate Student Success: The Development of an Institutional Framework* investigated the challenge of student retention and success faced by higher education institutions worldwide, from an African perspective.

The study focused on three African countries, namely Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, as they were seen as representative of the continent.

The study followed a qualitative research design and used grounded theory as its mode of enquiry. A total of 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with non-traditional postgraduate students in the three countries outlined above, and a focus group discussion with faculty and support staff, was also conducted in each country.

The findings lead to a systemic understanding of the non-traditional postgraduate students and their unique contexts and challenges, as well as the role of the institution and the role and impact of the academic supervisor. The study is concluded with an institutional framework for intervention, which should assist in improving student success.

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# CHAPTER 1

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

### 1.1 Introduction

In Africa, where the continuously increasing population places an ever increasing demand on limited resources (Klemencic & Fried, 2015), sustained economic growth is vital if the continent is to rise out of poverty (Bloom, Canning, Chan & Luca, 2014).

One of the means of achieving the required growth appears to be that of improved education, in particular higher education. Kruss, McGrath, Peterson and Gastrow (2015) make a compelling argument for the role of higher education in sustained economic growth. Mutisya and Nagao (2015:1) are in agreement, highlighting the critical role of higher education in addressing the increased demand for a 'generation of professionals who are trained in systemic and holistic thinking, familiar with field-based conditions, experienced in problem-solving approaches and endowed with leadership qualities for mediating among multiple groups of stakeholders' in Africa. These qualities will assist in addressing the complex issues faced by the African society including poverty alleviation, improvement of the quality of life of its citizens and conservation in general. Smith (2015:vii) echoes this sentiment, stating that higher education plays a critical role in realizing the democratic dream of a 'pluralistic society that works'.

In Africa and the developing world as a whole, socio-economic and political factors play a critical role (Sondlo, 2013) and these must be taken into account when considering challenges and solutions related to these contexts. It is therefore important to note the 'complex legacy of colonialism and apartheid', in terms of which the right to access to higher education and in fact 'culture' as such, 'was reserved for the racially white, culturally and geo-politically western people' (Vandeyar, 2003:193).

In addition, it must be kept in mind that the higher education system across the African continent is immature in comparison with the European and even American systems (Hayward & Ncayiyana, 2014) and that Africa is 'at the bottom of almost every indicator-based ranking and league table in science and higher education' (Cloete, Maassen & Bailey, 2015:8).

Furthermore, while private higher education has grown to such an extent globally in the past few decades that it is termed 'the private revolution' with around 30 percent of all global higher education enrolment being in the private sector, this is a new concept in Africa (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). Private higher education in Africa has really only started growing since the 1990s and the private sector does not

represent more than a quarter of total higher education enrolment anywhere in Africa (Mabizela, 2015).

While access to higher education has increased and the number of participants have grown considerably over the past few decades (UNESCO, 2010), higher education in Africa is still to a large extent an 'elitist system'. This fact is confirmed by a much lower participation rate than in the rest of the world, currently averaging between 5 and 10% (Cloete, Maassen & Bailey, 2015) against a world average of 25% (World Bank, 2012).

In addition to the low participation rate, more students leave higher education without completing a qualification, than those who complete their studies and the consequences of this 'massive and continuing exodus' (Steinman, 2007) are severe for the individual, the institution as well as the economy.

The research problem and its context will be explained in more detail in the next section and the aim and objectives of the study will be outlined. The research orientation, theoretical framework and research design and methodology will be explained and the limitations and scope of the study will be indicated. Lastly, the structure of the thesis will be outlined.

## **1.2 The research problem**

While the problem of student dropout or non-completion of degrees and in particular postgraduate degrees, is a source of concern for academics and administrators in higher education systems worldwide (Woodley & Simpson, 2014), it seems to be particularly prevalent in the African context (Koen, 2007; Botha, 2014), as illustrated above.

Research on postgraduate students at African universities shows a steady increase in enrolment numbers but graduation rates do not correspond with these (CHE, 2009:9). In fact, the throughput rates at postgraduate level are dismal as indicated by the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2009a), indicating a national average throughput rate (during 2005) of 20% at Master's degree level and 12% at Doctoral level.

It is acknowledged that the decision to enrol for further studies is a personal one and the motivation to enrol may differ from student to student. Brailsford (2010) identified three main categories of motives for enrolment in postgraduate studies, namely employment and career considerations; personal motives to complete a doctorate; and influence of friends, family, colleagues and academics. Leonard, Becker, and Coate (2005) found that the personal growth aspect was equal to external goals such as career progression, in motivating students to embark on postgraduate studies. Brailsford (2010) concluded that students' motives to enrol for postgraduate studies are 'complex and overlapping'.



This study however wishes to assume that most students enrol with a view to successful completion, regardless of what motivated them to embark on this journey. Naturally, the question that arises from such a supposition is: why do so few students complete their postgraduate studies successfully and what could higher education institutions do differently to make sure that their postgraduate students complete as intended?

If one peruses the literature on this topic, it presents itself as a complex question though, and attempting to answer it may be an ambitious undertaking. Longden (2004:107) refers to the issue of student attrition as a 'puzzle'. Other authors seem to be equally perplexed: Lovitts (2001:1) calls students' withdrawal from doctoral programmes one of the 'best kept secrets in the education field'. Tinto (2006:1) refers to a 'complex web' of factors that influences student behaviour and Braxton calls it an 'ill-structured problem' (Braxton, Brier & Steele, 2007:393).

The reason for this complexity seems to be that the reason to discontinue their studies is unique to each individual student and there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution (Yorke & Longden, 2004:2). Mentz (2012:46) notes that student success is a 'complex phenomenon' that cannot be understood by isolating a few limited factors but that it 'requires an integrated multi-disciplinary approach'.

In addition to the complexity referred to above, it seems that institutions do not have adequate data on the reasons for student attrition. In fact, learners that withdraw often appear 'invisible' in that they choose to quietly depart toward another occupation without ever being given an exit interview or follow-up (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). This topic has been researched extensively internationally and particularly in the United States of America, as will be evident from the literature review in Chapter 2.

However, very little research has been done within the African context to date. In fact, Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) indicate that, while there is a plethora of international research available on student success, research on student retention and success in Africa, is still in its 'infancy' phase. In addition, very little research seems to have been done on the dropout of non-traditional students – typically older students from diverse backgrounds who have to balance their commitment to their studies with other responsibilities, including work and family (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011), which may impact negatively on their success rate.

To conclude, the research problem can therefore be defined as follows: The reasons why non-traditional postgraduate students within a developing socio-economic context do not complete their studies as intended, are not understood.

Tinto (2002) indicates that studies on student success are context specific. Moagi-Jama (2009:21) supports this view, pointing out that the challenge of student retention is often 'complicated by a particular student population in a specific country', and highlighting the particular issues facing South Africa, including its socio-political context. In this light, the current study is considered to be of value. It is also with this statement in mind that the researcher will explain the context of the study in more detail in the next section.

### **1.3 Context of the study**

This study considers postgraduate student attrition in the context of Africa and the socio-economic developing world at large, which according to Sullivan, Arthur and Steven (2003) refers to nations with underdeveloped industrial bases and low Human Development Indexes (HDI) in comparison with other countries. The study will focus on three specific African countries, which are regarded as representative of the broader African experience. The three countries to be included in the study are Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

The changes in the higher education landscape and in particular those that affect higher education in Africa, will be explored first, and the higher education context of each of the countries involved in this study will be explained thereafter.

#### **1.3.1 The higher education landscape**

Higher education institutions play various roles in their contribution to political, social and economic development (Luescher-Mamashela, Ssembatya, Brooks, Lange, Mugume & Richmond, 2015). One of the most important of these roles is the production of a 'highly-skilled labour force necessary to run the complex institutions of modern society' (Luescher-Mamashela et.al, 2015:4) and the production of new knowledge, which is essential for development.

The benefits of higher education include the private benefits enjoyed directly by the individual, such as personal development and higher earnings, as well as the public or 'society-wide' benefits. The public benefits include having a critical mass of well-informed citizens who understand and work for democratic practices, a larger pool of capable business people who can run businesses that are more efficient and ultimately expand the economic pie, and political leaders who can understand the confluence of local conditions (Bloom & Sevilla, 2015). It is with these benefits in mind that Ó Maoláin (2013) advocates for post-secondary education as a 'public good, a public responsibility and an inalienable human right'.

These benefits became more accessible to the general population in recent years. Varghese (2013) reports that gross higher education enrolment ratios have increased

from 13.8% in 1990 to 29% in 2010. Scott (1995) termed this growth the 'massification' of higher education calling it an integral part of modernisation, with associated socio-economic, cultural and science and technology changes. This trend seems to be continuing as the World Bank estimates a 25% increase in global higher education attendance from 200 to 250 million in the next 12 years (Achanga, 2015).

Wood-Wyatt (2008) further states that non-traditional students form approximately 43% of all college students in the USA and that this number is continuously growing.

The change in the higher education landscape and increase in the number of non-traditional students are also evident in Africa. According to Wasike and Munene (2012), 34.2% of students enrolled in public universities in Kenya in the 2009/10 academic year were non-traditional students. According to Varghese (2013), the gross student enrolment ratios in Sub Saharan Africa have more than doubled, from 3% in 1990 to 7% in 2010.

The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) reports a 25% increase in higher education enrolments (public universities) from 2007 to 2012 (CHE, 2014). Naturally, the South African socio-political context where inequalities of the past dispensation are being addressed by a more inclusive education system also plays a role in this increase (Machingambi, 2011:13). 'Inclusion' in this context refers to more than just race: around 40% of students in public higher education are over the age of 25 (CHE, 2009).

Despite these increases in access, the African higher education system is still largely an elitist system, as the number of universities cannot keep up with the increase in demand: the continent would need to build four universities with capacities of 30,000 people every week just to accommodate the students reaching enrolment age by 2025 (Achanga, 2015).

### **1.3.2 The Kenyan context**

Kenya is situated on the equator on Africa's east coast. It has a population of 42.7 million. Kenya was a British Colony until 1963, when it gained independence and democracy after a traumatic struggle (Bienen, 2015).

The higher education sector in Kenya is, similar to those elsewhere in Africa, very young compared to its European and American counterparts. The first higher educational institution to open in Kenya was The Royal Technical College of East Africa, which opened in Nairobi in 1956 and after a number of name changes, became the University of Nairobi in 1970 (Otieno, 2012).

The first Council for Higher Education was established in 1985, at the same time at which an enabling legal framework was introduced, allowing for the first private higher education institutions to be established, resulting in the accreditation of the first private higher education institution in 1992 (Otieno, 2012).

The Commission for University Education (CUE), the government agency responsible for regulating higher education in Kenya, was established under the Universities Act, No. 42 of 2012 (CUE, 2016).

According to the CUE (2016) there are currently a total of 23 public universities in Kenya and 17 private universities. Otieno (2015) claims that private expansion is largely due to the public system's failure to meet the demand for higher education, similar to what is evident elsewhere in Africa.

However, the introduction of private universities has, according to Otieno (2012), led to more entrepreneurial behaviour from the public universities, leading to 'expansion, diversification and innovation'. The three main public universities (Nairobi, Kenyatta and Moi) resultantly still dominate with 74.4% of the public sector enrolment, and around 20 percent of all Kenyan higher education students are studying at private institutions (Otieno, 2012).

The Kenyan higher education landscape is of particular interest because according to Otieno (2012) it typifies the rest of East Africa, and the broader African experience.

### **1.3.3 The Zimbabwean context**

Zimbabwe is a land-locked southern African country bordered by South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia, with a population of 13.7 million (Russo & Banda, 2015). Having attained independence from British Colonial rule in 1980, Zimbabwe's economy was fairly healthy up to the decade commencing from 2000, when the economic conditions deteriorated drastically due to international economic sanctions and hyperinflation. A power-sharing agreement was reached in 2008, which eased some of the international sanctions and improved the economy somewhat (Russo & Banda, 2015).

According to Kotecha (2012), the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which opened in Salisbury in 1957, was the first higher education institution in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). This institution became the University of Zimbabwe after independence in 1980, the only higher education institution in the country at the time and until the early 1990s (Masuku & Muchemba, 2015).

Similar to elsewhere in Africa, the country had a 'racially biased education system' aimed at 'serving the white minority at the expense of the black majority' up to democracy in 1980 (Kotecha, 2012:116) and the new government turned its attention

to primary and secondary education first, as these opportunities were not previously available to all its citizens.

However, due to the increasing demand for higher education and the lack of capacity in the public higher education sector, the government of Zimbabwe allowed both public and private universities to be established and there are currently 16 universities in Zimbabwe (Masuku & Muchemwa, 2015), of which nine are public universities (Kotecha, 2016).

The Ministry for Tertiary and Higher Education (MTHE) has overall responsibility for the governance of higher education in Zimbabwe, overseeing provision and accreditation of all higher education institutions and programmes, both public and private. According to Mabizela (2015:20) the private institutions in Zimbabwe operate 'on par with their public counterparts'.

#### **1.3.4 The South African context**

South Africa is the southernmost country in Africa with a population of around 55 million (Stats SA, 2015). Like most African countries, it was previously colonized by the British, who instituted the first policies of racial segregation. Having obtained independence in 1934, it was ruled by the white Afrikaner minority with continued racial segregation (apartheid) and oppression of the black majority (Beck, 2013). Following extensive negotiations, a peaceful transition to a democratic state was achieved in the early 1990s and the first democratic elections took place in 1994 (Beck, 2013).

Due to the fact that the apartheid government limited access to higher education to advance inequality and sustain the superior position of white South Africans (Mentz, 2012), the newly elected democratic government inherited a deeply divided higher education system that had to 'wrestle with the shadows of apartheid' (Lolwana, 2015) and had to deal with the challenge of transforming the mostly white, elite higher education institutions to a system of universal access.

This attempt at transforming the higher education system resulted in accepting much higher numbers of students into public higher education. The total number of enrolments in higher education has increased by 160% (473,000 to 737,472) between 1993 and 2005 (Council on Higher Education, 2004; Department of Education, 2006). During this time, Black, Indian and Coloured student enrolment levels in South Africa have increased from 52% to 75%, and the enrolment of women increased from 43% to 54.5% (Council on Higher Education, 2004; Department of Education, 2006).

Reflecting on these numbers one should consider that some of these students also originate from neighbouring African states. According to Kotecha (2012) South Africa is 'a major role-player in higher education in the SADC region', based on the large

number of students from the region registered at South African universities (46 204 in 2010). The largest proportions of SADC students in South Africa come from Zimbabwe (41.8%), Namibia (14.9%), Botswana (9.3%) and Lesotho (9.0%).

It is also necessary to understand the regulatory context pertaining to private higher education institutions and this will be explained briefly in the next paragraph.

The South African Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) and its regulations allow for the establishment of private higher education institutions. These institutions are required to register with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (for which they must meet the quality assurance requirements of the CHE's Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), be financially sustainable, and comply with health and safety regulations. (The same legislation (SA Higher Education Act, Act 101 of 1997) also prohibits private higher education institutions from using the title 'University' and as such the term 'higher education institution' will be used throughout this study).

By July 2009 there were 103 registered and provisionally registered private higher education institutions in South Africa, ranging from small colleges offering a single programme to large multi-campus organisations offering a wide range of programmes (CHE, 2009b).

Despite the considerable increase in access to public higher education as well as the accreditation of a number of private higher education institutions as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, the apartheid legacy is unfortunately still visible in the education system. The majority of higher education dropouts are Black African students, impacting negatively on efforts to address equity in the South African workforce as well as the country's critical skills shortage (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). This dilemma is one not only faced in the undergraduate space: MacGregor (2012) notes that South Africa also lags behind developed and developing nations in terms of PhD graduation rates. The South African Council on Higher Education also confirms that racial differentiation is still a reality at postgraduate level, indicating that proportionally more White and Indian students embark on postgraduate studies and succeed in their studies than their African counterparts (CHE 2009b). This in turn could frustrate the social transformation agenda as well as economic development of the country as a whole.

The aim and objectives of this study will be explained next, taking the above context into account.

#### **1.4 Aim and objectives**

The problem underpinning this research study can be defined as follows: There seems to be a lack of understanding of the reasons why non-traditional postgraduate students, within a socio-economic developing context, do not complete their studies successfully. In addition, it is also not clear what institutions of higher learning could do to improve the retention of these students.

In view thereof the aim of this research can be articulated as follows: To develop an institutional framework that could facilitate the successful completion of postgraduate studies at Higher Education Institutions in developing socio-economic contexts.

In support of the aim, as stated above, the following objectives have been identified:

1. To understand the reasons why non-traditional postgraduate students do not complete their studies successfully;
2. To determine the institutional factors that may affect academic success of non-traditional postgraduate students in developing economies;
3. To determine the relevance of the constructs of social and academic integration, with respect to the success of non-traditional postgraduate students;
4. To determine the role and impact of the academic supervisor in the success of non-traditional postgraduate students; and
5. To understand the relevance of socio-economic factors in non-traditional postgraduate student success.

The research orientation of the study will be discussed next.

#### **1.5. Research orientation**

The approaches to and paradigms embedded in any research study derives from the researcher's own sociological understanding of the natural and social world (Lopes, 2015).

According to Grix (2004), the fact that researchers' ontological and epistemological positions differ, may lead to different research approaches towards the same phenomenon. Madill, Gough, Lawton, and Stratton (2005) proclaim that it is the responsibility of the researcher to state and clarify their ontological and epistemological positions. It is therefore important to illuminate the relationship between the researcher's ontological position, her epistemological position, and her methodological approach. The next paragraph will set out to establish these links, explaining the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher, the research paradigm, as well as the research type.

### **1.5.1. Ontological position**

The qualitative researcher is the primary research instrument that for data collection in research study. Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999) argue for 'owning one's perspective' emphasising the importance of the researcher's declaration of her theoretical orientations and personal anticipations in advance. Yin (2011:13) adds that the researcher does not function as a 'machine-like recorder of events' and that the researcher's personality, thinking, professional experiences, intellectual concerns and assumptions about knowledge, will impact the study.

Finally, Ramalho, Adams, Huggard and Hoare (2015) conclude that, in a grounded theory study, the researcher's voice should be explicitly recognised and analysed as it has a direct influence on the resulting theory. It is therefore necessary to position the researcher in terms of her research.

The researcher is a non-traditional student who 'dropped out' during her Masters studies due to personal reasons, despite a good academic record. As a result, she had to re-register for the qualification and finally completed it much later than planned. This was an emotional experience that affected her worldview, her empathy with non-traditional postgraduate students who have to balance study, work and personal responsibilities, and her approach to this study.

It is in fact the researcher's own experience as a non-traditional postgraduate student that stimulated her interest in this field and that ultimately lead to her accepting a position at The Da Vinci Institute, a position that makes her responsible for student support and retention. In this position, she deals with students at all levels (both under-graduate and postgraduate) and has become increasingly aware of the difficulties that non-traditional postgraduate students face and their need for support. The researcher's subjectivity is acknowledged and it is believed that this could be beneficial to the study as the research process becomes a process of co-constructing knowledge (Ramalho et. al., 2015). Her ontology can thus be described as relativist, suggesting that multiple truths exist and that she cannot uncover one objective truth but rather intend to co-construct reality through subjective interaction with her research respondents (Refai, Klapper & Thompson, 2015).

As an interpretivist researcher, she enters the field with her own prior insight of the research context but assumes that this is insufficient in developing a fixed research design due to the complex, multiple and unpredictable nature of what is perceived as reality (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988).



### **1.5.2 Epistemological position**

The researcher is aware that difficulties and needs vary between different students. As such, she does not intend to discover absolute truths, but rather to understand non-traditional students' support needs from their own experience of their postgraduate learning journey.

It therefore seems to follow naturally that the epistemological position must be interpretivist in nature, thus looking at the subject matter or social phenomenon from a subjective viewpoint, literally 'entering the participants' worlds' (Charmaz, 2006) without the assumption that there is one absolute reality or truth (Whittaker, 2012). The researcher also assumes that the retention and success of students must be seen from the multiple and relative realities of the institution, academic staff and students (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988) and that the knowledge acquired in this study will be 'socially constructed, rather than objectively determined' (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2001).

The subjective lens through which the researcher views the world also leads to the qualitative research paradigm in this case. The researcher will explore this paradigm in more detail in the next paragraph.

### **1.5.3 Research paradigm**

A research paradigm consists of a set of interrelated assumptions about the social world, which provides a framework for the organised study of that world (Ponterotto, 2005).

O'donoghue (2006) differentiates between four research paradigms, namely positivism, interpretivism, critical, and postmodernism, and explains that the research paradigm determines how the research problem is formulated, which research design is used and how the study is methodologically approached.

Easton (2002) regards an explanation of the research paradigm as essential both in guiding the researcher and in explaining the reasons behind choices taken by the researcher in her approach to the study.

The research paradigm of this study is the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises social interaction as the basis for knowledge. The role of the researcher in the interpretivist paradigm is to 'understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:19).

This paradigm is aligned with the researcher's own ontological and epistemological perspectives and will allow the researcher to use her 'skills as a social being, to try to understand how others understand their world', co-constructing knowledge through mutual negotiation (O'donoghue, 2006).

#### **1.5.4 Research type**

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) differentiate between three research types, namely exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research. This differentiation is also supported by Babbie (2010).

Burns and Grove (2003:313) define exploratory research as 'research conducted to gain new insights, discover new ideas and/or increase knowledge of a phenomenon'.

Exploratory research seems to be about 'putting oneself deliberately in a place where discovery is possible and broad', usually to allow for the pursuance of non-specialised interests (Stebbins, 2001:vi) or research problems for which the knowledge is either incomplete or unknown (Sosnowski, 2015). This resonates both with the researcher's own ontology and epistemology, as well as with the nature and aim of this study, taking into account that there is limited research on success factors affecting non-traditional students.

As the theoretical framework of the study has to suit this intention for broad discovery of 'non-specialised' (Stebbins, 2001:vi) or transdisciplinary interests, the researcher opted for systems thinking. This choice will be explained in more detail in the next paragraph.

#### **1.6 Theoretical framework**

Sinclair (2007: 39) describes research as a 'journey toward an endpoint – to develop new knowledge that will contribute to practice' and suggests that a theoretical framework serves as a 'guide' or 'map' for this journey. Anfara and Mertz (2014) in turn term it a lens through which to study and understand a particular phenomenon.

This study will be undertaken at a Mode 2 higher education institute that has as its primary aim, the solving of 'real-world' problems, using systems thinking as a theoretical framework.

Mode 2 in essence refers to a research system which is highly interactive and 'socially distributed', and the basic argument is that knowledge production is heterogeneous and takes place 'in the context of application' through transdisciplinary collaborations. As such, Mode 2 research lends itself to systems thinking as a theoretical framework as both are in essence arguing for 'heuristic, heterogeneous, non-linear' problem-solving engagements (Hessels & Van Lente, 2008:745). This framework will be explained in the next paragraph and the rationale for selecting it as a relevant framework for this particular study will be explained.

### 1.6.1 Systems thinking

Systems thinking can be defined as 'the ability to identify parts, causalities, flows and feedback loops' (Claesson & Svanström, 2015) or alternatively as 'a way of thinking ... that appreciates the dynamic, constantly changing, nature of complex systems and understands that the context and role of stakeholders are critical' (Adam & De Savigny, 2012:iv).

Both these definitions make it clear that systems thinking is a 'cohesive approach to management' (Furst-Bowe, 2011) that takes all key processes into account as part of a bigger system, rather than looking at individual parts in isolation. Furst-Bowe (2011) further contends that systems thinking is based on the concept that all key processes in an organisation are dynamically interrelated. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, and its parts cannot be understood in isolation from the whole (Ziegenfuss, 1992). Instead, understanding the relationships between the different parts is critical to organisational effectiveness and achievement (Furst-Bowe, 2011).

This holistic, cohesive approach allows for a greater understanding of the multitude of relationships as well as non-linear causality (Cabrera, Cabrera & Powers, 2015) and is essential in the establishment of synergies and improving organisational efficiency and profitability (Almeida, Domingues & Sampaio, 2014).

Banathy (2000) lists four major characteristics of systems, namely goal orientation, input from their environment, outputs towards goal achievement, and feedback from the environment regarding the output. This confirms the interaction between the system and its environment, which creates extensive networks of feedback loops with variable time lags between cause and effect and non-linear relationships between system elements, collectively creating a 'dynamic complexity' (Atun, 2012).

Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) identified five subsystems in organisations, namely the goals and values subsystem, the technical subsystem, the structural subsystem, the psychosocial subsystem and the managerial subsystem. Each of these subsystems constitutes the mutually interdependent parts of the larger system, interacting with each other to create new patterns of behaviour. It is the managerial subsystem, according to Kast and Rosenzweig (1985) that links the organisation to its environment by setting goals and values, by designing the structure, establishing a functional technical system, and managing the psychosocial subsystem.

Barton, Emery, Flood, Selsky and Wolstenholme (2004) further distinguish between five main interconnections in business, namely the interconnection between resources (both tangible and intangible), boundaries of organisational responsibility/power (which create barriers to processes), information feedback (which

makes processes work), policy, and time factors (which create complex behaviours in organisations).

As the present study wishes to investigate the complex, interrelated factors involved in non-traditional postgraduate students' non-completion of their degrees, systems thinking seems to provide a suitable theoretical framework for the study, providing an appropriate transdisciplinary and integrative lens which transcends the perspectives of individual disciplines (Koskinen, 2013).

Senge's (1990:7) definition supports the use of systems thinking as a 'conceptual framework, a body of knowledge... to make full patterns... clearer and help us see how to change them effectively'. Arnold and Wade (2015:675) state that the systems thinking approach involves 'a set of synergistic analytic skills used to improve the capability of identifying and understanding systems, predicting their behaviours, and devising modifications to them in order to produce desired effects'. This is aligned with the purpose of this study.

The following two concepts support the choice of theoretical framework and will be explained in the following paragraphs:

- student retention being an ill-structured problem
- a higher education institution being a complex system.

#### **1.6.1.1 Student retention being an ill-structured problem**

Newell and Simon (1972) introduced the terms 'well-defined' and 'ill-structured' problems in their work about human problem-solving. They defined well-defined problems as those where 'a test exists, performable (with relatively little effort) by the system, that will determine whether an object proposed as a solution is in fact a solution' (Newell & Simon, 1972:73). Jonassen (1997) and Lovett (2003) later added to the definition of a well-structured problem as being one with a clear starting point or 'given' (Lovett, 2003:723), where solutions require 'logical, algorithmic processes' (Jonassen, 1997:67).

In contrast, Jonassen (1997:69) defined ill-structured problems as those that 'require learners to express personal opinions or beliefs and make judgments'. Gallagher and Gallagher (2015) refer to ill-structured problems as real-life, complex problems with confounding variables that cannot be solved by following a simple algorithm, while Saaty and Kearns (2014:9) define an ill-structured problem as an 'interdependent systems of problems in which multiple decision makers in a pluralistic environment consider unlimited alternatives'.

As stated in the introduction to this study and supported by the above definitions, the issue of student retention could be seen as an 'ill-structured problem' (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007:393), which according to Tinto (2006:1) refers to a 'complex web of

factors' influencing student behaviour and which requires 'an integrated multi-disciplinary approach' (Mentz, 2012:47).

The reason for this complexity seems to be the fact that the decision to quit is unique to each individual student and there is no 'universal solution' (Yorke & Longden, 2004:2). This is compounded by institutions' lack of data on the reasons for student departure (Golde, 2005).

### **1.6.1.2 Higher education institutions being complex systems**

A system with 'numerous components and interconnections, interactions or interdependence that are difficult to describe, understand, predict, manage, design, and/or change' can be defined as a 'complex system' (Magee & de Weck, 2004:2). Complex systems are dependent on continuous mutual influence across agents, influencing the system to different degrees in a non-linear manner and producing escalating levels of unintended consequences through spontaneous self-organisation (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009).

In view of the above description, the researcher believes that a higher education institution can be seen as a complex system, where various interdependent and interactive elements affect each other (Saaty & Kearns, 2014:4), including disciplinary influences, ideological positions and regimes of teaching and learning (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Van Schalkwyk & Winberg, 2015).

This view is supported by Furst-Bowe (2011), who regards a systems perspective essential in the proper planning and management of a higher education institution's activities. Patterson's (1998) description of higher education as a 'pure' service, characterised by a greater amount of interpersonal contact, complexity, divergence, and customization than other service businesses, also links with the view that higher education institutions are complex systems.

Mizikaci (2006) describes higher education institutions as open systems, which are exposed and in fact reliant on the constant interaction between external influences including external quality accreditation systems, the labour market and society at large, as well as the internal interaction between subsystems. A higher education institution is in fact the ideal integrative 'platform for social experimentation through collaboration and networking among academia, industry, and the public sector', contributing to 'learning and innovation' (Yarime et.al, 2012). It is thus not just serving as a complex system on its own, but also forms part of a bigger societal and economic system, which adds to the complexity.

The other three characteristics of systems, in addition to the degree of openness, are hierarchy, homeostasis and purposiveness. It is the researcher's view that higher education institutions normally have rigid structures and complex hierarchies, which add to the complexity.

Learning programmes can also be seen as subsystems, as any learning programme should contain links between the various parts (modules or subjects) in order to enable students to understand multi-dimensional issues (Gregory & Miller, 2014).

The improvement of quality involves the design of an educational system that not only optimizes the relationship among the elements, but also between the educational system and its environment. In general, this means designing a system that is more open, organic, pluralistic, and complex.

As complex systems are dominated by irreducible, non-additive or non-linear interactions amongst components (Angoma, 2011), a systems thinking approach seems to be appropriate, as it focuses on the arrangement of, and relationships between, the various parts that connect them into a whole (Von Bertalanffy, 1968), and this is the intended approach to be followed in this study.

## **1.7 Research design and methodology**

In this paragraph, the research design selected to conduct the research will be outlined and the methodology will be explained.

The researcher's perception of the interrelationship between the ontology and epistemology of the researcher, the research design, the research paradigm, the mode of enquiry, and the chosen research method is illustrated in Figure 1.

As can be noted from this illustration, the researcher's own relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology guided her to choose to conduct an exploratory study, using a qualitative design within an interpretivist paradigm, with grounded theory both as the mode of enquiry and also ultimately as the qualitative research method. In addition, grounded theory as a mode of enquiry in a Mode 2 research context seems appropriate (Partington, 2000).

The ontology and epistemology of the researcher as well as the research paradigm and research type were discussed under paragraph 1.5 (Research orientation).

In this paragraph, the choice of a qualitative research design and the reasoning behind a grounded theory mode of enquiry and methodology will be discussed and the scientific beliefs from the literature that informs the chosen theoretical framework will be explained. Finally, the measures taken to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines will be described and the methods of data collection and analysis will be outlined.



**Figure 1 Interconnectivity of research concepts in the research design**

### 1.7.1 Research design

In view of the researcher's own world view, and as the study is an exploratory one aimed at explaining a social phenomenon (that of the reasons why non-traditional postgraduate students may not complete their studies), it seems appropriate to approach this study as a qualitative study from an interpretivist perspective, thus abandoning the notion of an 'objective' or absolute truth. Qualitative research designs are most commonly used in exploratory research studies (Engel & Schutt, 2014).

A research design can be described as 'a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between research questions and the execution or implementation of the research' (Terre Blanche *et.al.* 2006:34). Monette, Sullivan and DeJong (2011) define a research design as a detailed plan outlining how a research project will be conducted.

The design of this study takes into account that qualitative research seeks to obtain in-depth, subjective data from a small sample group of which the focus is on words, categorisation and qualities (Dwyer & Seetaram, 2012) to establish 'meaning in context' (Merriam, 2014:2), and as such, can be described as an interactive qualitative design.

Grounded theory will be the mode of enquiry for the implementation of this design. This mode of enquiry will be explained in more detail in the next paragraph.

### **1.7.1.1 Mode of enquiry**

Creswell (2013) lists five different modes of (or approaches to) enquiry under a qualitative research design, namely narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case studies.

The researcher's ontological and epistemological perspectives and her direct subjective involvement in the support of postgraduate students lead to her choice of grounded theory as the preferred research method to this study. This also allows for a more personal and flexible research structure (Carson et al., 2001) and for the researcher's own voice to be explicitly acknowledged (Mruck & Breuer, 2003), both in the study and the emerging theory, rather than be excluded, avoided or hidden (Clarke, 2005).

Grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the enquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Charmaz (2003:81) further describes grounded theory as a 'comparative, iterative, and interactive method' that allows the researcher to use 'flexible methodological strategies' to build theories from inductive data.

The present study consists of three main elements, namely a comprehensive literature review, an exploratory qualitative study, and finally theory development in the form of an institutional framework for engaging non-traditional postgraduate students, in line with the problem-solving nature of a Mode 2 study.

As such, the researcher will engage with her existing knowledge (Thornberg, 2012) as well as with the participants in the study in an interdependent and mutually interactive manner (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988) in order to make sense of different perceptions of reality (Carson et. al, 2001). However, her prior knowledge will be used to inform her analysis rather than directing it, and literature will be used as 'data' and will constantly be compared with the emerging categories with a view to integrating it into the theory (Glaser, 1992).

The three phases of the study will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 (Design and Methodology), whereas the following paragraphs will introduce the phases, namely the literature review, exploratory intent and theory building framework.

### **1.7.1.2 Literature review**

The researcher has chosen to review the literature prior to the exploratory study, although this is not the classic approach to grounded theory. This choice will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3 (Methodology).



The literature review covers the main international theories in the field of student retention and also considers studies undertaken in the developing world and Africa in particular, to the body of knowledge in this field.

The literature will not serve as a theoretical underpinning of the exploratory study but will rather be treated as part of the data, in line with the grounded theory approach to this study.

The process to be followed during the exploratory phase of the study will be discussed in paragraphs 1.7.4 and 1.7.5 under two headings, namely data collection and data analysis, respectively.

### **1.7.1.3 Exploratory study**

The exploratory study will take the form of a grounded theory study amongst non-traditional postgraduate students and academic and support staff involved in the support of non-traditional postgraduate students in three African countries. This phase of the study will be explored in more detail under paragraph 1.7.2 (Research methodology).

### **1.7.1.4 Theory building**

As explained above the current study will consist of a literature review, followed by an exploratory study, aimed at the construction of an explanatory theory of basic social processes, studied in the environments in which they take place (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

While most qualitative studies are descriptive by nature and not aimed at generating theory, grounded theory studies enable the integration, interpretation and explanation of descriptive data at a higher conceptual level, as well as the generation of new theory (Angoma, 2011).

The theory is expected to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), including both the data from literature as well as the data from the exploratory study (in the case of this study, interviews and focus group discussions), and will form the final phase of the study.

The grounded theory mode of enquiry is introduced in more detail in the next paragraph as well as in Chapter 3 (Research design and methodology).

## **1.7.2 Research methodology**

In view of the above research design the researcher will adopt a qualitative research methodology, and in particular grounded theory.

Monette, Sullivan, and DeJong (2011:506) describe qualitative research as 'research that focuses on data in the form of words, pictures, descriptions or narratives'.

Whittaker (2012:7) adds to this understanding, stating that qualitative research ‘seeks to explain the meaning of social phenomena through exploring the ways in which individuals understand their worlds.’

From Whittaker’s description, it is evident that qualitative research is not necessarily objective. Qualitative research is inductive and the researcher becomes immersed in details and specifics of the data to discover categories and interrelationships (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter 2006; Rubin & Babbie, 2013).

Qualitative research will allow the researcher to immerse into the details and specifics of the data to discover important categories and interrelationships (Terre Blanche, et al., 2006). Charmaz (2003) lists six distinguishing characteristics of grounded theory methods, namely simultaneous data collection and analysis, the development of analytic codes and categories from the data, the development of middle-range theories, memo-writing, theoretical sampling, and the delay of the literature review.

While the current study chose not to delay the literature review, the other characteristics will all be present. This will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3 (Research Design and Methodology).

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) divide the research methodology into three categories, namely sampling, data collection, and data analysis. These categories will be used to introduce the main steps of the methodology.

### **1.7.3 Sampling**

The research sample will be selected in a purposive, criterion-based manner (Palys, 2008). It is the intention to conduct between 30 and 50 interviews, each of around an hour in duration, with current and former non-traditional postgraduate students from the selected three countries as well as academic and support staff involved in the support of non-traditional postgraduate students.

### **1.7.4 Data collection**

Semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews will serve as the primary mode of data collection for this study, being generally accepted as a suitable vehicle for data collection in grounded theory research (Glaser, 1992). While it is the intention to conduct around 30 – 50 interviews, data collection will stop the moment theoretical saturation is reached in the sense that no new concepts emerges and the relationships between categories are established (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Gray (2014) indicates that semi-structured interviews allow for the probing of views and opinions where it is desirable for respondents to expand on their answers, thus making it a good choice for qualitative researchers, allowing for the in-depth

exploration of the topic. Focus group interviews will be used as a secondary data collection method, in addition to individual interviews.

The data analysis process will be explained in the following paragraph.

### **1.7.5 Data analysis**

Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicate that concurrent data collection and analysis is a fundamental element of a grounded theory design. This study intends to follow that approach as it will assist both with determining whether the data collected is sufficient in addressing the research question, and when theoretical saturation is achieved.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) differentiate between three different types of coding, namely 'open', 'axial' and 'selective'. It is the intention to use data analysis software to assist in all three types of coding in the present study as the initial open coding of concepts should assist in forming dimensions along a specific 'continuum or range' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:117). These should then lead to the formation of conceptual families or categories, and axial coding should in turn reveal connections among categories including the identification of an underpinning central theme.

The approach to data analysis is explained in more detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis. The next section will indicate the scope of the study and examine the limitations of the grounded theory methodology.

### **1.8 Limitations and scope of the study**

This study will focus on non-traditional postgraduate students in a developing socio-economic context, with specific reference to the African context. While it is expected that the findings will be generalizable to include non-traditional students at other levels of study, it may have limited applicability in a developed socio-economic context where support structures are assumed to be more sophisticated.

It is acknowledged that the subjectivity of the data in a grounded theory study may lead to difficulties in establishing reliability and validity. In addition, the fact that the researcher is both employed at a higher education institution in a student support role and enrolled as a PhD student at the time of the study, may lead to researcher-induced bias. This risk will be mitigated through a number of preventative measures including audio recording, memo writing and verbatim transcription of interviews as well as external moderation of interview data.

### **1.9 Structure of the thesis**

In addition to Chapter 1, which embodies a general orientation to and overview of the study, the thesis will consist of the following chapters:

Chapter 2 - a detailed literature review focusing on student retention and defining the terms non-traditional and postgraduate students.

Chapter 3 - a description of the research design and methodology used to conduct the study.

Chapter 4 – field work (exploratory study).

Chapter 5 - data analysis and results (a discussion of the findings from the empirical investigation on factors affecting the academic success of non-traditional postgraduate students).

Chapter 6 - the final chapter presenting the proposed framework for the academic support and retention of non-traditional postgraduate students, which will be based on the literature review together with the research outcomes of the empirical study. This chapter will also include the limitations of the study, recommendations for further study and concluding remarks.

## **1.10 Conclusion**

This chapter provides an introduction and orientation to the study. The background to and context of the study were explained. The research aim and objectives were discussed and the research design and methodology were outlined. A brief introduction to the theoretical framework was also provided and an outline of the remaining chapters was given.

The next chapter is a preliminary literature review aimed at understanding student retention theories and concepts underlying the study, specifically focusing on postgraduate and non-traditional students.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

It is acknowledged that the traditional notion regarding a grounded theory study is that conducting a literature review prior to data collection hinders grounded theory research as it contaminates the objective thinking of the researcher (Ramalho et al., 2015).

The researcher however challenges the traditional approach based on Thornberg's (2012) argument for informed grounded theory. Charmaz (2014:306) supports this view, stating that a lack of familiarity with the existing literature is both 'unlikely and untenable' as most researchers 'hold perspectives and possess knowledge in their fields prior to engaging in specific research'. Birks and Mills (2015) indicate that a 'limited and purposive preliminary review' can assist the researcher in a number of ways, including the enhancement of theoretical sensitivity.

Ramalho et. al. (2015) further argue that the researcher's influence - and through her that of the reviewed literature - is neither avoidable nor undesirable, but rather recognized and included in the analytical process. They argue for an active, ongoing and deliberate commitment from the grounded theory researcher, thus in this case, to explicitly explore and acknowledge her epistemological position in the early stages of the research, as it is this positioning that will ultimately frame the usefulness and potential impact that a literature review, conducted prior to data collection and analysis, may have on the resulting grounded theory.

Strauss and Corbin (1990:216) advocate a balanced interpretation, indicating that familiarity with the relevant literature may 'enhance sensitivity to subtle nuances in data' just as well as it can 'block creativity'. What does seem to be important in a grounded theory study is that the literature is not given a position of privilege over the emerging data from the empirical study, but that it is treated equally as important as data.

In view of the above argument, the researcher will present a preliminary literature review in this chapter. She will however approach the literature review with the grounded theory mode of enquiry in mind, treating the literature review as data equal to the data to be collected during the exploratory study. While the literature review will attempt to provide a preliminary overview of the main theories and models within this field, and the topics identified during this review will inform the interview questions, the researcher will take great care not to force her pre-conceived ideas and theories on the interviewing process, nor to come to conclusions too soon in the process.

## **2.2 Overview of student retention theories from the developed world**

### **2.2.1 Introduction**

There is a plethora of literature on the topic of student retention. Braxton (2000:1) refers to the 'longevity of this line of inquiry', contending that this topic has been studied over several decades and from a number of different perspectives or disciplines since the early 1970's - initially primarily in the USA (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1993, 1997; Bean 1980, Bean and Eaton, 2000).

Despite the volumes of literature on this topic, Yorke and Longden (2004:75) denote the 'multiplicity of perspectives' and 'theoretical pluralism', concluding that despite the efforts of a great number of scholars, there is no 'unified, grand theory' on student retention as yet, 'nor is a quest for such a theory likely to succeed', due to the complexity of the problem.

Yorke and Longden (2004) however recognize the contributions of Tinto and Bean as the main theorists in this field. The contributions of these authors will be considered in detail. In addition, Berger's theory on Cultural Capital, Ackerman and Schibrowsky's work on Student Relationship Management (SRM) and Kuh and Krause's Student Engagement theory will be discussed. Lastly, a brief overview of contributions to the literature by a number of African authors will be given, in view of the fact that this study is situated in the developing world and Africa in particular.

### **2.2.2 Interactionalist Theory (Tinto)**

Following Tinto and Cullen's (1973) first publication on student dropout, Tinto published his seminal theory on student departure in 1975 with revisions in 1993 and 1997. Tinto suggests that student success can be predicted by the degree to which students are integrated into the academic and social life of the higher education institution and the degree to which students are committed to their studies and the goals of the higher education institution (Tinto, 1997). The essence of this model seems to be an assimilation of the student into the higher education institution context, fitting the student into the institution.

It was in his earliest work that Tinto coined the term academic integration as a measure of the expansion of the intellectual scope of the student, his or her critical thinking ability and the mental stimulation derived from his or her academic (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Tinto and Cullen (1973) also introduced the concept of social integration, which they described as the social fit of the student in the social environment of the institution, as manifested by, inter alia, participation in the extracurricular activities offered by the

institution. Tinto's description of the concept of social integration (fit of the student into the social environment of the institution) specified the abandonment of previous communities as a precondition for successful social integration at the institution (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). However, because of the nature of the non-traditional student's reality (working adults, often married, with children), integration in this context cannot entail complete separation from previous groups or networks, but rather the addition of the educational environment (Barnett, 2014). It can only imply the addition of the educational environment, to an existing support community consisting of family, friends and the workplace (Barnett, 2014), resulting in interdependence rather than independence from the family support context (Hurdado & Carter, 1997; Castillo, Conoley & Brossart, 2004).

Tinto's theory of social and academic integration has since achieved 'paradigmatic status' (Mentz, 2012:49) as 'the most studied, tested, revised and critiqued in the literature' (Seidman, 2005:66). Braxton goes as far as calling it 'hegemonic' (2000), while Zepke labels it the 'pre-eminent example of the integrationist discourse' (Zepke, Leach and Prebble, 2006:588). Kelly (2008:63) indicates that Tinto's work enjoys 'broad acceptance in the academic community'.

Those in support of Tinto's theory claim that it 'makes a significant contribution to an understanding of retention' by introducing 'much-needed internal accountability of the institution in student retention', 'by positioning it as an institutional-level problem that needs to be addressed' (Melguizo, 2011:395).

The model has nevertheless been critiqued by a number of authors: Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997) conducted a thorough review of Tinto's theory and they argue that 'there is very little empirical evidence supporting the theory'. They also question the fact that none of Tinto's revisions of his theory seemed to include a thoughtful review of the numerous studies that were aimed at testing his model.

Braxton (2000:3) later states that the model 'is partially supported and lacks empirical internal consistency', while Zepke et al. (2006:587) describe the sociological approach of integration as 'appealing but one-dimensional', contending that it tends to over-emphasise the institution's ability to impact student retention and success. Melguizo (2011:395) seems to agree with this view, pointing out that it assumes a 'small and static world' and that it fails to capture the external forces that may impact the institution and students alike, resulting in a lack of external accountability.

McCubbin (2003:1), in his examination of the criticisms of Tinto's work, groups these criticisms into three categories: the first category includes those that state that the model is not an adequate model of student attrition, the second is about generalizability, and the third is that academic integration is not an accurate predictor of student success.

Moja, Schreiber and Luescher-Mamashela (2014:v), assert that the criticism of Tinto's work seems to focus primarily on its 'generalizability'. This view is supported by McCubbin (2003:4) who indicates that the 'most consistent criticism' of Tinto's theory is that it seems applicable only to traditional, residential students.

Bean and Metzner (1985:485) indicated that social integration is not a reliable indicator for persistence rates amongst non-traditional students as it 'does not fully account for those students who do not particularly wish to become involved in the social aspects of student life' due to other commitments such as work and family responsibilities.

Braxton and Hirschy (2004:119), support this view, noting that 'there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the impact of social integration on student retention of part-time (non-traditional) students'. Prinsloo (2009:86) further argues that 'student throughput and retention operate differently for students of different ages, and that different factors influence early leavers and later leavers'.

Johnson, Soldner, Leonard and Alvarez (2007) contend that Tinto's integration discourse puts too much emphasis on the efforts of the individual, placing the burden on students to adapt to an 'unalterable campus context' and to seek a sense of belonging. They argued for institutions to adapt their cultures to accommodate students from diverse backgrounds, instead.

Tinto, in his own later critiques of his work, concedes that his original model did not provide for the different educational experiences, which occur due to differences in sex, race and social status (McCubbin, 2003). Tinto (1993) defines the pre-entry attributes of a student as the family background of the student (social status, size, parents' education), the attributes and skills of the student (including psychological attributes, intellectual ability, and motivation), and prior schooling.

In his revised model (Model of Student Attrition, 1997), he links the pre-entry attributes of the student and in particular the student's intentions, goals and commitments, to the institutional experience and ultimately to educational outcomes, student retention and success.

McCubbin (2003) admits that the Tinto model is quite ambitious in scope in that Tinto attempted to explain the full range of student attrition behaviours in one single model. However, he contends that, despite all the criticism, Tinto's model remains the 'most influential model of dropout from tertiary education' (McCubbin, 2003:1).

### **2.2.3 Psychological Theory (Bean and Eaton)**

Bean (1980) originally developed the psychological theory of student retention in 1980, building on the work of Tinto and Spady. This first theory was limited in terms of



generalisation as his study sampled only young (under 22 years of age) Caucasian students at a single institution.

However, similar to Tinto, Bean has revisited his own work a number of times and published a revised theory with Eaton in 2001. While Bean seems to agree with Tinto regarding the need for integration, he argues that psychological theories can help explain how social and academic integration come about (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

Bean and Eaton (2001) hypothesised that a student's psychological responses to the college environment will influence the student's decision to persist. Their built model is based on four psychological theories, namely:

- attitude-behaviour theory,
- coping behavioural (approach/avoidance) theory,
- self-efficacy theory, and
- attribution (locus of control) theory.

They propose that institutions design their retention programmes in such a way that it is aimed at facilitating psychological growth in these four areas, so that students develop self-efficacy, internal locus of control, approach academic and social work, and positive attitudes toward attending the school (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

An important feature of this model is that it assigns a role in the drop out decision to influences external to the college and to non-intellectual factors (Cabarrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993).

Bean concluded that organisational attributes such as the quality of education received, involvement within higher education institution organisations, and grade point average help determine student's levels of satisfaction with their respective universities. The more students are satisfied with their universities, the higher their levels of institutional commitment and the more likely they are to persist and graduate.

While Bean and Eaton encouraged researchers to engage with the model for refinement and clarification, the model has received little scholarly attention to date (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim & Yonai, 2014).

#### **2.2.4 Cultural capital (Berger)**

Berger (2000) introduced the concept of 'cultural capital', based on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (1973), into the student retention discourse. Berger proposes that mutual engagement and success are enhanced when each of the agents possesses certain kinds of capital. In addition to financial capital, Berger differentiates between cultural, intellectual, organisational and attitudinal forms of capital.

Berger (2000) theorises that cultural experiences, as a driver of inequalities, may lead to limited and restricted opportunities and that students may not succeed in institutions where their cultural capital is neither recognised nor valued and leave early. It may also be that the student does not possess the cultural capital required for success in an academic context. Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) cite academic literacy as one form of cultural and intellectual capital required by the student. If this is absent, the student will struggle to succeed.

Krause (2005:9) concurs with Berger, comparing the engagement experience of students who do not have the social and cultural capital required to adjust to the requirements of complex 'foreign and at times alienating and uninviting' higher education institution systems, to 'being in a battle'. Campus climate emerges from an institution's operating philosophy, its 'unspoken but deeply held values and beliefs about students and their education' (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005:27).

This concept seems particularly relevant in the African context. Walker (2005) investigated the racialised identities of black and white students at South African institutions, proving that, while an institution may admit black students, it may also subtly exclude them. This feeling of isolation and exclusion experienced by black students surfaced strongly in the 2015 '#Fees must fall' student protests, which addressed issues of access and symbolic representation (Kiguwa & Langa, 2015).

The concept of cultural capital opens the door to a new approach to student retention, namely that of 'adaptation' (by the institution) (Zepke, Leach & Pebble, 2006), as opposed to 'assimilation' (by the student) (as per Tinto's integration model). They argue that student departure is influenced by their perceptions of how well their cultural attributes are valued and accommodated, and how differences between their cultures of origin and immersion, are bridged.

As mentioned under paragraph 3.2.1.2 where criticisms of Tinto's theories were discussed, Johnson et. al. (2007) concluded that institutions should adapt their cultures to accommodate students from diverse backgrounds in a learner-centred way, rather than relying on students to adapt to an 'unalterable campus context' and to seek a sense of belonging.

Yorke and Longden (2004) confirm the link between the level of cultural capital and student retention and success. However, there is less empirical evidence supporting this discourse than supports the assimilative view as represented by Tinto's theories.

It draws on what Zepke and Leach (2005) call an adaptation discourse, in which institutions accept and recognise diverse learners' goals and cultural capital, and adapt their mores and practices to accommodate these in a learner-centred way.

### **2.2.5 Student Relationship Management (Ackerman and Schibrowsky)**

The concept of Student Relationship Management was derived from the concept of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and is based on a marketing/commercial understanding of education as a service, and the student as a client who is receiving a service that will enable gainful employment, thus approaching the issue of student retention from a consumerist framework (Schreiber, 2013).

Payne and Frow (2005) define Customer Relationship Management (CRM) as 'a strategic approach that is concerned with creating improved shareholder value through the development of appropriate, long-term, profitable relationships with customers, using data and information to understand customers and co-create value with them'. (Payne & Frow, 2005:168). The strategic orientation of CRM is supported by Hilbert, Schönbrunn and Schmode (2007). They add that the aim of CRM is to increase customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Payne and Frow (2005:168) further point out that CRM requires a 'cross-functional integration of processes, people, operations, and marketing capabilities that is enabled through information, technology, and applications'.

Similarly, student relationship management (SRM), a term coined by Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007), refers to the building of relationships with students to increase retention and loyalty to the school. The concept is based on the premise that a student is a client who engages in a longitudinal business relationship with the higher education institution and focuses strongly on service quality (Göpfrich 2002).

Relationship marketing maintains that retaining customers requires focused, post-purchase activities rather than pre-purchase and purchase-time activities (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007)

In this context, student retention is approached from the commercial premise that it is easier, less expensive, and more profitable to retain current clients than to acquire new ones (Jain, 2005).

Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007) indicate that the relationship-building approach to client satisfaction and retention is based on trust and commitment. They are of the view that the degree to which parties in the relationship trust each other and the extent to which the parties are committed to maintaining the relationship, determines the success of the relationship.

Additionally, student perceptions of how supportive and engaged their higher education institution is toward their academic success seem to have an effect on student success. The perception of reduced support in the second year of learning, for example, perceptions of support, as well as actual student success, will decrease (Kuh et al., 2006). Coll and Draves (2009) further suggest in their study that the

relationship between students and academic staff is crucial to student success (Coll & Draves, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006).

This makes it important for the institution to know who the students are, what they want, and what is important to them (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). An institute that knows its students is in a better position to build relationships.

Applied to higher education, the relationship marketing concepts hold promise for furthering the understanding of student retention and the improvement of retention practices. Just as managers of businesses have in place strategies to retain customers, campus faculty and staff can readily adapt the principles of relationship marketing to develop strategies to retain already-enrolled students.

This approach is not without criticism: Schreiber (2013:7) is of the opinion that viewing students as clients implies that students are 'passive recipients of a service', outside of the collaborative knowledge-creation process.

A supplier offers a value proposition, but value actualisation occurs in the usage and consumption process. Thus, value is the outcome of co-creation between suppliers and customers (Gummesson, 2007).

Keeling (2004) suggests that alternative methods of soliciting students' voices should be explored. Having a listening process in place that includes timely responses lets students know they are participants in the community and that their input is valued beyond that of being a revenue source.

Student empowerment that includes having a voice in the decision making power over issues concerning their education, as well as in the ways students experience the campus, is crucial to the building of commitment and loyalty (Kuh et al., 2005), which may impact positively on their academic success.

### **2.2.6 Student engagement (Kuh and Krause)**

According to Trowler (2010), the term student engagement, which appears in literature since the 1990's, can be traced back to Astin's 1984 work on student involvement. Both Kuh and Krause have since published extensively on this topic and refined the concept and the term student engagement.

Kuh (2009: 683) defines student engagement as 'the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities'. This definition is similar to that of Krause (2005), who defines engagement as 'the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at higher education institutions'.

Zepke and Leach (2005) presents a more detailed definition which includes the student's emotional commitment, cognitive involvement as well as active participation in activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning. This definition seems to speak to the 'academic integration' element of Tinto's Revised Student Integration Model (1997), addressing the assimilation of academic skills or capital.

Chen, Gonyea and Kuh (2008:1) contends that students develop 'habits of the mind and heart that promise to stand them in good stead for a lifetime of continuous learning', if they are engaged in their learning.

Kuh (2008:21) suggests that student engagement can best be achieved through 'high-impact activities', including induction ('first-year seminars') learning communities, and service learning.

Various studies show that student engagement is an important antecedent of student learning and institutional quality, but there is as yet relatively little evidence on the relationship between engagement and student attrition (Gordon, Ludlum & Hoey, 2008).

### **2.3 Overview of student retention theories from the developing world**

As student retention studies is context-specific according to Tinto (2002), a brief overview of the work done regarding student retention in the developing world, and Africa in particular, will be given to establish whether there is any relevant work that can contribute to the understanding of the student retention puzzle in the developing world and African context.

As pointed out in Chapter 1 of this thesis, despite the plethora of international literature on student retention, very little research has been done in the African context to date. According to Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011:178) research on student retention and success in Africa is still in its 'infancy' phase.

Morrow (2009) introduced a valuable concept that may affect non-traditional students in particular, namely that of epistemological access. The contributions of Koen (2007), Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011), and Ley (2013) all focused on either postgraduate or non-traditional students and these studies are considered particularly relevant to the current study. Sadly, the African contributions to the literature seems to be relying heavily on the international, and in particular British, work done in this field and as such have limited independent value (Koen, 2007).

Morrow (2009:77) introduced the concept of 'epistemological access', which implies an understanding of the 'intrinsic disciplines and constitutive standards' of academic practice. Morrow asserts that formal access at a higher education institution does not guarantee epistemological access. He defines epistemological access as access to

successful participation in an academic practice by ‘learning the intrinsic disciplines and constitutive standards of the practice’ and that to deny this type of access amounted to ‘facile relativism’ (Morrow, 2009:70).

Koen (2007) conducted a case study at the University of the Western Cape, focusing on postgraduate student retention and success. His main argument is that the institutional culture and academic practices of a higher education institution creates a framework for interaction and integration. He proposes that student retention and success can be enhanced through ‘constructing intimate and collegial learning experiences and exposing students to the responsibilities and identities associated with academic life’ (Koen, 2007:104).

Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) argue that a fit between the student and institution leads to sustained student success. Their ‘student walk’ model, which refers to ‘the numerous continuous interactions between student and institution throughout each step of the student’s journey, beginning with application and registration but also including teaching, learning and assessment, student support, graduation and ending with participation in the community and labour market’. This model seems to be built on what Zepke and Leached termed ‘transactional engagement’ (Zepke & Leach, 2005).

Ley’s 2013 study considers the relationship between sense of coherence, time-to-degree and academic achievement of non-traditional students at a distance learning institution. Ley’s work covers the definition of non-traditional students very comprehensively and her definition incorporates the South African context. This is particularly useful and is referred to under Section 3.3, where the definition of non-traditional students is discussed in more detail.

In view of the context-specific nature of student retention and the fact that this study wishes to add a developing world and in particular African perspective to the body of knowledge, it seems imperative to understand the socio-economic factors at play in higher education and in particular those faced by non-traditional students. The next paragraph will consider these factors.

### **2.3.1 Socio-economic factors impacting higher education**

As indicated in paragraph 1.3.1 dealing with the higher education landscape, the traditional higher education landscape has changed dramatically in the past decades with a shift ‘from elite to mass systems across virtually all developed countries’ as there has been a tremendous increase in the number of ‘non-traditional students’, to the extent that the adult student is now ‘the dominant learner in the 21st century’ and is ‘changing education’ (Williamson, 2009:1).

However, Wangenge-Ouma (2012) argues that access in an expanding (socio-economic developing) system is necessarily characterised by an increase in financially needy students. This seems particularly relevant in Sub-Saharan Africa where poverty is rife and 220 million people are projected to be malnourished (Sabi, Kolanisi, Siwela, & Naidoo, 2015).

Students seem to be particularly vulnerable to poverty and food security: Gwacela (2013) found that 55% of students at the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa considered themselves to be from low income households with little or no financial support to them from home throughout the year. In addition, Fekisi and Jaffer (2013) documented that many students at the University of the Free State in South Africa were ashamed to expose their impoverished lifestyle, to the extent that they were reluctant to accept help for example from friends or the food security aid on campus.

Bowl (2001) highlights additional challenges faced by non-traditional students, including increased travelling, complicated arrangements for dropping off and collecting children, and childcare costs, and concludes that poverty is a reality for non-traditional students.

In addition, research has confirmed that poverty significantly impacts on the students' academic performance leading to low graduation rates and high failure and drop-out rates (Letseka, 2009).

However, while universities often actively encourage the enrolment of non-traditional students in the higher education system, they do not seem to understand the needs and circumstances of these students and maintains a system designed for traditional students, whose needs are substantially different (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

The socio-economic context also places demands on institutions, facing 'severe austerity regimens imposed by the various economic stabilisation policies, at the same time as they were pressured to increase enrolment and maintain quality levels, without commensurate increases in resources' (Sawyerr, 2004). Due to these challenges, academic careers are not attractive and Africa is resultantly faced by an aging academic corps, resulting in a shrinking pool of knowledge producers and a stagnation of knowledge societies (Klemencic & Fried, 2015:13).

There also seems to be very particular social memes that affect the way people from Africa approach higher education. This will be discussed in the next section.

### **2.3.2 Social memes impacting higher education in Africa**

A social meme can be defined as 'an element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means' (Oxford dictionary, 2016). A meme acts as a unit for

carrying cultural ideas, symbols, or practices that can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phenomena with a mimicked theme. Supporters of the concept regard memes as cultural analogues to genes in that they self-replicate, mutate, and respond to selective pressures.

The general approach seems to be that 'good education secures good earning' but this is may be a western meme that we socially enforced over time.

The apparent dissonance between the curriculum, pedagogic practices and the everyday lived experiences of students (Shizha, 2015) contradicts the quest to bring 'our ways of knowing into closer harmony with our ways of being in the world' (Buttimer, 1976:277). African higher education institutions may therefore be faced by a need for a 'more self-conscious theoretical position' about their role in an attempt to redefine themselves, their purpose and identities (Soudien, 2012). In addition higher education institutions (in Africa) will have to change both their structures and their academic offerings to accommodate the needs of 'an increasingly diverse student population' (Klemencic & Fried, 2015:13) within its developing societies.

The discussion regarding retention and success factors will now be summarised.

## **2.4 Summary of the discussion regarding retention and factors impacting on education success**

This preliminary literature review highlights a number of concepts that can be used as points of departure (Charmaz, 2003) for investigation during the exploratory study.

### **2.4.1 Pre-entry attributes of students**

The first concept that the researcher identified from the literature is that of the pre-entry attributes of students (such as family background, skills and abilities, prior schooling, academic preparedness), as raised by Tinto (1993) and Bean and Eaton (2001). From the literature reviewed, it became clear that the pre-admission attributes or the background of a student, including socio-economic circumstances, the quality of schooling, being a first-generation student, and commitments outside of the study context, including work and family responsibilities, play a role in student retention. Some scholars (e.g., Bean) seem to place more emphasis on these elements, while others choose to emphasise the role of the institution or other factors.

### **2.4.2 Social integration**

The second concept that seems to emerge from the literature studied, is that of social integration or belonging (Tinto, 1997). This topic seems to cover Ackerman and Schibrowsky's (2007) concept of Student Relationship Management, (SRM) which implies the building of relationships with students to increase retention and loyalty to



the school. A number of authors refer to the role that the culture of the institution and the commitment and attitude with which the institution treats students, coupled with student satisfaction, plays in student persistence. The concepts of normative congruence (Spady), Tinto's social integration, Student Relationship Management (SRM) theory and the theory of student engagement, all speak to this element.

### **2.4.3 Academic integration**

The third concept identified by the researcher is that of academic integration. This topic emerges from Berger (2000) and Krause's (2005) writing on cultural capital, which refers to the student's ability to adjust to the requirements of higher education institution systems, as well as from Morrow's (2009) theory of epistemological access, and Tinto's (1997) concept of academic integration. The literature seems to indicate that formal access is not enough to ensure student success but that planned, deliberate action is required to ensure student success. Kuh's work (2009) and Krause's (2005) work on student engagement also seem to fit into this topic, as they refer to the time and effort students invest in their studies and alignment to the institution's goals. However, their approach puts more emphasis on the role of the student and less on that of the institution.

### **2.4.4 Socio-economic factors impacting education success**

The impact of the socio-economic reality faced by non-traditional students, on their successful completion of postgraduate studies, presents the fourth concept for further investigation in the exploratory phase of this study.

It seems clear from the literature discussed in section 2.3.1, that financial hardship has significant impacts on student retention and withdrawal. In addition, the institutional habitus seems to be strongly related to the socio-economic background of the student and this may impact on their social integration (Thomas, 2002).

Although the role of financial considerations in higher education student dropout is increasingly being recognised, the dominant international literature 'fails to reflect the extent of socio-economic deprivation among students in countries where many people live below the poverty datum line' (Breier, 2010:657).

The exploratory study will use these concepts as a point of departure but will also seek to broaden the understanding of non-traditional postgraduate students and their success, adding further concepts to these identified from the literature.

The next section will focus on defining postgraduate and non-traditional students.

## **2.5 Postgraduate students**

Merriam-Webster (2016) defines postgraduate studies simply as ‘formal studies after graduation’.

The concept of postgraduate education originates from the medieval European higher education system which originally introduced levels of study in the form of Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral degrees (Verger, 1999).

According to the CHE (2009:1) the production of university graduates – and especially postgraduate students – is ‘an essential component of the national system of innovation of modern industrialized societies’, as postgraduate studies underpin the modern knowledge economy and enables the production of new knowledge.

Hayward (2015) underlines the critical need for more postgraduate graduates, stating that ‘the case for the expansion of graduate education is compelling’ and that the critical contribution of higher education to national development has been empirically demonstrated.

### **2.5.1 The role of the academic supervisor in relation to postgraduate students**

One of the factors that make postgraduate students unique is that they are required to produce research, either in the form of a dissertation (Masters) or a thesis (PhD).

There seems to be general agreement in the literature that the relationship between the academic supervisor and postgraduate student is decisive for the success of the latter’s Masters dissertation and/or PhD thesis (Deuchar, 2008).

Research supervision, though, seems to be challenging: Grant (2009) calls research supervision ‘a puzzling pedagogy requiring a thoughtful response from its practitioners’. Pearson and Kayrooz (2005) add that there seems to be a lack of robust conceptual understanding of what supervision involves and Olivier (2007) calls it an unsure and complex process. The relational aspects of the highly demanding, interpersonally focused, one-on-one relationship between the student and supervisor (Davel, 2012) seem to add to the complexity.

Mouton (2001) views the academic supervisor’s role as providing guidance and advice, ensuring scientific quality and providing emotional support. Lessing and Schulze (2002) in turn describe a threefold role for the academic supervisor: expertise in the research area; support for the student and balancing creativity and critique.

Grant, Hackney and Edger (2014) indicate that the topic of postgraduate supervision has not been investigated in any significant depth as yet. The direct impact of academic supervision on postgraduate student success is therefore still largely

unknown. This is one of the aspects of postgraduate studies that will be explored in more detail in the current study.

## **2.6 The non-traditional student**

It is necessary to define the term 'non-traditional student' in detail as the retention discourses discussed in this chapter must for the purposes of this study, be considered in the context of their applicability to the non-traditional student.

The term non-traditional student will be discussed under two headings: the term will first be defined and secondly, an introduction to the unique challenges faced by non-traditional students will be provided.

### **2.6.1 Defining the term 'non-traditional student'**

Traditionally, students entered higher education directly from secondary school, stayed and studied on campus full-time, and were primarily from high socio-economic backgrounds (Chung, Turnbull & Chur-Hansen, 2014).

The traditional landscape has changed dramatically in the past decades with the shift 'from elite to mass systems across virtually all developed countries' as there has been a tremendous increase in the number of 'non-traditional students', to the extent that the adult student is now 'the dominant learner in the 21st century' and is 'changing education'. (Williamson, 2009:1). This increase is ascribed to the democratisation of higher education and the social justice agenda in many countries (Hornsby and Osman, 2014), and to the labour market's demand for increased skill together with employees' pursuit of career advancement and life-long learning (Gregory & Kurisky, 2011).

There does not seem to be one universal understanding of the term 'non-traditional student' – in fact, Chung, Turnbull and Chur-Hansen (2014) could, even after studying 45 definitions in peer-reviewed articles, not find consensus on the precise definition in the literature.

The confusion is further compounded by the use of different terms - literature from the United States and Australia term these students 'minority students' (Robert, Davis, & Dina, 2011) or 'at risk students' (Comber & Kamler, 2012) , while authors from the United Kingdom tend to prefer the term 'non-traditional' (Allan, O'Driscoll, Simpson & Shawe, 2013).

As a result Chung, Turnbull and Chur-Hansen (2014:1224) chose to describe non-traditional students as 'those with socio-demographic characteristics that differ from traditional participants in higher education'. Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, and Anae (2006), as well as Tlupova (2008), adopted similarly broad definitions, using the term to refer to students from any social grouping that is under-represented in higher education or those who possess characteristics that do not normally appear in entrants to higher education.

In a developing country such as South Africa, the socio-economic and political factors play a critical role (Sondlo, 2013). Given the previous uneven structuring of educational opportunities based on race under apartheid (Soudien, 2010), the South African definition of 'non-traditional' is slightly different.

It is in this context that Ley (2013) defines non-traditional students as those students who have at least one of the following characteristics: being over the age of 25, delayed enrolment, working full-time, being a non-resident student and being a student from one of the race groups previously excluded from higher education.

Smit (2012) adds that the term 'non-traditional students' is often used interchangeably with the term 'disadvantaged students' in South Africa, taking the South African context into account.

However, it must be clarified that, for the purpose of this study, the term 'non-traditional students' will take a broader approach and will not focus exclusively on the South African understanding of 'disadvantaged' (which has a racial connotation) but will encompass the three criteria identified by Ley (2013) outlined above, as this seems to be the most appropriate definition for the purposes of this study.

### **2.6.2 Challenges faced by non-traditional students**

Considering the above understanding of 'non-traditional', it stands to reason that non-traditional students may experience their postgraduate studies as more challenging.

Challenges associated with the retention of non-traditional students include competing responsibilities among family, work and school, single parenthood, and the resources (academic and financial) available at the institution (Berger, 1992).

Many studies claim that the non-traditional students present a higher risk of dropping out (National Audit Office, 2007; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Nevertheless, empirical research that tries to understand this is still insufficient (Yorke and Longden, 2004) and it seems that the traditional retention models do not address the unique situation of non-traditional students. Bean and Metzner (1985) indicated that environmental variables (such as work, family responsibilities and financial constraints) may have a greater impact on departure decisions of adult students than academic variables (such as study habits, career advice and course availability).

Ryan and Deci (2000) link student engagement to the feeling of belonging, of being accepted and affirmed. They note that 'non-traditional' students often do not have that sense of belonging and consequently do not feel engaged. Laird et al. (2007) also found that non-traditional students often feel uncomfortable in traditional institutions. Johnson et al. (2007) are of the opinion that it is the role of the institution

to adapt its culture to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, rather than expecting of students to seek a sense of belonging on their own.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter provided a preliminary overview of the primary student retention theories from both the developed and developing world. The theories of Tinto (1975; 1993; 1997) and Bean (1980; 2001) are most prominent in the literature from the developing world, focusing on both pre-admission attributes (Bean) and the student's sociological integration, both socially and academically (Tinto), in the higher education context. The applicability of these theories to postgraduate, non-traditional students have not yet been proven and since student retention is by Tinto's (2002) own admission context-specific, the contributions of the developing world to this topic is all the more relevant.

The contributions of developing world and Africa in particular to the retention body of knowledge however seems to be limited and the African literature on this topic seems to be relying heavily on the international, and in particular American and British work done in this field and as such seems to have 'little independent value' (Koen, 2007:42).

This confirms the decision of the researcher to follow a grounded theory mode of enquiry as well as her choice to cast this study as an exploratory one.

The literature review also sought to clarify certain key differentiating concepts included in this study, namely the definitions of postgraduate, as well as non-traditional students, and the challenges faced by non-traditional students.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, will explain the research design and methodology, which were introduced in Chapter 1, in detail.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

De Vaus and De Vaus (2001:9) proclaim the function of the research design as enabling the researcher to 'answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible'. Methodology in turn refers to 'the science of finding out' (Babbie, 2015:4) or the theory of how inquiry should proceed, including the analysis of assumptions, principles and procedures in a particular approach which in turn leads to the use of particular methods (Schwandt, 2001). This Chapter will explain how the researcher intends to go about this process.

The researcher's ontological and epistemological perspectives, the Mode 2 research approach to the study, the research paradigm, the research type, the choice of a qualitative design and the reasoning behind a grounded theory mode of inquiry and methodology were discussed in detail in Chapter 1 and will be referred to only briefly. The reader is also referred to paragraph 1.7 and to Figure 1, which demonstrates the interrelationship between the various research concepts, for the purposes of this study.

The research design and planned methodology of the current study will be explained in more detail in this Chapter, taking the above context into account. The planned methods of data collection and analysis will be outlined, the scope and limitations of the study will be stated, and finally the measures taken to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines will be described.

#### **3.2 Research orientation**

The reader is reminded that the study takes place in the context of a Mode 2 learning environment, referring to a research system which is highly interactive and 'socially distributed', where knowledge production is heterogeneous and takes place 'in the context of application' through transdisciplinary collaborations (Hessels & Van Lente, 2008).

It was explained in Chapter 1 that the research paradigm of this study is an interpretivist paradigm, which requires the researcher to understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007:19).

As stated in Chapter 1, the study is exploratory in nature, allowing for the pursuance of non-specialised interests and broad discovery (Stebbins, 2001:vi), especially with reference to research problems for which knowledge is either incomplete or unknown

(Sosnowski, 2015). This resonates both with the researcher's own relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, as well as with the nature and aim of this study, taking into account that there is limited research on success factors affecting non-traditional students.

### **3.3 Research design**

The term research design can be defined as a 'strategy of enquiry' (Ebersohn, Eloff & Ferreira, 2010:130) but is broader than 'just a workplan' (De Vaus & De Vaus, 2001:9), and deals with a 'logical problem and not with a logistical problem' (Yin, 1989:29).

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) emphasise the importance of choosing a study design that is philosophically aligned with the worldview, personality and skills of the researcher and corresponds with the research question.

In view of the researcher's world view explained in Chapter 1 of this thesis, and as the study aims to explain a social phenomenon (that of the reasons why non-traditional postgraduate students may not complete their studies), a qualitative research design seems to be the most appropriate for the current study. This selection will now be discussed in more detail.

#### **3.3.1 Qualitative design**

As stated above, the research design of this study is qualitative. Monette, Sullivan, and DeJong (2011:506) describe qualitative research as 'research that focuses on data in the form of words, pictures, descriptions or narratives'. Whittaker (2012:7) adds to this understanding, stating that qualitative research 'seeks to explain the meaning of social phenomena through exploring the ways in which individuals understand their worlds.'

Qualitative research seeks to obtain in-depth, subjective data from a small sample group 'delving more deeply into those individuals, settings, subcultures, and scenes', (Baker, Edwards & Doidge, 2012:8) hoping to generate 'meaning in context' (Merriam, 2014:2). Data is collected by way of open-ended questions so as to get subjective, personal opinions and insight (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011).

Whittaker (2012:7) further notes that, while quantitative research emphasises objectivity through scientific methods using numbers, counts and measures of things, qualitative research 'seeks to explain the meaning of social phenomena through exploring the ways in which individuals understand their worlds'.

From Whittaker's description, it is clear that qualitative research is not necessarily objective. Qualitative research is inductive and the researcher becomes immersed in



details and specifics of the data to discover categories and interrelationships (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006; Rubin & Babbie, 2013).

Zepke and Leach (2010) support this view, indicating that qualitative studies are necessary to help understand the 'finer-grained reasons' for student success or their lack thereof.

As also explained in Chapter 1, the present study will consist of three main phases, namely a preliminary literature review, an exploratory qualitative study following a grounded theory mode of enquiry, and finally the development of a grounded theory (theory building).

It is acknowledged that these three phases, in view of the grounded theory mode of enquiry, will not be linear but may overlap as data collection and analysis may occur concurrently and theory may have emerged from the data gathered during the collection phase.

It is however felt that breaking down the three main phases of the study should enhance the understanding of the design of this study. This will be done first, and the grounded theory mode of enquiry will be discussed in more detail thereafter.

#### **3.3.1.1 Literature review**

As explained in Chapter 2 of this study, a preliminary literature review was conducted first. In view of the fact that the researcher has chosen a grounded theory mode of enquiry, the literature will not be given a position of privilege over the emerging data from the empirical study, but will be treated as equally important data (Ramalho et al., 2015).

The preliminary literature review, contained in Chapter 2, covers the main theories in the field of student retention and defines key concepts including non-traditional and postgraduate students. The concepts identified from the literature review should inform the research instruments (interview questionnaire for in-depth one-on-one interviews and a semi-structured interview schedule for focus group discussion) to be utilised during the exploratory phase.

The approach to the exploratory phase will be explained next.

#### **3.3.1.2 Exploratory study**

As previously stated, the exploratory phase will take the form of a grounded theory study amongst non-traditional postgraduate students in three African countries. Grounded theory will serve both as the mode of enquiry as well as the methodology for data collection and analysis.

The results from the literature review as well as the exploratory study will be used for the next phase, which is that of developing a framework. This phase of the research journey is termed 'theory building' and this will be elaborated on in the next section.

### **3.3.1.3 Theory building**

The third step in the completion of this study links to the ultimate goal of a grounded theory study, namely to generate a substantive theory that is grounded in the verifiable data from an empirical study of a particular group of people (Compton & Barrett, 2016).

Theory construction can therefore be described as a process of 'puzzling out' and problem solving that draws on existing ways of understanding a phenomenon (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Grounded theory scholars differentiate between substantive theories, which attempt to conceptualise only the people observed and do not infer a universal theory for the broader sociological canon, and formal theory (Compton & Barrett, 2016). A formal theory is aimed at addressing a 'generic issue that cuts across several substantive areas of study, containing abstract and general concepts, and specifies links between these concepts' (Charmaz, 2014:343). It is envisaged that the current study will result in a formal theory.

The ultimate goal of the study is to potentially build an inductive framework which shows the dynamic relationships among the emergent concepts, themes and dimensions resulting from a grounded theory study and should reflect not only the essential concepts, themes, and/or dimensions contained in the data structure, but also the relational dynamics among those concepts that are now made transparent (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013).

For this purpose, the theory emerging from the data will be compared with the extant literature to enhance the internal validity, generalisability, and theoretical level of the theory building from the data (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The researcher used Section 3.3.2 to outline the three key steps to be followed in the study, namely the literature review, exploratory study, and finally the construction of a grounded theory. This provides a 'big picture' overview of the study. The grounded theory mode of enquiry will be explored in more detail in the next section.

### **3.3.2 Mode of enquiry**

As explained in the previous section, the research design of the study is qualitative. The mode of enquiry was also indicated in Chapter 1, as a grounded theory mode of enquiry. This choice will be explained in more detail in this section.

As indicated in Chapter 1, little research has been done in the field of non-traditional, postgraduate student success, in particular from an African or developing world perspective. As such, grounded theory seems particularly well suited for this study, which is aimed at theory development that privileges multiple, co-created realities, the linkage between values and facts, and provisional truth (Lowry, Cartier, Back and Delconte, 2015). The study hopes to facilitate not only a description of what is happening, but also an understanding of the process by which it is happening (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Since the initial introduction of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), grounded theory was taken in 'somewhat divergent directions' (Charmaz, 2014:11), with Glaser and Strauss later advocating vastly different approaches to grounded theory with significant incompatibilities and contradictions. As a result, many researchers opt to use a medley of aspects from both the Glaserian and Straussian methods (Cutcliffe, 2004).

McCallin (2006) suggest that researchers select the version of grounded theory that suits them and their research best, and reflects the skills, preferences and interests of the individual researcher. There is an important correlation between the researcher's thinking, learning style and their preferred approach (McCallin, 2006).

Charmaz however introduced a pragmatic and flexible alternative in the form of constructivist grounded theory, providing a set of general guidelines rather than 'formulaic prescriptions' (Charmaz, 2014:3) and allowing for the co-creation of knowledge through the interpretive understanding of participants' subjective meanings (Charmaz, 2003:250). This approach seems appropriate in view of the researcher's own interpretivist ontology.

The qualitative research methodology which will be utilised for this study will be discussed next. The details of the methods to be followed in the exploratory study, namely sampling, data collection and data analysis will also be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### **3.3.3 Research methodology**

As noted previously, the methodology to be followed in this study is qualitative.

According to Patton (2002), qualitative research is based on the appreciation of the subjective, experiential life world of people and in-depth description of experiences. Whittaker (2012) further notes that, while quantitative research emphasises objectivity through scientific methods using numbers, counts and measures of things, qualitative research seeks to explain the meaning of social phenomena through

exploring the ways in which individuals understand their worlds, rather than seeking to develop testable hypotheses.

### **3.3.4 Sampling**

Social sciences studies aim at understanding the nature and form of a specific phenomenon in a particular population (Robinson, 2014; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). Naturally, time, costs and accessibility prohibit the collection of data from every member of the population (Somekh & Lewin, 2011), and as such, a sampling strategy is developed to ensure the selection of specific data sources, which is representative of the total population, from which data can be collected to address the research objectives (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg & McKibbon, 2015).

The sampling strategy of the present study will be discussed under three headings: the population or sample universe will be described first, whereafter the sampling strategy will be explained and lastly, the sample size will be indicated.

#### **3.3.4.1 The population**

The population or sample universe of a study is understood as the total number of individuals that meet the criteria or possess the attributes that qualify them to participate in the study (Robinson, 2014). This implies that a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria is specified for the study, drawing a boundary around the sample universe (Robinson, 2014).

In the case of this particular study, the target population or sample universe consists of all non-traditional postgraduate students in Africa, meaning those who had at least one of the following characteristics: being over the age of 25, delayed enrolment, working full-time, being a non-resident student (Ley, 2013), who are currently or have previously been enrolled in postgraduate studies.

The sample universe also includes persons involved in the support of these students, including academic supervisors, facilitators, lecturers and other support staff, with a view to allowing the researcher to triangulate data across different sources (Creswell & Miller, 2000) for completeness purposes (Hussein, 2015). Literature related to the retention and success of non-traditional traditional students will also be considered as these also represent the 'support' voice.

The above two groupings clearly present an unmanageably large population, necessitating the selection of a representative sample, which would enable the study of the population (Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee, 2006). The sampling strategy followed by the researcher will be discussed in more detail next.

#### **3.3.4.2 The sampling strategy**

The approach to sampling in qualitative studies seems to be complicated and contested. The literature often uses the terms purposeful, selective and theoretical sampling interchangeably (Coyne, 1997) or with wide ranging and occasionally contradictory meanings (Emmel, 2013).

Patton (2015) describes purposive sampling as the purposeful selection of information-rich cases for in-depth study, with a view to gaining insights and in-depth understanding. Ritchie et al. (2013) indicates that theoretical sampling allows the researcher to identify participants on the basis of their proximity to the research question and their ability to provide the richest and most relevant information (Ritchie et al., 2013).

From the above definitions, purposive and theoretical sampling seems to be very similar. The main differentiation between the two seems to be the fact that theoretical sampling is guided purely by the conceptual and informational needs of the study (Emmel, 2013) and the fact that sample selection, fieldwork and analysis may be undertaken iteratively rather than sequentially (Ritchie et al., 2013), allowing flexibility in the sample selection, based on the nature of the initial findings.

Theoretical sampling seems appropriate for exploratory studies, where it may be difficult to identify in advance the groups and characteristics that need to be included in the sample (Ritchie et al., 2013), and it is the preferred sampling method in grounded theory studies (Charmaz, 2003). It was therefore selected as the preferred sampling strategy for the current study.

While a grounded theory study requires a flexible approach to its sampling and the exact sample cannot be predetermined at the outset (Glaser, 2001), it seems customary for grounded theory scholars to start with a purposive sampling, considering participants that meet the theoretical requirements of the study, and to use a reiterative approach, which is considered theoretical sampling.

#### **3.3.4.3 The sample size**

Sample sizes in qualitative studies are generally much smaller than those in quantitative studies (Mason, 2010) as the intent of qualitative research is to develop 'an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon' (Creswell, 2005:203) rather than making hypothetical statements that can be generalised across the larger population (Dworkin, 2012).

The exact number of participants seems to depend on the type of study, the nature of the question, and the context. Different authors recommend different sample sizes for qualitative studies involving individual interviews, ranging between 20 to 30 respondents (Bryman, 2012), 50 respondents (Ritchie et. al., 2013) and a minimum of

60 participants (Gerson and Horowitz). For grounded theory studies in particular, Morse (1994) recommends 30 to 50 individual interviews.

In view of the above discussion, the researcher plans to follow a theoretical sampling strategy, keeping the theoretical purpose and theoretical relevance of the sample in mind (Ritchie et al., 2013) and involving between 30 and 50 non-traditional postgraduate students through individual interviews. These participants will be selected on the basis of whether they could, in the opinion of the researcher, contribute meaningfully to the study, based on their postgraduate study experience.

It is also the intention of the researcher to involve individuals involved in the support of non-traditional postgraduate students. These participants will also be selected through the theoretical sampling method, based on their expected ability to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on non-traditional postgraduate student support.

The researcher will initially approach students and student support staff, including academic supervisors, known to her in the course of her work and own studies or suggested to her by the particular higher education institution, and will request them to refer her to other possible participants based on the emerging theory from the initial interviews.

In keeping with the theoretical sampling approach, the sample size will be adjusted if the researcher realises that there is a need for data collection from respondents not included in the original sample universe (Robinson, 2014), or when data saturation has been reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The next section will focus on the data collection process.

### **3.3.5 Data collection**

As indicated in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the aim of the current study is to potentially develop an institutional framework that could facilitate the successful completion of postgraduate studies at Higher Education Institutions in developing socio-economic contexts.

The objectives supporting the achievement of the above aim are to understand the reasons why non-traditional postgraduate students do not complete their studies successfully, to determine the institutional factors that may affect the success of these students, to determine the relevance of the concepts of social and academic integration in the case of these students and to determine the role and impact of the academic supervisor in the success of non-traditional postgraduate students.

To achieve these objectives, data has to be collected from the sample discussed above, including non-traditional postgraduate students and persons involved in the support of these students.

Grounded theory seems to be the most appropriate approach to data collection and analysis, given the flexible nature of the constant comparative method (Slatyer Williams & Michael, 2015) which implies that data can be collected and analysed concurrently (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), allowing the researcher to discover patterns, themes, continuities and discontinuities in the data (Anderson & Jack, 2015).

The researcher will firstly discuss the proposed data collection instruments (interview questionnaire and schedule), and will then elaborate on the data collection methods (individual and focus group interviews).

#### **3.3.5.1 Data collection instruments**

As stated previously, it is the intention to collect data through individual interviews with non-traditional postgraduate students, as well as group interviews or focus groups with academic and support staff involved in the support of non-traditional postgraduate students.

An interview questionnaire will be designed for the individual interviews, aimed at testing the social integration, academic integration, personal circumstances and support system at home, support received from the institution and the relationship with the academic supervisor.

Charmaz (2006) as well as Jacob and Furgerson (2012) recommends that the constructivist grounded theory researcher should limit the questions to a few broad and expansive questions that will invite detailed, in-depth responses from participants and allow the free flow of information as well as the materialisation of unexpected data from participants (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

For this purpose, questions will be as open and non-threatening as possible. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) recommend the phrase 'tell me about' as this is both an invitation and a subtle command to encourage the interviewee to start talking, and it is a non-threatening way to phrase an open question, suitable for exploratory studies.

Table 1 reflects the topics to be covered and the proposed questions to be included in the questionnaire to be used for individual interviews with students:

Topic	Question
Pre-entry attributes, personal circumstances and support structures, motivation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please tell me about yourself and your family background.</li> <li>2. What motivated you to enrol for a postgraduate degree?</li> <li>3. What developmental opportunities do postgraduate studies offer?</li> </ol>
Integration (social as well as academic)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Please describe your experience as a postgraduate student at the ABC institution, in detail.</li> </ol>
Challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Please tell me about any challenges that you faced during your postgraduate studies.</li> </ol>
Research supervision	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Tell me about your research supervision experience.</li> </ol>
Personal motivation during studies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Tell me what motivated you to continue studying or</li> <li>8. Tell me what caused you to terminate your studies.</li> </ol>
Other	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. In your opinion, what are the critical success factors for non-traditional postgraduate students to complete their studies successfully?</li> <li>10. Is there anything else you would like to share with me as part of this research study?</li> </ol>

**Table 1 Individual interview schedule**

Due to the fact that the focus group interviews will target a different group of respondents, namely individuals involved in the support of non-traditional postgraduate students, a different interview schedule will be used for the semi-structured group interviews (focus groups).

Kruegar and Casey (2000:41) call open-ended questions 'the hallmark of group interviews' and recommend that questions sound conversational, are short, clear, easy to understand and one-dimensional (ask only one thing). They further recommend that the number of questions be limited and that between 5 and 20 minutes be allowed for discussion of each question (Kruegar & Casey, 2000).

Table 2 contains the interview schedule for the semi-structured group interviews (focus groups).



<b>Topic</b>	<b>Question</b>
The student: Pre-entry attributes /social integration/academic integration/ personal circumstances/support	1. In your experience, what are the success factors for postgraduate students to complete their studies successfully?
	2. In your experience, what are the key challenges faced by post-graduate students?
	3. What developmental opportunities do postgraduate studies offer?
The role of the academic supervisor	4. How do you see the role of the supervisor?
The role of the institution	5. What could higher education institutions do to ensure that non-traditional postgraduate students complete their studies successfully?
General	6. Is there anything else that you would like to add as part of this research study?

***Table 2 Focus group individual schedule***

The data collection methods to be used to collect data using the above instruments will be discussed in more detail next.

### **3.3.5.2 In-depth individual interviews**

Semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews are generally accepted as a suitable vehicle for data collection in grounded theory research (Glaser, 1992). Gray (2014) indicates that semi-structured interviews allow for the probing of views and opinions where it is desirable for respondents to expand on their answers, thus making it a good choice for qualitative researchers, allowing for the in-depth exploration of the topic.

It is in view of the above that the researcher intends to use semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary source of data for this study, supplemented by focus group discussions. While both individual interviews and focus group discussions are resource-intensive data collection methods, these methods provide insight into the world of the participants, their opinions, thoughts and their feelings (Sánchez-Gordón & O'Connor, 2015).

In-depth interviews provide an opportunity for the detailed exploration of each participant's personal perspective, the personal context within which the research phenomenon is located, and for very detailed subject coverage (Ritchie et al., 2013).

This goes beneath the surface of ordinary conversation, bridging the limitations posed by etiquette, social conventions and inaccessibility, resulting in the collection of rich data (Charmaz, 2003). Rubin and Rubin (2005:vii) equated in-depth qualitative interviews to night goggles, which allows us to see ‘that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is looked at but seldom seen’.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will therefore be used as the primary data collection method in this study with a view to allowing candid in-depth discussions (Sánchez-Gordón & O’Connor, 2015).

As indicated under Section 3.3.4 (Sampling) it is the intention to conduct between 30 and 50 interviews with participants who can make a meaningful contribution, adding rich data towards answering the research question. In accordance with the flexible approach required in a grounded theory study, data collection will continue until theoretical saturation is reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

A pilot interview will be conducted to test the instrument and make any required adjustments, before continuing with further interviews.

Interviews will be around one hour in duration, will be conducted in a private, neutral environment, and consent will be collected at the beginning of each interview (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

All interviews will be digitally recorded, transcribed in detail and the transcripts checked against the recordings, ensuring reliability of the data and increasing the ‘detail richness’ (Sánchez-Gordón & O’Connor, 2015).

The researcher will document the inquiry process, keeping a research log of all activities, developing a data collection chronology, and recording data analysis procedures clearly (Lewis, 2009), thus establishing an audit trail, which adds to the validity and reliability of the study.

The individual interviews will be supplemented by focus group discussions. The rationale for including focus groups as an additional data collection method will be explained in the next section.

### **3.3.5.3 Focus groups**

Focus groups, also known as group interviews, can be defined as organised, interactive discussion sessions with selected groups of individuals to gain the views of the participants on a research topic (Gibbs, 2012). Marczak and Sewell (2007) stipulate that the group usually has ‘some common interest or characteristics’ while Krueger and Casey (2014) add the element of a ‘permissive, non-threatening environment’.

Focus groups foster dynamic group interaction, resulting in enhanced data gathering, activating details of forgotten experiences and also generating better data through a wide range of responses (Sánchez-Gordón & O'Connor, 2015).

Focus groups also illuminate the differences between participants' experiences and create the opportunity for these differences to be directly and explicitly discussed (Ritchie et al., 2013).

Krueger and Casey (2014) recommend that focus groups consist of five to eight people. This is considered small enough to afford all the participants the opportunity to share their views, yet large enough to allow for the diversity of perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

The researcher plans to host at least three focus group discussions, one in each of the countries represented in the study (Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa) with between five to eight participants each, using the same interview questions designed for the individual interviews, with slight adaptations to allow for group discussions.

The data analysis process will be explained in the following section.

### **3.3.6 Data analysis and integrity**

Qualitative data analysis is aimed at producing a convincing explanation of the phenomena under investigation (Tajuddin & Jauhar, 2015) in order to 'make sense of, or interpret meanings' (Creswell, 2013:8), while noting 'patterns, themes, categories and regularities' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011: 461).

Grounded theory data analysis is an inductive coding process aimed at the development of theory from the data, through successive comparative analyses (Birks & Mills, 2015). The coding process to be followed by the researcher will be explained in more detail next. The use of Atlas.ti software will be justified, and lastly the issue of validity and reliability will be addressed.

#### **3.3.6.1 Data coding**

The coding process used in grounded theory studies is a critical link between data collection and deducing meaning (Charmaz, 2003), which allows the researcher to move from the empirical level by fracturing the data, and then conceptually grouping it into codes (Lawrence & Tar, 2013). The researcher is then able to progressively develop more abstract conceptual categories for the synthesis, explanation and understanding as well as the development of patterned relationships within the data (Charmaz, 2003).

Three major types of coding can be used in grounded theory studies, namely, open coding (termed 'initial coding' by Charmaz, 2003), axial coding and selective coding

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher plans to employ all three these phases of the coding process, as will be explained next.

The researcher will start the coding process with initial or open coding, during which she will identify important words or groups of words in the data and then label or code them accordingly (Birks & Mills, 2015)

She will then proceed to axial coding, to develop the individual categories fully by connecting sub-categories and developing the range of properties and their dimensions, and to establish relationships between the categories. It reconnects the data into conceptually abstract concepts (Birks and Mills, 2015).

The researcher will then move to selective coding, at which stage the categories developed during the axial coding phase, will be integrated to establish a core category on which an initial theoretical framework can be built (Pandit, 1996).

When applied appropriately and vigilantly, this methodology should result in a rigorous theory, well-grounded in the data (Lawrence & Tar, 2013).

### **3.3.6.2 The use of Atlas.Ti software for data analysis**

This decision to use qualitative data analysis software is based on the general consensus in the literature that this seems to be beneficial to the process, both in terms of speed, its ability to handle large amounts of textual data, the improvements of rigour and consistency of approach, and the relative ease of navigation and linking or consolidation of data (Drisko, 2013).

After careful consideration and discussions with experienced grounded theory scholars, the researcher decided to use 'Atlas.Ti' software to analyse the data that she will collect through individual and group interviews.

The principal advantage of using data analysis software is that it enables the technical aspects of data analysis, so that the researcher can focus on the analytical tasks and conceptual decisions, rather than the mechanical aspects (Tesch, 1991).

Atlas.Ti is believed to add significantly to the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative inquiries (Tajuddin& Jauhar, 2015, Drisko, 2013), while allowing the researcher to stay close to the data and to draw her 'own constructions and interpretations' as required by a more constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000:520).

In addition, Atlas.Ti seems particularly well-suited to grounded theory studies as it allows the researcher to establish links and relationships between codes and categories (Drisko, 2013).

It can list and number categories, assisting with the quantitative verification of the data, in line with the 'interplay between qualitative and quantitative' envisaged by

Strauss and Corbin (1998), as well as memo writing (Friese, 2014). This enables the researcher to focus on the discovery of patterns, themes, forms and qualities, and to explore these further.

The classification of codes into categories allows the contextualisation of findings, comparison between subgroups and the linkage and relation of categories (Bendassolli, 2013). In addition, the concurrent data collection and analysis process allows for constant comparison between responses, codes, and categories (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Because the researcher chose grounded theory as the mode of enquiry, she will attempt a 'willing suspension of belief' during this phase, or 'witting ignorance' of previous theorising, to allow openness during the discovery process (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013).

The steps taken by the researcher to ensure the integrity of the study will be discussed under validity and reliability in the next section.

### **3.3.6.3 Validity and reliability**

The terms validity and reliability are associated with positivist quantitative studies (Tobin & Begley, 2004), while the qualitative research community seems to prefer terms such as credibility or trustworthiness. These terms however all seem to attempt to deal with the issue of academic rigour or research integrity. The question seems to be whether the researcher's work 'can be trusted as truthful positions and statements' (Yin, 2011: 41).

Noble and Smith (2015) indicate that judgements about the reliability of a research study are made based on the application and appropriateness of the research design and methodology and the integrity of the final conclusions.

It therefore seems that trust in the validity and reliability of a study can be obtained by disclosing as much as possible about the researcher's ontology and bias, as well as the design and methodological conditions of the study. This will be done through a thorough description of the fieldwork in the next Chapter, in an attempt to present a thorough recording and recognition of constructs that may influence the research process, either implicitly or explicitly (Guba & Lincoln 2005).

The planned triangulation of sources (Creswell & Miller, 2002) as described under Section 3.3.4 (sampling) and the use of regular peer reviews and debriefings with peers (Creswell & Miller, 2000) should also add to the credibility of the study.

Lastly, the use of an electronic data analysis tool (Atlas.Ti) should ensure objectivity during the coding and analysis of data, adding to the trustworthiness and lending some objectivity to the analysis process.

### **3.4 Limitations and scope of the study**

The focus of qualitative research is on the extent to which the study generates useful knowledge and address common or universal aspects of the current human condition, rather than the generalisability of the study (Chapman, Hadfield & Chapman, 2015).

As mentioned in Section 1.8 (p. 35), the current study is focused on non-traditional, postgraduate students in three African countries, namely South- Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya. The bounded nature of the theory to be produced to the characteristics of this particular respondent group and the geographical, organisational and political context is recognised (Chapman, Hadfield & Chapman, 2015). This is aligned to the intention of the researcher to provide an African perspective on the issue of non-traditional postgraduate student retention.

In addition, grounded theory studies are, by their very nature, more subjective than quantitative studies, and this can lead to opportunities for error and bias (Chapman, Hadfield & Chapman, 2015). The personal bias of the researcher was declared in detail and will be managed appropriately as indicated under paragraph 3.3.6.1 (validity and reliability).

The ethical aspects of the study will be explored in the next section.

### **3.5 Ethics**

Although in this study the researcher shares personal views and expressions of respondents, the elements of risk and exposure are minimal because the other principles of ethics in research were followed. These principles, as stated by Mouton (2001) are informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. These principles will be maintained.

The researcher will provide detailed information about the purpose of the study and the role of the participant in it, so that each participant can make a careful and informed choice about their own participation. In addition, participants will be assured that the final thesis will contain no identifiable personal information about participants (Breckenridge, 2010).

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Qualitative studies, and in particular grounded theory studies, 'appear especially vulnerable to criticism' because of their flexible nature (Katz, 2015:131).The integrity of such studies are primarily judged by the soundness of the strategy followed by the

researcher to ensure qualitative rigour or thoroughness (Tajuddin & Jauhar, 2015). For this reason, the first three chapters of this study are of particular importance in establishing a sound research framework from which to proceed with the fieldwork.

Chapter 1 provided a detailed overview of the complex problem posed by the non-completion of postgraduate studies. This problem is faced by non-traditional students in particular, who can for the purposes of this study be described as working adults over the age of 25 years, with responsibilities including work, family and community engagements.

The research orientation was explained, positioning the researcher ontologically as an interpretivist researcher and as a non-traditional postgraduate student faced with difficulties during her Masters studies. The researcher indicated her subsequent involvement in a student support role and also outlined her epistemological position.

In Chapter 2, the researcher outlined the findings of her preliminary literature review and the concepts that she discovered from the literature, which served as a basis for the exploratory phase of the study.

Chapter 3 provided a detailed discussion of the research design and methodology. The qualitative research design, interpretivist research paradigm and the exploratory nature of the study were explained. The researcher positioned grounded theory as the ideal mode of enquiry for this study. The researcher also explained the approach to data collection through both individual and group interviews and outlined the use of Atlas.ti software for data analysis. Validity and reliability, as it relates to this study was discussed and the scope and limitations of the study were outlined.

The detailed understanding of the problem and careful positioning of the researcher and her own bias, enabled the researcher to approach the preliminary literature review in a focused manner, while the in-depth overview of the design and methodology ensures both the academic rigour of the study and enables the reader to follow the researcher's conceptual frame of mind in terms of her approach to the study.

In the next chapter, the researcher will describe and document the fieldwork.

## **CHAPTER FOUR FIELDWORK**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter 3 outlined the intended research design and methodology for this study. This Chapter must be read against the backdrop of Chapter 3, where it was indicated that grounded theory would serve both as the mode of enquiry as well as the methodology for data collection and analysis.

Grounded theory studies requires reflexivity regarding the theoretical pre-dispositions as well as the practical steps followed during the research process so that the reader can make an informed judgement regarding the reliability of the outcomes (Engward & Davis, 2015).

This Chapter therefore serves as an important continuation of Chapter 3 in that it will provide a detailed account of the methodology applied in the research process and the strategies employed to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Noble & Smith, 2015).

### **4.2 Research design**

The design followed during the study will be explained in detail under the following headings: sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

#### **4.2.1 Sampling**

As indicated in Chapter 1, the study is aimed at exploring an African perspective on the success of non-traditional postgraduate students.

For this reason, the target population or sample universe consists of non-traditional postgraduate students in Africa, meaning those who had at least one of the following characteristics: being over the age of twenty five, delayed enrolment, working full-time, being a non-resident student (Ley, 2013).

The initial purposive sampling of this study started with the selection of three countries that could be regarded as representative of an African perspective, namely Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa. This choice was based on the belief that these countries would provide an adequately representative picture of the African continent as a whole (Otieno, 2012) and on the relative ease of access. Once the countries for participation in the study were identified, the researcher had to establish contact with possible participants in each country for participation in the study.

Higher education institutions in Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa were approached and permission was sought to interview some of their non-traditional postgraduate



students and also to have focus group interviews with faculty at these institutions. In addition, calls for volunteers were made using social media and sourced from the researcher's own network, in order to gain access to individuals studying at different institutions.

As the researcher wished to follow a purposive, theoretical sampling strategy, she needed to obtain a sample that meets the conceptual and informational needs of the study in that they met the required criteria classifying them as non-traditional postgraduate students (Morse, 2010). This was communicated clearly to the institutions participating in the study well in advance, and the institutions took the responsibility of inviting students who met these requirements to participate in the study on a voluntary basis, and to set up interview timetables according to the availability of the participants.

Although the researcher had initially confirmed eight interviews in Zimbabwe, one student unfortunately did not meet the criteria of being a non-traditional postgraduate student as he was studying full time, and one student did not show up at the appointed time. As a result, a total of six participants were interviewed in Zimbabwe, all of which were current PhD students, and one focus group consisting of faculty and support staff, was conducted.

Nine participants were interviewed in Kenya. Unfortunately, due to a technical problem with two of the interviews and the fact that the one participant did not technically meet the requirements of being a non-traditional student, only data of six interviews could be included. One focus group discussion was conducted with members of faculty.

In South Africa, the researcher interviewed 15 non-traditional postgraduate students representing both public and private institutions. She also conducted a focus group discussion with members of faculty, including representatives from both public and private institutions. She also applied for permission to host another focus group at one of the public universities in South Africa, which permission was unfortunately not obtained.

In total, respondents from a total of six different institutions from the three countries were included. A total of 28 interviews were conducted and three focus group discussions were held.

The demographics of the participants are indicated in Table 3.

Participant	Country	Race	Gender	Age	Degree
P1	South Africa	White	Female	50+	Masters
P2	Zimbabwe	Black	Male	41 - 50	PhD
P3		Black	Female	50+	PhD
P4		Black	Male	50+	PhD
P5		Black	Male	50+	PhD
P6		Black	Male	50+	PhD
P7		Black	Male	50+	PhD
P8		Kenya	Black	Female	41 - 50
P9	Black		Male	41 - 50	Masters
P10	Black		Female	41 - 50	Masters
P11	Black		Female	41 - 50	PhD
P12	Black		Female	41 - 50	PhD
P13	Black		Male	31 - 40	PhD
P14	South Africa		White	Male	41 - 50
P15		White	Female	41 - 50	PhD
P16		White	Female	31 - 40	Masters
P17		White	Female	25 - 30	Masters
P18		White	Female	41 - 50	PhD
P19		White	Male	31 - 40	Masters
P20		Coloured	Male	50+	PhD
P21		White	Female	50+	Masters
P22		Black	Male	50+	PhD
P23		Black	Female	41 - 50	Masters
P24		Coloured	Male	50+	PhD
P25		White	Female	31 - 40	PhD
P26		White	Male	41 - 50	Masters
P27		White	Male	50+	Masters
P28	Indian	Female	31 - 40	PhD	

***Table 3 Demographics of participants (individual interviews)***

All the respondents participated voluntarily and proved to be ‘excellent participants’ (Morse, 2015), sharing their experiences openly and eloquently. The interview process itself will be discussed in more detail under Section 4.3 (Data collection).

The decision to conclude data collection at that time was impacted by the researcher’s conviction that theoretical saturation was reached. This sample size is supported by Braun and Clarke (2013), who recommends 15 – 20 interviews in a study of the nature of a PhD, or 30 if it is the only data source, and three to six focus groups in a PhD study.

The researcher's decision regarding theoretical saturation will be explained next.

#### **4.2.2 Theoretical saturation**

Interviews continued until theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was reached, in other words, although individual participants related their own unique experiences, their accounts contained the same theoretical concepts or themes (Morse, 2007), and as such, continued data collection was not expected to add value to the findings (Dey, 2007).

Hyde (2003:48) calls for researchers to provide clear evidence of saturation in the presentation of their data, following 'a coherent and rigorous process of data condensation and interpretation'. This will be provided in the description of the data analysis process (Section 4.4).

A detailed description of the data collection process will be given under data collection in the next section. It must be read with the understanding that data collection and data analysis took place concurrently.

#### **4.3 Data collection**

The process followed will be discussed under three main headings: finalisation of the data collection instruments, individual semi-structured interviews, and focus group interviews.

##### **4.3.1 Finalisation of the data collection instruments**

The two instruments (for both the individual semi-structured interviews as well as the focus groups/group interviews) were drafted and submitted to the researcher's academic supervisor as well as a group of peer reviewers, including two experienced grounded theory scholars and two other experienced researchers.

The feedback received on the first drafts of the instruments was that they are too detailed and structured for an exploratory grounded theory study. Both were adjusted substantially to align with the open and broad nature required in a study like this (the instruments included in Chapter 3 under Section 3.3.5.1 were the final instruments after the initial inputs were received).

Both instruments were then piloted and subsequently adopted without changes as the instruments proved to work well, both in terms of soliciting adequate and relevant responses, and in terms of the clarity of the questions.

The approach to both methods of data collection will be discussed in more detail next.

### **4.3.2 Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews**

As the context of discovery is an immanent quality of grounded theory (Konecki, 2008), decisions on the setting, nature and duration of interviews were not automatic but carefully considered (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985) to ensure that the research objectives are achieved.

In keeping with Myers and Newman's (2007) recommendation that interviews be conducted in an informal, quiet setting, the researcher made use of small, intimate meeting rooms as far as possible.

The researcher personally conducted all interviews, consistent with Charmaz's (2014:339) view that grounded theorist scholars should personally engage in data collection as well as analysis, enabling them to 'explore nuances of meaning and process'.

As the purpose of in-depth interviewing in this exploratory study was to understand the lived experience of the participants during their postgraduate studies and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2013), interviews could not be rushed. Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, depending on the participant's willingness to openly share his/her experiences with the researcher.

The same questions were posed to all participants in an attempt to reduce the researcher's bias within the study (Turner, 2010) and to enable the researcher to code the data in a meaningful way (Creswell, 2007). The researcher maintained the instrument as far as possible and only clarified or probed when it was clear that the participant did not understand the question or when they strayed completely from the topic. Participants were however allowed to talk freely and to contribute as much detailed information as they desire, resulting in rich and thick qualitative data (Turner, 2010).

Some of the participants became emotional when having to share the challenges that they had to face during their postgraduate studies and this resulted in some of the interviews lasting longer as the researcher did not interrupt interviewees if they continued talking (Ritchie, et al., 2013). She did however respond empathetically and from time to time paused to allow participants to regain their composure.

A digital recorder was used to record each interview to ensure that the responses of the participants were captured accurately, and transcriptions were typed out to enable coding and analysis (Charmaz, 2003). This also enabled the researcher to focus fully on the interview without dividing her attention between writing and listening to the participant.

The researcher started by welcoming each interviewee, after which she explained the aim of the study, the purpose of the interview, and the ethical aspects including confidentiality. In addition, each interview began with an open, non-intimidating question, asking participants to “tell me about yourself and your family background”. From a qualitative perspective this choice of opening question was non-controversial, easy to answer and a useful starting point for developing rapport (Patton 2002).

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

Schreier (2012) argues that it is important to explain the analysis and resulting conclusions for the sake of validity. The data analysis process will therefore be explained in detail.

The researcher’s approach to data analysis was influenced by Charmaz’s (2006) detailed explication of grounded theory data analysis. The approach to the transcription of data will be explained first, followed by the use of Atlas.ti software (reference) for data analysis. The coding process will then be explained in detail.

##### **4.4.1 Transcription of data**

As stated in Section 4.3 (Data collection), every individual interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. Due to the high volume, some of the transcriptions of the individual interviews were outsourced but the researcher personally quality assured the transcriptions closely and read the text several times so as to remain close to the data and avoided the temptation to start coding or jumping to broad categorisations prematurely (Charmaz, 2006).

She also performed the transcriptions of the focus group discussions personally, both because it would be hard for somebody who was not present at the discussion to differentiate between the voices of the different participants, and also for the purposes of staying close to the data, as explained above (Charmaz, 2006).

##### **4.4.2 Use of Atlas.ti software for analysis of data**

As indicated in Section 3.3.6 (Data analysis and integrity), the researcher used ‘Atlas.Ti’ software to analyse the data that she collected both through the individual and focus group interviews. This choice was motivated under Section 3.3.6.1.

The coding process followed by the researcher will be explained in detail next.

##### **4.4.3 The coding process and results**

Charmaz (2006) urges grounded theorists to avoid expectations and assumptions, but to rather examine the data in search for patterns.

The coding process was therefore aimed at attaching conceptual labels to the issues or phenomena raised by participants, developing these into categories with same or similar characteristics, and finally pulling these together into themes, interlinked to form the basis for a theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The researcher chose not to develop codes prior to data collection (a priori) but instead used emergent codes after viewing of the data, so that she would not be unduly prejudiced (Male, 2015). She developed conceptual codes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) from the data (Male, 2015).

#### **4.4.3.1 Initial (open) coding**

The first step followed in the analysis of the data, was the initial or open coding of the transcripts. This was done using the Atlas.ti software.

The researcher first read through the transcripts carefully, line by line, searching for the phenomena raised by the participant (Charmaz, 2006), and assigning conceptual labels (codes) (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to these, and producing a list of codes identified by each participant.

She chose not to use In Vivo coding as this step helped the researcher to move away from particular statements of more abstract interpretations of the interview data (Charmaz, 2006).

Throughout this process, the researcher used constant comparison, revisiting the codes assigned to specific phenomena as she came across them again in the different transcripts, and comparing them for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This allowed the researcher to group similar incidents under the same conceptual label, conveying underlying uniformities in the data (Dey, 1999). She however made no conscious effort to interpret the data in relation to emerging categories during this phase, but reserved that for the axial coding phase.

While grounded theory methodology typically does not use quantifying data to obtain meaning (Birks & Mills, 2015), the researcher kept the frequency with which concepts occur in interview transcripts in mind as she regarded this as a useful indication of their importance for the interviewees. She took the decision to disregard concepts mentioned by less than one quarter of interviewees for the purpose of theory development.

The detailed lists of all concepts in terms of the initial open coding process are included in Annexure A (individual interviews) and Annexure B (focus group interviews). Table 4 contains a summary of the concepts and frequency with which these concepts occurred.

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Freq: indiv interviews</b>	<b>Frequency: focus group</b>
Work responsibilities	15	5
Family size large	8	0
Parent with higher education	9	0
Married and has children	18	0
Student support system	12	7
Family values education	10	0
Workplace support	5	0
Feeling discouraged	8	0
Academic self-confidence	12	0
Feelings of uncertainty	16	0
Stress experienced	12	0
Open to feedback	6	0
Contribution to knowledge	8	0
Impact on society	7	6
Legacy	7	0
Student self-actualisation	14	4
Student values education	9	0
Build expertise, interest in topic	9	0
Professional and personal esteem	11	0
Professional opportunities	24	0
Student balance studies and other priorities	20	6
Self-regulation (manage time)	21	6
Calling (higher purpose)	11	7
Resilience	26	8
Student passionate about topic	9	5
Academic writing challenge	7	7
Academic writing success factor	0	3
Clarity on methodology	10	0
Student understanding of what is required	9	0
Research skills success factor	6	7
Challenge financial, funding of studies	19	9
Funding process complex, institution help	7	0
Travel cost and distance	5	4
Course work experience positive	13	0
Coursework challenging	7	0
Credibility of institution	8	4
Student identify with institutional culture	11	7
Importance of social interaction	12	4

Support from peers,classmates	15	6
Personalised support	10	6
Student-centred approach	7	4
Progress unique learning journey	8	5
Student needs flexibility	9	5
Academic staff caring	10	5
Institution communication clear and constant	8	4
Support staff friendly and helpful	8	0
Institution administration frustrating	9	0
Academic staff accountability	8	5
Academics have high workloads (too high)	8	5
Monitoring of student progress	9	5
Access to resources, facilities	13	9
Academic induction	8	5
Supervisor expertise	7	7
Feedback quality	7	0
Feedback timing	12	4
Supervisor mentor	16	10
Supervisor administration negative	7	0
Supervisor approachable, open	12	10
Supervisor available, time	15	6
Building relationship with supervisor	12	5
Defining relationship with supervisor	14	5
Recourse, serious challenge	7	0
Supervisor support, encouragement	9	7

**Table 4 Summary of concepts and frequency**

When the researcher was satisfied that this first step of the analysis process was satisfactorily concluded, both in terms of the consistency in the application of the code as well as the accurate and fair representation of the concepts, she entered into the next phase of analysis, namely axial coding, as explained below.

#### **4.4.3.2 Axial coding**

The second phase of grounded theory analysis involves intermediate coding or axial coding (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) which is focused on developing individual categories with connecting sub-categories, and linking related categories with each other. Initial coding is often said to fracture the data, whereas intermediate coding reconnects the data in ways that are conceptually much more abstract than would be produced by a thematic analysis (Birks and Mills, 2015).



During this phase, she created categories or overarching labels, organising the codes into code families, and establishing relationships between the codes (Bohm, 2004), refining and differentiating between concepts and putting them into categories (Bohm, 2004). While it is noted that Charmaz (2006) is of the opinion that axial coding applies too rigid and formal a frame to the data analysis, and recommends a less formalised approach of reflecting on categories, sub-categories, the researcher preferred to follow a more structured approach as she regarded this more rigorous and defensible in terms of the validity and reliability of the study.

The development of categories helped reduce the large number of concepts to a manageable few and assisted in forming a holistic view of the factors that may have impacted the success of non-traditional postgraduate students.

#### 4.4.3.3 Selective coding

The third phase of coding was selective coding, where the researcher attempted to integrate the various categories and relationships and identify the centrally relevant themes with a view to developing a holistic theory (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Drisko (2013) explains that the selective coding process involves the fleshing out of concepts related to the categories within the transcripts and literature texts. During this advanced stage, the researcher also started to refer back to the literature.

For details regarding the selective coding results, refer Table 5.

Concept	Freq: indiv interviews	Frequency: focus group	Category
Work responsibilities	15	5	Work context
Family size large	8	0	Family background (past)
Parent with higher education	9	0	
Married and has children	18	0	Personal context (present)
Student support system	12	7	
Family values education	10	0	Value attached to education
Workplace support	5	0	Work context
Feeling discouraged	8	0	Discouragement
Academic self-confidence	12	0	Level of confidence
Feelings of uncertainty	16	0	
Stress experienced	12	0	Stress
Open to feedback	6	0	Feedback orientation
Contribution to knowledge	8	0	Altruistic motivation
Impact on society	7	6	
Legacy	7	0	Personal motivation
Student self-actualisation	14	4	

Concept	Freq: indiv interviews	Frequency: focus group	Category
Student values education	9	0	
Build expertise,interest in topic	9	0	Professional drivers
Professional and personal esteem	11	0	
Professional opportunities	24	0	
Student balance studies and other priorities	20	6	Self-directed learning
Student Challenge time management,make time	21	6	
Calling (higher purpose)	11	7	Personal attribute
Resilience	26	8	
Student passionate about topic	9	5	
Academic writing challenge	7	7	Academic literacy
Academic writing success factor	0	3	
Clarity on methodology	10	0	
Student understanding of what is required	9	0	
Research skills success factor	6	7	
Challenge financial,funding of studies	19	9	Funding of studies
Funding process complex, institution help	7	0	
Travel cost and distance	5	4	
Course work experience positive	13	0	Sense of belonging
Coursework challenging	7	0	
Credibility of institution	8	4	
Student identify with institutional culture	11	7	
Importance of social interaction	12	4	
Support from peers/classmates	15	6	Support from peers
Personalised support	10	6	Student centricity
Student-centred approach	7	4	
Progress unique learning journey	8	5	Flexible approach
Student needs flexibility	9	5	
Academic staff caring	10	5	Staff service behaviour
Institution constant communication	8	4	
Support staff friendly and helpful	8	0	
Institution administration frustrating	9	0	Institution admin processes
Academic staff accountability	8	5	Management of academic staff
Academics have high workloads (too high)	8	5	

Concept	Freq: indiv interviews	Frequency: focus group	Category
Monitoring of student progress	9	5	Monitor student progress
Access to resources/facilities	13	9	Access to resources, facilities
Academic induction	8	5	Academic induction
Supervisor expertise	7	7	Academic expertise
Feedback quality	7	0	Assessment role
Feedback timeous	12	4	
Supervisor mentor, guide	16	10	Mentorship, guide
Supervisor administration negative	7	0	Supervisor administration
Supervisor approachable, open	12	10	Approachability
Supervisor available, time	15	6	Availability
Building relationship with supervisor	12	5	Building relationship
Defining relationship with supervisor	14	5	Define relationship
Recourse, serious challenge	7		Recourse
Supervisor support	9	7	Support

**Table 5 Selective coding results**

#### 4.4.5 Comparative analysis

Constant comparative analysis is a key feature of the grounded theory methodology (Straus & Corbin, 1998).

For purpose of this research study, this process was used in every phase of the coding process, comparing concept to concept, to identify similarity and differences and also to ensure consistency in the coding of concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Triangulation was done between the data collected through individual interviews (with non-traditional postgraduate students) and focus groups (with members of faculty and support staff), and these were recorded under findings in Chapter 5.

This will be illustrated in Chapter 5 when the findings of the study are discussed.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

This Chapter provided a detailed overview of the fieldwork phase of the study, starting with the sampling and data collection process. It explained the researcher's experience in terms of data saturation and her decision to stop collecting data at that point.

The data analysis process was also explained and the concepts (codes) and categories identified were listed.

Chapter 5 will continue the process of making meaning out of the data, by presenting the data in the themes identified through the selective coding process, and interpreting these. This will be followed by the researcher's conclusions in Chapter 6.

## **CHAPTER FIVE FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

While Chapter 4 provided an overview of the fieldwork conducted, this chapter is focused on presenting the findings that culminated from the data collection and analysis process.

Grounded theory is not aimed at generating conclusive results or verifying facts but rather at theory building (Holton, 2007). As such, data analysis in grounded theory studies does not normally provide the thick description including detailed interview quotations and examples typical of other qualitative studies.

Verbatim passages and case histories may however assist in keeping the human story in the forefront of the reader's mind and making the theoretical analysis more accessible to a wider audience (Charmaz, 2003, Ritchie & Lewis, 2004). The researcher has therefore chosen to include original passages to elucidate the subtleties and complexities of the research participants' accounts (Kyale, 1996). This also serves to demonstrate that the findings presented are generated from, and grounded in the data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2004).

Frequencies are not important in qualitative research, as one occurrence of a phenomenon is potentially as useful as many in gaining an understanding and making meaning (Mason, 2010). Strauss and Corbin (1990) however indicate that concepts earn their way into theory only if they are repeatedly present in the data. The researcher therefore chose to exclude concepts raised by less than 25% of the individual respondents (student) and less than 25% of the focus group respondents (faculty and support staff), as these were considered outliers, which would not contribute to theory building (Morse, 2010).

The next section of this Chapter is dedicated to reporting the findings of the study.

### **5.2 Presentation of the findings**

As illustrated in Chapter 4 (Section 4.4.3.3), the researcher identified categories from the concepts identified. The further process of meaning making entails the building of themes from the categories.

After studying the categories carefully and comparing them with each other constantly, thirteen themes emerged from the data.

The thirteen themes are as follows:

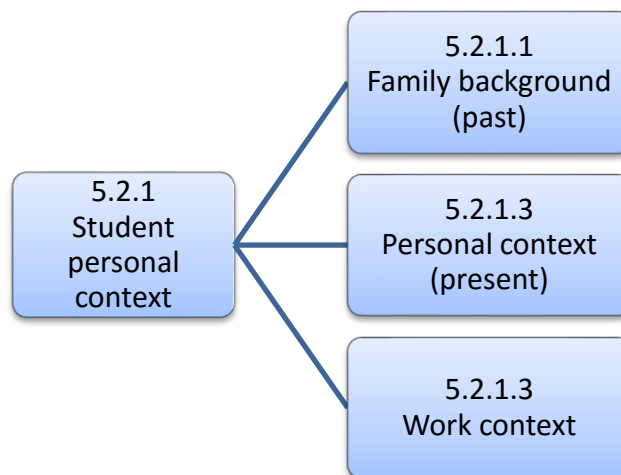
- The student's personal context
- The emotional status of the student
- The student's motivation to enrol and complete
- Personal success factors
- Academic challenges
- Financial challenges
- Social integration
- Service orientation of the institution
- Management and administration of the institution
- Academic support offered to students
- Academic function of the academic supervisor
- Administrative function of the academic supervisor
- Relationship between the student and the academic supervisor

This Chapter will consider the findings in terms of each of these themes, in the order listed above.

The first theme to be discussed is the student's personal context.

### 5.2.1 The student's personal context

The first theme to be discussed, relates to the student's personal context in three categories: the role of the student's family background (past) and personal context (present), and the work context of the student. The structure of this theme is illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Personal context of the student**

This theme arose from the first question posed to interviewees, which dealt with the personal context and family background of students. This was aimed at establishing what the pre-entry attributes of successful students were, and whether family background in particular, played any role in their success.

The first dimension within this theme is the family background of the student, as discussed in detail next. The second is the student's current personal support context, and the third is the value that the student's family attached to education.

### 5.2.1.1 Family background of the student

The study found that non-traditional postgraduate students may come from a wide variety of family backgrounds. The diversity in responses is illustrated in Table 6.

Concept	Respondents	
	No	List
The student's family (growing up) was financially sound	2	P16, P21
The student's family (growing up) was financially deprived	4	P8, P19, P22, P23
The student comes from a large family (four or more children)	8	P3, P5, P6, P8, P13, P22, P23, P26
The student comes from a small/nuclear family (three or less children)	5	P1, P2, P15, P16, P17
The student's family values education and encouraged studies	10	P3, P8, P15, P17, P18, P21, P22, P23, P25, P26
The student grew up in a rural area	6	P2, P3, P18, P20, P21, P28
The student grew up in an urban area/town	1	P19
The student's parent completed a degree/higher education	9	P1, P5, P6, P14, P15, P17, P18, P21, P26
The student's parent did not complete any higher education	4	P3, P19, P22, P25
The student studied abroad (Europe/USA) before	3	P6, P11, P12
The student studied at local university (Africa) before	3	P3, P5, P6
First degree obtained full time	3	P3, P5, P23
Prior schooling 'good' school	1	P26
Prior schooling mission school	1	P6
Prior schooling private school	1	P16
Prior studies Europe	3	P6, P11, P12

**Table 6: Family background of students**

The researcher could not detect any significant patterns in the backgrounds of the participants in terms of the level of education of their parents, their own prior schooling and undergraduate studies, and the size and economic context of the family.

As can be seen from Table 6, eight of the participants indicated that they came from large families (of four or more children). However, this seems to be linked to being from rural African families that tend to be larger (Randall & Coast, 2015) and students themselves did not make any link between the size of their families and their success, nor could the researcher detect any link

A concept that featured quite strongly is the value that the family attaches to education (see Table 6). This will be discussed under Section 5.2.3.2.1 as it links to the value that the student attaches to education.

Another recurring concept is the fact that nine of the participants indicated that at least one of their parents had completed some form of higher education. As this is just over 25% of the total number of participants, it may not support a conclusive finding regarding the qualifications of students' parents. It may, however, be linked to the value that the family attaches to higher education as highlighted in Section 5.2.3.2.1.

### **5.2.1.2 The student's current personal and family context**

The current personal contexts of the non-traditional postgraduate students who participated in the study were fairly similar (working adults, often in senior positions at work, married, with family and other responsibilities). For example, a total of 18 of the 28 interviewees indicated that they were married and had children, while two indicated that they were single parents.

It is recognised that the family context of the student could have a negative impact on their success. The demands that family responsibilities places on the time of the student and the challenge of balancing all the various responsibilities will be discussed in more detail under Section 5.2.1.4.1 (balancing studies and other responsibilities).

The differentiator may however lie in how the student's family accommodates this additional demand on their time, as this study found that students' immediate context in terms of their family and friends' support and understanding of the time and effort required, seems to play a significant role in their motivation and success.

Twelve of the interviewees referred to their 'personal support system' and the important role that the support of their family or friends played in their academic



success to date. The importance of the student's personal support system was also raised by seven of the focus group participants.

The value that the family places on education (discussed in more detail in Section 5.2.3.2.1 also seems to be a motivating factor, as mentioned before.

In summary, it seems that the non-traditional postgraduate student places a high value on their own personal support system and while family responsibilities may impact negatively on their time, it also seems that the support of their families and friends plays a major role in keeping them motivated to complete their studies.

### 5.2.1.3 Work context

The category titled work-context consists of two concepts: work responsibilities impacting negatively on studies, and the importance of the understanding and support of the workplace.

The responses in this category are summarised in Table 7.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
The student's work responsibilities impacted negatively on their studies and progress made	15	P2, P3, P4, P7, P8, P10, P11, P13, P15, P17, P18, P20, P22, P25, P26	5	Z3, K1, K2, K6, S1
The understanding and support of the workplace is important	11	P1, P11, P15, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23, P26	5	K1, K6, S1, S2, S3

**Table 7: Work context of students**

As illustrated in Table 7, 15 out of the 28 students interviewed indicated that their work responsibilities often impacted negatively on their studies and slowed their progress.

Eleven students however reported that workplace support counted as a significant success factor, as illustrated by the response from participant P19, below:

*'My boss at the workplace is supporting me in that he gives me as much time as I need.... The company held the classes in as high a regard as I did. The company did not regard my attendance at the classes as optional. So they encouraged me to attend the classes and I had no problems when I had to leave early or miss a day at work. They allowed me to book that time as if I am*

*at work. So I didn't have any interruptions from work. I did not have to leave early or come in late. So I think that was a big success factor.'*

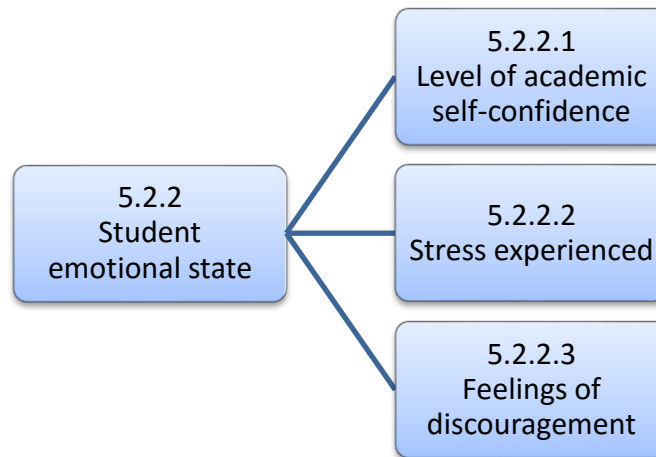
In conclusion, the pressure that students experience in the workplace may affect their progress negatively, whereas an understanding workplace and supportive manager may impact student success positively.

The lived experience of non-traditional postgraduate students and the impact of their studies on their emotional state, will be discussed next.

## **5.2.2 Emotional state of postgraduate students**

The second theme emerging from the data relates to the emotional state of non-traditional postgraduate students.

In this theme, three categories emerged: the level of confidence that students had in their own academic abilities, the level of stress and anxiety experienced by the student, and feelings of discouragement. The structure of this theme is illustrated in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Emotional state of the student**

These categories will now be unpacked in more detail.

### **5.2.2.1 Level of academic self-efficacy**

The first aspect in the theme related to the emotional state of the non-traditional postgraduate student seems to be that of the level of academic self-efficacy experienced by the student.

This aspect is made up of two concepts, namely the student's experienced feelings of academic self-confidence, and the student's experienced feelings of academic

uncertainty. Note the small overlap between the students listed in Table 8, indicating that some students experienced both confidence and uncertainty.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Non-traditional postgraduate students are academically self-confident	12	P2, P3, P6, P9, P13, P15, P16, P18, P20, P21, P26, P27	1	K3
Non-traditional postgraduate students experience feelings of academic uncertainty	16	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19, P22, P23, P24, P25, P27, P28	1	K4

**Table 8: Levels of academic self-efficacy**

The following response is an example of a student (P13) with a positive academic self-concept and demonstrates how this impacted on his determination to complete:

*'I don't see what will cause me to terminate my studies at this point. I as a person, I don't see it. Because I believe I am doing well in my studies. I am up to the task. The feeling that I could terminate my studies has not come into my mind. I am already focussed to move on.'*

Unfortunately, most participants did not share his confidence. Instead, they reported a lack of confidence, uncertainty and anxiety. The vast majority (16 of the 28) of the students indicated that they often felt uncertain or 'stupid' during their postgraduate studies (see Table 8).

These feelings generally seemed to be linked to their lack of academic skills and a sense that they 'did not know what they were doing', as illustrated by participant P15 below:

*'It has definitely been difficult and on many levels as well. I felt quite stupid a lot. Emotionally I have really struggled. My health has not been so great because I am always anxious. It is not only been that I don't know what I am doing. It is how would I get through each and every day? It is so weird. You cannot think that it will affect you so much but it really has. I have never had such a tough year as this one.'*

These feelings of uncertainty seemed to have caused stress and anxiety. The stress experienced by non-traditional postgraduate students will be discussed next.

### 5.2.2.2 Stress experienced by students

The stress caused by postgraduate studies seems noteworthy. As indicated in Table 9, twelve out of the 28 students interviewed reported feelings of stress and anxiety, and some of these reported negative physical effects resulting from stress.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Non-traditional postgraduate students experience high levels of stress and anxiety	12	P3, P8, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19, P20, P22, P26	5	Z3, K1, K2, K6, S1

**Table 9: Stress experienced by students**

There seems to be a relationship between the feelings of uncertainty explained above, and the feelings of stress and anxiety – six of the students who reported feelings of uncertainty, also reported that they had experienced severe stress and anxiety. This is however not the only source of stress - students however also cited the high workload and time constraints as stressors.

The following description from participant P14 illustrates the severity of the stress experienced by some of the respondents:

*‘Most of the time during this five years I was tired, I was grumpy. Sleep deprivation does that to you. I got sick. I had scans done. I thought there was something wrong with my brain. I had to go and see a neurologist because of some dizzy spells that I got. Apart from that it is all due to stress.’*

Besides the feelings of stress and anxiety, students also felt discouraged often, as explained in the next section.

### 5.2.2.3 Feelings of discouragement

Commenting on their postgraduate study experience, eight of the participants reported feelings of discouragement. This is illustrated in Table 10.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Non-traditional postgraduate students often feel discouraged during their studies	8	P1, P8, P10, P16, P17, P21, P22, P28	0	N/A

**Table 10: Feelings of discouragement**

There seems to be a relationship between this feeling and the feelings of uncertainty indicated in Section 5.2.2.1 as five of the respondents indicating feelings of discouragement also reported feelings of academic uncertainty.

There does however also seem to be a direct link between the students' feelings of discouragement and the feedback they received on their work, as illustrated by the following statement made by one of the focus group participants (S2):

*'Yes, I don't know if it is stamina, or resilience, but I had this with a few of my students: when they get their feedback, they are so despondent by it... and I realised through all of this, it is such a personal journey, in that you are criticised, personally. You can't separate the two and say it is my Masters, it is different, it is you, because you are putting everything into it. So the opportunity to, I don't know, have a thick skin, or be criticised, and come out a bit better...'*

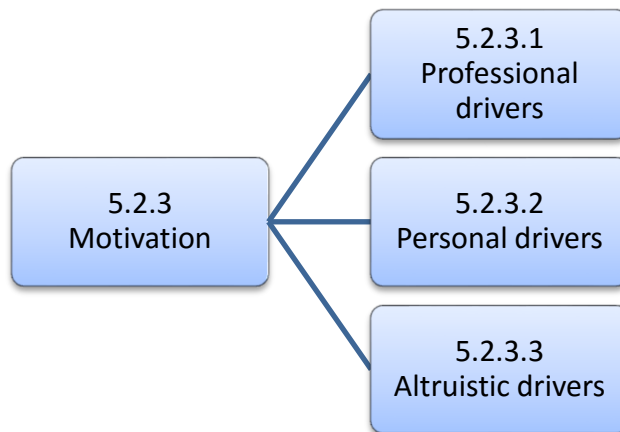
The ability to cope with feedback and also to manage feelings of discouragement may therefore be factors impacting student success.

The next section will provide a summary of the findings on the emotional state of non-traditional postgraduate students, during their studies.

### **5.2.3 Motivation to enrol and complete postgraduate studies**

The third theme related to the student is that of motivation to enrol and complete postgraduate studies. The students interviewed did not differentiate between their motivation to enrol and their motivation to continue, and as such this is treated as one topic.

Three main categories made up this theme, namely professional drivers, personal drivers and altruistic drivers. The structure of this theme is illustrated in Figure 4.



**Figure 4: Motivation of the student**

Personal motivation in this context refers to the drivers that seem more intrinsic in nature, while professional and altruistic drivers seem to be more extrinsic in nature. These will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

### 5.2.3.1 Professional motivation

The first category in the theme titled motivation is that of professional motivation. As stated in the introduction to this section, these seem to be more extrinsic in nature.

As can be seen from Table 11, students cited three concepts under professional drivers that motivated them to enrol for and complete their postgraduate studies, namely career opportunities, the development of expertise, and professional esteem.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Students pursue postgraduate studies to improve their career opportunities	24	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P23, P25, P26, P27, P28	2	K2, K5
Students pursue postgraduate studies to build their expertise in a specific topic	9	P2, P3, P4, P6, P9, P14, P20, P21, P24	3	Z1, K1, K3
Students pursue postgraduate studies to improve their professional esteem	11	P3, P5, P8, P12, P15, P18, P20, P21, P24, P25, P27	0	N/A

**Table 11: Professional motivation**

These will now be discussed in more detail.

#### **5.2.3.1.1 Career opportunities**

The study found that the primary reason or motivation for non-traditional students' enrolling for and completing postgraduate qualifications revolves around their professional career (this concept was raised by 24 of the 28 students).

The first and most obvious one is that of promotion to a more senior position in the current workplace or workfield, as outlined by participant P6:

*'Here where we work, with a PhD you are offered more opportunities. You are open to more opportunities outside. Just that title of Doctor when you have a PhD, open up more opportunities outside. And also here, you are looked more seriously at in the line of promotion in your profession.'*

Students however also indicated that they hoped that the degree could potentially open the door to consulting opportunities, especially after retirement from their formal employment, which links closely to the second professional driver, namely the building of expertise.

#### **5.2.3.1.2 Developing expertise**

The second concept in the category titled professional motivation is that of 'becoming an expert', as being a recognised expert in a particular field, will naturally contribute to the professional opportunities available to the student. This was raised by nine of the individual participants.

The views expressed by students in this regard, is well-represented by the following statement of participant P21:

*'So again, there is a very strong motivation to, because if I want to be an internationally recognised engagement specialist, and that is what I want in terms of my work, and getting the PhD is a part of that. It's not just about writing a book, it is about being an authority on the subject. So that is a very strong pull factor.'*

Becoming an expert in a particular field links closely to the third concept in the category titled professional drivers, namely the perceived increase in professional esteem.

### 5.2.3.1.3 Professional esteem

The third concept that emerged under the category titled professional motivation is that of professional and personal esteem.

There seemed to be a common perception amongst participants that individuals that hold postgraduate degrees enjoy higher professional and personal esteem and are better respected than those who do not. This was raised by 11 of the individual participants as a motivating factor.

The next category under motivation is that of personal drivers.

### 5.2.3.2 Personal motivation

This category is the second category under the theme titled motivation.

Besides the potential professional motivation as indicated above, the desire to complete a postgraduate degree seems to have deep personal meaning to non-traditional postgraduate students. Personal drivers seemed to be more intrinsic in nature, which refers to inherent satisfaction or enjoyment (Legault, 2016).

The personal motivation concepts that emerged from the data include the value attached to education, a passionate interest in the topic, the need for self-actualisation, and leaving a legacy.

These are summarised in Table 12.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
The student's family values education and encouraged studies*	10	P3, P8, P15, P17, P18, P21, P22, P23, P25, P26	2	K2, K5
<i>*Note: this concept was reported under family background but is repeated here for reference purposes</i>				
The student attaches a high value to education	9	P3, P10, P13, P15, P17, P18, P22, P23, P27	3	Z1, Z3, S2

**Table 12: Value attached to education**

These concepts will now be discussed in more detail.



### 5.2.3.2.1 Value attached to education

In spite of the diversity described in Section 5.2.1.1, there was one consistent concept emerging from the discussion on their family backgrounds: the attitude towards learning in a student's family and the value that his/her family places on education seemed to have a significant impact on the student's choice to pursue and persist in postgraduate studies.

Nine students reported that their parents had achieved some form of higher education, and this did seem to inspire them to enrol for postgraduate studies.

The factor pertaining to the value of education was however raised by students from a variety of family backgrounds, and was not limited to privileged families or students who reported that their parents had postgraduate or professional backgrounds.

Some of the students indicated that their parents valued education and that they always encouraged them to study despite the fact that they had not had the opportunity to pursue higher education. The response from participant P25 has relevance in this regard:

*'They both came from poverty stricken backgrounds with no money for universities, a very, very humble background. Nobody in their families ever went to the university or anything like that. I think that's why they always pushed me: 'Must study, must study!'*

Another student (P17) in turn reported that her mother had a postgraduate (PhD) degree, which served as a motivating factor:

*'The more loaded answer would be that I tried to impress my mother, maybe? (laughs) - No, ja, maybe a bit of that. I saw the value that it gave her in her life to do something more and to learn more, and not stop wondering about things that happen around us. That kind of drive came with wanting to know some more and so on.'*

The value that the student personally attaches to education also emerged as a success factor. Nine of the interviewees indicated that they attached a high value to education. This seems to be related to the value that their family attached to education: six of the students that indicated that they value education highly, also indicated that their family attached a high value to education and encouraged them to study.

This finding of the passionate interest of students in their research topic seems to be linked to the need for personal fulfilment, which will be discussed next.

### 5.2.3.2.2 Personal fulfilment

The second category in this theme is the personal fulfilment which the student derived from the research. This category consists of two intrinsic concepts, namely the student's expressed need for self-actualisation and the desire to leave a legacy.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Students are motivated by the desire for self-actualisation	14	P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P16, P17, P18, P22, P24, P25, P26	4	Z2, Z4, K2, S2
Non-traditional postgraduate students are motivated by the desire to leave a legacy	7	P2, P3, P6, P7, P10, P20, P25	Not raised in focus group discussions.	

**Table 13: Personal fulfilment**

Self-actualisation as a source of personal motivation, will be discussed first, and the desire to leave a legacy, thereafter.

#### 5.2.3.2.2.1 Self-actualisation

The first concept in the category titled personal fulfilment, is a personal need for self-actualisation.

As noted in Table 13, fourteen of the 28 individual participants indicated that their motivation to pursue postgraduate studies was related to their need for self-actualisation. This was confirmed by four of the focus group participants.

The following student's (P5) view is representative of the typical response received pertaining to this concept:

*'It is really very personal. When I did my Master's I said I want to do a PhD. It just sound like you are not finished until you got to the top. You cannot go to the top unless you complete you doctor's. Then I said maybe if you get one doctorate, you can get a second one. Can one have two good doctoral studies? For me it is actually self-actualisation...'*

This concept (self-actualisation) is closely linked to the other concept in this category, namely the desire to leave a legacy, as illustrated in the next section.

### 5.2.3.2.2 Leaving a legacy

As indicated in Table 13, seven of the 28 individual interviewees indicated that they were motivated by the need to leave a legacy. Although this was recorded as a separate concept from self-actualisation discussed in the previous section, these concepts seem to be very closely related in the minds of the respondents.

The following response from participant P3 is a typical of the responses received when students were asked why they enrolled for a postgraduate degree, illustrating the integration of these concepts:

*'I can say... I just wanted my own space where I could express myself, where I can also be myself and leave a legacy. Not to be known as xxx's (name of husband) wife, but xxx (student's name) who lived as one, two, three... and has done one, two, three.... That motivated me to go into studying for my PhD, and also for self-actualisation...'*

The next category is focused on the altruistic motivation of students.

### 5.2.3.2 Altruistic motivation

This category is the third under the theme titled motivation. It consists of two concepts, namely the desire to make a contribution to the field of knowledge, and the desire to make a positive impact on society. These are summarised in Table 14.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Students are motivated by the desire to make a contribution to knowledge in their field	8	P3, P4, P7, P16, P17, P18, P24, P25	1	Z2
Students are motivated by the desire to make a positive impact on society	7	P2, P3, P6, P7, P18, P22, P25	6	Z3, Z4, K4, K6, S1, S3

**Table 14: Altruistic motivation**

These will be unpacked in more detail, next.

#### **5.2.3.2.1 Making a contribution to knowledge**

Eight of the students interviewed indicated that they were motivated by the desire to make a contribution to knowledge in their field.

These students, in their discussion of their wish to make a contribution to knowledge, referred to their own capabilities as a person, and their belief that they can make a meaningful contribution to the body of knowledge in their own fields.

The last concept in the category of altruistic drivers is the desire to make an impact on society. This concept will be discussed next.

#### **5.2.3.2.2 Impact on society**

The last concept in the category altruistic drivers is that of having an impact on society, which includes their own local or other communities, their country, or society at large.

Seven of the participants highlighted this as a particular source of inspiration and motivation. This aspect was also regarded as important by six of the focus group participants, as indicated in Table 14.

The sentiment expressed by the following student (P2) is representative of this concept:

*'I grew up in a rural community .and I am quite motivated to work with a rural community. My PhD programme is basically on social innovation, focusing on rural community transformation. Uhm... I've seen those people going through periods of drought, scarcity of water, and all that. So, my motivation was to see how I could help that community to move out of such poverty through social innovation. My thinking was that if I could introduce three crops per year per household in the community, they can be able to alleviate drought. That is what I am working for, working on.'*

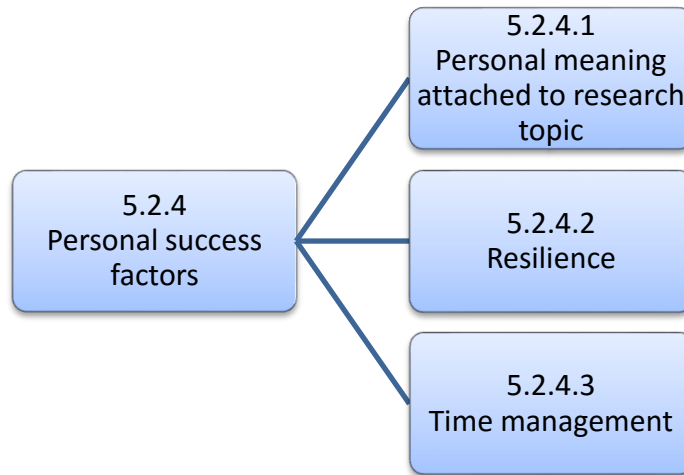
This finding links to Section 5.2.4.1 as students related this to their personal life purpose or calling.

The personal success factors of non-traditional postgraduate students will be discussed next.

#### **5.2.4 Personal success factors**

Both individual participants (students) as well as focus group participants (faculty and support staff) were requested to name the key factors that, in their view, impacted student success.

The three categories emerging from the data related to personal success factors, are the personal meaning that the student attaches to the research topic, the resilience of the student, and the ability of the student to manage their time while balancing competing priorities. The structure of this section is illustrated in Figure 5.



**Figure 5: Personal success factors**

These will be discussed in more detail, next.

#### **5.2.4.1 Personal meaning attached to the research topic**

The most prominent concepts in the category relating to the personal alignment of the student with the topic of their research are so closely related that it is difficult to discuss the one separate from the other.

The two concepts in this sub-category are namely firstly that the student experiences his or her research topic as a personal higher calling or life purpose, and secondly that the student has a passionate interest in the topic.

The number and detail of the responses from both the individual participants (students) and focus group participants (faculty and support staff) in this category is illustrated in Table 15.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Students who experience their research topic as a higher calling or life purpose (success factor) are more likely to succeed	11	P1, P3, P7, P8, P10, P14, P20, P22, P24, P25, P27	7	Z2, Z3, Z4, K2, K5, S1, S3
Students who feel passionate about the topic of their research are more likely to succeed	9	P1, P3, P7, P14, P16, P19, P20, P21, P24	5	K2, K3, S1, S3, S4

**Table 15: Personal meaning attached to research topic**

Students who reported a strong alignment and passion for their topic to the extent that some even terming their research their ‘calling’ also indicated that they were determined to complete despite any challenges experienced. Seven of the focus group participants also referred to the sense of calling that some students experienced, citing this as a success factor.

On the other hand, students who reported a lack of interest in the topic or did not have clarity about the aim and scope of their studies, seemed to have become discouraged easier, as illustrated by the following response from a student (P21) who had dropped out of a postgraduate degree before:

*‘You know, looking at the curriculum for the last two years, I was thinking you know this is all about global finance and all this kind of thing, and I was going I have no interest in that. I am interested in leadership and people development. I am not actually interested in where this degree is going to take me. So I think that was a factor as well. But I was doing well and I was passing, and I was, it just got too much.’*

The next category relates to the resilience of the student.

#### **5.2.4.2 Resilience**

Participants frequently referred to the concept of resilience as a key factor in postgraduate student success.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Successful non-traditional postgraduate students display tenacity (self-drive, determination)	26	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25, P26, P27, P28	9	Z1, Z2, K1, K4, K6, S1, S2, S3, S4

**Table 16: Resilience**

As indicated in Table 16, this concept was raised by 26 out of the 28 interviewees, highlighting the importance that they attach to this particular element. This concept was also strongly confirmed by the focus group discussions, where it was raised as a success factor by nine of the participants.

While different terms including determination, self-drive, and tenacity were used interchangeably, the meaning seemed to be similar in that participants described this concept as a psychological attribute of the student, something that comes from within, as illustrated by participant P8 below:

*‘But motivation has to come from within a guy. I don’t really see it coming from without. It is who you are right in the beginning. It is who you are before you start. It is who you are when you grow up. It is character formation in your childhood years that make you determined enough to begin something and to complete it. For me it is the character of who you are and from who you are flows what you do.’*

Nine of the interviewees indicated that the only reason why they would possibly terminate their studies would have to be a major tragedy or trauma, which seems to confirm their intrinsic motivation to complete their studies.

From the interviewee’s responses, students also seemed to associate their level of determination with the value that they attach to education (how important it is to them to obtain the qualification) as well as their view on the importance of their research.

The time management skills of the student also seem to be a critical success factor. This will be discussed next.

### 5.2.4.3 Self-regulated learning

Two main concepts pertaining to self-regulated learning (time management) emerged from the data.

These two concepts, although reported on separately here, (time constraints and balancing responsibilities) seem to be very closely related as both seem to refer to the ability to prioritise and manage one's time.

These will now be considered in more detail.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No of respondents	List of respondents	No of respondents	List of respondents
Non-traditional postgraduate students suffer severe time constraints	20	P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25, P26, P27	6	K1, K2, K3, S1, S3, S4
Non-traditional postgraduate students need to balance their studies with a range of other commitments and priorities	20	P2, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25, P26, P27	6	Z1, K1, K6, S1, S2, S3

**Table 17: Self-regulated learning**

As indicated in Table 17, participants highlighted the time constraints brought about by their studies, as a major challenge. Taking into account that non-traditional postgraduate students employed or self-employed on a fulltime basis, are often married and have children and also may have other responsibilities, this finding seems to merely confirm a known reality.

The other finding in this category, namely the need to balance all the various priorities, seems to flow from the first. Participants in both individual interviews (students) as well as in focus group discussions (faculty and support staff) indicated



that the ability of non-traditional postgraduate students to balance their studies and other responsibilities is a key success factor.

Participant P17 summarised this finding very aptly:

*'The challenges!! Challenges, of course! I could write about it! (laughter) You are a bread winner that must win bread – but here is a bread winner that also must do school. That balancing act is not easy. There are also the family demands that you can never defer. Your son is going for sport and you have to go. Your wife has got a birthday. Things must happen. In other words, you are learning to balance such that the family cogs continue to move normally and at the same time you are fulfilling your academic requirements which can be very taxing. You also have to do your bread winning. That can be quite taxing.'*

This finding also needs to be considered together with the finding under Section 5.2.1.1.2 (the personal support context of the student), where the issue of family members not understanding the time demands on non-traditional postgraduate students is discussed. It seems that the student's family's understanding of the requirements can impact the student's ability to manage this balancing act successfully.

The academic challenges and success factors identified from the study will be discussed next.

### **5.2.5 Academic challenges and success factors**

The academic challenges and factors that may impact student success inform the next theme that emerged from the data. This theme consists of two categories, namely an understanding the academic requirements, and academic literacy skills.

The first category is students' understanding of academic requirements. This will now be discussed.

#### **5.2.5.1 Understanding of academic requirements at postgraduate level**

The first concept under academic challenges is that of lack of understanding of the academic and other requirements at postgraduate level. This concept is summarised in Table 18.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Non-traditional students do not have a clear understanding of the academic requirements at postgraduate level	9	P1, P14, P15, P17, P18, P19, P21, P27, P28	3	K6, S1, S4

**Table 18: Understanding of academic requirements**

This could be seen in the context of the reality of non-traditional postgraduate students: The age group of respondents (11 over the age of 50 and 11 between the ages of 41 and 50) makes a long delay between undergraduate and postgraduate studies probable.

The lack of understanding could however also stem from the difference in requirements at undergraduate and postgraduate level, as well as the communication from the institution, about the requirements (discussed in Section 5.2.2.2.4).

One of the interviewees (P17) reported the lack of understanding of what is required, as follows:

*'I think I touched on some of that. There is a big difference for me between the first and the second year. Just the difference between Honours and Master's, I mean, the very first day when you got there they already ask you: What are you going to study? I mean like: Aren't you going to help me figure out what I want to study? For me it was a nerve breaking experience to say what I want to study because I have not really given it much thought.'*

The second category in the theme academic challenges and success factors, namely that of academic literacy, will now be discussed.

### **5.2.5.2 Academic literacy**

This category consists of four concepts. The first two concepts relate to academic writing skills (as a challenge and as a success factor) and the second two concepts relate to research skills (as a challenge and as a success factor). The views of the individual respondents (students) and the focus group respondents (faculty and support staff) seem to complement each other.

Read together, these concepts seem to indicate that academic literacy is a key success factor of non-traditional postgraduate students, and that students may not have this skill, resulting in their identification of academic literacy as a challenge.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Non-traditional postgraduate students are challenged by a lack of academic writing skills	7	P1, P2, P10, P16, P21, P24, P28	4	K1, S1, S3, S4
Academic writing skill is a key success factor	0	N/A	3	K4, K6, S1
Non-traditional postgraduate students are challenged by their lack of research skills	5	P1, P15, P17, P19, P23, P24	4	K2, K6, S1, S4
Research skill is a key success factor	0	N/A	4	K4, K5, K6, S1

**Table 19: Academic literacy**

Academic writing skills were reported as critical to the success of non-traditional postgraduate students. As indicated in Table 19, seven of the individual interviewees raised this as a challenge. It was also raised by four of the focus group members, while another three focus group members indicated it as a critical success factor.

This focus group member (S1) illustrates the issue of writing skills from the perspective of a faculty member:

*‘The other challenge that I have seen, as I said, the writing challenge, referencing, has been quite a big challenge. Academic writing, where you have to have that critical thinking mind, it is quite a big challenge for many, whereby you will find the non-traditional students, they come with a lot of experience, they come with a lot of workplace knowledge, however they lack that academic rigorous knowledge, and now to link from the much experience they have and how to write their own stories in a more academic acceptable way, it becomes a big challenge for them’.*

The following quotation from a Master’s student (P1) indicates her perception of the skills required and her struggle with that:

*‘Uhm, at one stage I felt that, when I was in school, I was not good with comprehension tests, and reading is not one of my strong points. So writing*

*this Master's degree was like doing a comprehension test and then writing an essay, the two things in school that I didn't like at all.'*

Academic writing skills seem to be closely related to research skills, which will be discussed next.

As indicated in Table 19, ten out of the 28 students indicated that they did not have a clear understanding of the research methodology to be used, and that this impacted their enthusiasm and progress.

The following statement by participant P4 is representative of the responses from students in this regard:

*'For it is this kind of thing that will influence my progress. If I am confident of this is how you do it, this will be very critical for me to succeed. But as long as I am not sure, I may not be very enthusiastic, you know, to get on with it. It is that which in turn will slow my progress. I am not too sure whether the kind of methodologies that I intend to use is really the correct one. It is easy to correct the one or the other that is applicable. I need that confidence that a research workshop can give.'*

While this particular quote referred to the student's need for a research workshop and this is representative of some of the other students' views, others required more personal (one on one) engagements as illustrated by individual participant P25, but the essence of the matter seems to be that they needed more help on this.

*'Maybe there was one other challenge about how you deal with supervision and the process thereof. There are some things that I just don't know how to do. I don't know about grounded theory. I told my supervisor: 'I don't know what I am doing. I am reading about it and I can't understand it'. And she said: Come, let us talk about it. I will help you.'*

This finding can also be linked to the uncertainty experienced by many of the students, as indicated in Section 5.2.1.2.1 (level of academic self-confidence).

In summary, the main academic challenges experienced by non-traditional postgraduate students seem to be their understanding of the academic requirements at postgraduate level and their lack of academic literacy, which consists of research skills and academic writing skills. These were also identified as critical success factors, highlighting the need to support students in developing these skills.

The next theme relates to the financial challenges experienced by non-traditional postgraduate students.

### 5.2.7 Financial challenges

This theme consists of two categories, namely the financial difficulties experienced by students in order to fund their studies, and the complexity of the funding mechanisms available to students. The first category, namely the struggle to afford postgraduate studies, will be discussed first.

As illustrated in Table 20, a total of 19 out of the 28 individual interviewees reported that they had experienced financial difficulty or challenges in funding their postgraduate studies. This was also confirmed by nine of the focus group participants and was indicated as a cause of slow progress and non-completion, as institutions would not allow students to continue their studies unless they had a ‘zero balance’ (no fees outstanding). This finding may point to the need for a more flexible fee structure, which allows students to pay fees over a longer period.

The cost of studying relates to the fees payable to the institution as well as the cost of travelling to and from the institution, which also affects students negatively.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Students struggle to afford university fees	19	P2, P3, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P21, P23, P24, P25, P27, P28	9	Z1, Z2, K1, K2, K3, K4, K6, S1, S3
Students struggle to afford the cost of travel to and from university (long distances)	5	P3,P9, P10, P14, P18	4	Z2, Z4, K1, K6
The funding mechanisms available to students are overly complex	7	P13, P16, P17, P19, P25, P27, P28	3	K4, S1, S2

**Table 20: Financial challenges**

As indicated in Table 20, participants also reported that, although there were funding mechanisms available, the funding process was overly complex and that they struggled to navigate this.

Participant P16 explained this challenge as follows:

*‘Do you know anything about the xxx (name of research funding body)? I got to a point this year that I e-mailed to say: Thank you very much. I am not taking any of your money any more from a personal perspective. For they make you jump through loops again and again and again and again. I told them I don’t have time to fill out the same things four or five times because your system does not work properly. I wrote my progress report and they said it was devoid of any useful information. So I said, fine. Thank you for the money of last year. That was really useful. But that’s it. You can keep it. I don’t have time or energy to expend on that kind of nonsense...’*

It seemed that students sometimes did not make use of the available funding even though they were desperate for it, due to the complexity of the processes, and the fact that they did not know who to turn to for assistance.

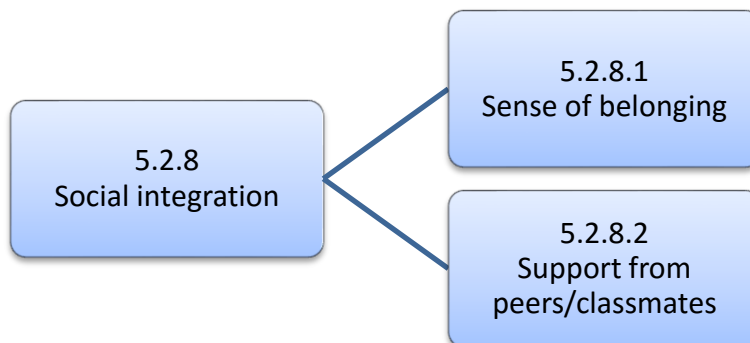
The financial challenges, in summary, consist of the struggle to afford the fees but also travel and other related costs. While funding mechanisms are available, these are difficult to navigate, resulting in students not making use of the available funding.

The next section will focus on the culture of the institution and the student’s alignment to the culture, which impacts the social integration of the student.

### **5.2.8 Social integration**

The next theme that emerged from the data, deals with the culture of the institution.

The concepts in this theme are firstly the sense of belonging or alignment with the culture of the institution, followed by the academic rigour and credibility of the institution. The structure of this section is illustrated in Figure 6.



**Figure 6: Social integration**

The student’s sense of belonging will be discussed first.

### 5.2.8.1 Sense of belonging

The sense of belonging of the student in relation to the institution seems to relate to the culture of the institution (including the academic credibility of the institution) the student's personal alignment to the culture, and students' social interaction with the institution as well as peers or classmates.

The first three concepts, which relate to the student's relationship with the institution itself, will be discussed together as they seem closely related, and support from peers or classmates will be discussed thereafter under a separate heading. The concepts are illustrated in Table 21.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
The alignment of the student, to culture of the institution impacts student success	11	P2, P5, P6, P12, P16, P17, P20, P21, P26, P27, P28	7	Z4, K1, K3, S1, S2, S3, S4
The academic credibility of the institution enhances motivation	8	P6, P11, P12, P15, P16, P20, P21, P27	4	K2, S1, S3, S4
The social sense of belonging impacts student success	12	P3, P10, P13, P14, P15, P16, P20, P22, P24, P25, P26, P27	4	K6, S1, S2, S4

**Table 21: Sense of belonging**

Eleven respondents made mention of the culture of the institution and their personal alignment to it, as a motivational or hampering factor. The importance of the institutional culture (as a success factor) was also raised by seven of the focus group participants.

The following statement made by a student (P16) is typical of these comments:

*'There have been times when I looked at all the politics in the department and I think why am I here? Other days I think I am here to sort the stuff out. Is this the kind of faculty, the kind of university that it is supposed to be? If I didn't have a personal support system at home, I would have left long ago.'*

The next concept in this category was that of the academic credibility of the institution. This issue was raised by eight respondents as a motivator to enrol at the particular institution and also to continue with their studies. This concept was confirmed by four of the focus group participants.

The response from participant P20 below, is representative of the responses in this category. Note that the student also linked the credibility of the institution with the career opportunities that the postgraduate degree may create:

*'That, to me was extremely important to put my ladder against the right wall so that when I had climbed it I know that it is going to be recognised and it would give me the freedom of the type of learning environment that I believe made a huge difference in my working career. All of those guys – xxxx (names of four colleagues) – all of them, from managers to senior managers to executives. That to me showed me that xxx (name of institution) has cutting edge competence, learning skills, proficiencies and diligence to make sure that they make a difference in people's learning careers.'*

In addition to the alignment of the student to the culture of the institution, twelve of the 28 students interviewed raised the concept of 'belonging' in a social sense (social interaction), to the institution where they were studying. This concept was also flagged by four of the focus group correspondents.

The following student's (P14) experience seems representative of the responses of students who raised this concept:

*'That I think would be very important, especially on PhD level where you do not see the student. The student is sitting somewhere in the sticks or somewhere very far from the university. I have never been to xxx (name of institution) up till today and I have been studying there for more than five years. I have never been there to see anybody... I do not know what the xxx (field) department looks like. I am a distance education student. I would have liked to have some contact with the university that I did not have up till now.'*

The lack of social interaction seemed to cause frustration especially where students did not participate in coursework, as they seemed to experience the research journey in particular, as lonely. They also indicated that they did not know who to approach when they encountered difficulty.

The next concept relates to the support from peers or classmates.

#### **5.2.8.2 Support from peers or classmates**

As indicated in Table 22, fifteen of the students raised the issue of support from and working with their peers or classmates as a success factor (which also seems to



relate to the sense of belonging. The importance of peer support was also raised by six of the focus group participants.

This seems to be supported by the thirteen participants who found the coursework experience positive, primarily because of the team learning context. (although seven indicated that they found the coursework challenging, having studied the responses carefully, this seems to be a time management issue and not because they did not experience the interaction positively).

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Students that receive support from peers or classmates are more likely to succeed	15	P1, P3, P4, P7, P8, P13, P15, P16, P17, P20, P21, P22, P23, P25, P26	6	Z1, Z3, Z4, K2, K6, K7
Non-traditional postgraduate students find coursework useful	13	P1, P6, P7, P15, P16, P17, P19, P20, P21, P24, P25, P26, P27	Not discussed.	

**Table 22: Support from peers**

The following student (P20) illustrates the importance of peer support:

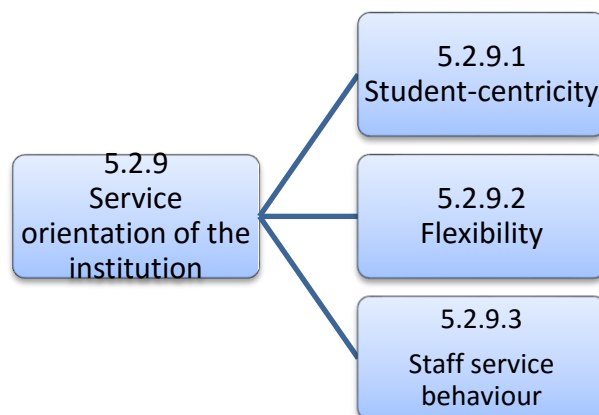
*'I think that the inter activeness, the courtesy sessions, the team that I had with me ... - they would continuously meet with me, you know. We would brain storm; we would chat on Whatsapp; we would meet at my offices in xxx (name of company); and they would go out of their way to just coming there and talking; several Sundays I would go to xxx's (name of student) place and we would be working very, very close. So there was a close bond that they have developed there over time to give us the understanding that we are not an island and we were not alone. There were support mechanisms in place. I think it would be extremely difficult...'*

The finding in this regard is that non-traditional students have the need to feel that they belong to the institution and to a learning team, and also that they know who to contact when they experience difficulties.

The service orientation of the institution will be discussed next.

## 5.2.9 Service orientation of the institution

The next theme that emerged from the data was that of the service orientation of the institution. This theme consists of four categories, namely student-centricity, flexibility in terms of the approach to service, the service behaviour of staff and communication with students, as illustrated in Figure 7.



**Figure 7: Service orientation of the institution**

These elements will be discussed in detail, next.

### 5.2.9.1 Student-centricity

The first important category related to the service orientation of higher education institutions emerging from the data is that of student-centricity.

This category is made up of the following concepts: the institution should have a student-centred approach and the institution should offer personalised service and support (see Table 23).

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
The institution should follow a student-centred approach	7	P14, P16, P18, P20, P21, P27, P28	4	Z4, K6, S1, S2
Students need personalised service and support	10	P1, P2, P3, P16, P17, P18, P20, P21, P24, P27	6	Z4, K1, K6, S1, S2, S4

**Table 23: Student-centricity**

In the understanding of the respondents, this means that the institution, as represented by both academic and non-academic staff, should care, should understand the needs of students, should be responsive to those, and should communicate with students clearly and consistently. Students expressed the need to be ‘more than just a number’ to the institution.

The frustration experienced by students is voiced by participant P16, below:

*‘They don’t ever seem to put the student’s needs first. You know, my experience as a post grad has not been any better as an under grad. Why do they make the people teach? They don’t even like the students. They really don’t.’*

The next category related to the theme of service orientation is that of flexibility. This is closely related to student-centricity, as it deals with responsiveness to student needs.

### 5.2.9.2 Flexibility

Flexibility is the second category in the theme titled service orientation. Flexibility in this context includes an understanding of and response to the needs of working adults to have access to facilities and staff outside of working hours, and the availability of services to distance learners, as well as an understanding of the possible slower progress of these students due to the time constraints and reality of their lives outside of their studies.

The two concepts in this category are as follows: the institution needs to be aware of and responsive to, the needs of individual students, and the institution needs to accommodate the student’s individual progress in the context of a unique learning journey (see Table 24).

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Non-traditional postgraduate students require the institution to be flexible	9	P3, P10, P11, P13, P18, P20, P22, P26, P27	5	K1, K6, S1, S2, S4
The institution should treat each student and his learning journey as unique	8	P3, P4, P6, P8, P11, P21, P26, P28	5	Z3, K1, S1, S2, S4)

**Table 24: Flexibility**

The following student (P18) described her challenge to help her supervisor understand her context and need for flexibility:

*'I am a teacher and a mother and a wife and there would be a long stretches that I could not do anything. Then there would be times in the school holidays that I would catch up and I would do a lot of intense work. It took my supervisor two years to understand... It actually came to conflict. I said to him my life is complex and it is a complexity that I own, and I would not drop any of these balls. I had to make him aware that I was very committed to do the study. There was quite a tense moment. In the end he understood that I was committed and he was able to make the adjustments...'*

This student (P26) in turn indicated that his supervisor displayed an understanding of the progress that the student (a single parent with difficult work circumstances at the time) could make in his particular circumstances:

*'And one of the things I really appreciate is that she (academic supervisor) said: Why are you rushing? And I said everybody else is rushing, everybody else is rocking. And she said this is your journey. You need to take your time. If you want to take another year take another year. Get it right. Don't worry about other people's stuff.'*

The next category relates to the service attitude and behaviour of the institution's staff, including both academic and non-academic staff.

### **5.2.9.3 Staff service behaviour**

The third category under service orientation is that of the service behaviour of staff. In this category, two concepts were identified, namely the extent to which academic staff are showing interest in and care for their students, and friendliness and helpfulness of support staff in assisting students to navigate the institution's systems and processes.

#### **5.2.9.3.1 The interest and care of academic staff**

The extent to which academic staff care and are interested in the success of their students, was raised as a success factor by ten of the individual interviewees and also by six of the focus group participants.

While some students had a positive experience with the academic staff who demonstrated an interest in them and their progress with their studies, students often felt that academic staff did not care for them or their success, as illustrated by participant P10:

*'They don't ever seem to put the student's needs first. You know, my experience as a post grad has not been any better as an under grad. Why do*

*they make the people teach? They don't even like the students. They really don't.'*

The next concept in this category is the friendliness and helpfulness of the non-academic or support staff.

#### **5.2.9.3.2 Friendliness and helpfulness of support staff**

The friendliness and helpfulness of support staff was raised by ten of the individual interviewees (P8, P9, P10, P15, P16, P19, P21, P24, P26, P28), noting this as an important success factor in their navigation of the institution's systems and processes. This includes the statisticians, librarians, and administrative support staff of institutions.

This student (P1) had a good experience in terms of support from non-academic staff:

*'The support of the statistician was very good. I was working in a little storeroom next to her office on one day at one stage when she wanted something to be done. She was always friendly and when I asked her for more information, she replied very fast and gave me the information, so the support from the statistician of the University is very good. The support from the library people was also very good. They always tried to help me.'*

The last category under service orientation is that of the communication between the institution and the student.

#### **5.2.9.4 Communication between the institution and the student**

Eight of the students interviewed raised the issue of clear and constant communication between the institution and the student. This concept was also raised by four of the focus group participants.

Having read the responses carefully, the issue of communication seems to be related to the day-to-day communication about processes, procedures and progress. This in turn links to the service orientation and behaviour of staff (both academic and support staff) and is therefore classified under service orientation, although it could also be linked to the management of the institution.

Respondents indicated that the lack of clear communication from the institution caused frustrations and delays in their progress as they were not always sure what the institution expected of them, as illustrated participant P10 below:

*'For me there was a massive communication gap there. I have to take partial responsibility because I never checked up with them either. But it is the first time I am doing this and I didn't know I am supposed to do all this and submit all this and it has to be done by X, Y and Z. And then, "I'm sorry as far as this*

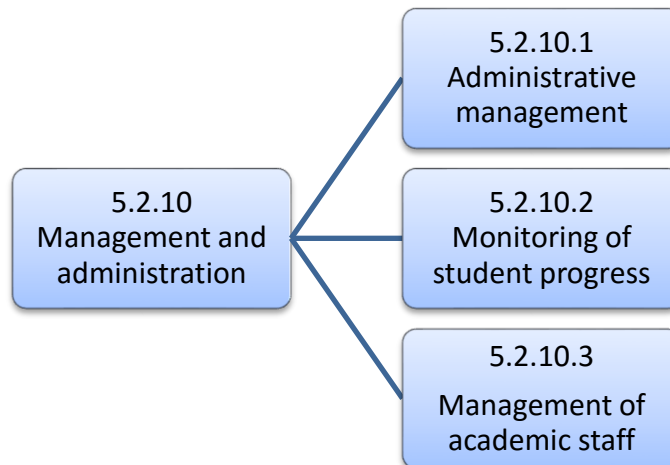
*is concerned you have not done anything.” And I admit, yes this is fine. I haven’t done anything so I have to start again.’*

The management and administration of the institution will be discussed next.

### **5.2.10 Management and administration of the institution**

The effectiveness and efficiency with which the institution is managed and the quality of the administration emerged as a theme, consisting of the administration of the institution, the monitoring of student progress, and the management of academic staff, which includes their workload and accountability.

The structure of this section is illustrated in Figure 8.



**Figure 8: Management and administration**

The first category in this theme, the administrative management of the institution, will be discussed next.

#### **5.2.10.1 The institution’s administrative management**

The first category under the management and administration of the institution is that of the management of the institution’s administration.

This category consists of two concepts namely the administration of the institution, and the support offered to students (relating to support from administrative staff).

Nine of the individual interviewees indicated that they had found the institution’s administrative processes frustrating.

This frustration seems to be linked to a lack of communication about what is required from students, poor efficiency, slow turnaround times to enquiries (for example e-mails) and a lack of availability of staff.

Students also had the perception that there is a lack of understanding of the needs of the non-traditional postgraduate student in terms of administration and the time pressure that they often find themselves in, as illustrated by participant P27 below:

*'They must have appreciation for part-time students with busy schedules at the pitch of their careers who are still working... most of the time these people are already in senior management positions. So you have to understand that time are precious for them... please understand that when the student makes time available and makes arrangements to spend the next four hours with the supervisor, or with the administration staff or with the post-graduate staff and the faculty staff to sort out stuff, the staff must be available. You must not arrive there and this person is missing and the other one can't help you. You must not send an e-mail and have to wait three four days to get some response. That to me was a great frustration. That needs to be fixed.'*

The next concept in category, although titled 'support', links to the administration of the institution. This is because students, when asked about support services, often referred to the assistance of support staff such as administrative staff, in navigating the processes and procedures of the institution.

Nine of the participants were of the view that they did not receive adequate support from the institution where they studied and that they experienced delays as a result. The following comment of participant P16 is representative of the comments made by these students:

*'You don't actually make provision for your students' needs. You don't give them information, you don't give them the space that they need and you don't give them the support that they need either. When stuff goes wrong like this last one, you hear: "Sorry, you are not actually registered" - from the post grad office. Just an e-mail to say we are sorry and I have to sort it all out. There is this very little support... To whom do I go now to say I need some help here? There is no one.'*

In addition, it seems that some institutions may offer support services, including academic support services, but offer these during working hours only, which may be problematic to non-traditional students. This also points to the administrative management of the institution rather than the content of the support services itself.

Student P22 voiced her frustration with the institution's seeming lack of understanding of her context as a working adult:

*'It is an unrealistic expectation that everybody has the ability to study full-time and other people should not have the opportunity to study... They should make it possible for anybody to study and not exclude anybody that wants to develop themselves. It is very unfortunate. All of them are doing a working day... So I missed out on all of the support programmes (offered during working hours only). Very much like doing it as a distance student, really.'*

The management and administration of support services are closely related to the service orientated behaviour of staff (Section 5.2.2.2.3).

The next concept related to the management and administration of the institution, is the monitoring of student progress. This relates to students in the research phase of their studies or in pure research degrees in particular.

#### **5.2.10.2 Monitoring of student progress**

Nine of the individual interviewees raised the importance of the institution's monitoring of student progress. This concept was also raised as a success factor by five of the focus group participants.

Some of these students enjoyed a very positive experience (where the institution did monitor progress closely and conducted personalised follow-ups), described by participant P24 below:

*'When I look at the times when I had a difficulty I also had a phone call coming. Someone noticed that I haven't sent something on time. They would ask: What is happening? Can we help you with this? (Laughter) Can we help you with this? And those things prompt you to do your work. That helped me quite a bit.'*

Other students however felt that progress was not monitored and expressed the need for a monitoring system to be instituted by the institution, as indicated by participant P14:

*'I would like the university to contact the student and to have some kind of a check system or interview system with the student right through the process of their study on a regular basis, to make sure that this student is still on track. And not just leave them for five or six years and then expect a final product. There must be some way of monitoring the progress of the student, but not only the progress of the student academically, but also the problems that the student experience. There must be some kind of a feedback system that is not in place at xxx (name of institution). That I think would be very important, especially on PhD level where you do not see the student.'*



This is closely linked to the support provided by the institution, as discussed under Section 5.2.10.1 above, and also to the next theme, namely the management of academic staff (including accountability).

### **5.2.10.3 Management of academic staff**

The third category in the theme dealing with the management and administration of the institution, relates to the management of academic staff. The concepts identified in this category, are that of the workload of academic staff, and the accountability of academic staff. These will now be discussed in more detail.

#### **5.2.10.3.1 Workload of academic staff**

The first concept in this category is that of workload. This includes references by eight respondents to the number of academic staff, the perception that institutions are understaffed and that academic staff have overly high workloads that may hamper their service to students. The issue of adequate academic staff and high workloads was also raised by five of the focus group participants.

This element seems to be of particular relevance to the academic supervisors, as the high workload impacts the turnaround time of feedback.

Student P1 reported that she asked her supervisor regarding her workload based on the slow turnaround time of feedback on her work:

*'Uhm... I think the lecturers have a lot of responsibility. Because I asked my promoter recently how many postgraduate students she has, because she is teaching undergraduate students and at that stage, when she was marking the exam papers, she said it was I think, 210 exam papers that she had to mark for the undergraduate students, and she had about eight Master's degree and four Doctoral degree students. So she is really pressurised.'*

The management of the workload and accountability of academic staff seems closely related, in that it deals with the prioritisation of student support, by academic staff. Accountability will be discussed next.

#### **5.2.10.3.2 Accountability of academic staff**

The category titled accountability of academic staff consist of two concepts: the institution should hold academic staff accountable, and students should have recourse in case academic staff does not deliver the necessary academic services required for the student to succeed. These two concepts will now be unpacked.

#### **5.2.10.3.2.1 Holding academic staff accountable**

The first concept pertaining to the management of academic staff identified by respondents is the accountability, or lack thereof, of the academic staff. This was raised by eight of the individual interviewees. This concept was also confirmed through the focus group discussions, with five of the focus group participants raising the need to hold academic staff accountable.

The frustrations ranged from meeting appointments that were not kept, slow turnaround time on feedback, or even rudeness on the part of academic staff – students seemed to feel that there was a power relationship between them and the academic staff and that academic staff were not held accountable for their actions, as indicated by participant P27:

*‘What is happening at the moment is that the supervisor will say: You will see me tomorrow. And then he is not available. This is unacceptable. It is like a power relationship.’*

This is not limited to academic supervisors but seem to relate more generally to the academic and administrative processes at the institution, as illustrated by participant P10 below:

*‘So, I thought like obviously, my supervisor was partially at fault for not telling me, but they at the Department were more at fault for they have all these boxes to check. But nobody seemed checked up on it. They just let me go off and do whatever I wanted to do.’*

#### **5.2.10.3.2.2 Recourse**

The second concept in this category relates to the recourse available to students who experienced serious challenges in their relationship with their supervisors. This concept was noted by seven of the individual interviewees.

For students who felt that they did not have recourse (could not complain to the institution), the challenges they experienced lead to their transferring to other institutions or even giving up their studies altogether.

Some students did however raise the matter with their institutions and highlighted the importance of having recourse in cases like this.

The following student (P24) illustrates the impact that this may have on student success:

*‘And I could not even get an appointment with him. I could not see him. I was three months late in starting. I had to start with my research. I did not know where to start. I started writing up stuff and I could not get a meeting with him.’*

*So eventually I came and complained to the university about him and to Dr xxx (name of Research Manager). I decided I had to give up. That was actually six months before I could actually start and finish my research. I decided I have to give it up. I will not make the deadline because of that.'*

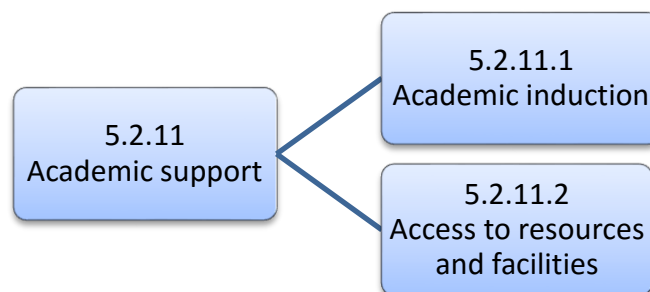
The institution in this case responded well and allocated another supervisor, which led to the student completing his studies successfully.

The next theme under the role of the institution is the support that the institution offers students.

### **5.2.11 Academic support offered by the institution**

The above frustration regarding administrative matters is closely linked to the next theme raised by interviewees, namely the academic support provided by the institution.

Two concepts are included in this category, as illustrated in Figure 9: academic induction, and access to resources and facilities.



**Figure 9: Academic support**

The issue of student support links closely to Section 5.2.2.2.1 (student-centricity) where the issue of personalised service is discussed.

#### **5.2.11.1 Academic induction**

This study found that non-traditional postgraduate students require academic induction and guidance, as illustrated in Section 5.2.5 in the discussion of the academic challenges faced by non-traditional postgraduate students.

Eight of the 28 students interviewed raised the need for academic induction, which includes academic literacy skills, as well as research guidance. This finding was also confirmed by the focus group participants, with five out of the fourteen participants confirming this need.

The need for academic induction is voiced by individual participant P23 below:

*'In terms of research – for a person like me it was my first time. And I think that xxx (name of institution) could maybe spend more time at the beginning to help the students understand the concept of research better. I think for PhD students who have done research before it is not much of a problem. But for a person like me to do research and come up with people's theories, and referencing!'*

The resources and facilities offered by the institution and students' access to these, will be discussed next.

#### **5.2.11.2 Access to resources and facilities**

The third concept in this category is that of access to resources and facilities. Non-traditional students also require access to resources and facilities to assist them in their learning journey.

While it is recognised that access to resources and access to facilities may be seen as two different concepts, respondents used the two interchangeably and in an integrated manner, and the researcher has therefore treated it as one concept.

Note for example the comment from one of the focus group respondents (K3) below, where the respondent refers to facilities (such as the library) but the impact on the student is the lack of access to resources (scholarly works):

*'The other one is the facilities within the university. One key facility in a learning environment like this is the library. So if the library is not linked internationally, if the students cannot get the latest scholarly works, that they need in a particular area of speciality, that university is not measuring to the standards. And so, when the library is equipped, at least the students at least have something, have somewhere to begin from, ok.'*

Thirteen students mentioned access to resources and facilities as an important success factor and some indicated that these were not always available. This concept was also raised as an important success factor by nine of the focus group members.

The findings pertaining to the academic support rendered by the institution will be summarised next.

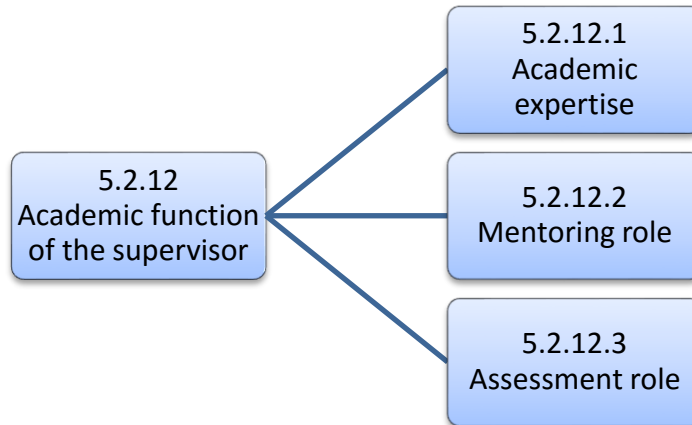
The next section will focus on the academic function of the academic supervisor.

#### **5.2.12 Academic function of the supervisor**

In the theme pertaining to the academic role of the supervisor, three concepts emanated from the data: the academic expertise of their supervisors in the field of study, the academic guidance and mentorship received from their academic

supervisors, and the assessment role of the supervisor (quality and frequency of feedback on the academic work of the student).

The structure of this section is illustrated in Figure 10.



**Figure 10: Academic function of the supervisor**

These concepts will now be discussed in more detail.

#### **5.2.12.1 Academic expertise of the supervisor**

Seven of the students mentioned the academic expertise of the supervisor and his or her knowledge of and interest in the student's research topic, as a critically important factor. This was also highlighted as a success factor by seven of the focus group participants.

Participants generally seem to have experienced this aspect quite positively and it does not seem that lack of expertise is a general problem experienced by postgraduate students. It was however reported by respondents that not all supervisors take the time and effort to update themselves on the field of interest of the student, in order to advise them properly.

This student (P8) reported that he chose his academic supervisor specifically because of his reputation of knowledge in the particular field, however the student had to cover issues slightly outside the supervisor's own field of interest:

*'I would have liked him to give me more guidance in terms of where I'm coming from and what I'm going. Even in terms of the sources that I was using, I would have liked him to tell me to use some of the sources that the university eventually told me to use. I don't think he knew about it.'*

This concept (academic expertise) is closely related to the academic mentoring role of the academic supervisor, which will be explored next.

### 5.2.12.2 Mentoring role of the supervisor

A total of 16 out of the 28 individual interviewees raised the importance of the supervisor’s mentoring and guidance pertaining to the academic work of the student. This finding was confirmed by the focus group participants as well.

While the functional role (academic expertise) of the supervisor seems to be taken for granted, the mentoring aspects sometimes seem to be neglected, leading to frustration for the student, as indicated by participant P28:

*‘Along with this person with this extensive impressive record of expertise comes this person with a stupid performance, a person who refuses to read my work, a person who does not give me feedback.’*

While mentoring is classified as part of the academic role, it has an obvious link to the supervisor/student relationship, which is discussed in more detail in Section 5.2.13.

### 5.2.12.3 Assessment role of the supervisor

The issue of assessment of academic work and feedback on it seems to be a key concept in the category titled academic role of the supervisor.

The study found that non-traditional students were concerned with two concepts pertaining to feedback: the quality of feedback received and the timing thereof.

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
Feedback must be detailed, valuable, constructive	7	P15, P20, P20, P22, P25, P26, P27, P28		
Feedback must be given constantly, regularly, timely	12	P1,P2, P8, P10, P12, P14, P16, P20, P23, P24, P26, P27		

**Table 25: Feedback on academic work**

Four of the focus group participants also highlighted the issue of regular, timely feedback, confirming the importance of this aspect.

The quality of feedback seems to be influenced by two elements: the adequacy of the feedback, and how constructive it is. The following student (P27) voiced his frustration with the adequacy of the feedback received:

*‘So my frustration with him was that he took on too many students.... So what happened is that ... he would say I will quickly work through it. He would scan through it and say very good, brilliant, carry on with it... What I found is that I wasted a lot of time in second guessing, going through and redoing stuff when it would have been a lot quicker if he had applied his mind, set aside a proper time for me in the earlier stages, done a full assessment and then came back to me. Then I could have done the corrections and developed it further...’*

Participant P22 in turn illustrates the frustration with the tone of the feedback (not constructive):

*‘Another thing that I have experienced: When the work is done, and you get comments from the supervisor, I don’t think some of the comments I would even give to my daughter or my kid or anybody. They are extremely belittling. You are an academic and I want to be regarded as equal and be respected. I don’t expect comments such as: “This is a stupid thing”; “This is beneath what I expect of a student” or “Ha ha ha! Who do you think you are?” Those are the kind of things we are getting...’*

The timing of feedback was also a source of frustration to students (feedback was often not received regularly enough and the turnaround times of feedback were disappointing). While feedback on written work is considered to be part of the academic role of the supervisor, it is noted that managing this task and the turnaround time of feedback may be administrative in nature.

The next theme deals with the administrative function of the supervisor. This is discussed in more detail, next.

### **5.2.13 Administrative function of the supervisor**

The next theme emerging from the data is the administrative role that the supervisor needs to play.

Participants in this study relayed the frustrations caused by the poor administrative skills of supervisors, both in terms of turnaround times, lack of response to communication, forgetting about meetings, and so forth, as mentioned by participant P10 below:

*‘But he is absolutely useless with paperwork, terrible. He doesn’t even read his e-mails. I have given up sending him e-mails... I sent him my protocol and I heard nothing. So three weeks later I followed up. And I heard nothing. Three weeks later I still heard nothing. Then I decided that’s it. I just cannot sit and wait any longer for weeks and weeks and weeks. So far he has not responded to that e-mail yet...’*

The following student (P1) also demonstrates the link between the administrative role of the supervisor and their academic workload:

*'She said the next appointment will be on a specific Tuesday and she said "You must come at 09:00". And when I got there at nine o'clock, she said: "Oh, did we have an appointment?" and I said yes. And she said "Is there things that I was supposed to read?" and I said yes, chapters 4 and 5. And she said "Oh... I am so busy marking exam papers that I totally forgot about it..."*

In summary, the supervisor has to manage his/her administration to ensure that student requests are responded to and the feedback process is efficient.

The next theme relates to the student/supervisor relationship.

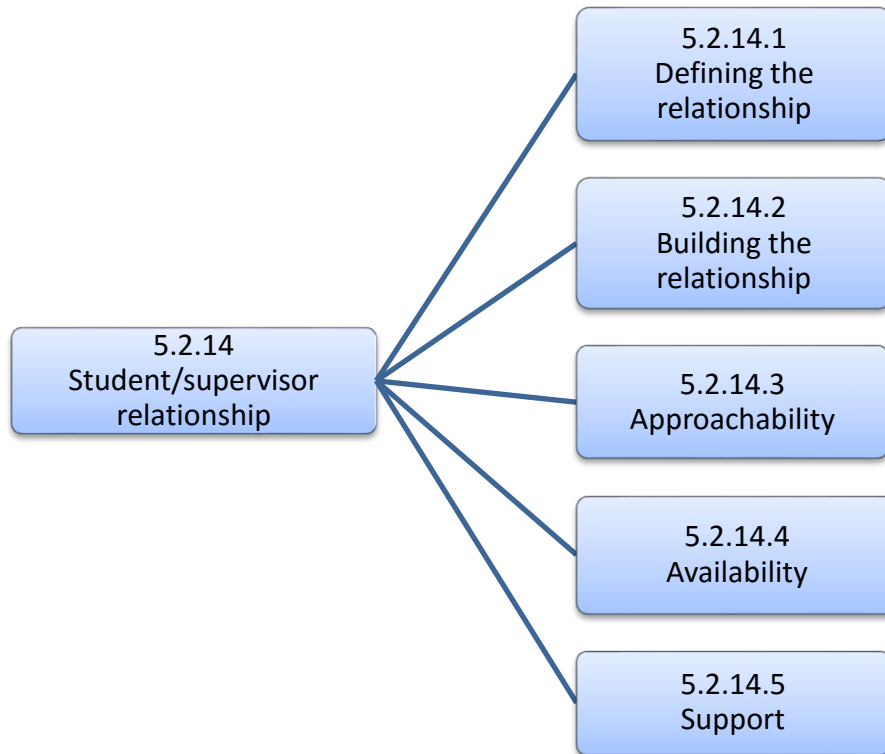
#### **5.2.14 Relationship between the student and supervisor**

The third theme under the role and impact of the supervisor focuses on the relationship between the supervisor and the student.

The study found that the relational aspects of the supervisor's role play an important role in the learning experience and success of a postgraduate student. The following concepts emerged in this category: defining (contracting) and building a good relationship, the approachability and availability (time) of the supervisor, and the support and encouragement offered to the student by the supervisor.

The structure of this section is illustrated in Figure 11 and the concepts are summarised in Table 26.





**Figure 11: Student/supervisor relationship**

Concept	Individual respondents		Focus group respondents	
	No	List	No	List
The relationship between the supervisor and student must be defined upfront	14	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P13, P17, P22, P25, P27, P28	5	Z1, K4, K6, S1, S3
It is important for the student to have a good relationship with the supervisor	12	P3, P8, P13, P15, P17, P18, P20, P22, P25, P26, P27, P28	5	Z2, Z4, K6, S1, S2
The supervisor must be approachable and there must be open communication	12	P1, P8, P12, P13, P14, P16, P18, P20, P21, P22, P25, P28	10	Z1, Z2, Z4, K1, K2, K3, K4, S1, S2, S3
The supervisor must make time available to the student	15	P1, P2, P3, P4, P8, P11, P12, P13, P16, P17, P20, P24, P25, P27, P28	6	Z1, Z4, K1, K4, S2, S3
The supervisor's support and encouragement is important	9	P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P10, P17, P24	7	Z3, Z4, K2, K3, K4, S2, S3

**Table 26: Student/supervisor relationship**

#### **5.2.14.1 Defining the relationship**

The first concept in this category, namely the contract between the supervisor and the student (raised by 14 students, as illustrated in Table 26), stems from the reported uncertainty that students experienced in navigating the relationship with the supervisor. They reported that they were not sure what to expect and what the supervisor expected of them.

Five of the focus group participants also raised the importance of contracting between the supervisor and the student and the clarification of expectations, upfront.

This perspective is well-illustrated by the focus group participant (Z1) quoted below:

*‘So you should agree, there should be some sort of agreement of how do you work as we begin this. Otherwise you just begin supervising. You should be like: now, you are my student, and you are my supervisor, and how do we work, from the beginning. And I know if you work that way, it is easier, because you have to conform to what you have agreed.’*

Following a clear definition of the relationship and roles, the building of a personal relationship seems to be equally important. This concept will be discussed next.

#### **5.2.14.2 Building the relationship**

The second concept is that building a relationship and working closely with the supervisor is essential for the student to succeed (see Table 26).

This is explained well by participant P3, below:

*‘You also have to work with your supervisor. The supervisors are very important. They will help you and encourage you, support you. When you find the going are getting tougher and tougher, they will be there to support you, or to direct you to areas where you can get more help. You need to be really in touch with your supervisor.’*

This seems to be closely related to the next concept, which is the approachability of the supervisor, allowing open communication between the supervisor and the student.

#### **5.2.14.3 Approachability**

The approachability of the supervisor, allowing open communication between the student and the supervisor, was raised by twelve of the individual respondents. The importance of approachability was also raised by ten of the focus group participants.

Participant P20 ascribed his success to the approachability of and open communication between him and the supervisor:

*‘Very soon I realised that Dr xxx (name of supervisor) would allow you to work to a point where, if she wasn’t happy, she would then call. And I think her direct involvement, frequency and duration of her feedback and comments were encouraging to me.’*

The availability of the supervisor to spend time with the student and to respond to communication from the student seems equally important. This will be discussed next.

#### **5.2.14.4 Availability of the supervisor**

The fact that supervisors are not always readily available to students, were raised by 15 of the individual interviewees and six of the focus group participants (see Table 26).

This pertains to physical meetings as well as response to e-mail or other communication, as described by participant P25:

*‘There was a time when access to her was difficult. There was a period when there was no response to e-mails. She was not available for some time. Access to her is still difficult. I suppose she was not well. She had two accidents. And for me trying to debate with her – I could not do it...’*

This concept may relate to the workload of academic staff (Section 5.2.2.2.3) but also seems to be linked to the concept of flexibility in terms of meeting arrangements between students and supervisors, as described by student P18 below:

*‘So yes, there were initial difficulties. But once you got over those difficulties I did find that my supervisor was supportive. And he kind of often would go out of his way to meet with me at a time that suited me and he became aware that my time as a school teacher was actually very awkward. And he would actually go out of his way to accommodate me and meet me at another time to make it possible.’*

The support and encouragement of the academic supervisor will be discussed next.

#### **5.2.14.5 Support from the supervisor**

Nine students also noted that the support of the supervisor was important to their success (see Table 26). This was supported by the seven the focus group participants as well.

The following student (P3) had a positive experience pertaining to the support received from the supervisor and reported that this impacted his progress positively:

*‘The supervision: I think they have been very helpful, very supportive... So if there are any problems, Dr xxx (name of academic supervisor) is on your back,*

*phoning: Do you need any help? Do you have any problems? Timeline? Where are you now? Are you facing any problems? ... he has been very understanding and he has been very helpful...'*

The concept of support seems to link to the service behaviour of staff at the institution (Section 5.2.2.2.3).

This concludes the discussion on the relationship between the student and the academic supervisor.

The next section will summarise the findings reported in this Chapter.

### 5.3 Summary of findings

After examining the thirteen themes identified during the data analysis and reporting process carefully, the researcher came to the conclusion that the thirteen themes could be divided into three main clusters, namely: themes related to the student, themes related to the institution, and themes related to the academic supervisor. The categorisation of the themes into three clusters is illustrated in Table 27.

Themes related to the student	Themes related to the institution	Themes related to the academic supervisor
Student personal context	Social integration	Academic function of the supervisor
Emotional status of the student	Service orientation of the institution	Administrative function of the supervisor
Student motivation	Management and administration of the institution	Relationship between the student and the supervisor
Personal success factors	Academic support	
Academic challenges		
Financial challenges		

**Table 27: Summary of themes**

The findings of the study will now be summarised briefly, using the three clusters as illustrated in Table 27, as a framework.

### **5.3.1 Findings related to the student**

The findings pertaining the family background and personal context of the non-traditional postgraduate student revealed that these students may come from a variety of family backgrounds and that, other than the value attached to education, the family background of the student does not seem to play a role. The current personal context of the student including the student's personal support system, does however influence student success.

In terms of the emotional state of the student, it was found that non-traditional students often experience uncertainty and stress, as well as feelings of discouragement. These feelings seem to be related to their academic literacy, the high workload and competing priorities, as well as their ability to deal with negative feedback.

Students seemed to be motivated by professional, personal, and altruistic drivers. In terms of professional drivers, career opportunities featured the strongest, while personal drivers included the personal meaning attached to the research topic (or the passionate interest of the student in the topic) as well as the search for personal fulfilment, which includes self-actualisation and the desire to leave a legacy. Altruistic drivers seemed to centre around the desire to make an impact on society and contributing to knowledge in their field.

Non-traditional postgraduate students reported time management and balancing studies with other responsibilities, as a major challenge. Respondents also reported challenges related to the understanding of the requirements at postgraduate level and academic literacy.

Work pressures and financial difficulty do also seem to feature in the lives of almost all non-traditional postgraduate students, according to this study.

Students who feel passionate about their topic seem to be more determined to complete their studies. A high level of resilience and good time management skills (self-regulated learning) also emerged as success factors.

The findings related to the institution will be summarised next.

### **5.3.2 Findings related to the institution**

The institution and its culture and management seem to play an important role in student success.

Students at institutions with a student-centred, flexible and personalised approach may be more successful in creating a sense of belonging, leading to social integration of students into the institution.

The service orientation of the institution as well as the management and administration of the institution, including the management of academic staff, also seem to be significant factors in student success.

Lastly the support offered to students, which includes access to facilities and resources, is also an important factor.

The findings related to the academic supervisor will be summarised next.

### **5.3.3 Findings related to the academic supervisor**

Central to the success of non-traditional postgraduate students, is the academic supervisor. The academic supervisor, according to this study, plays a functional role as well as a relational role. The functional role includes the academic expertise and guidance as well as administration, which many students seem to find quite frustrating. The relationship is however just as important and the support of the academic supervisor plays an invaluable role. Lastly, students should have recourse in case the relationship does break down, as mentioned in the findings related to the institution (Section 5.3.2).

## **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter reported the findings of the study in detail in thirteen themes, which finally culminated into three clusters, namely themes related to the student, themes related to the institution, and themes related to the academic supervisor.

The next Chapter contains the conclusions drawn by the researcher, based on the above findings.

## **CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Introduction**

While Chapter 5 reported the findings that culminated from the data collection and analysis process, this Chapter presents the interpretation and conclusions of the study.

It also contains the researcher's endeavour to construct theory from the empirical findings of the study and to create a framework for institutional intervention, grounded in the theory developed by the researcher, or as termed by Charmaz (2009), 'an imaginative interpretation of studied life'.

As explained in Chapter 1, systems thinking was employed as the theoretical framework of this study. In line with this framework, the researcher assumes an interconnectivity between a number of components and interactions (Magee & De Weck, 2004) pertaining to the student, the institution and the supervisor. All of these are believed to impact each other and the student's likelihood for success in a non-linear manner (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009).

The conclusions of the study will be discussed under the following main headings in line with the clusters identified in Section 5.3: the student and the personal and support context, the institution, the academic supervisor, and the socio-economic context within which the student functions.

As explained in Chapter 1 (Section 1.6), this study was undertaken in the context of a Mode 2 learning environment, which implies that the researcher has to demonstrate the contextual application of the knowledge produced through the study. This takes the form of notes on the practical implications of the conclusions of the study for institutions, throughout this Chapter.

The discussion on the theory as well as the theory building process will follow this.

### **6.2 The non-traditional postgraduate student**

In discussing the non-traditional postgraduate student, the attributes and skills of the student (including psychological attributes and intellectual ability) and motivation of the student will be considered. This is in alignment with Tinto's (1993) and Bean and Eaton's (2001) definitions of pre-entry attributes of students as discussed in the literature review, in Sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3 respectively .

As also indicated in the literature review (Section 2.6.1), this study adopted Ley's (2013) definition of non-traditional students, which implies that they are over the age

of 25, may come from a disadvantaged background, may work full-time and study part-time, and may have other responsibilities such as children.

These two definitions introduce the system within which the non-traditional postgraduate student functions, placing the non-traditional postgraduate student at the centre of his or her own study experience and success. As stated in the introduction to this discussion, the student and his or her immediate context are naturally closely related and may impact on each other, as would be the case in any complex system.

This discussion will focus on the student first (attributes, skills and motivation) and will then consider the personal context of the student.

The first element related to the student is the psychological attributes of the non-traditional postgraduate student. This will be discussed next.

### **6.2.1 Psychological attributes**

This study concludes that non-traditional postgraduate students with high academic self-efficacy, positive feedback orientation and high resilience are more successful in the completion of their studies. This conclusion is based on the findings reported in Sections 5.2.2.1, 5.2.4.2 and 12.2.12.3.

These three attributes (academic self-efficacy, positive feedback orientation and high resilience) are believed to be highly interconnected with each other, as will be explained in this section.

High academic self-efficacy in this context can be defined as the student's confidence in his or her own academic competence (Curtin, Stewart & Ostrove, 2013). This study concludes that students with higher self-efficacy overcome challenges and setbacks better than those with lower academic self-efficacy. This conclusion is supported by similar findings in other studies (Yeager & Dweck, 2012; Gong, Huang & Frah, 2009).

Higher self-efficacy is also believed to impact the student's feedback orientation or openness to feedback their ability to process and use feedback effectively towards their own development and the improvement of their work. This conclusion is also supported in the literature (London & Smither, 2002; Ferguson, 2011).

As higher self-efficacy enhances the student's ability to cope with setbacks, it is believed to also impact the student's resilience, which in the view of the researcher includes the inherent ability of the student to cope with the stress brought about by postgraduate studies.

It is proposed that the institution can play a role in the improvement of students' academic self-efficacy, which should in turn improve both their feedback orientation



and their resilience. This will be explored in more detail under academic integration in Section 6.4.2.

The skills required by students in order to complete their postgraduate studies successfully, will be discussed next.

## **6.2.2 Skills required by the student**

This study identified two main skills sets required by non-traditional postgraduate students, in order to complete their studies successfully, namely academic literacy skills and self-regulated learning (time management) skills.

### **6.2.2.1 Academic literacy skills**

The findings of this study pointed to the lack of and need for academic literacy amongst non-traditional postgraduate students.

For the purposes of this discussion, the researcher interprets academic literacy in terms of Weideman's (2013) definition as an integrated set of research skills, consisting of three main concepts, namely: gathering academic information (reading and listening), processing that information (analysing), and producing new information (writing).

It is the conclusion of the current study that non-traditional postgraduate student success could be improved if the academic literacy skills of students are addressed upfront as part of the academic induction of the student.

This links closely to the discussion on psychological attributes including academic self-efficacy (Section 6.2.1) and will be discussed in more detail under academic integration (Section 6.4.2.2).

Self-regulated learning as a required skill will be discussed next.

### **6.2.2.2 Self-regulated learning**

Self-regulated learning is understood to mean that students must plan and set their own goals and also monitor their own progress against their goals and the requirements of the qualification (Endedijk, Brekelmans, Sleegers, & Vermunt, 2016).

This study proposes that non-traditional postgraduate students need to master the skill of self-regulated learning to be successful in their studies. Students need to take responsibility and manage their studies as mature, professional adults.

This conclusion is based on the finding related to time management and the ability to balance various priorities as discussed Section 5.2.4.3 as well as the finding related to students' lack of understanding of the academic requirements at postgraduate level

in Section 5.2.5.1, which seems to pertain, at least partly, to the student's dependence on the institution (*vis-à-vis* the ability to work independently).

This aspect will also be included in the discussion under academic integration (Section 6.4.2.2).

The motivation of the student to enrol and continue with their studies will be discussed next.

### **6.2.3 Motivation**

As pointed out in the findings under Section 5.2.1.3 (motivation), it is evident from this study that the student's motivation or reason for enrolment for a postgraduate degree impacts the probability of their success.

Although the institution may not be able to impact students' motivation to pursue postgraduate studies directly, it does seem important for institutions to understand the motivation of students in order to create a supportive and commitment-enhancing responsive environment (Einolander, Vaharanta & Visa, 2017).

Non-traditional postgraduate students seem to be motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The intrinsic motivation of the student may relate to their own psychological needs for self-actualisation and generativity as well as their personal alignment with the research topic. It may also include more altruistic motives such as making an impact on society. Extrinsic motivators in turn include professional opportunities and economic benefits.

These will now be discussed in more detail.

#### **6.2.3.1 Intrinsic motivation**

The researcher understands intrinsic motivation as the inherent satisfaction or enjoyment that the student derives from their studies (Legault, 2016).

The intrinsic motivation of students seemed to be linked to their sense of 'calling', which is understood in this context, as the individual's strong sense of inner direction and need to do fulfilling work that could impact society positively – in other words, the work that the person perceives as the purpose of his or her life (Hall & Chandler, 2005).

These students reported a strong alignment and passion for their topic and held the view that their study would make a positive impact on society, and they seemed more determined to complete and overcome various challenges towards that end-goal. This implies that institutions need to steer away from issuing students with research topics with which they are not necessarily personally strongly aligned.

The second element of the intrinsic motivation of students seems to be self-actualisation, which is understood as the process of growth towards becoming what the person can become, actualising all his or her talents and potential to the fullest (Cilliers & Coetzee, 2013).

The third element considered to form part of the intrinsic motivation of students, was generativity. This is understood to be the psychological need for transcendence and symbolic immortality – in other words, to make a significant contribution or leave a legacy (McAdams, 2013).

This conclusion is supported by previous studies that linked higher intrinsic motivation positively to student persistence (Augustyniak Ables, Guilford, Lujan, Cortright, & DiCarlo, 2016).

The extrinsic motivation of students will now be discussed.

#### **6.2.3.2 Extrinsic motivation**

Participants in this study confirmed the view that postgraduate studies underpin the modern knowledge economy and enable the production of new knowledge (CHE, 2009).

The need to build expertise and to innovate and solve real-world problems – either in their professions or in their communities – seemed to be a key driver to pursue postgraduate studies. Some respondents cited altruistic motives such as community development, but the majority of students' motivation to pursue postgraduate studies is vested in their professional career, either within or outside of the higher education context.

The notion of postgraduate studies as a preparation for future employment outside of higher education was confirmed by Huisman, De Weert and Bartelse (2002), who indicated that European PhD holders could be found in research as well as professional and leadership positions in both government and private organisations.

This has implications for the curricula of postgraduate qualifications as there is a need to ensure that curricula are relevant and qualifications are fit for purpose in preparing students for employment outside of the higher education space.

A summary of the conclusions of the study pertaining to the non-traditional postgraduate student will now be provided.

#### **6.2.4 Summary of conclusions pertaining to the student**

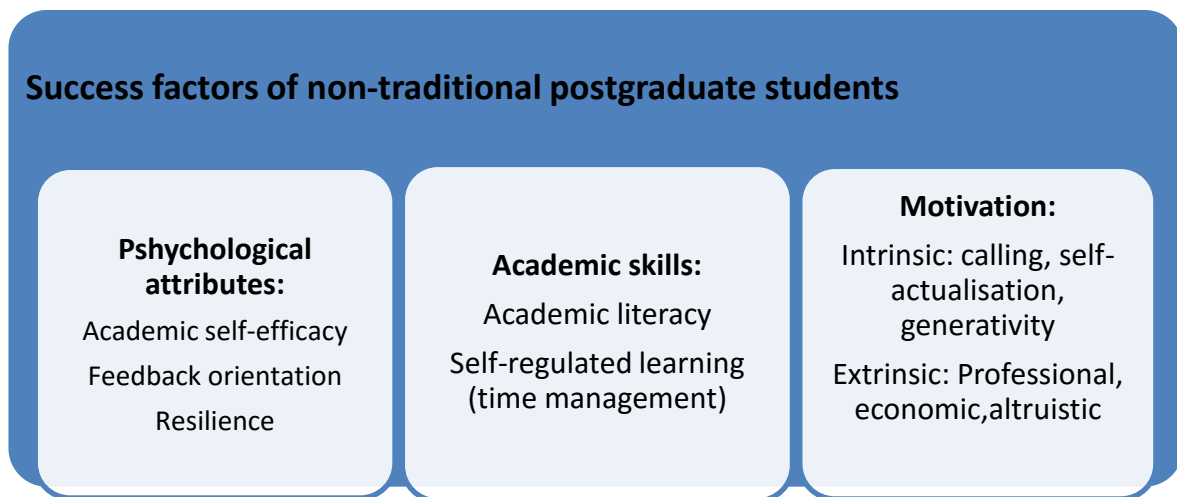
In terms of the pre-entry attributes required of non-traditional postgraduate students to conclude their studies successfully, the personal (psychological) attribute of the greatest importance, seems to be academic self-efficacy, which in turn influences the

resilience and ability to cope with stress as well as the positive feedback orientation of the student.

The academic literacy skills and self-regulated learning, which implies good time management skills, also seem to be key factors in student success.

The motivation of the student (why they chose to pursue postgraduate studies) seems to be of major importance in their commitment to complete. Non-traditional postgraduate students who have a passionate interest in their topic and even regard their topic as a personal calling seem to be more committed to complete their studies.

The conclusions pertaining to the student are illustrated in Figure 12.



**Figure 12: Success factors of non-traditional postgraduate students**

These conclusions seem to hold the following implications for institutions of higher learning:

- A more holistic approach to student selection and induction processes may be appropriate, which may consider the psychological attributes of students, as well as their motivation for enrolment;
- There may be a need to focus on personal development of students with particular focus on academic self-efficacy, feedback orientation and resilience; and
- The issue of academic integration becomes all the more pertinent in view of students' evident lack of academic skills, which includes academic literacy as well as self-regulated learning skills.

The personal context of the student will be discussed next.

### **6.3 Personal context of the non-traditional postgraduate student**

As highlighted in the findings under Section 5.2.1, the current personal contexts of non-traditional postgraduate students seem to be of particular importance to their success, while their background (upbringing) may not necessarily impact their success.

As stated in Section 2.2.2 of the literature review, Tinto specified the abandonment of previous communities as a precondition for successful social integration at the institution (Tinto & Cullen, 1973), while other scholars suggested the addition of the educational environment to the existing social context of the non-traditional student, instead (Barnett, 2014; Hurdado & Carter, 1997).

The family support context has been linked to academic success before (Castillo, Conoley & Brossart, 2004). This study however proves the importance of family support in the black African context where a more collectivist family culture is generally present, households are often multi-generational and family means the extended family (Carteret, 2011).

It is concluded that the support of the non-traditional postgraduate student's family in fact seems as, or even more, important to their success than their social integration at their institution of study. This conclusion is also supported by the work of Braxton and Hirschy (2004) and Prinsloo (2009), as highlighted in Section 2.2.2 of the literature review.

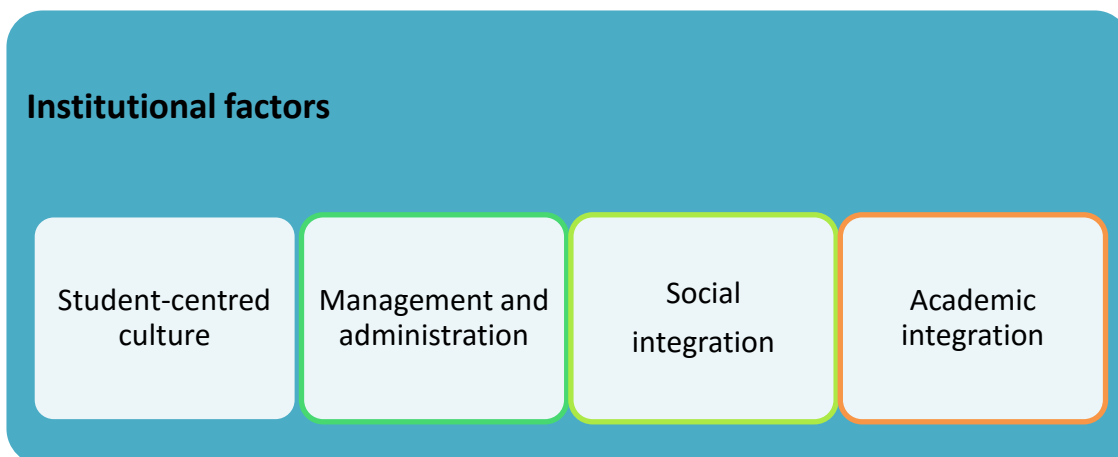
This conclusion seems to imply that institutions must be cognisant of the impact and importance of the immediate family support context of students, and also that it has to consider its approach to the social integration of non-traditional postgraduate students completely differently from the approach to the social integration of traditional students (also see Section 6.4.2.1).

The institutional context within which the non-traditional postgraduate student functions, will be discussed next.

### **6.4 Institutional context**

This discussion will firstly focus on conclusions of the study pertaining to the institution itself (management and administration as well as service orientation of the institution) and secondly on the conclusions pertaining to the integration of the student into the institutional culture.

The conclusions of the study on the success factors related to the institution and the integration of students are illustrated in Figure 13.



**Figure 13: Institutional factors impacting student success**

#### **6.4.1. The institution**

The institution will be discussed under two headings namely management and administration and the service orientation of the institution.

##### **6.4.1.1 Service orientation**

It is concluded that the service orientation of the institution plays a significant role in the success of non-traditional postgraduate students. The following elements of the service orientation of the institution are of particular importance and should be addressed: a student-centred culture, flexibility, the service behaviour of staff, and communication between the institution and students.

This conclusion holds the following implications for institutions:

- Institutions catering for non-traditional postgraduate students need to approach a student-centred culture and approach to service delivery (based on findings reported under Section 5.2.9.1);
- Institutions have to adopt a flexible approach to their needs in terms of access to facilities and staff (including academic supervisors) outside of normal working hours, the availability of support services to distance learners, as well as accommodating students who may make slower progress in their studies due to the time constraints and reality of their lives outside of their studies (unique learning journey). (This is based on the findings reported under Section 5.2.9.2; and
- Flexibility is also required in terms of the payment structure relating to the fees of these students, based on the finding on the financial challenges experienced by non-traditional postgraduate students (Section 5.2.7).

The management and administration of the institution is closely related to the institution's service orientation, as is pointed out in the next section.

#### **6.4.1.2 Management and administration**

This study concludes that the management of the institution, which includes the accountability of staff and the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery and the utilisation of resources, plays a role in the success of non-traditional postgraduate students. This conclusion relates to the findings reported under Section 5.2.10.

This study also proposes that there is a need for clear and constant communication between the institution and the student (based on the findings of Section 5.2.9.4).

The implications of these two conclusion for institutions are as follows:

- Institutions should manage their administration carefully and should pay particular attention to service level agreements (such as turnaround times) (based on findings reported under Section 5.2.10.1);
- Institutions should pay attention to their systems for monitoring student progress, in particular during the research phase of their studies (based on findings reported under Section 5.2.10.2);
- The workload of academic staff (including academic supervisors) should be monitored and managed to ensure that they are able to spend adequate time on supporting students and on research supervision (based on findings reported under Section 5.2.10.3.1);
- Academic staff must be held accountable for their service to students. This implies that students should be allowed or even required to give feedback on the performance of academic staff, and that appropriate actions should be taken against academic staff who do not deliver satisfactory service. This also includes recourse for students in cases where their academic supervisor did not deliver or where the relationship broke down (based on findings reported under Section 5.2.10.3.2); and
- Institutions have to communicate with students clearly and constantly. This includes the monitoring of progress and soliciting feedback from the student on academic progress as well as service-related matters. It also implies that the academic and administrative systems and processes of the institution must be made clear to students upfront (see Section 5.2.9.4).

The relevance of the constructs of social and academic integration to non-traditional postgraduate students will be discussed next.

## **6.4.2 Integration of the student into the institution**

Although discussed separately here, the constructs of social integration and academic integration must be seen as two nested spheres, where academic integration occurs within the broader social system that pervades the campus (Tinto, 1997), blending together into a desire for socially-oriented academic integration (Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

The construct of social integration will be discussed first, followed by the construct of academic integration. The role and impact of the academic supervisor will be discussed last.

### **6.4.2.1 Social integration**

Tinto and Cullen (1973) described the concept of social integration as the fit of the student in the social environment of the institution, as manifested by, inter alia, participation in the extracurricular activities offered by the institution.

As the findings of the current study did indicate that the culture of the institution and their alignment to it (sense of belonging) as well as their interaction with staff and peers at the institution are critical success factors, the relevance of social integration in this context cannot be denied (see Section 5.2.8.1)

It must however be read in conjunction with the personal context of the student (Section 6.3), which indicates that non-traditional postgraduate students' personal support context is of more value to them than their social integration into the institutional context.

This study therefore concludes that social integration is relevant to the success of non-traditional postgraduate students, but that it takes a completely different shape in comparison to the social integration of traditional or undergraduate students as their main source of support does not come from the institution's social system, but from their own personal support system instead.

It is further concluded that the social integration of non-traditional postgraduate students implies a student-centred approach to service delivery and support from the institution and its staff, and the personal interest and care that staff displays towards students and their success, resulting in the student experiencing a sense of belonging.

In addition, social integration includes the integration of the student into a learning team (peers, classmates) as per the findings reported under Section 5.2.8.2.

This conclusion has the following practical implications for institutions:



- The workloads of academic staff should be managed in such a manner that they have adequate time (refer Section 5.2.10.3.1 and Section 5.2.14.4) to work with their students;
- Academic staff should be approachable (see Section 5.2.14.3) and care about their students (see Section 5.2.9.3.1);
- Support staff should be friendly and helpful (Section 5.2.9.3.2); and
- Students should be organised in cohorts or should be encouraged to form learning teams to ensure peer support (refer to Section 5.2.8.2).

The academic integration of non-traditional postgraduate students will now be considered.

#### **6.4.2.2 Academic integration**

As indicated in the literature review under Section 2.2.3 of this study, academic integration was defined by Tinto and Cullen (1973) as the expansion of the cognitive ability of the student as a result of the stimulation offered by the academic coursework, while Brown (2002) simplified the definition, stating that it relates to how well the student feels that he or she fits into the academic life of the institution.

This study adopted a broader definition of academic integration, which includes the concept of epistemological access as introduced by Morrow (2009) (see Section 2.4.3) and implies access to successful participation in academic practice.

This (epistemological access) seems to be a very relevant construct in the life of non-traditional postgraduate students. These students, who have often not studied for quite some time, seem to require immersive academic induction and guidance, which include a range of factors, including the navigation of the institution's processes and administrative practices and requirements, academic literacy skills, as well as research guidance. Their reported lack of academic self-efficacy, uncertainty and anxiety, points to the fact that this need is generally not met by institutions.

In addition, it seems that institutions, while encouraging non-traditional students to enrol, have generally not adjusted their academic support service delivery to cater for the needs of these students in a more flexible manner, but are content to continue to cater as if all students are full-time, traditional students.

This study concludes that the need for academic integration or epistemological access of non-traditional postgraduate students is a crucial element of student success, and one currently not being sufficiently addressed by institutions. It is proposed that student success could be improved significantly if institutions paid sufficient attention to this aspect.

This conclusion holds the following practical implications for institutions:

- Institutions should invest in immersive academic induction programmes for non-traditional postgraduate students, which allows students to understand the academic requirements at postgraduate level and master academic literacy skills (as also confirmed in Section 6.2.2); and
- Institutions should offer regular academic interventions such as workshops throughout the duration of the students' learning journey (refer Section 6.2.2).

## **6.5 The academic supervisor**

In essence, the study came to the conclusion that the role and impact of the academic supervisor may be one of the most important in terms of the success of non-traditional postgraduate students, and that it may very well also be one of the key factors impacting the decision to terminate postgraduate studies.

The literature pertaining to the role of the academic supervisor, which was discussed in Section 2.5.1, seems to focus on the academic role, including mentoring of the student.

The findings of the current study however lead the researcher to view the role of the supervisor as threefold, namely academic, administrative and relational.

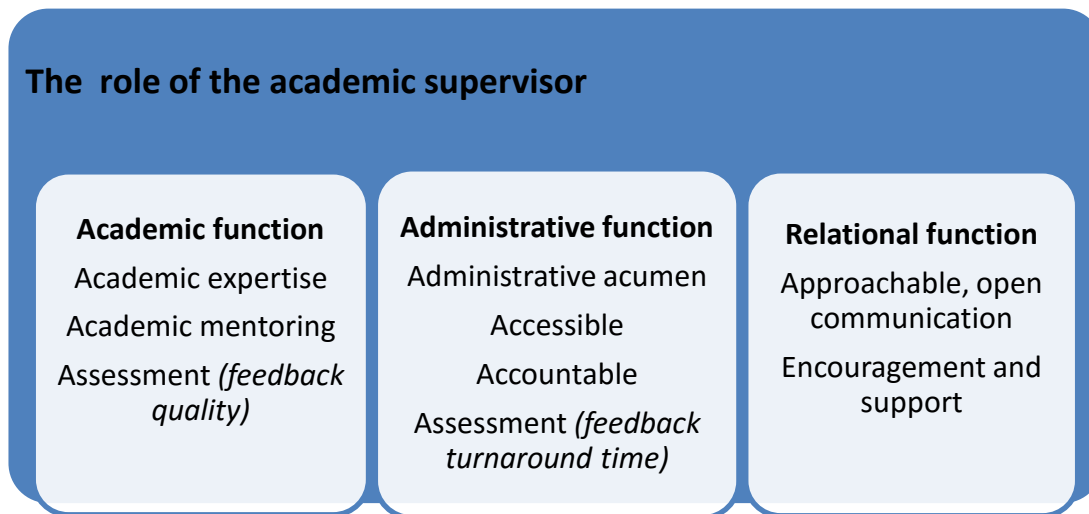
While the academic elements (academic expertise, academic mentoring) of the supervisor seem to be of critical importance, this generally did not seem problematic. Instead, the relational aspects seemed to be most problematic (see Section 5.2.14), while the administrative and assessment or feedback aspects also seemed to cause frustration to students, with the quality and timing of feedback on written work as the central theme (see Section 5.2.12.3).

This conclusion holds the following practical implications for institutions:

- It is important for the relationship between the academic supervisor and student to be clearly defined. This includes the approach to and turnaround time for feedback on written academic work (refer to the findings reported under Section 5.2.14.1);
- Supervisors' interpersonal skills should be addressed in development programmes as seem to be of equal importance to their academic expertise. This includes approachability, the ability to build and maintain relationships with open communication, and mentoring skills. (refer to findings reported under Section 5.2.14);
- The workload of academic staff must be managed as it may impact student success (refer to the findings reported under Section 5.2.14.4);

- Academic supervisors must have administrative capacity or support to manage the administrative aspects of supervision (refer to the findings reported under Section 5.2.13).; and
- As already mentioned, the progress of students, especially in the research phase, must be monitored and academic staff must be held accountable for the progress of their students. In addition, institutions must offer recourse for students (refer to the findings under Section 5.2.10.3.2).

The conclusions pertaining to the academic supervisor are graphically illustrated in Figure 9.



**Figure 13: The role of the academic supervisor**

The relevance of socio-economic factors in non-traditional postgraduate success will be discussed next.

## 6.6 Socio-economic factors

This discussion will focus on the relevance of socio-economic factors in the success of non-traditional postgraduate students in the context of Africa and the developing world.

As indicated in Section 5.2.7 (financial challenges), students reported financial constraints and the lack of funding for their studies as the main cause for non-completion, and shared their difficulties in raising the necessary funds for their studies.

As indicated in Section 6.4.2.1 (social integration), a more collectivist family culture is generally present in the African context, where multi-generational households and family ties seem to be strong and much seems to be made of the extended family, unlike the nuclear family contexts of a more Western culture (Carteret, 2011). This

impacts the financial burden on non-traditional students as they are not only expected to contribute to the financial well-being of their own small nuclear family but to the extended family and broader community.

In addition, the African reality is that education is costly, not only in terms of the actual fees payable to the institution, but in terms of the costs related to travel, as well as loss of income to those who have to sacrifice work time to attend classes or to spend time on their research (refer to findings under Section 5.2.7).

This study proposes that the socio-economic circumstances as well as the institutions at which non-traditional postgraduates students are studying, could have a considerable impact on the success of such students.

Institutions of higher learning are not always well-equipped, causing difficulties in terms of access to resources and facilities required to complete certain research projects (see findings under Section 5.2.11.2). Institutions also seem to struggle to attract an adequate number of academic staff of the right quality to serve the needs of non-traditional postgraduate students (see Section 5.2.10.3.1), resulting in high workloads and service frustrations.

The practical implications of these findings are as follows:

- Institutions have to consider flexible fee structures (as already noted under Section 6.4.1.1 and based on the findings reported under Section 5.2.7) and funding mechanisms (including national funding mechanisms) must be reviewed to be more user-friendly and accessible (based on the findings reported under Section 5.2.7); and
- Institutions should endeavour to attract adequate (academic) human resources and provide adequate facilities. If this is not possible due to budget or other constraints, creative solutions (such as the pooling of resources or sharing of facilities) must be considered.

## **6.7 Theory building**

The final step in the completion of this study links to the ultimate goal of a grounded theory study, namely to generate a substantive theory grounded in the data (Compton & Barrett, 2016).

This study was aimed at the development of an institutional framework to improve the success rate of non-traditional postgraduate students. This is premised on Tinto's (2012) conviction that higher education institutions have an obligation to support students whom they admit to conclude their studies by creating conditions which will promote student retention and success.

The factors that influenced the theory building process and the framework for institutional intervention, which is the outcome of this thesis, will be discussed next.

### **6.7.1 Conclusions from the data that informed the theory**

Scholars in the field of student retention and success seem to agree that improvement in retention and graduation rates is the effect of intentional, structured, and proactive actions that are consistently applied over the longer term (Carey, 2005). This implies the constant collection and analysis of data on student success, as well as the development, implementation and consistent monitoring of action plans (Tinto, 2012).

The framework proposed by the researcher is informed by the following conclusions reported in this Chapter. These can be broadly categorised as follows:

- Conclusions pertaining to non-traditional postgraduate students as related to psychological attributes, skills and motivation;
- Conclusions regarding the institution (in particular the service orientation and management and administration of the institution) as well as the integration of the student (social and academic) into the institutional culture;
- Conclusions on the role that academic supervisors could play in the success of non-traditional postgraduate students; and
- Conclusions pertaining to the socio-economic context within which the student as well as the institution functions.

The literature that informed the theory (framework) of this study will be discussed next, whilst the framework will be presented and explained later.

### **6.7.2 Literature that informed the theory**

As previously stated, this study and the resulting framework are impacted by a systems thinking framework, which served as the theoretical framework for this study, assuming an interconnectivity between a number of components and interactions (Magee & De Weck, 2004) pertaining to the student, the institution and the supervisor.

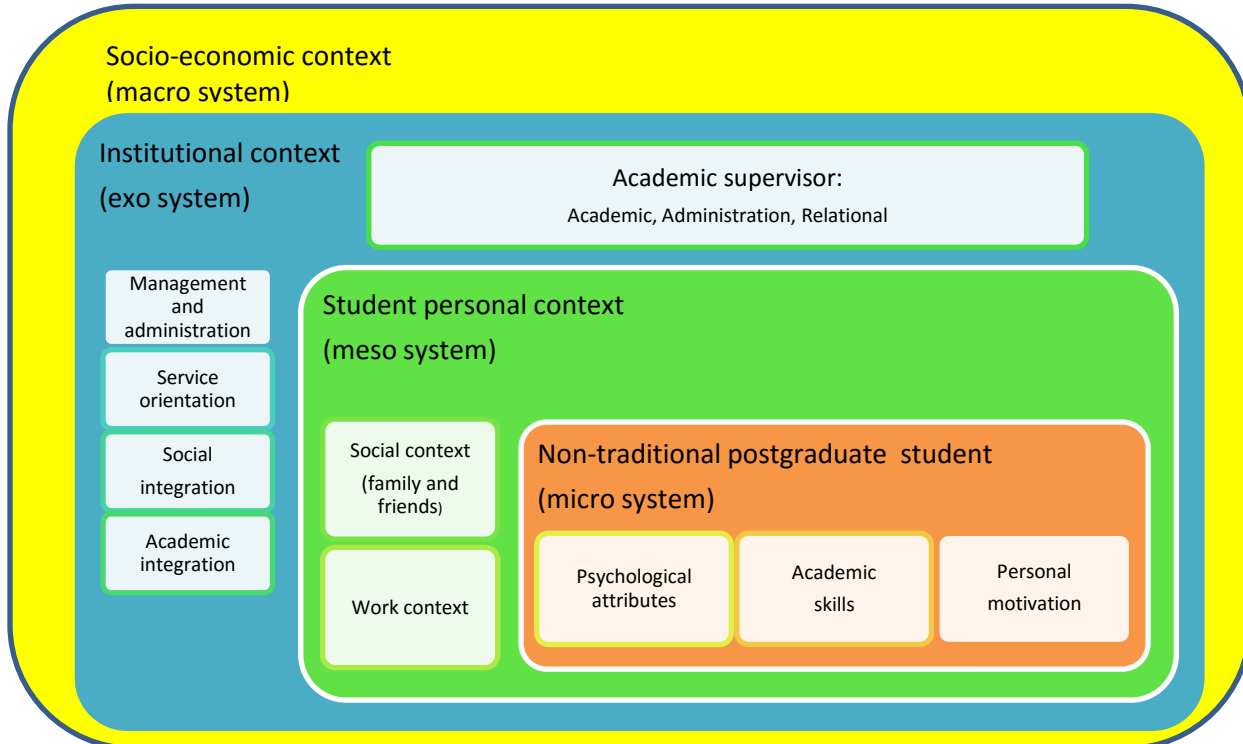
It is not standard practice to introduce new literature at this late stage of a research study. However the researcher, upon her return to the literature during the conclusion phase, identified considerable correspondence between the findings of this study and the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), and as such was obliged to acknowledge this similarity. The correspondence between the current study and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work lies in the positioning of the student and the personal context of the

student as a complex system inside the broader system of the institution and the socio-economic context.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) positions the student as a microsystem and relates the context of the student in terms of a mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The findings of the current study contain the same elements, namely the student (microsystem) the personal context of the student (mesosystem), the interaction between the student and the institution (including the academic supervisor) (exosystem) and lastly the socio-economic context of the country and continent within which the student functions (macrosystem).

In addition, the researcher was influenced by Tinto's work on student retention and throughput (1973, 1997, 2003, 2007) and in particular by the concepts of social integration and academic integration, introduced in his work. The study in fact had as one of its objectives, determining the relevance of the constructs of social and academic integration.

The researcher's understanding of the non-traditional postgraduate student, based on the findings of this study, and influenced by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1973), including the context within which they function is demonstrated in Figure 10.



**Figure 14: The non-traditional student in eco system**

The researcher's proposed framework for institutional intervention is based on the above understanding. The framework will be explained in detail next.

### **6.7.3 The proposed framework for institutional intervention**

The proposed framework is aimed at enabling higher education institutions to enhance the retention and success of non-traditional postgraduate students. It must be read together with the conclusions in this Chapter and in particular, the notes on the practical implications of the conclusions for institutions.

As indicated in Section 6.7.3 (literature that informed the framework), and in view of the fact that systems theory formed the theoretical framework of the study, the framework positions the student as a microsystem placed within a broader eco system.

The non-traditional postgraduate student (microsystem) is placed at the centre to illustrate the proposed student-centred approach which an institution should adopt.

The student (microsystem) has to master certain skills and have certain psychological attributes, to succeed in their postgraduate studies. The arrows pointing from the student to the rest of the system, show the influence of the student and the skills and attributes of the student, on the system as a whole.

The student is influenced by the personal context of the student (mesosystem), the interaction between the student and the institution and academic supervisor (exosystem) and lastly the socio-economic context of the country and continent within which the student functions (macrosystem).

Some of the findings of this study are noteworthy but not within the direct control of the institution, for example the institution most probably will not have direct control over the socio-economic context, nor does it have direct control over the psychological attributes of the student or the personal challenges which the student may experience.

The institution should however take the personal context of the student into account and should attempt to be flexible in its service delivery.

The institution may also be able to influence the student's psychological attributes to some extent, for example the academic self-efficacy of the student could be enhanced by the institution.

The factors within the direct control of the institution include the management and administration and the service orientation of the institution, coupled with accountability, monitoring of progress and recourse related to all academic staff including the supervisor. The institution is therefore in a position to impact the academic integration and social integration of non-traditional postgraduate students.

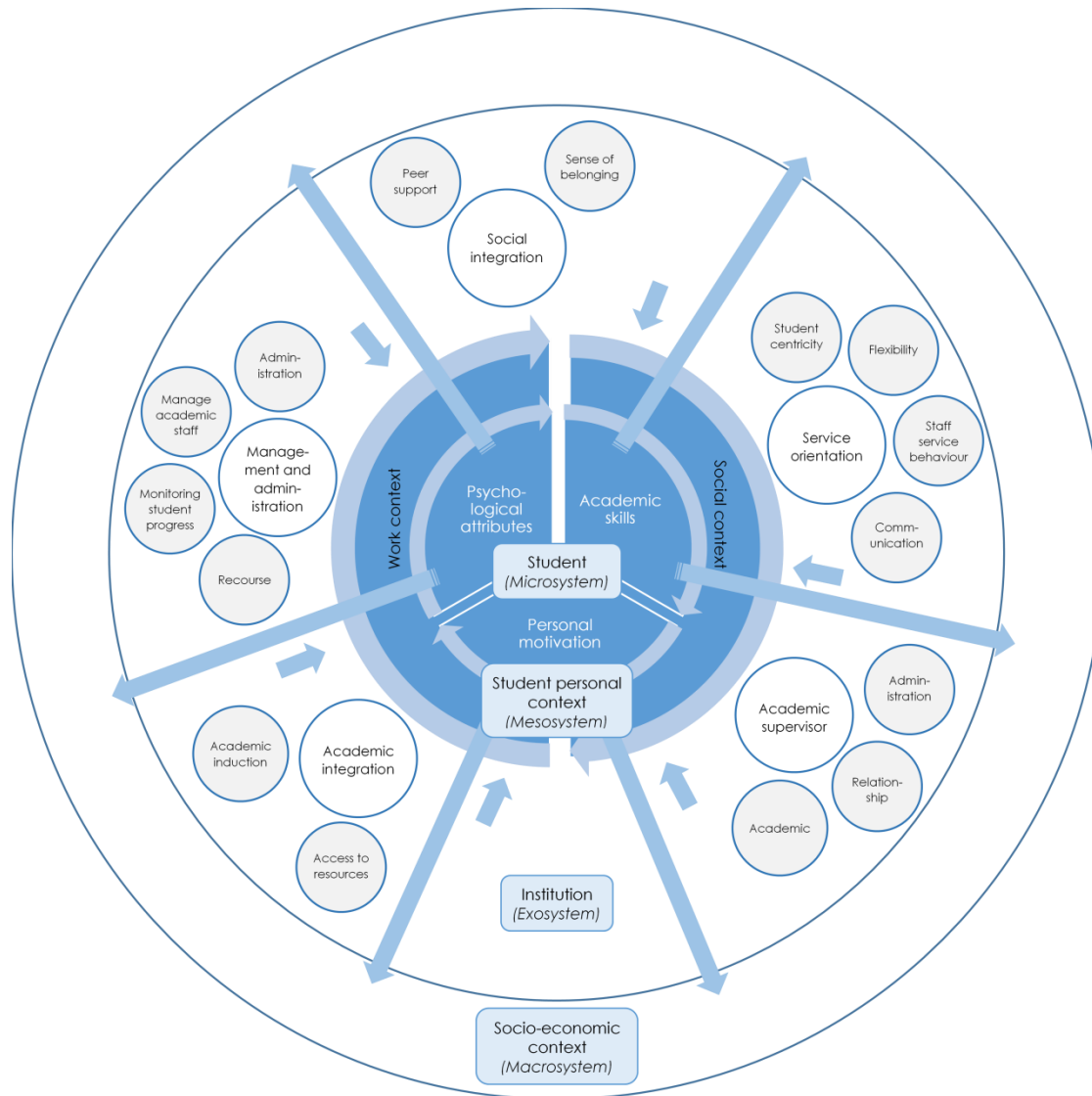
The framework, which is presented in Figure 13, therefore proposes:

- That institutions note the make-up of non-traditional postgraduate students as well as their personal circumstances;
- A holistic approach to student support, which includes a focus on academic self-efficacy, resilience and self-regulated learning (time management);
- A student-centred service orientation, including flexibility as it pertains to services, service hours, student progress, and payment structures, as well as clear and ongoing communication;
- Strong management and excellent administration, including the monitoring of the workload of academic staff, monitoring student progress and establishing a culture of accountability;
- Social integration focused on excellent service delivery including friendly, attentive staff and peer support, enhancing a sense of belonging;
- Academic integration which must include immersive academic induction (epistemological access), both in terms of understanding the academic requirements of postgraduate studies, and in terms of academic literacy skills; and
- Academic supervisors who are able to provide academic guidance, build healthy relationships with their students, and manage administrative tasks.

While the framework is focused on the context of the non-traditional postgraduate student within an African context, it is believed that it may be generalised to a broader postgraduate audience, in particular findings pertaining to the management and administration of the institution, the service orientation of the institution, as well as the role and impact of the academic supervisor.

The framework is presented in Figure 15.





**Figure 15: Institutional framework for intervention**

A number of limitations and subsequent recommendations for further research have been identified as part of this study. The next section highlights these limitations, and the recommendations for further study will then be outlined.

### **6.8 Limitations of the study**

The expected limitations of this study were outlined in Section 1.8 and Section 3.4. This section will present the final comments of the researcher regarding the limitations of the study, at its completion.

The first limitation deals with the representation of the broader African context. While the researcher regarded the three countries of the study (Kenya, South- African and Zimbabwe) as representative, this is not conclusive and the applicability of the results of this study to the rest of Africa may have to be tested with a wider audience.

The second limitation deals with the sample size. While the sample was carefully selected to provide the richness in context required in a grounded theory study and complies with Creswell's guidelines for grounded theory studies (as outlined in Section 3.3.4.3), the proposed theory (framework) is presented as an idea that needs further investigation.

In view of the above, the researcher will make recommendations for further study, in the next section.

### **6.9 Recommendations for further study**

As indicated in the previous section, the theory (framework) proposed by this study is presented as an idea to be tested in further research.

Further research pertaining to the reality of non-traditional students in undergraduate studies is recommended.

In addition, in view of the importance of the role and impact of the academic supervisor, it is suggested that this may be the topic of another study, with a view to proposing a framework for research supervision.

### **6.10 Achievement of study aim and objectives**

The overall aim of this study was to propose an integrated framework that will enable higher education institutions to enhance the retention and success of non-traditional postgraduate students within an African context. This aim was supported by five research objectives, namely:

1. To understand the reasons why non-traditional postgraduate students do not complete their studies successfully;

2. To determine the institutional factors that may affect academic success of non-traditional postgraduate students in developing economies;
3. To determine the relevance of the constructs of social and academic integration, with respect to the success of non-traditional postgraduate students;
4. To determine the role and impact of the academic supervisor in the success of non-traditional postgraduate students; and
5. To understand the relevance of socio-economic factors in non-traditional postgraduate student success.

It is the view of the researcher that this study succeeded in achieving the above objectives, in the following manner:

This study shed some light on the reasons for non-completion and proposed success factors that enable conclusion, based on the challenges identified by respondents. This is particularly true of the institutional factors that may impact student success, as well as factors pertaining to the academic supervisor.

The study established that, while academic integration is a core success factor in non-traditional postgraduate success, the concept of social integration as initially defined by Tinto (1973) is less relevant or should take a different shape in the context of non-traditional postgraduate students.

Lastly, it was established that the socio-economic context of non-traditional postgraduate students do impact student success as the funding of postgraduate studies is a challenge faced by non-traditional postgraduate students.

## **6.11 Conclusion**

The researcher's own lived experience in the course of this study was one of excellent support from her family support context, workplace, institution (including support staff) as well as her academic supervisor.

However, as she engaged with the lived experiences of individual non-traditional postgraduate students, the purpose of this study became all the more real and urgent to her.

One of the key factors of the model is the psychological attributes and skills of the non-traditional student and the self-regulated nature of postgraduate studies.

The responsibility for creating an enabling environment however rests on the institution and its staff, and it seems that institutions need to be reminded of this responsibility.

This statement by participant P10 seems to be an apt conclusion:

*'I just think: How many other people have been suffering. How many other people could not complete their studies because they have not received the support? How many more have dropped out? I was able to move to another university, but many others are just giving up. They have been holding back my dream. I think lecturers have to be told, that they have a responsibility towards their students. You help others to move on to their dream...'*

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