

# **Academic Development and Support at a tertiary institution: narratives of second year at-risk students**

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## DECLARATION

I the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation / thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. A. van der Merwe', written in a cursive style.

Signature

Date

2016/02/23

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## DEDICATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

In South Africa it is found that students are not prepared for tertiary education. Many tertiary institutions have academic development and support units to support the enrolled students. These units are responsible for providing academic support programmes to at-risk students. At the North-West University there is an academic development and support unit at each of its three campuses. I only engaged with the academic development and support unit at the Vaal Triangle Campus. This research study was aimed at exploring the narratives of second year at-risk students on this campus. The narratives gave the at-risk students a voice to assist the Academic Development and Support unit in reconceptualising the factors contributing to the profiles of at-risk students and enhancing its academic support programmes.

A scholarly literature review was conducted to identify the factors that contribute to the profiles of at-risk students. This included engaging with the factors that contributed to students being academically prepared, underprepared and at-risk. A differentiation was made between underprepared and at-risk students. The literature study also explored the nature of the academic support programmes at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus.

When the qualitative research design was employed a critical theory paradigm framed the research study and a life design narrative methodology was used. Data was generated using a self-administered biographical questionnaire to ascertain the students' profiles and then the student participants were given narrative prompts to write their narratives. The research environment was the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus because I specifically explored their academic support programmes. The purposive sampling method was used to select the at-risk student participants. The method of data analysis used was critical narrative analysis.

Eight prominent themes emerged from the main data findings: financing studies, institutional support, ADS support programmes, time management, academic and social integration (within the tertiary institution), collaboration (learning from peers), career path planning, and developing academic goals. The theme 'financing studies' was shown to be an ecological factor which causes students to become negative about their studies because the students are not able to sustain their finances. Institutional support is available to the students but they find the support structures intimidating. It emerged that ADS support programmes are only used by at-risk students after they receive a warning letter. Time management was a very prominent theme; it was revealed that the students have not developed the necessary skills to cope in a tertiary institution environment. Students have to make the transition from secondary school to a tertiary institution and it is often difficult for them to integrate academically and socially into the institution. Since career path planning is often not done, the students pick the wrong qualification; consequently they become negative about their studies. Students experience

difficulty in developing academic goals to assist them in obtaining their qualification successfully.

From the main findings it became evident that students should be given opportunities to meet with an academic advisor to assist them with planning their academic career path. If students can access the academic support programmes provided to them at an earlier stage, they may be able to integrate academically and socially into the tertiary institution environment, work collaboratively to learn from their peers, set attainable goals, develop their learning strategies and time management skills, and become responsible towards their studies rather than becoming negative towards their studies, not performing well academically and becoming at-risk students.

After reflecting on my research study I make suggestions to reconceptualise the current academic support programmes.

**Keywords:** Academic Development and Support, at-risk students, tertiary institution, narratives, academic support programmes, digital age, retention theories

## OPSOMMING

Daar word dikwels gevind dat studente in Suid-Afrika nie voorbereid is vir tersiêre opvoeding nie. Baie tersiêre instellings beskik oor eenhede vir akademiese ontwikkeling en ondersteuning (AOO-eenhede) om die ingeskrewe studente te ondersteun. Hierdie eenhede is daarvoor verantwoordelik om programme te voorsien vir die akademiese ondersteuning van risikostudente. By elkeen van die drie kampusse van die Noordwes-Universiteit is daar 'n akademiese ontwikkeling-en-ondersteuningseenheid. Ek het slegs die akademiese ontwikkeling-en-ondersteuningseenheid van die Noordwes-Universiteit se Vaaldriehoekkampus by my ondersoek ingesluit. Die doel van hierdie studie was om die narratiewe van tweedejaar-risikostudente by hierdie kampus te ondersoek. Die narratiewe het 'n stem gegee aan die risikostudente om sodoende die akademiese ontwikkeling-en-ondersteuningseenheid te help om die faktore wat tot die profile van risikostudente bydra, te herkonseptualiseer en om die eenheid se akademiese ondersteuningsprogramme te verbeter.

'n Oorsig van die relevante wetenskaplike literatuur is onderneem om die faktore te identifiseer wat tot die profile van risikostudente bydra. Die faktore wat daartoe bydra dat studente akademies óf voorbereid óf ondervoorbereid is, of wat daartoe bydra dat hulle risikostudente is, is bestudeer. Daar is tussen ondervoorbereide en risikostudente onderskei. Die literatuurstudie het ook die aard van die akademiese ondersteuningsprogramme aan die Noordwes-Universiteit se Vaaldriehoekkampus verken.

Met die gebruik van die kwalitatiewe navorsingsontwerp het 'n kritieseteorie-paradigma as raamwerk vir die studie gedien. 'n Lewensontwerp- narratiewe metodologie is gebruik. Data is gegenereer deur gebruik te maak van 'n self-gedadministreerde biografiese vraelys om die studente se profiel vas te stel. Die studente is daarna deur narratiewe prikkels aangespoor om hul narratiewe te skryf. Die navorsingsomgewing was die Vaaldriehoekkampus van die Noordwes-Universiteit, omdat ek spesifiek ondersoek ingestel het na hul akademiese ondersteuningsprogramme. Ek het gebruik gemaak van 'n doelgerigte steekproefmetode om die risikostudente te selekteer. Narratief-kritiese analise is as metode van data-analise aangewend.

Agt prominente temas het voortgespruit uit die hoof- databevindinge: finansiering van studies, institusionele ondersteuning, die AOO-eenheid se ondersteuningsprogramme, tydsbestuur, akademiese en sosiale integrering (binne die tersiêre instelling), samewerking (leer van die lede van die portuurgroep), beplanning van loopbaanpaadjie, en die ontwikkeling van akademiese doelwitte. Die tema 'finansiering van studies' het na vore gekom as 'n ekologiese faktor wat veroorsaak dat studente negatief raak oor hul studies omdat hulle nie genoeg geld het nie. Institusionele ondersteuning is beskikbaar aan die studente, maar hulle ervaar hierdie ondersteuningstrukture as intimiderend. Die AOO-ondersteuningsprogramme word slegs deur risikostudente benut nadat hulle 'n aanmaningsbrief ontvang het. Tydsbestuur was 'n baie

prominente tema en dit het aan die lig gekom dat die studente nog nie die vaardighede ontwikkel het om in 'n tersiêre instelling die mas op te kom nie. Studente moet die oorgang van sekondêre skool na tersiêre instelling maak, maar vind dit dikwels moeilik om akademiese en sosiaal in die instelling te integreer. Daar word dikwels geen beplanning ten opsigte van hul loopbaanpaadjie gedoen nie; gevolglik kies die studente die verkeerde rigting om in te kwalifiseer, wat daartoe lei dat hulle negatief raak oor hul studies. Studente vind dit moeilik om akademiese mikpunte te ontwikkel om hulle te help om hul kwalifikasie met sukses te behaal.

Die hoofbevindinge het duidelik aangetoon dat studente geleenthede behoort te kry om met 'n akademiese raadgewer te praat sodat hulle gehelp kan word om hul akademiese loopbaanpaadjie te beplan. Indien studente vroeër reeds toegang kan verkry tot die beskikbare akademiese ondersteuningsprogramme, sal hulle moontlik op beide akademiese en sosiale vlak in die tersiêre instelling-omgewing kan integreer. Hulle sal dan ook moontlik met hulle portuurgroep kan saamwerk en sodoende van hulle leer, bereikbare doelwitte stel, hul leerstrategieë ontwikkel en verantwoordelik optree ten opsigte van hul studies eerder as om negatief te raak oor hul studies, nie goed te presteer op akademiese gebied nie en risikostudente te word.

Ná refleksie oor my navorsing maak ek sekere aanbevelings om die huidige akademiese ondersteuningsprogramme te herkonseptualiseer.

**Slutelwoorde:** Akademiese Ontwikkeling en Ondersteuning, risikostudente, tersiêre instelling, narratiewe, akademiese ondersteuningsprogramme, digitale era, retensieteorieë



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND INTELLECTUAL CONUNDRUM

#### 1.1 Introduction

Learners leave their schooling career behind and begin a new journey at a tertiary institution. It is often found that students enjoy their journey at the tertiary institution but sometimes there are challenges that may hinder their academic success. Therefore the tertiary institution provides academic support programmes to assist students with their academic development. I am an academic advisor at the Academic Development and Support (ADS) unit and as a result I am exposed to the academic support programmes offered by the ADS unit at my campus. I am, however, unaware of the experiences of the at-risk students within the academic support programmes. Therefore, by doing this research study I have been able to hear the voices of the at-risk students and become aware of their experiences. Through their experiences, this research study can contribute to informing and reconceptualising the academic support programmes offered by the ADS unit.

This chapter provides an overview of my research study. The following aspects of the research study are discussed in this chapter:

- A historical overview of Academic Development and Support (1.2)
- Background to the problem statement and intellectual conundrum (1.3)
- Research questions (1.4)
- Purpose of the research (1.5)
- Research design, methodology and research processes (1.6)
- Researcher's role (1.7)
- Validity and trustworthiness (1.8)
- Ethical considerations (1.9)
- Chapter outline in this research study (1.10)

#### 1.2 A historical overview of Academic Development and Support

In 1983, the Apartheid government passed the University Amendment Act (Act 83 of 1983), also known as the 'Quota Act' (Boughey, 2010:4–5; Scott, 2009:21). The Act allowed a limited number of 'non-white' students to enter predominantly white tertiary institutions. The reason for the 'Quota Act' was to empower persons of colour and allow them access to knowledge that would transform their societies (Volbrecht, 2003:113).

To adhere to the 'Quota Act' many tertiary institutions developed support structures called Academic Development and Support (ADS) units. ADS institutional support structures form part of most tertiary institutions and they are identified differently across tertiary institutions as units

or centres called Academic Development (AD) or Academic Development and Support (ADS), Academic Support Services (ASS), Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), Student Learning Unit (SLU) and Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED). The purpose of such units is to support students and lecturers in the teaching and learning process (Boughey, 2010:3–4). According to Scott (2009), the name for ADS has always been contested since there has been a difference of opinion about the terms ‘support’ and ‘development’. Support was not a popular term to use because students felt this pointed to weaknesses in their academic ability, therefore development is regarded as more positive (Scott, 2009:22). For the purpose of my research study I have chosen to use ADS because this is the name of the department used in the tertiary institution where my research study was conducted.

In the 1980s, ADS did not focus on development but rather on supporting disadvantaged students of colour. Boughey (2010:5) notes that ADS focused on supporting students in two key areas. The first area related to students that were given access and admission into tertiary institutions although they did not have adequate matric examination results and came from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Secondly, ADS was to address the phenomenon of “underpreparedness” (ibid.), to understand the type of students who were accessing the tertiary institution and to implement structures that should assist students in adapting to a tertiary institution environment.

Around the mid-eighties there was a need for tertiary institutions to develop their support structures rather than use their programmes predominantly to identify students’ weaknesses (Vilakazi & Tema, as cited in Boughey, 2010:9). In the early 1990s there was a change in the country’s political structure toward democratic governance. In the name of democracy, South African public tertiary institutions had to adapt their demographics and include students’ profiles to reflect the diversity of the country. Institutional transformation was a solution for many tertiary institutions in dealing with students of colour entering the tertiary institution (Boughey, 2010:10). In many instances, students of colour expressed their discomfort with academic support. The students reported that the process was separated from their academic subjects and it highlighted them as “problematic students” (ibid.).

During the 1990s ADS needed to move towards making student’s support part of mainstream teaching and learning through both staff development and curriculum development which would contribute to the general institutional development. Therefore, ADS had to rethink the idea of providing equal support to all students because the existing support programmes targeted students of colour only (Boughey, 2010:11).

Currently, ADS units at tertiary institutions tend to focus on various aspects such as the implementation of policies from the Department of Higher Education and Training, curriculum alignment for quality assurance of the qualifications and programmes offered, developing



academic staff in improving teaching and learning for effective students' experience at a tertiary institution, compiling data from throughput to identify at-risk modules and developing programmes that will support at-risk students academically (Boughey, 2010:13–14). The main focus for ADS has always been to provide equity and focus on the formal educational process (Scott, 2009:22). ADS has a history of over 20 years of supporting and developing programmes that assist students. However, since there are gaps in the literature I discuss the background to the problem statement and the intellectual conundrum in the next section.

### **1.3 Background to problem statement and intellectual conundrum**

After completion of 12 years of schooling, students are required to achieve marks which grant them access into tertiary institutions (Fraser & Killen, 2003:254). The general admission requirement at North-West University is a National Senior Certificate (NSC) which is issued by Umalusi – a statutory body that checks for quality assurance. On their NSC, students need to have achieved at least 4 (50–59%) in the following subjects: two official languages, mathematics or mathematical literacy and life orientation (NWU, 2012:2). Students are accepted according to criteria set by tertiary institutions as well as their achievement in their matric results. The matric results obtained by the students provide tertiary institutions with an indication of students' academic capabilities (Fraser & Killen, 2003:254). Eloff (2009:15) explains that students who gain access embark on a new journey called 'university life'. Tertiary institutions become places where students learn more about themselves and the world. The knowledge gained at a tertiary institution should therefore guide the student in becoming a mature adult who is responsible for using knowledge to better the world (ibid.).

Tertiary institutions are very diverse places where students start to encounter differences in terms of race, language, culture or religious views (ibid.). In addition, students also differ with regard to their expectations of the tertiary institution, their attitudes towards their studies and other students, as well as their intellectual capabilities and learning styles (Schroeder, 2003:55). As a result, there is a lot of responsibility on the students at this point: they have to fit in with the diverse environment, form relationships with strangers with different intellectual capabilities, and challenge different views, worldviews and knowledge economies. Students are also exposed to student life, which includes many cultural activities that take place on the campus to establish relationships with peers (Eloff, 2009:13). In addition, they also have to learn to take responsibility for their own learning and exploration of knowledge. The role of ADS is to develop and support the relationship between the lecturers and the students so that quality teaching and learning can take place both within and outside the classroom (Leibowitz, 2011:21). There needs to be a lecturer–student relationship to maintain an effective tertiary institution environment.

ADS units were established in some South African tertiary institutions during the 1980s (Boughey, 2010:4). This was done mostly in liberal tertiary institutions in South Africa because

during the 1980s these institutions provided access to a small number of non-white students. Many of these students required additional support in the tertiary environment due to the fact that they had been exposed to a watered down school curriculum during the Apartheid era (Hoadley & Jansen, 2012:171). ADS units were established to provide support for students of colour and provide them with equal opportunities so as to aid in bridging the gap between the varying socioeconomic backgrounds (Boughey, 2010:5). However, these units also had a second function, namely to improve the quality of teaching and learning at the tertiary institution (Boughey, 2010:4). At the North-West University there is an ADS unit on each of its three campuses that aims to provide support and development unique to the needs of each campus. For the purpose of my research study, I engaged only with the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus ADS unit. The aim of ADS on the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus is to develop and support academics and students in the teaching and learning process. The vision of the unit is to “leave no one behind” (NWU, 2011); in this case providing everyone with a fair chance to use the support services available to them. The mission of the ADS unit is to support and develop the students academically in order for students to be successful in their academic career. Two primary support service programmes available to the students are the Supplemental Instruction (SI) and Academic Peer Mentoring programmes. In 2004, SI was fully implemented and it became part of ADS in 2009 (NWU, 2011). It is an academic development programme that supports students in mastering coursework and learning skills necessary to be academically successful. SI is conducted by senior students that have completed the module successfully and have been chosen by the lecturer. The senior students must also be trained by certified SI co-ordinators before they can conduct SI sessions. The Academic Peer Mentoring programme was adopted by the unit in 2011, and the aim of this programme is to enhance students’ experiences of their first year and to assist them with the transition from secondary school to tertiary institution (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011:41). A peer mentor is assigned to all first year students only if the first year student volunteers to be part of the academic peer mentoring programme. The peer mentor is chosen according to certain criteria. The criteria for a peer mentor are as follows: they must be interviewed by the academic peer mentoring co-ordinator at ADS, have an excellent academic record and go through an academic peer mentoring training session provided by the academic peer mentoring co-ordinator at ADS (NWU, 2011:2). Peer mentors assist first year students in mastering their course outcomes, developing appropriate learning skills and adjusting to the tertiary institution environment (Christies, 2014:956). I explain the support structures in more detail in Chapter 2 (2.3).

There are many challenges currently being faced by the ADS unit and one of those challenges is to provide support for underprepared students. Brüssow and Wilkinson (2010:364) define underprepared students as students who are unable to achieve good academic results at a tertiary education level because they are not equipped well enough academically to meet the expectation of a tertiary institution. Some of the factors contributing to underpreparedness of

students are disadvantaged social and/or economic backgrounds, inadequate motivation, insufficient self-efficacy or self-regulatory skills and insufficient basic academic study skills (Brüssow & Wilkinson, 2010:364). The poor academic record of the student influences the throughput rate of the tertiary institution which in some instances has resulted in more than 50% of students not completing their modules or dropping out of a course (Cilliers, 2009:116). This challenge can be articulated to students who have not been adequately prepared for tertiary education once they leave the schooling system (Ndebele, Badsha, Figaji, Gevers, Pityana & Scott, 2013:27-28). For the purpose of this research study a tertiary institution is defined as a place where students are given admission to study towards obtaining a certificate, diploma or degree.

The tertiary institution identifies the underprepared student as an 'at-risk' student because of the low academic throughput rate produced; this data is available from the ADS office as well as the office of the Vice-Rector of the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus (Boughey, 2010:17). At-risk students are traditionally defined as students that do not achieve academically because of their disadvantaged socioeconomic background (Calabrese, Hummel & San Martin, 2007:276). A student's inability to perform academically can be associated with some of the following factors: school, family, community and the students themselves (ibid.). Therefore, if there is a weak interrelationship between the student, family, community and the tertiary institution, the student often has difficulty integrating into a new educational environment (Arrington, Melvin & Wilson, 2000:223). If the student is unable to integrate well enough into an educational environment; such as a school or a tertiary institution, it is assumed that a stressful situation is created and the student is at risk of not achieving academically; therefore, this research study focuses on the narratives of second year at-risk students. The second year at-risk students are struggling to cope at a tertiary institution and perform poorly academically. Based on their poor performance the second year at-risk students receive a warning letter.

In this research study, at-risk students are not merely equated with the traditional view of underprepared students (as discussed above). An underprepared student has left secondary school and has been given access to a tertiary institution. The underprepared student has been exposed to the tertiary institution's educational environment and support structures for a period of one year or more. Therefore one may ask: is it plausible to still call the student underprepared or should the term at-risk be used instead? In my research I sought to separate the two terms from each other in order for the ADS unit to provide support according to the challenges faced by both underprepared and at-risk students at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus. As a preliminary departure point, factors such as disadvantaged social and/or economic backgrounds, inadequate motivation, insufficient self-efficacy and self-regulatory skills and basic academic study skills were regarded as factors that constitute an at-risk student (Calabrese *et al.*, 2007:276). I go into more detail on at-risk students in Chapter 2 (2.1.3).

At the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus at-risk students have been identified by the faculty advisor at academic administration by means of checking the amount of modules a student has failed per semester. If a student only passes less than 50% of their modules, according to the general academic rules a warning letter will be sent to the student (NWU, 2014:7). The warning letter invites the students to visit the ADS unit for support with their studies. For the purposes of this research study the ADS unit is defined as a unit that has been established by the tertiary institution to provide academic support programmes to students and support lecturers with their various teaching and learning tasks. There is also a psychologist on the campus who can refer at-risk students to the ADS unit. This can also be done by the lecturer of a specific module or the subject head (NWU, 2011). When at-risk students are referred to the ADS unit, it is the responsibility of the ADS advisors to guide the at-risk students in determining the academic support programme and the academic path they should take in order to improve on their academic performance (Eiselen & Geyser, 2003:119).

In order for the ADS advisors to guide at-risk students they need to have a clearer understanding of the factors that would contribute to an at-risk profile. They also need to develop their support programmes to support at-risk students academically. ADS advisors must keep up to date with the latest literature in the field to perform this task effectively. According to Barbatis (2010:14–24), Boughey (2010:1–31), Davidowitz and Schreiber (2008:191–206), Eiselen and Geyser (2003:118–130), Scott (2009:37) and Smith (2009:1009–1025), studies conducted on support programmes have focused on students' socioeconomic backgrounds, students' academic preparedness for higher education, and students' learning at tertiary institutions in South Africa.

The above-mentioned requirements force the ADS advisors to look for trends in supporting at-risk students from an international perspective, which may not always be suitable academic support for the profile of South African at-risk students. In my research study I sought to reconceptualise the profiles of the at-risk student within a tertiary institution and disassociate at-risk students from the underprepared student's profile. This approach is necessary in order for the ADS advisors to differentiate between the two profiles so that the most efficient and effective advice on academic support can be given to at-risk students to become academically successful. At-risk students are advised by the ADS advisors to use the support programmes available (SI and Academic Peer Mentoring programmes).

The SI programme was developed in the in the 1970s and the North-West University adopted the SI programme in 2004 (NWU, 2011). The student profile has changed since then and there is no element of technology within the programme (Hurley, Jacobs & Gilbert, 2006:11). The Academic Peer Mentoring programme was developed in 2011 and it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of the support programme because it is still at an early implementation stage at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus. There is a need for academic support

programmes to be reconceptualised so that more effective support can be provided to at-risk students currently studying at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus. The at-risk students' experiences of the academic support programmes need to be heard in order for ADS to improve or develop these programmes.

Therefore the research study I conducted focused on giving the at-risk students a voice in guiding ADS advisors to reconceptualise support programmes in order to support at-risk students and to develop programmes in the future. The research study will also assist the ADS advisors in understanding the nature of support programmes offered at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus. This research study engaged with the narratives of the second year at-risk students so as to explore their experiences and determine whether these students can develop academically in programmes offered by ADS and to improve their academic performance.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

The following section provides the main research question and secondary research questions. These questions were directives that guided me in my pursuit of addressing the main research problems outlined above.

##### **1.4.1 Primary research question**

To what extent, if any, can second year at-risk students' narratives assist the Academic Development and Support unit in reconceptualising programmes that academically support at-risk students?

The primary research question was guided by the following secondary questions:

##### **1.4.2 Secondary research questions**

- What are the factors contributing to the profile of at-risk students?
- What is the nature of current support programmes offered by the Academic Development and Support unit to develop the at-risk students academically?
- How can the narratives of at-risk students assist the Academic Development and Support unit in reconceptualising current support programmes?

#### **1.5 Purpose of the research**

The research aimed to explore the narratives of second year at-risk students, so as to assist Academic Development and Support in reconceptualising the profile of at-risk students can enhance the academic support programmes within the institution.

The following secondary research aims were addressed within the study:

**Secondary Research Aim 1:** To determine the factors contributing to the profile of an at-risk student

**Secondary Research Aim 2:** To determine the nature of the support programmes offered by the Academic Development and Support unit to develop at-risk students academically

**Secondary Research Aim 3:** To determine empirically how the narratives of at-risk students can assist the Academic Development and Support unit in reconceptualising their current support programmes.

## **1.6 Research design, methodology and processes**

Mouton (2001:55–56) defines the research design as the blue print of a research study. The research design, methodology and processes are the plan and the procedure that assist researchers to successfully conduct their research (Creswell, 2012:4).

According to Punch (2006:48), the research design allows the researcher to design a basic plan to carry out the empirical research. This plan has five main elements: research methodology (1.6.1), paradigm (1.6.2), sample and research environment (1.6.3), method of data generation (1.6.4) and method of data analysis (1.6.5). A qualitative research approach was used to develop an understanding of at-risk students' experiences to provide guidelines to ADS in terms of the academic support programmes presented by the ADS unit. Creswell (2012:16) argues that this approach is valuable because qualitative research is used to explore and understand the research problem, a literature review is conducted to justify the research problem, and the research question is stated in such a way that the researcher can learn from the participants. Data is collected from a small number of participants to gather their views, analyse and interpret data to find meaning and report on the findings (Creswell, 2012:16). The qualitative research design has five elements as explained in the sub-sections that follow.

### **1.6.1 Methodology: life design narrative**

A life design narrative methodology was used, since this research methodology allows the participants to share their narratives in three phases (Figure 3.1) and according to the narrative prompts given (Savickas, 2012:15–16). The reason for this approach is that the life design narrative methodology reflects the experiences of the participants in particular situations. From a critical theory perspective, it allows the participants to use their narratives to break down disempowering discourses and emancipate themselves (Prosser, 2009:608). The life design narrative methodology is explained in greater detail in section 3.2. This methodology is valuable as it allowed the student participants in this research study to re-author their narratives and to form an action plan for their future career paths. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to explore their own identities and develop an understanding of themselves in a tertiary institution context (Savickas, 2012:15).

### **1.6.2 Paradigm: critical theory**

The philosophical worldview underpinning the research study is critical theory. A critical theory perspective aims to expose the restrictive and alienating conditions in society; it allows a

researcher to reconceptualise and critique the relationship of individuals and society and to expose the oppression of an individual within the community in which the individual interacts and lives (Blake & Masschelein, 2003:40). In effect, critical theory brings about change in society, in which humans are emancipated and engages in dialogue to challenge society's structures (Blake & Masschelein, 2003:41; Creswell, 2009:10; Nieuwenhuis, 2007a:62). The critical theory paradigm allowed me and the participants to engage in their lived experiences so as to determine how the academic experiences of at-risk students can assist the ADS unit in reconceptualising their current support programmes. The notion of reconceptualising enables linking the research question and critical theory.

### **1.6.3 Sample and research environment**

Purposive sampling was used because the participants had the characteristics that served the purpose of this research study (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2011:232; Nieuwenhuis, 2007b:78–79). This approach was chosen because it allowed me to purposefully select the participants who were situated at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus. These participants were second year at-risk students. Students within each School were invited to participate. The North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus has seven Schools and therefore I purposefully selected a minimum of seven second year at-risk student participants.

### **1.6.4 Method of data generation**

Before the data generation method (narratives) was employed, a self-administered biographical questionnaire was distributed to the participants to obtain their basic profile. Narratives were used to gather data from the participants concerning their individual experiences so as to gain rich descriptions and a better understanding of these experiences (Creswell, 2012:502; De Vos *et al.*, 2011:313).

All the student participants were invited to share their narratives in a journal that was provided to them. These narratives were written during three different phases of the research as specified by the research methodology (3.2). The participants were provided with four narrative prompts to guide them in writing their narratives. The first narrative was constructed to establish the at-risk student participants' successful and unsuccessful experiences and the events that caused them to receive a warning letter (Savickas, 2012:15). The second narrative prompt was aimed at student participants deconstructing their narrative and making meaning of their failures that had led to them being placed in the academic support programme at the ADS unit. The third narrative was done to re-author the first two narratives with the purpose of allowing the student participants to reconstruct and make meaning of their academic progress and improvement. According to Savickas (2012:17), the value of re-authoring a narrative is to assist participants in finding paths to improve and progress in their life. The fourth narrative gave student participants the opportunity to create an action plan which described the goals to be achieved by the student participant in an attempt to become academically successful. The

narrative prompts that were used as well as the phases that were employed in the life design narrative methodology are presented in Chapter 3 (3.2). The researcher collected the narrative journal from the participants and transcribed the written narratives in order to analyse the data.

#### **1.6.5 Method of data analysis**

The data presented in this research study was analysed according to a qualitative data approach. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011:537), qualitative data analysis is used to organise, account for and explain the data. This is done by finding patterns, themes and categories in the data collected from the participants. Critical narrative analysis was used in my research study.

Critical narrative analysis allowed me to deconstruct the student participants' narratives and explore their "micronarratives" and also to analyse the institutional role within the student participants' narratives (Souto-Manning, 2012:162). The narratives were analysed according to the experiences that the individuals went through in their social setting (ibid.). According to Souto-Manning (2012:163), critical narrative analysis explores the relationship between the participant and the institution. For this research study the written narratives were analysed to reveal the "micronarratives" of the at-risk students, and to understand the cause of the students' success and failure at the institution and the relationship that the tertiary institution has with the at-risk students.

#### **1.7 Researcher's role**

A researcher's role is to maintain relationships with the participants so that the data collected is accurate and reliable (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:332). My role as the researcher was to establish a relationship with the participants through explaining the reason for my research study in the pursuit of obtaining accurate and trustworthy data from the participants (Jansen, 2007:15). I collected the data from the participants and analysed it; no fieldworkers were used. It was part of my role as a researcher to apply for and obtain ethical clearance from the North-West University ethics committee and to get informed consent from the participants.

It was important for me to be aware of my positionality as the researcher within this research study. Therefore, as I am currently employed at the ADS unit of the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus I am an insider within the context because part of my position is to advise at-risk students. At the time of the research study, I was aware that this could lead to bias or cause the participants to feel uncomfortable or threatened by their participation in the research study. I addressed this problem by reassuring the student participants that ethical considerations (1.9) had been taken into account in this research study.

#### **1.8 Validity and trustworthiness**

It is important for a research study to be trustworthy because data that is collected is personal information from the participants. The researcher should ensure that the data is checked by a



stakeholder to confirm the data is trustworthy (3.7) (Nieuwenhuis, 2007c:113). Cohen *et al.* (2011:180) contend that to ensure validity the data should be collected in its natural research environment, where the researcher is part of the researched world. Furthermore, data should be presented by the participants rather than the researcher.

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the research, I checked for the accuracy of my findings when I received the written narratives from the student participants (Creswell, 2009:190). The following strategies were used to ensure that the data are valid and trustworthy: member checking, audit trail, peer briefing, thick descriptions and crystallisation. These strategies will be discussed in Chapter 3 (3.7).

### **1.9 Ethical considerations**

The data that was collected was about the student participants, therefore I, as the researcher, needed to protect their identity, develop a relationship of trust with them, promote integrity during the research study and not make decisions that may cause misconduct during the research study (Creswell, 2009:86).

The following ethical considerations were adhered to in this research study: informed consent, right to privacy, protection from harm, and accuracy. These considerations are elaborated on in Chapter 3 (3.8).

### **1.10 Chapter outline in this research study**

In this chapter a history of ADS was given, and the background to the problem and the research problem was explained. The research question as well as the primary and secondary questions and the aim were presented. A brief description of the research design, methodology and research process was given.

In Chapter 2, three profiles are used to describe students: academically prepared, underprepared and at-risk. The different factors contributing to underprepared and at-risk students are discussed. The academic support programmes offered by the ADS unit, as well as the nature of the academic support programmes, the relevant retention theories and the elements found in the academic support programmes are also explained. To conclude, the place of academic support programmes in the digital age are considered.

In Chapter 3 the research design, methodology and the research processes are explained in detail. This includes an explanation of the three phases of the life design narrative methodology, the sample and research environment, the method of data generation, the paradigm and the data analysis. The strategies used to ensure that the data is valid and trustworthy are also presented and the importance of ethical considerations is highlighted.

In Chapter 4, the narrative data of each student participant is presented. The verbatim quotes are presented in table format. This approach, which made it possible for me to find codes within

the narratives, is described. The codes were used to find emerging themes and the themes were analysed according to critical narrative analysis, as explained in this chapter.

Chapter 5, the final chapter, consists of the interpretation of themes emanating from the narrative data, a summary of the findings, a brief discussion on the shortcomings of the study and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### A SCHOLARLY REVIEW OF ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

#### 2.1 Introduction

The revolving door syndrome, in which increased access is accompanied not by success but by high failure, repetition and dropout rates, continues to characterise the higher education system (Ndebele *et al.*, 2013:27).

The quote provided above was found in the Council of Higher Education (CHE) report on higher education undergraduate curriculum in South Africa. According to Ndebele *et al.* (2013), South Africa's transition to democracy since 1994 and the inequalities in terms of access that have been addressed thus far are those of race, gender and admission to a tertiary institution. According to the report, it was also found that the graduation rates for three-year degrees, four-year degrees and three-year diplomas have only increased slightly and the graduates produced do not always meet the needs of economic and social development. The reported research found that from 2006 only 35% graduated – but not within the allocated time – and 55% of students may never graduate (Ndebele *et al.*, 2013:47–52).

In the CHE report Ndebele *et al.* (2013) give an overview of higher education, with emphasis on access and graduation. The report outlines the institutions' responsibilities in supporting students and the role ADS units play as agents in developing and supporting students academically (Ndebele *et al.*, 2013:155). In order to carry out this task it is important to know the profiles of students that have gained access to a tertiary institution. From the literature I identified a profile that can be built to identify students in order for ADS to provide support to students (Purnell, McCarthy & McLoed, 2010:77). In this case profiling was not done to classify students into groups but rather to assist the academic advisor in identifying factors that contribute to students not performing well academically. The academic advisor is a person working in the ADS office who assists students in improving their study skills as well as their time management skills. The academic advisor also helps them to identify additional resources for their module (Bettinger, Boatman & Long, 2013:103). Once the academic advisor has determined the factors that influence student profiling, it is easier for him or her to understand what caused the students to be academically unsuccessful. If students seek support from the academic advisor at the ADS unit, the academic advisor should guide them towards academic development in order for the students to complete a qualification successfully within the allocated time as specified in the CHE report of 2013.

In order for me to understand how students are profiled, I explored the factors that contribute to a student's academic identity. This resulted in identifying factors that influence student

academic success (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohret, Niemantverdriet & Kommers, 2012:806). According to Lemmens, du Plessis and Maree (2011) and Brüssow (2007), three types of student profiles can be identified: the academically prepared student, the underprepared student and the at-risk student. In this chapter I explore these three types of student profiles in order to distinguish which factors lead to student academic success. Thereafter I discuss the ADS unit that formed the research environment of this research. I highlight the theories underpinning the ADS support programmes to explain how these programmes are developed and implemented. Through the literature study I also became aware of how the digital age can influence the support provided to students of the new generation.

### **2.1.1 The academically prepared student**

Conley and French (2013:3–4) developed a model to determine college readiness comprised of the following elements: thinking skills (cognitive strategies), content knowledge (value and understanding the content knowledge being presented), learning strategies, and key transition knowledge and skills. Although this model is applicable to college students and not university students, the elements guided me in exploring factors that contribute to academic preparedness.

The four key elements of Conley and French's (2013) model can be broken down to reveal more factors. For the purpose of this research study the following factors were used to determine academic preparedness: academic integration (2.1.1.1), ownership of learning (2.1.1.2), identifying learning strategies (2.1.1.3), goal setting (2.1.1.4) and self-directed learning (SDL) (2.1.1.5).

#### **2.1.1.1 Academic integration**

Levy and Earl (2012:62) explored students' narratives regarding academic integration at both an Australian and a South African university. The following aspects required for success at a tertiary institution were identified through the narratives of students: being honest (know the reason for your choice of study, be open to new ways of thinking and learning), and social and tertiary support (get to know your environment by collaborating with their peers). Peers at a tertiary institution should be able to assist students when they are studying or when they need support. It could be meaningful for students to form support networks with lecturers as well as the academic advisor at ADS, for in this way they can familiarise themselves with the support services provided to them if necessary (Purnell *et al.*, 2010:77). Students need to partake in social events so that they can integrate and get together with their peers in an informal environment but this requires maintaining a balance. It also means that students should balance their time effectively between social activities and their academic workload (Levy & Earl, 2012:63).

### **2.1.1.2 Ownership of learning**

Academically prepared students are able to demonstrate ownership of learning in a range of learning environments such as online or large class environments. A high APS score<sup>1</sup> obtained by students in their matric examination results can also be used as a factor for academic preparedness (Lemmens *et al.*, 2011:618). Academically prepared students realise the difference between learning at a secondary school and at a tertiary institution. Students learn to engage with the content by formulating arguments and evaluating their own work (Levy & Earl, 2012:101). Academically prepared students are independent learners, they are able to read large volumes of material and to reflect and learn from their mistakes. They adjust comfortably into the new environment by using skills, resources and learning strategies that have been provided to them to develop into academically successful students (Levy & Earl, 2012:322).

### **2.1.1.3 Identifying learning strategies**

Successful students use learning strategies to engage with academic tasks and learn for tests and examinations. Such students possess skills related to managing their time, taking notes, reading, collaborative learning and using technology to study or complete academic tasks (Conley & French, 2013:3; Lemmens *et al.*, 2011:616; Purnell *et al.*, 2010:77).

### **2.1.1.4 Goal setting**

In order to complete their academic tasks the students set achievable goals for themselves such as attending all classes, handing assignments in on time, making use of library resources and ultimately obtaining their degree. Goal setting helps the student to focus on the reason for being at a tertiary institution (Purnell *et al.*, 2010:77). Successful students are motivated to go to a tertiary institution; it is a goal to obtain a degree because such students want to work, earn an income, become financially stable and become part of society eventually (Levy & Earl, 2012:44).

### **2.1.1.5 Self-directed learning (SDL)**

The concept 'self-directed learning' (SDL) originated in the 1960s. This approach is considered to be a more active approach to learning since the students take a more active role in being responsible, identify their own learning strategies and resources and use the resources to attain the goals they created for themselves (Francis & Flanigan, 2012:2). This is a more successful approach, according to Fisher, King and Tague (2001), because it involves students taking sole responsibility for their learning and being able to evaluate their learning. Students should be given opportunities to evaluate sources of information, engage in academic discussions about the content, organise information by making summaries, timelines and mindmaps and being able to write. Students are also responsible for managing their time by keeping track of assignment deadlines, test dates and examinations. They must reflect on their learning to assist

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<sup>1</sup> An APS score is the admission point system calculated according to the matric marks a student achieves in secondary school. If the student receives the required APS score they are accepted to study a programme.

them with higher-order thinking skills (Mentz, du Preez, Van der Westhuizen, Pool & Claassen, 2014:4-5).

According to the factors identified for the profile of successful students, ideal students are produced by the schooling system and then they access tertiary education (Conley & French, 2010:2). As mentioned earlier, in the CHE report it is pointed out that students are more likely to drop out or complete their degree but not in the required time, one of the main reasons being that students enter tertiary institutions academically underprepared (Brüssow, 2007). The next profile that is discussed is the academically underprepared student.

### **2.1.2 The academically underprepared student**

In South Africa students are not prepared academically for tertiary education in their basic schooling, and some of the challenges they experience are a lack of language proficiency and mathematics skills, not identifying their own learning strategies, inability to identify a career path, a lack of self-efficacy and a lack of motivation (Fraser & Killen, 2003:255; Ndebele *et al.*, 2013:58; Smith, 2009:1009). There might also be political and historical factors that still contribute to school curricula not preparing the students adequately for tertiary institutions (Brüssow, 2007:134).

In the CHE report Ndebele *et al.* (2013:57) explain that underprepared students struggle to cope with their formal curricula and find it difficult to adjust to tertiary education. Underprepared students start to struggle in the tertiary institution environment and their difficulties become evident when they are obviously unable to cope with the academic tasks (for example portfolio work, assignments and tests) set by their lecturers (Brüssow, 2007:134).

According to Brüssow (2007:143–145), three domains have been identified to explain academically underprepared students: academic (2.1.2.1), cultural (2.1.2.2) and emotional (2.1.2.3) underpreparedness.

#### **2.1.2.1 Academic underpreparedness**

When students' mathematical skills are inadequate, their problem-solving capabilities are hindered (2.1.2.3). Furthermore, language is often a major barrier in South Africa because so many languages are spoken in the country. English, which is the most widely used language of tuition, is often a student's second or third language; therefore, many students find it difficult to understand academic texts, formulate main ideas, and understand instructions regarding assignments. Consequently they also structure arguments poorly. Inadequate abilities, such as taking notes in class, mind-mapping and mark relevant passages in their text books are skills (learning strategies) that are not well developed (Brüssow, 2007:143).

### **2.1.2.2 Cultural underpreparedness**

In view of the diversity of cultures and languages in South Africa, more should be done to include diversity in curricula in order for students from different backgrounds to be accommodated in the curriculum. When education is not valued in a culture, it can be difficult for the people involved to understand the need for studying and the student may not be supported at home (Brüssow, 2007:144).

### **2.1.2.3 Emotional underpreparedness**

A lack of self-efficacy causes students not to structure their knowledge gained from instruction, observation and exploring. Self-regulated development can also be hindered because the students are unable to master their own acquisition of knowledge by using their own learning strategies and motivation and reflecting on their learning effectively (Brüssow, 2007:145).

Within these domains Brüssow (2007) includes factors that have been mentioned above in 2.1.2. The factors are explained below: limitation of language proficiency and mathematics skills, inability to identify their own learning strategies, a limitation of self-efficacy, and a limitation of self-regulation.

#### **Limitation of language proficiency and mathematics skills**

A prominent factor that contributes to students' inability to succeed academically is the lack of language proficiency (especially in English). Students – irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds – seem to experience great difficulty with the use of English since it is in many instances their second or third language (Brüssow, 2007:137).

A student that struggles with English often finds it difficult to understand, analyse and interpret academic texts (Smith, 2009:1010). If students cannot analyse and make sense of the texts, they are more likely to copy work from the Internet or their peers and not grasp the content being studied. This means that students have difficulty in engaging with their learning material due to their lack of language proficiency in English (Brüssow, 2007:139).

Language is a concern when it comes to solving problems mathematically; if the students cannot understand the mathematical text it becomes difficult for them to solve mathematical problems and improve on their numeracy skills (Smith, 2009:1013). When students struggle to understand the English text of mathematical problems they cannot link the correct mathematical concept to solve the problem and they find it difficult to communicate their answers in English (Van der Walt & Maree, 2007:224). According to Van der Walt, Maree and Ellis (2008:207), when a student learns mathematics they begin to understand the importance of problem solving, reasoning, communication and critical thinking. As students progress from primary to secondary school the development of the language is minimal and therefore they continue to struggle with developing their mathematic concepts which in turn hinders their problem solving

skills (Van der Walt & Maree, 2007:225). Thus, language proficiency is a major contributor to students' inability to master basic academic skills (Van der Walt *et al.*, 2008:230).

Learning mathematics is important in developing problem-solving skills for students to use when solving various kinds of problems. Problem solving is a way of thinking and analysing situations or question in a test or examination by using skills to reflect on the correct concepts to solve situations or questions and reason out problems (Van der Walt *et al.*, 2008:228).

### **Inability to identify their own learning strategies**

In secondary school, the structure for learning is stricter than at a tertiary institution because students need to be more responsible with time management, handing in assignments and attending classes (Levy & Earl, 2012:100). Students need to become more independent towards their learning at a tertiary institution rather than expecting to be 'spoon fed' as they often are at secondary school (Leese, 2010:242). After accessing tertiary institutions, students struggle to identify their own learning strategies and therefore their ability to acquire, record, remember and apply information becomes difficult (Leese, 2010:244). This is problematic because a lack of these strategies affects the students' ability to perform tasks such as interpreting and analysing the information or the content to gain knowledge (Raab & Adam, cited in Brüssow, 2007:136). If students lack study skills then they will most likely perform poorly in the examinations and this can lead to a lack of interest in the module, which can also hamper their motivation to succeed. The students also experience difficulties in engaging with their learning material and this could have a negative effect on their academic performance (Fraser & Killen, 2003:260).

### **Limitation of self-efficacy**

Self-efficacy is limited when students do not take responsibility for completing their own tasks and performing well in their tasks, and this reflects negatively on the student (Brüssow, 2007:143). Davidowitz and Schreiber (2008) found that students realised if they could not keep up with the academic workload at a tertiary institution they could not deal with the academic pressure and this had a negative impact on their studies. They started to become stressed and had difficulty keeping up with their academic studies (Davidowitz & Schreiber, 2008:203).

Fraser and Killen (2003) argue that students often find it difficult to cope with the following three objectives at a tertiary level: Firstly, students have to get used to the pace of working within two semesters. Secondly, they must have time-management skills in order to complete assignments, hand assignments in on the due date, study for examinations or tests and prepare for classes. Lastly, they are also required to be responsible for completing the reading of the required tasks that have been given to them by the lecturer (Fraser & Killen, 2003:260).



## **Limitation of self-regulation**

Self-regulation is defined as self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions that facilitate the process of students attaining their goals. Self-regulation, according to Byrd and Macdonald (cited in Brüssow, 2007:145) occurs when a student takes responsibility for their own studies. Self-regulation becomes especially significant given the recent turn toward learner-centred approaches of teaching and learning in tertiary education contexts (Cretchley & Castle, 2010:487). Consequently, if the student does not have self-regulatory skills, they may not be responsible in completing their studies and achieving good academic results (Brüssow, 2007:145). Students are responsible for attending lectures because if they miss lectures they miss important work that took place in that lecture (Fraser & Killen, 2003:268).

Once underprepared students are admitted into a tertiary institution and begin to struggle with integrating into the tertiary institution, they become at-risk students (Purnell *et al.*, 2010; Lemmens *et al.*, 2011). In the next paragraph I identify factors that contribute to students becoming at-risk students.

### **2.1.3 The academically at-risk student**

At-risk students are students that find it difficult to maintain motivation, have unrealistic expectations about managing their studies and are reluctant to seek assistance from support staff on campus (Purnell *et al.*, 2010:80). At-risk students can be students that experience distraction, interference and blocks to their learning. Examples of these challenges are financial problems, difficulty in understanding the academic language and not being able to integrate into the tertiary environment (Carnell & Lodge, 2002:43). These students are more likely to drop out of a tertiary institution or might not graduate (McMahon, 2006:127). If they come from poor socio-cultural backgrounds it puts them at a disadvantage in their academic performance (McMahon, 2006:128). Another disadvantage is if students gain access into a tertiary institution with a low APS score, because this may identify them as academically at-risk students (Lemmens *et al.*, 2011:618).

The factors that contribute to academically at-risk students are limitation of critical thinking skills (2.1.3.1), limitation of self-directed learning (2.1.3.2), the academic gap between secondary schools and tertiary institutions (2.1.3.3), ecological factors (2.1.3.4) and difficulty integrating into a tertiary institution environment (2.1.3.5).

#### **2.1.3.1 Limitation of critical thinking skills**

Limitations in language proficiency skills contribute to a student being academically underprepared and at risk. Grosser and Nel (2013) found that in South Africa most students whose second or additional language was English – and as a result of their diverse languages – experienced problems when they entered a tertiary institution because their academic language skills had not yet been developed (Grosser & Nel, 2013:10). Their study shows that there is a

link between good academic language proficiency and developing a student's higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills assist in solving problems, creating stronger arguments, identifying relationships, drawing conclusions and synthesising or evaluating information (Grosser & Nel, 2013:13–14). If students have difficulty in developing good language proficiency it will hinder their academic progress, because they could struggle with the academic language in terms of reading texts, understanding and recalling texts. If the students' academic language is affected their critical thinking will be hindered (Grosser & Nel, 2013:3).

#### **2.1.3.2 Limitation of self-directed learning**

SDL is also associated with critical thinking because it improves understanding and decision making (Francis & Flanigan, 2012:2). Therefore, limitations in critical thinking will also affect SDL negatively. If students are not prepared for tertiary education, they will find it to be overwhelming once they access the environment and this could lead to dissatisfaction and loss of self-confidence (Francis & Flanigan, 2012:4).

#### **2.1.3.3 The academic gap between secondary schools and tertiary institutions**

The CHE reports in their recent study that many students who accessed tertiary institutions since 2000 dropped out in their first year and only a small group of only 27% or one in every four (Ndebele *et al.*, 2013:43) students completed their studies in regulation time (Case, Marshall & Grayson, 2013:1). This study shows that the gap between secondary school and tertiary education is increasing and this causes the first year student to become academically at risk (Nel, Troskie-De Bruin & Bitzer, 2009:974).

Examples of such gaps are thinking skills not being developed during learners' secondary school education and learners finding it difficult to understand, apply and evaluate content at a tertiary institution level. I indicated earlier (2.1.2) that according to a lack of language skills it may hinder a student's development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Grosser & Nel, 2013:13–14). Another factor, according to Maree (2010:93), is that mathematics is not studied in depth at school level and consequently there are gaps in the students' understanding of mathematics at a tertiary level, thus students perform poorly in this discipline. This state of affairs could be due to the low mathematics and physical science marks obtained in matric because students are not adequately prepared for tertiary education. They perform poorly in their first year at a tertiary institution and may drop out or fail the course for which they are registered (Case *et al.*, 2013:2).

Maree (2010:93) argues that if there is inconsistency in teaching and learning between tertiary and secondary education, students may find it difficult to form links in their learning and this may lead to their not being academically prepared. At-risk students in teaching environments can find it difficult to make the transition from school to tertiary institution as a result of the

inequalities in the schooling system. In most cases the at-risk student is from a disadvantaged background and may not have experienced the same quality of teaching and learning in their schooling career (Maree, 2010:80; Nel *et al.*, 2009:974). One can also argue that tertiary institutions are not prepared to deal with students being academically at-risk (Nel *et al.*, 2009:975).

#### **2.1.3.4 Ecological factors**

Students' inability to pay for their studies can also affect them adversely. They have to buy textbooks, as well as stationery and they need to pay their tuition fees. In some instances a bursary may be insufficient. Such students may not have access to resources such as computers and these financial constraints may prompt them to drop out (Leibowitz, 2009:265).

Some students' cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds do not support the idea of further education (Brüssow, 2007:141). If the student's family members do not have an understanding of tertiary studies a negative relationship begins to form between the family member and the student because the family member may not see the value of studying. This could lead to such students not getting the needed support to be successful in their academic studies (Inkelas, Daver, Voght & Leonard, 2007:404). These students are often referred to as first-generation students; they are the students that will break away from their family traditions and need to adjust to the social and academic lifestyle of a tertiary institution (Inkelas *et al.*, 2007:405).

#### **2.1.3.5 Difficulty integrating into a tertiary institution environment**

Students need to integrate socially as well as academically into the tertiary institution environment (Tinto, 2006:6). New students will be part of a new teaching and learning environment that consists of large classes and they have to cope with being in a class of for example more than 500 students; consequently, they may start to feel isolated (Fraser & Killen, 2003:260).

Transition into a tertiary institution can be difficult due to differences in ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic class or background (Leese, 2010:243). At-risk students find it difficult to create support networks and therefore also find it difficult to integrate and engage socially at a tertiary institution (Leese, 2010:242). It is very important for students to integrate socially because they will be able to build relationships that assist them in becoming part of the tertiary environment. However, as an at-risk student it is often difficult to build relationships with peers (Nel *et al.*, 2009:976).

For example, in many schools in South Africa technology is not integrated into the school curriculum and when students come to tertiary institutions it is most likely the first time they are exposed to a computer. Such students could be negative towards their studies because of their lack of computer skills which causes anxiety, because they fear that they might not integrate into the learning environment (Leese, 2010:245).

Once access has been granted to students with different social backgrounds they have to start integrating into the tertiary environment. It is clear that in some cases students can be academically underprepared or academically at risk and the ADS advisor must support them so that they can be successful. Therefore it is important for the ADS advisor to differentiate between the two profiles during consultation with the student. In the next paragraph I discuss the similarities and differences between academically underprepared and at-risk students.

## **2.2 Academically underprepared vs. academically at-risk students**

There is limited literature on at-risk students in the South African context; therefore more studies need to be conducted to understand the profile of an at-risk student in this country. The literature on this issue in South Africa is not very clear regarding the retention and persistence of at-risk students in terms of their academic development and their learning process. If there were a greater understanding and more available information about the profile of an at-risk student, then support units such as ADS could better support and develop students academically at the tertiary institutions in South Africa. There is a need to clarify the differences between the two profiles 'academically underprepared students' and 'academically at-risk students', as this is not always evident in the literature. In the following discussion the differences between academically underprepared and academically at-risk students are explicated.

When **defining the different profiles** of underprepared students and at-risk students it is clear that the two groups of students are similar in the sense that they are not really prepared for the tertiary institution environment; they struggle to adjust in a tertiary institution and both types of students often come from poor schooling and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The differences between the underprepared and the at-risk students are that the at-risk students become extremely negative about their environment and may actually drop out. According to Brüssow (2007), there is no indication that underprepared students drop out of tertiary institutions, but merely that they struggle to cope. At-risk students also find it difficult to integrate into the tertiary institution and are sometimes reluctant to seek assistance. They usually set goals that are unrealistic or have difficulty in achieving the set goals (Lemmens *et al.*, 2011:618; Purnell *et al.*, 2010:80). Due to the many languages spoken in South Africa, students' understanding of English texts may vary and this can hamper the students' understanding of academic texts.

**Cultural and ecological factors** have been identified for both at-risk and underprepared students. Underprepared students experience a culture shock at the tertiary institution and the curricula do not always cater for the diverse student backgrounds (Brüssow, 2007:144).

At-risk students' struggle is influenced by socioeconomic factors: struggles with finances, not enough support from their family and isolation from their peers at a tertiary institution. They

struggle to cope with and integrate into the tertiary environment due to the socioeconomic factors (Brüssow, 2007:144; Inkelas *et al.*, 2007:404).

**Limitations in English proficiency** for both the underprepared and at-risk students cause them to struggle with developing their academic writing skills. The at-risk students also struggle with developing their mathematical skills. Mathematics and language are closely related: if students cannot reflect on and communicate their understanding about mathematical texts they have difficulty with solving problems (Van der Walt & Maree, 2007:224).

The issue of **critical thinking skills** is identified as an at-risk factor because the students' language development is limited (Grosser & Nel, 2013:3). The students have a problem in developing their academic language. This causes difficulties with solving problems, finding links in content and engaging in discussion with their peers (Grosser & Nel, 2013:3). There is no clear link between the limitations caused by a lack of language proficiency and critical thinking skills not being developed in underprepared students

**Self-efficacy and self-regulatory skills** are barriers to learning experienced by both underprepared and at-risk students. They lack responsibility in managing their academic tasks and have not developed individual learning strategies in order to be successful. They are also not motivated to reach the goals they had set for themselves. Consequently the students find it difficult to become self-directed learners and they stand a greater chance of being at risk (Cretchley & Castle, 2010:487).

According to Guglielmino (2008), **SDL** is fostered when students are given opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills, be responsible for their own work, develop time management skills, find and evaluate the value of resources, reflect on their learning and decide on their own learning strategies. In this way the students become more confident in their skills and are able to participate in the environment. However, if they start to experience a negative effect and become less responsible towards their studies, they become at-risk students.

**A lack of learning strategies** is a similar challenge in both the academically underprepared and the at-risk profile. The students' learning strategies are not developed and therefore they cannot form links in their discipline. The at-risk students become negative and will drop out of the tertiary institution but it appears that the underprepared students are able to develop their strategies (Leese, 2010:244).

**The academic gap** is not identified as a factor related to being underprepared; it is an at-risk factor because students have difficulty in understanding the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of their peers. Therefore the students start to isolate themselves and they do not integrate into the social environment of the tertiary institution. The students feel intimidated by

large classes and struggle to fit into the teaching and learning environment (Nel *et al.*, 2009:974).

The discussion provided above shows that at-risk students become negative towards their studies, and finally they turn out to be demotivated. They probably also experience financial difficulty and have difficulty becoming part of the tertiary environment socially. The students struggle to communicate with peers or lecturers about their studies.

The difference between at-risk and underprepared students is that at-risk students may drop out or their studies may be terminated at a tertiary institution. There are also further problems when they experience limitations in their SDL and critical thinking skills.

In tertiary institutions there are ADS units that provide voluntary academic support programmes for students. These academic support programmes are offered to students in order to support and develop them academically to become successful in their academic career. The next section of this chapter discusses the nature (theories) and elements of academic support programmes offered to at-risk students at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus.

### **2.3 The role of Academic Development and Support in supporting at-risk students**

The various tertiary institutions want their students to be successful, therefore the ADS units offer support programmes for at-risk students to assist them with their academic development. The ADS unit at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus chooses to refer to at-risk students rather than underprepared students, therefore, from here on students will be referred to as at-risk students (1.3). The at-risk students are referred to the ADS unit after they receive a warning letter. The at-risk students need to be supported to improve their academic results.

#### **2.3.1 The nature of academic support programmes offered at the ADS unit**

As the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus was used as the context of this research study, it framed this study. On the Vaal Triangle Campus the ADS unit is responsible for offering voluntary academic support programmes to students registered on the campus. The two academic support programmes are Supplemental Instruction (SI) and Academic Peer Mentoring programmes. I explain the background of the academic support programmes below and then focus on the theoretical framework that underpins the programmes.

SI is a current programme offered all around the world; it was developed in 1973 by Dr Deanna Martins at the University of Missouri Kansas City (UMKC) (Drake & Foresman, 2012:3; Hurley *et al.*, 2006:11; Malm, Bryngfors & Morner, 2011:282). SI is an academic support programme that is scheduled out of class and it is facilitated by a senior student. The senior students are chosen by a faculty member to become the SI leaders in the module for a year (Drake & Foresman, 2012:4; Hurley, *et al.*, 2006:11). SI is peer-assisted learning in which the SI leaders assist students in using learning strategies to engage with their learning material. Through this

approach the students are assisted in improving their learning skills and understanding the content. The SI leaders are also encouraged to find learning material that is more beneficial and enriching to the students (Ning & Downing, 2010:922).

The SI leaders are students who completed the modules successfully the previous year. The new SI leaders are trained by the SI co-ordinator (Ning & Downing, 2010:923). The SI leaders are trained to assist students in embedding learning strategies such as study skills, reading strategies, and organising their schedule and learning material in order for students to become more responsible in their studies (Drake & Foresman, 2012:3; Malm *et al.*, 2011:282; Ning & Downing, 2010:921). The SI sessions also assist students in using these learning strategies in other modules, thus promoting self-regulation and motivating students to study (Malm *et al.*, 2011:282; Ning & Downing, 2010:923). An SI session is usually about 60 minutes long. The session is arranged between the SI leader and the students and the students attend it voluntarily. The students and the SI leader work on examination papers or test questions, terminology, theorems and concept clarification and they solve problems together. Students are encouraged to participate in groups and work collaboratively to solve a problem or work on an assignment together (Malm *et al.*, 2011:283; Ning & Downing, 2010:923).

The second support programme offered to students on the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus is the Academic Peer Mentoring programme. Peer mentoring can be defined as the act of engaging in a personal relationship in which a senior student (the mentor) shares his or her experiences of the tertiary institution with the junior student (the mentee) (Schulze, 2010:782).

Mentors are allocated to mentees according to their age, gender and qualification. It is important to match the mentor with the correct mentee in order to develop a good relationship or to form a bond between mentor and mentee (Christies, 2014:956). This programme is important for the tertiary institution because it assists in the student's transition from secondary school to the tertiary institution and enhances the student's experience of the first year at the institution (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011:41).

The mentor already has knowledge and understanding of the tertiary institution and therefore his or her role is to assist mentees to integrate and to provide social support. Students are supported socially in order to engage with the surrounding tertiary environment that they are in rather than just focusing on classroom instruction. Students are given social support in understanding the values of the institution, socialising at the institution, being able to criticise their peers but also to take into consideration their peers from different backgrounds and cultures as well as to act responsibly towards their peers, lecturers and the tertiary environment (Schulze, 2010:782).

During peer mentor sessions mentors work with small groups of between 8 and 15 mentees. In the session mentees work on assignments, learning material and writing skills. The mentors

assist the mentee in reflecting on their work so that they can gain a deeper meaning and understanding. The mentors also provide emotional support for the mentees. The emotional support helps the mentees to be more self-confident so that they feel free to answer questions during lecture sessions. As students become more comfortable and confident with their learning material they are more likely to succeed (Douglas *et al.*, 2013:220).

The academic support programmes have been developed to ensure that students have a smooth transition from school to tertiary education. They assist students in organising their learning material and in developing their learning strategies. The programmes allow students more time to engage with their learning material and to become confident in their studies. The programmes have been developed for academic development purposes but are also important in understanding the theories that underpin and guide the programme in order for the students to succeed.

### **2.3.2 Theories that underpin Academic Development and Support programmes**

Much research has been conducted on SI and academic peer mentoring programmes (Douglas *et al.*, 2013:220–232; Drake & Foresman, 2012:4; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011:54; Malm *et al.*, 2011:282; Ning & Downing, 2010:922–923; Schulze, 2010:782–796). The theories on which these programmes are predominantly based are: peer-facilitated learning (2.3.2.1), cognitive development (2.3.2.2), Vygotsky's theory of socially mediated learning (2.3.2.3), social constructivism (2.3.2.4) and self-efficacy theory (SET) (2.3.2.5).

#### **2.3.2.1 Peer-facilitated learning**

The senior SI leaders and peer mentors assist students in enhancing their understanding of course material and improving their learning strategies. Peer facilitators also assist students in becoming more comfortable at a tertiary institution. This approach creates opportunities for students to work collaboratively with their SI leader and peer mentor and it guides students in the expectations within the learning environment (Ning & Downing, 2010:922).

#### **2.3.2.2 Cognitive development**

Hurley *et al.* (2006) note that cognitive development theory is based on work done by Bruner (1968), Piaget (1973) and Flower and Hayes (1981). Students are assisted in learning study material, linking old concepts to new ones, solving problems, strategically organising information, connecting real-life experiences to the context of the content, and engaging in discussion with one another to argue and compare their information, which stimulates the development of critical thinking skills. It is important for students to develop their higher-order thinking skills because the expectations of the institution are to produce students with good cognitive skills in order that they may use these skills when they are no longer at the institution but at the workplace. Therefore cognitive development forms part of the support programmes.



### **2.3.2.3 Vygotsky's theory of socially mediated learning**

According to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of socially mediated learning, learning takes place as an internal developmental process when the student is interacting with peers (socially) in a tertiary environment and there are available resources. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of socially mediated learning underpins the above-mentioned academic support programmes because both the programmes rely on trained senior students to assist students with understanding the content material. By creating a learning environment the students use learning strategies which allow them to learn from one another and develop their understanding about the content, while also developing their social skills. In these programmes academic writing is improved in order for students to make more sense of academic writing and completing academic tasks (Ning & Downing, 2010:923; Vygotsky, 1978:79).

### **2.3.2.4 Social constructivism**

According to Hurley *et al.* (2006), the theory of social constructivism is based on students building on their old knowledge in order to construct new knowledge. The SI leaders and peer mentors in the above-mentioned programmes facilitate the learning process of building on knowledge by conducting sessions in which the students take a more active role in their learning (during the session the students are active and not passive). Students have knowledge that they gain from the tertiary institution or the community; the knowledge that they have should be used to build and link new knowledge to old knowledge. The SI and peer mentoring sessions create opportunities for students to discuss their knowledge with their peers and learn from one another. In this way they build on the knowledge but they also learn from their SI leaders and peer mentors (Hurley *et al.*, 2006:12).

Students are encouraged to discuss their thoughts about their leaning or learning material during the session with other students and the SI leaders and peer mentors facilitate these discussions. This approach promotes constructing knowledge through social support and collaboration among peers and facilitators. When socially constructing knowledge students have a meaningful learning experience which also challenges their thinking of problem solving (Schulze, 2010:783).

### **2.3.2.5 Self-efficacy theory**

Based on Schulze's (2010) study, the SET theory can be defined as the ability to accomplish a task according to the individuals' own capabilities. The theory promotes goal setting and the students' achieving their goals to the best of their ability. SI leaders and peer mentors assist students in creating goals for themselves and creating a path to achieve the goals that have been set.

Academic support programmes have been developed to support students that are usually not performing well academically in their modules at the tertiary institution. Therefore the academic

support programmes should also be underpinned by retention theories. Retention theories have been proven to understand the needs of underprepared or at-risk students. The next section explains the link between academic support programmes and retention theories.

### 2.3.3 The link between academic support programmes and retention theories

Retention refers to the tertiary institution's ability to retain a student in the institution (Demetriou & Schmitz-Scriborski, 2011:300). Research into retention theories began in the 1600s and the theory was influenced by World War II, politics, society and the economy – all of which have played a role in shaping the theory till today (Demetriou & Schmitz-Scriborski, 2011:301). Based on these theories tertiary institutions have created academic support programmes to help students to have a better learning experience at the tertiary institution and to be successful academically (Demetriou & Schmitz-Scriborski, 2011:303).

Although the retention theories are not mentioned in the academic support programmes, the elements of these theories contribute to supporting academically underprepared or at-risk students (Astin, 1999 Bean & Eaton, 2002 Tinto, 2006). Table 2.1 summarises the retention theories and the role they play in academic support programmes.

Table 2.1: Explanation of retention theories and their role in academic support programmes

	<b>Astin (1999)</b>	<b>Bean &amp; Eaton (2002)</b>	<b>Tinto (2006)</b>
<b>Name of theory</b>	Student involvement	Student retention	Student retention (1975) changed to enhance student education (2006)
<b>Definition</b>	Student involvement is based in developmental tools that are used to create more effective learning environments. This term also refers to the quality and quantity of physical and psychological energy that students invest in their tertiary studies.	The support programme should also make provision for psychological attributes such as self-efficacy, locus of control and coping in order for the student to integrate successfully into the tertiary institution both academically and socially.	Students integrate into the tertiary environment during their first year. The interaction between student and the tertiary institution contributes to retaining the student in the tertiary institution system.
<b>Elements of the theory</b>	The theory is grounded in the following theories in which involvement is further explained: The subject matter – students are involved in their learning by meeting with faculty members, going to classes, doing and reading assignments and working in the library. It	Self-efficacy involves students acting in a certain way in order to achieve good marks or complete a task. Coping behaviours allow the students to become part of the environment such as good grades, working hard and the teacher liking you. The student	The elements are involvement, cultural, social, and economic and the institution shapes this theory. These are the factors that will always have an impact on the student. As an institution it entails what is being done to allow the

	<p>focuses purely on the expertise of a lecturer. Astin suggests this may not always be the ideal situation for an underprepared / at-risk student. The resource theory – the resources available for students to use at the institution. Resources assist with learning and development. Resources can be the library, laboratory, human resources and support personnel as well as study aid for finances.</p> <p>The individualised theory – the curriculum should meet the needs of the student, not just completing the course. The student needs to develop in order for this to take place. The student should be guided by the student advisor in the learning process.</p>	looks for these types of relationships and in this way integration can be promoted. The locus of control is the extent to which students view their past experiences and this may determine an individual's success and failures.	student to become more integrated or in recent studies more engaged with their study material and the environment they are in. There is a shift in focus on the institutional policies, procedures and processes to make the student the centre and build a community of success with the institution around the student.
<b>Academic support programmes and its link to retention theories</b>	<p>SI and Peer mentoring</p> <p>The programmes focus on teaching content by using learning strategies in order for the students to understand content and build on their knowledge. The programmes make the student aware of the resources available for their use, such as the social worker and psychologist. The SI leader or peer mentor acts as a guide to assist students in developing their skills and taking them through the learning process. The programmes appeal to the individual. Students are assisted to be more engaged with their material, allowing them to spend time and energy on their studies during these sessions.</p>	Students who participate become more responsible, show enhanced academic development and gain knowledge and understanding. They also acknowledge differences in culture and develop improved interpersonal skills. Mentor programmes are intended to improve retention because a mentor provides incoming students with the support needed to adapt to the tertiary institution.	Academic support programmes are a way for students to integrate into the tertiary institution because there are senior students guiding them through the new environment. The academic support programmes in place have not changed and therefore need to grow and get the necessary funding to develop and cater for a larger population of students. Within these academic support programmes data should be shown to demonstrate how students succeed.
<b>Link to critical theory paradigm</b>	The programme benefits the students because they become more actively involved in their own	Students become socially integrated in society through being given opportunities to be	Focus shifts occur in understanding that the student has other factors that contribute

	studies. The idea is to empower the students by making them aware of the resources available to them (Cohen <i>et al.</i> , 2011:31).	successful and develop their knowledge and understanding socially and understanding differences in knowledge and culture (Cohen <i>et al.</i> , 2011:31).	to their success. The institution should recognise that the student is a knowledgeable being and the institution should create policies that will assist the student in developing and learning at the institution. It is political in a sense that policies created by the institution should include academic support programmes (Cohen <i>et al.</i> , 2011:31).
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Table 2.1 shows similarities between the retention theories and academic support programmes at the tertiary institution. Elements such as students using resources and spending more energy on their studies as well as integrating into the tertiary environment academically and socially are found in both the retention theories and the academic support programmes. In the next section the academic support programmes found in the ADS unit at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus are discussed.

#### **2.4 Elements found in academic support programmes to develop at-risk students academically: the case at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus**

At the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus two academic support programmes are offered at the ADS unit. They are called the SI and the Academic Peer Mentoring programmes. The SI programme is a non-remedial approach to increase student retention and performance. SI is discipline-specific and provides regular out of class study sessions. In these sessions, students work together to develop key concepts about the content as well as effective study strategies to be followed. SI sessions are facilitated by the SI leader who completed the module successfully the previous year. SI targets first year modules, modules with a pass rate below 60%, modules with large classes, modules with difficult content and students that have failed their modules in which they received a result of below 50% (NWU, 2015:36).

The Academic Peer Mentoring programme was designed to assist first year students in making a successful transition from secondary school into the tertiary institution. The peer mentors are senior students that apply for the position and are trained to become peer mentors. The peer mentors assist the first year students (mentees) in developing learning strategies and adjusting to the tertiary institution environment. All first year students apply for a peer mentor to be assigned to them based on similarities of gender and study programme (NWU, 2015:40).

After receiving a warning letter, students who come to the ADS unit are considered to be at-risk students because they have not performed well academically. The at-risk students are placed in academic support programmes by the advisor to assist them in improving on their academic results. The key elements found in the academic support programmes to support at-risk students are discussed below.

The key elements found in ADS unit academic support programmes to nurture academic development in at-risk students are developing: academic and social integration (2.4.1), student engagement (2.4.2), self-efficacy and self-regulatory skills (2.4.3), SDL (2.4.4) and critical thinking skills (2.4.5), as shown in Figure 2.1 below.

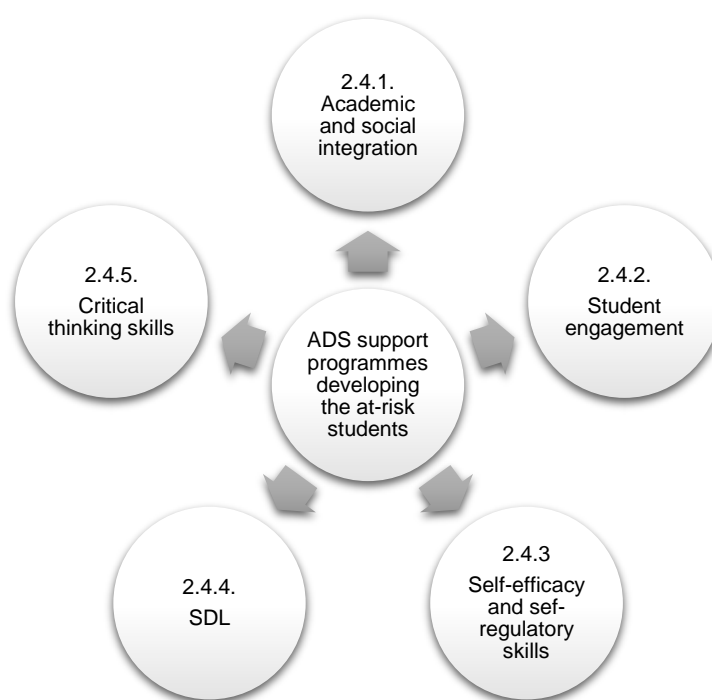


Figure 2.1: ADS unit academic support programmes developing the at-risk student

### 2.4.1 Academic and social integration

It is important for students to integrate into the tertiary environment, since this creates a less stressful environment in which the students can learn. When the students join the tertiary environment they learn to become socially or academically successful in understanding the different cultures and the structure of the tertiary institution (Rienties *et al.*, 2012:687).

According to Tinto (2006), students should be given opportunities to interact with faculty, administration, support services and their peers. This interaction assists the students in becoming integrated into the institution. Therefore it is very important for students to be able to move from secondary school into the tertiary institution with ease. This is actually the first step to developing a student academically (Tinto, 2006:2).

To integrate academically the students must cope with the academic demands of the institution's academic environment and the students must be able to apply their knowledge for

them to perform well. The social integration requires the students to keep up with the social activities at the institution and be able to work in groups with their peers to complete group tasks. Students also need to adjust emotionally to the academic life-style (Rienties *et al.*, 2012:687).

The Academic Peer Mentoring programme at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus was designed for first year students, with the purpose of a smooth transition from secondary school into the tertiary institution. As the at-risk students go to the sessions the mentor assists the students to interact with their academics as well as peers for greater social interaction. This programme encourages students to engage and participate in events at the tertiary institution and enhance their experiences (Christies, 2014:955). The programme helps the students to be culturally sensitive to the different backgrounds, to improve their communication skills, to develop and maintain relationships and to manage their time by balancing their social and academic lifestyle (Colvin & Ashman, 2010:122).

Often, at-risk students can be inclined to isolate themselves from their peers, lecturers and support services and because the Academic Peer Mentoring programme is voluntary they do not always see the value in using the academic support programme. In their second year, if they carry first year modules, only then they are allowed to have a peer mentor for the first year modules they carry into the second year, even though the programme is mainly intended for first year students.

The programme co-ordinator assists the at-risk students by allocating them to a peer mentor. The mentor assists the students in establishing networks to integrate into the tertiary institution and supports them emotionally so that they can cope with the academic environment (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011:42). For these students to cope they also need to be given opportunities to put time, energy and effort into their learning activities.

### **2.4.2 Student engagement**

There are many recognised definitions for students' engagement in higher education. Students' involvement with activities within the tertiary environment determines the quality of learning, the time and energy they spend on a task, and their participation both inside and outside the classroom. Students learn effectively when engaged with learning activities. Consequently there are measurable outcomes (Harper & Quaye, 2009:33; Pike, Kuh, McCormick, Ethington & Smart, 2011:81; Zepke & Leach, 2010:168).

Students are engaged when they are actively working on their academic tasks. SI assists students with spending time on their academic work outside of the classroom and it provides students with opportunities to get involved with their academic work (Harper & Quaye, 2009:34; Ning & Downing, 2010:922).

The students are able to work and discuss their academic assignments and projects with their peers and work collaboratively to complete their academic tasks. During a peer mentoring session the mentee is engaged in discussion with the mentor and the mentor assists the students in completing tasks by giving them feedback. The mentees work collaboratively in small groups for active involvement, thus more meaningful learning takes place. They are given more time so that they can spend their energy engaging with their learning material during an academic support programme session (Cassidy, 2012:796; Douglas *et al.*, 2013:220; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011:52; Harper & Quaye, 2009:34).

Engagement is also linked with Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement. He suggests that if students are physically and psychologically involved in activities at a tertiary institution then they are engaged with their learning (Astin, 1999:519). When at-risk students use academic support programmes they have created opportunities for themselves to become engaged in their learning activities and make a commitment to the programme (Astin, 1999:527).

#### **2.4.3 Self-efficacy and self-regulation skills**

In paragraph 2.3.2 self-efficacy is described as one of the theories that underpin support programmes. Self-efficacy comes to the fore when the students make choices, take action, make an effort and persevere in obtaining the goals they have set for themselves (Van Dinther, Dochy & Segers, 2010:96). In the peer mentoring sessions at-risk students set goals for themselves with the assistance of the peer mentors and the peer mentors encourage the student to attain the goals set to develop self-efficacy (Schulze, 2010:780–784). In the SI sessions the group of peers collaboratively assist each other in deciding on common goals in order to be successful with their academic work and assist each in learning while the SI leader facilitates them through the goal-setting process (Ning & Downing, 2010:923).

Self-regulation is achieved when a student attains all their goals, and this requires a very highly motivated student (Lee, Lee & Bong, 2014:86). At-risk students are often very negative towards their studies and they are not always motivated (2.1). A self-regulated student is very involved in their learning because the student is able to plan, monitor, control and reflect on their learning, but all this is done only if the student is motivated to do so (Lee *et al.*, 2014:87). There is a link between Astin's (1999) student's involvement theory and self-regulation theory because according to Astin (1999:522) if students are motivated then they are dedicated to their learning. This retention theory underpins the support programme because the mentors and the SI leaders motivate students to achieve their goals and provide feedback to students when they perform well on academic tasks (Christies, 2014:960).

#### **2.4.4 Self-directed learning (SDL)**

According to Mentz *et al.* (2014) there are five characteristics of an SDL student: ownership of learning (taking responsibility, diagnosing and formulating learning goals and learning

strategies); extension of own learning (implementing learning strategies, applying subject knowledge in new learning context, being able to self-assess their learning); management of own learning (choosing learning strategies, formulating questions to guide inquiry and learning needs become learning objectives); self-regulation and metacognition (planning, goal setting, reflecting and evaluating on their own learning); and motivation (the student is motivated because they enjoy their studies, there was a goal, they demonstrate a need to know, they are curious, independent and responsible and they persist with their learning).

When at-risk students start using the support programmes offered they are actually taking a step toward responsible learning because both the academic support programmes are voluntary. This means that the at-risk students have identified support programmes as a resourceful tool to assist with their learning. During the SI session study skills are developed and students are made more aware of their own learning strategies and are able to use these strategies in other modules (Ning & Downing, 2010:923). Students are given opportunities to ask questions, clarify concepts, are encouraged to participate in their own learning, develop skills to summarise notes and learn to organise their learning material (Drake & Foresman, 2012:4; Malm *et al.*, 2011:282–283; Ning & Downing, 2010:923). Students are encouraged to set clear goals and the academic support programmes assist the students in achieving the set goals (Ning & Downing, 2010:923; Schulze, 2010:92). The academic support programmes offered at ADS assist the students in becoming more self-directed learners by taking a more responsible role in their learning.

Academic support programmes assist the students with developing skills that are needed for learning and becoming more self-directed learners. These skills actually assist students in becoming critical thinkers. They are able to develop the following skills needed for critical thinking: analysing text, understanding new concepts, creating relationships by recognising patterns and being able to communicate their knowledge and understanding of concepts and applying new reasoning skills (Dynan, Cate & Rhee, 2010:97).

#### **2.4.5 Critical thinking skills**

Critical thinking skills are part of cognitive development. Figure 2.2 illustrates the role of critical thinking in the cognitive process.



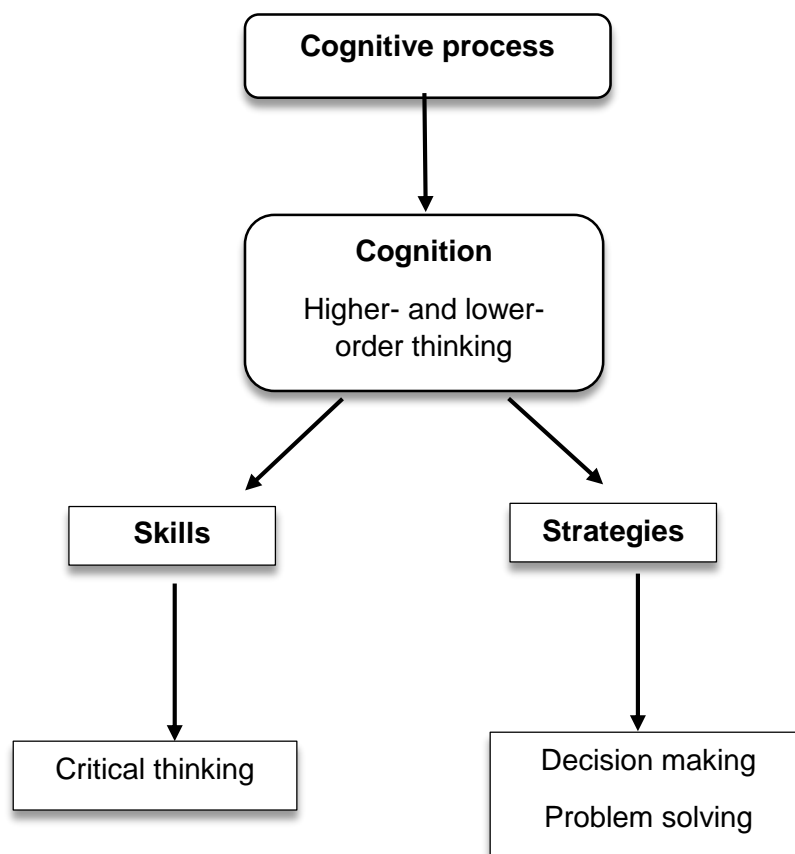


Figure 2.2: The role of critical thinking in the cognitive process (adapted from Grosser, 2006 and Lombard & Grosser, 2008)

Cognitive development takes place when students interact and support one another in the tertiary learning environment, when there are set goals, when they participate in activities where learning occurs and learning is encouraged. Cognitive development gives rise to a cognitive process that allows the students to use their resources and tools to argue, reason, make choices and debate. This often includes using the tools and resources from their cultural or their own historical background to assist them with solving problems (Lombard & Grosser, 2008:1366–1367).

When students are required to solve problems they use cognitive strategies. According to Grosser (2006:360), a strategy is different from a skill: a cognitive strategy is problem solving, decision-making ability and conceptualising. A cognitive skill is more like critical thinking and creative thinking and it is used to process information, classify, compare, categorise, analyse and evaluate arguments, being able to reason, argue and form own opinions (Grosser, 2006:360; Grosser & Nel, 2013:3).

The core elements of critical thinking skills, according to Facione (2009:5–7), are interpretation (students are able to comprehend and express meaning of experiences, situations, judgements, rules, procedures or criteria, being able to put something in their own words); analysis (being able to identify relationships among statements, concepts, descriptions and being able to

express beliefs and judgements when examining ideas, and to detect and analyse arguments); evaluation (being able to assess the credibility of statements, actual relationships among statements and questions); inference (being able to draw reasonable conclusions and query evidence); explanation (a skill that students use when they describe methods, results, justify procedures, defend with good reason and present good arguments to seek understanding); and self-regulation (being able to use one's own reasoning skills to analyse and evaluate their own work).

Cognitive development is one of the theories that underpin academic support programmes (2.3.2). During the SI and Academic Peer Mentoring sessions, students can ask questions, the SI leader or peer mentor can re-direct questions to students during a session to probe understanding, the students can break down problems to analyse them, make sense of questions and relate them to real-life experiences to make more sense of the information. They can also apply the information to new contexts or situations. Students interact with one another in social settings and they learn from one another even though they are from different cultural backgrounds. Students work in groups and have discussions about their academic work in order to organise, explain and communicate their thinking (Douglas *et al.*, 2013:230; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011:52; Malm *et al.*, 2011:283; Ning & Downing, 2010:922). The academic support programmes of the ADS unit assist the at-risk students to develop their critical thinking and strategy skills during the support sessions.

The five key elements are explained to at-risk students when they join the academic support programmes. According to the literature, some of the elements actually link with each other. The literature also shows there has been a shift to understanding the digital age and the implications for support programmes. This aspect is elaborated on in the next section.

## **2.5 Academic Development and Support programmes in the digital age**

Since technology is advancing at a rapid rate, the academic community is seeking to understand the new generation and their use of technology in their community and daily lives (Jones & Hosein, 2010:43). According to Jones and Hosein (2010:43), commonly used terms are the Millennials, the Y-generation, the net generation, and digital natives ('digital natives' is a term coined by Marc Prensky in 2001). Research shows there is another term that might be used to refer to students today, namely the i-Generation (Jones & Hosein, 2010:43; Rosen, 2011:1). The academic community may debate on the name for this generation but they do agree that this generation is being exposed to new technologies. The digital natives or net generation have a natural ability to use technology at a high level and may have thinking patterns that differ from the established ones (Jones & Czerniewicz, 2010:317; Prensky, 2001:1).

Prensky (2001:1) suggests that there are two sets of people in the digital generation: the so-called “digital natives” and the “digital immigrants” [sic]. Digital natives have an understanding of the digital language, while digital immigrants learn the language through trial and error. For example, digital natives do not need a manual to set up a personal computer, while the digital immigrant will need to look at the manual and apply their understanding of how to set up a personal computer (Prensky, 2001:2).

When we observe our students that are digital natives we notice that they are always on some type of device. These devices are referred to as information and communication devices and they can either be a cell phone, a laptop or a tablet (Van Deventer & Blignaut, 2013:1). They use the devices to stay in touch with friends and family through communication platforms such as Facebook or Twitter or Google+. They also use the devices to connect with the Internet to find resources that can be used to complete their assignments or even to link to the institution’s learning management system to find information from their lecturers about the modules they study (Van Deventer & Blignaut, 2013:2). There are also students that use their devices to play games. However, not all students are familiar with technology. Students who can afford the latest technology have it and make some use of it. Students that are not exposed to technology can be at a disadvantage in the digital world (Bennet & Maton, 2010:5). The effective use of these devices also depends on the access students have to technology outside the tertiary institution. According to Bennet and Maton (2010:7), not all students are comfortable with the idea of using technology in their studies or as a tool for learning because they are unable to access technology due to financial constraints or do not see the value in using technology.

Students entering tertiary institutions are not always equal in terms of the digital age. When students have limited access to technology due to their background, they are referred to as digital strangers and still need to learn the digital language (Bennet & Maton, 2010:7). These researchers suggest that it will be valuable to incorporate technology activities into the curriculum in order for students become more comfortable with the idea of using technology in their studies.

In the South African context it is found that due to demographic differences of the digital natives (also known as the net generation), South African students can either have a familiar digital background because they grow up using technology or they are digital strangers because they are not necessarily exposed to technology (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2010:859). In South Africa when students enter tertiary institutions it is found that depending on their course requirements students are being exposed to computers, the Internet and social media. Even if they are digital strangers they can over time develop skills to use technology when studying. The most popular device that students use is mobile technology such as cell phones because they are able to access the Internet faster in this way (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2010: 863).

Exposure to technology can also mean that students have access to a vast amount of information; they need to use the information gained to improve on their skills and knowledge since that can enable the digital natives/net generation to solve problems within the teaching and learning context (Bennet & Maton, 2010:7). Therefore, when profiling students it is valuable to determine the level of technology to which the students have been or will be exposed. The support programmes offered at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus have not yet made provision to accommodate technology in an SI or peer mentoring session. The academic support programmes are not fully aware of the technology support that students need in their learning for academic purposes. Based on the above-mentioned literature, it is becoming more and more important for ADS programmes to take technology into account in this digital age.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

A literature study was conducted to engage with the literature that focused on profiling students by finding similar characteristics or factors to satisfy the profile of an at-risk student. Profiling can be important in the South African curriculum to gain insight in the diversity among students accessing tertiary institutions. One of the factors that contributed to students being unsuccessful is the power structures within the community from which the students come.

The scholarly review also assisted me in gaining insight into the nature of support programmes offered at the ADS unit at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus. It was important to establish the theories that underpin ADS academic support programmes, to find out the nature of the academic support programmes. It was found that there are elements within retention theories that link to academic support programmes. The academic support programmes are developed by the tertiary institution to assist students in becoming academically successful.

The academic support programmes have senior students that assist students with learning strategies and concept development. The literature is not very clear on the faculty member or the lecturer's involvement in these programmes and whether the faculty member is aware of the implications of the academic support programme for their curriculum. Another related issue is that these programmes are not ready to support the digital students (2.5) accessing the tertiary institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A concern is that at-risk students are given warning letters and the students make their way to the ADS unit but there is no information given to substantiate that the at-risk student are academically successful after using the academic support programmes. I hear the theories but I cannot hear the students' voices that actually use these programmes. I would argue that if the ADS unit wants to redesign their programmes they must justify their academic support programmes by taking into consideration the experiences of students involved in these academic support programmes.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the research design, methodology and process that were used to conduct my research study. I explain the qualitative approach to my research study and the reason for

using a critical theory paradigm for my research study. I explain the sample that was used, the life design narrative methodology approach that was employed to generate data as well as the method of data analysis. A discussion on ensuring validity and trustworthiness and ethical considerations concludes the chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND PROCESSES

#### 3.1 Introduction

In his explanation of research designs, Creswell (2009) says the following:

Research designs are plans and the procedures for research that span the decisions of broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis. This plan involves several decisions and they need not be taken in the order in which they make sense to me and the order of their presentation here. The overall decision involves which design should be used to study a topic. Informing this decision should be the worldview assumptions the researcher brings to the study; procedures of inquiry (called strategies); and specific methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The selection of a research design is based on the nature of the research problem or issue being addressed, the researchers' personal experience, and then audience for the study.

According to Creswell (2009), a research design is a plan and procedure used to study a topic. The research design involves strategies and methods that will be used to collect and analyse the data. A research design is chosen based on the research problem.

It is important for five key elements to be considered in the research design (Punch, 2006). These five elements are elaborated on below: the research methodology (3.2), the paradigm (3.3), the sample and research environment (3.4), the method of data generation (3.5), and the method of data analysis (3.6). To conclude this chapter, strategies to ensure validity and trustworthiness (3.7) as well as ethical considerations (3.8) are briefly discussed.

#### 3.2 Methodology: life design narrative

Qualitative research was used to explore, understand and interpret the meaning and develop an understanding of how people or individuals are able to adapt to a central phenomenon or situation (Creswell, 2009:4; Merriam, 2009:5; Nieuwenhuis, 2007a:50). Qualitative research focuses on a variety of research designs which the researcher can use to interpret, describe and find patterns or themes in people's lives (Merriam, 2009:13).

This research study involved a form of qualitative research adopting a life design narrative as methodology. The life design narrative methodology allows individuals to construct narratives, and to deconstruct and re-author the narratives in order for the individuals to explore new ways to achieve their goals in society (Savickas, 2012:13).

Narratives are more commonly associated with 'stories'. For Creswell (2012:502), narratives are not just any story, they are an individual's experience and therefore they are 'true stories'.

Narratives can either be written or told from a first person perspective or be collected from documents (Creswell, 2012:502). The narratives allow researchers to find meaning and understand the individual's experiences through their narrative (Creswell, 2012:502; Merriam, 2009:32; Nieuwenhuis, 2007c:102). According to Thrift and Amundson (2007:44–45), narrative research allows individuals to become aware of themselves within their narrative. This allows the individuals to become more aware and understand the societal structures that played a role in their lives. It also allows for reflection of their narratives in relation to society and culture through the language that is used to depict their life experiences in their narratives.

It is evident that narrative research has close connotations with life design narrative methodology. Savickas (2012), one of the first scholars to use the term 'life design narrative methodology', uses this approach to develop individuals' career paths in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He used narratives to counsel people on developing their career paths, so that they could develop strategies and techniques to better their careers but also understand the development of their career path (Savickas, 2012:13).

Through a life design narrative methodology, individuals are also given the opportunity to re-author their narrative. The individuals process their narratives and begin to understand their own experiences as they have taken place within society through relationships or when people are in dialogue with one another. This methodology also assists the individuals to reflect on their life experiences, as well as on the structures within society that play a role in the life experiences of people within the society (Savickas, 2007:2).

Within society individuals construct and make meaning of their beliefs, their part in the global economy, the need to balance time between work and family, and become aware of their self-reflection and self-realisation, as well as the environment that they reside in (Savickas, Nota, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck, & Van Vianen 2009:245). These factors form part of individuals' life designs so that they can use their narratives to understand, interpret, critique and make meaning of the above-mentioned factors in society. In addition to narrating their experiences, individuals are also given the opportunity to reflect on and re-author their life design (Savickas, 2012:14). The theory of life design narrative methodology which is illustrated in Figure 3.1 is followed by an elaboration of its phases (3.2.1, 3.2.2 and 3.2.3).

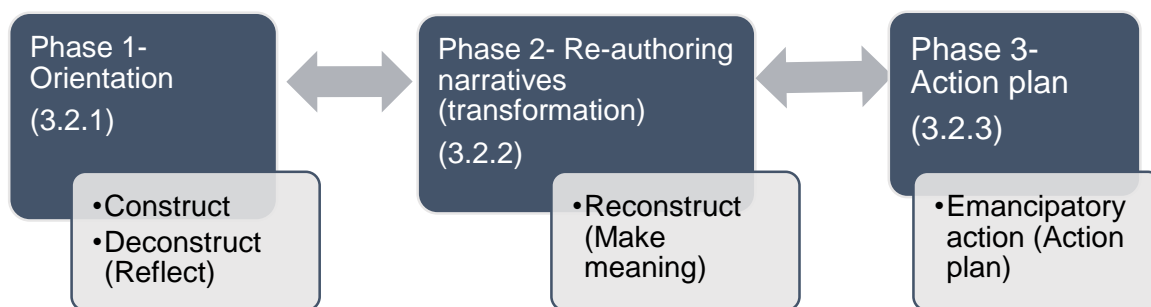


Figure 3.1: Life design narrative methodology (adapted from Savickas, 2007)

### 3.2.1 Phase 1: Orientation

The first phase in the life design narrative is called orientation. In this phase individuals construct and deconstruct their narrative. When the individuals construct their narrative they are narrating their own biography by selecting events which describe their past till present academic careers using “micronarratives” (Savickas, 2012:14). “Micronarratives” allow the individuals narratives to describe “complex relationships within society” and, as the micronarratives develop, to form a constructed macronarrative or a larger story (Savickas, 2012:15).

When individuals deconstruct their narrative they are able to take them apart and are given an opportunity to think about the dominating structures within their society as well as in their lives. This gives them an opportunity to understand the situation from their own view without deviating from their narrative (Chope & Consoli, 2007:91; Savickas, 2012:16). For Savickas (2007), deconstructing one’s narrative from a macronarrative into micronarratives will assist one in critiquing the social structures and understanding the problems that one experiences due to the structures within society or the actions one has taken (Sliep & Kotze, 2007:141). During deconstruction, the individual can reflect on their narrative. The value of reflection is that it gives the individual an opportunity to explore their narratives and to reflect on themselves, their decisions and relationships within society that led to the events by which their micronarrative is shaped (McMahon, Watson, Chetty & Hoelson, 2012:731). The narrative prompts used for phase 1 are shown below.

#### *Narrative Prompt: Construction*

*Explain, in detail, your tertiary academic career thus far and include how you received a warning letter. Why did you decide to attend SI or peer mentoring sessions? When writing your story, focus on successes and failures you’ve experienced during your academic career. Explain any differences between tertiary institutions and secondary schools. Were you able to adjust in the tertiary education environment? (Addendum B)*



*Narrative prompt: Deconstruction*

*Can you break down your story so as to identify specific events and/or factors that resulted in these successes and failures? Please explain why you think these events and/or factors were so prominent in your academic career. Focus on the ADS support programmes, how they assisted or did not assist in your learning. Think about what prompted you to attend the SI and/or academic peer mentoring programme. (Addendum B)*

In this phase the student participants needed to construct their macronarrative and from their macronarrative it was deconstructed to form a micronarrative (see above). Therefore in phase 2 narrative prompts were given to the student participants. The student participants reflected on their deconstructed micronarrative and re-authored their narrative. This aspect is addressed in the next section.

### **3.2.2 Phase 2: Re-authoring narratives (Transformation)**

In this phase the individual reconstructs and makes meaning of their narratives in order to transform their narratives. If narratives can be constructed and deconstructed, the narratives can also be reconstructed and this means that the individual writes a new micronarrative of themselves within the tertiary institution (Chope & Consoli, 2007:91). The individual narrates a micronarrative of their academic development and in doing so they start to reconstruct themselves in this narrative. As the individual reconstructs their narratives they embark on the process of re-authoring their narrative. Through re-authoring, they begin to learn from their experiences and transform their narratives. This gives the individual an opportunity to question the social structures influencing their experiences and to re-author themselves in their narratives (Chen, 2007:32; Chope & Consoli, 2007:91; Sliep & Kotze, 2007:142). The idea is that the individual can approach their problems differently but to also reconstruct a narrative that is more meaningful to his or her life (Savickas, 2012:16). The reconstructed narrative becomes the new knowledge that the participant gains about their life situation. This enables the individual to emancipate themselves from the social structures that might hinder their academic development (McMahon *et al.*, 2012:737). The narrative prompt used for phase 2 is presented next.

*Narrative prompt: Reconstruction (Making meaning)*

*If you could change the circumstances of your academic career, what would you change? What would you have done differently? What would you have liked to be different? Rewrite your tertiary academic career story to illustrate what you would have had considered ideal. If you had used the ADS support services earlier would it have had an effect on your academic studies? What would you have liked to know*

*before you came to the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus? What would have made the transition easy from school to tertiary institution? (Addendum B)*

Only one narrative prompt was given to the student participants because all that was required in phase 2 was reconstructing a narrative. The student participants reflected on their re-authored narrative and created an action plan which is discussed in the next section.

### **3.2.3 Phase 3: Action plan**

In this phase the individual devises an action plan of activities that they intend to carry out in order to improve their life situation. The individual should be able to use the reconstructed narratives as a form of emancipatory action in which they are able to take responsibility for their own action and act on improving their academic development (Savickas, 2012:17). In addition, the individual should also be able to establish themselves in the narratives and gain new knowledge about their identities (Savickas, 2012:12) in order for the individual to use the knowledge to emancipate themselves at a tertiary institution. The narrative prompt for phase 3 is shown below.

*Narrative prompt: Emancipatory action (Action plan)*

*Given your actual academic career story and your ideal idea of an academic career path at a tertiary institution, draw up an action plan (maximum five action points) that you can follow to further cultivate your successes and address your weaknesses. Do you have any suggestions to improve the academic support programmes at ADS (in particular the SI and/or the academic peer mentoring)? (Addendum B)*

The life design narrative methodology guided the student participants to write their narrative according to their experiences within the tertiary institution. In the next section the paradigm of this research study is discussed.

### **3.3 Paradigm: critical theory**

The philosophical worldview explains why qualitative research was chosen: it is a set of beliefs that guide the research (Creswell, 2009:5–6). The worldviews are formed by paradigms, which are defined as philosophies with a set of assumptions and beliefs. A paradigm is used to guide the research design, to collect and interpret the data (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:40). For the purpose of this research study a critical theory paradigm was used.

Critical theory has been influenced by works mainly of Habermas, Paulo Freire and the Frankfurt School of thought. In addition it is also a philosophy influenced by Karl Marx and Foucault (Cohen *et al.*, 2011:31; Klincheloe & McLaren, 2008:403; Merriam, 2009:34; Nieuwenhuis, 2007a:60). From an ontological point of view, critical theory seeks to find the hidden relations behind structures and people. The relations need to be exposed or removed

and this requires one to critique these relationships (Delanty & Strydom, 2003:6). Critical theory is political in nature (Merriam, 2009:34); it seeks to not just understand but to critique society structures. This paradigm acknowledges that power is given to certain individuals or groups in society that can easily oppress others; therefore this paradigm seeks to find the injustices that cause people to become oppressed (Cohen *et al.*, 2011:32; Freire, 1970:36; Merriam, 2009:34).

From an epistemological point of view, critical theory should be reflective and transformational knowledge (Delanty & Strydom, 2003:5–6). The methodological view is that critical theory should be self-reflective and should question the literature and the philosophy; it should be constructed in such a way that the literary text can be understood and the voice of the researcher can be heard (Agger, 1991:121).

Critical theory assisted me in critiquing the structures within the tertiary institution and in becoming aware of any power structures influencing the ADS programmes that support at-risk students.

### **3.4 Sample and research environment**

The sample of participants is the representation of a group within a certain population. The participants are selected from a population that have the characteristics that best represent and can provide the most insightful information in a particular research study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:145). Two types of sampling methods are probability sampling (based on random methods and generalising a population) and non-probability sampling (the researcher does not know the size of the population or the individuals in the population) (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:231; Maree & Pietersen, 2007:172). For the purpose of this research study non-probability sampling was used to identify the participants. In non-probability sampling there are four main types of sampling: convenience sampling (easily and conveniently available), quota sampling (identifies categories of people that need to be represented by the required number in the sample), snowball sampling (population is difficult to find), and purposive sampling (sample is done for a specific purpose) (Maree & Pietersen, 2007:177–178). For this research study purposive sampling was used.

A purposive sample is a sample that has the typical characteristics of the population that is needed in the research study (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:232). I decided to use this method because it would allow me to select participants who were situated at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus, who were seen to be at risk based on the modules they had failed in the previous academic year, and students who were in their second historical year of study. The students had been identified by the tertiary institution as at-risk students, based on their poor academic record and had also received warning letters regarding the future of their studies. In the letters the students were referred to the ADS unit for support in improving their academic record.

In this research study systems were not compared; the focus was on the support programmes that ADS offers at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus to improve academic performance. At the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus there are only two faculties: the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Information Technology which has three schools, namely the School of Accounting Sciences, the School of Information Technology and the School of Economic Sciences, and the Faculty of Humanities which has four schools, namely the School of Behavioural Sciences, the School of Languages, the School of Basic Sciences and the School of Educational Sciences.

One at-risk student participant per school was invited to participate (seven students in total) because of the diversity of educational practice in the tertiary environment and according to the characteristics of an at-risk student. The characteristics of an at-risk student are a lack of self-regulatory and self-efficacy skills, a lack of motivation towards their academic career, poor academic performance or inability to fit into the tertiary education environment. A sample of at-risk students with the most characteristics of an at-risk student was invited to participate in the research (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:232).

### **3.5 Method of data generation**

In this research study two data collection methods were used: a self-administered biographical questionnaire and a life design narrative. The first method of data generation was a self-administered biographical questionnaire to determine the profile of the student participants (Maree & Pietersen, 2007:164). The characteristics that made up the profile of the students illustrated the diversity of the student participants. The student participants completed the self-administered biographical questionnaire on their own and the researcher assisted them when assistance was needed (De Vos *et al.*, 2011:186–188).

The student participants were identified according to the warning letter list sent to the ADS unit via the academic administration office. I contacted the student participants and invited them to meet with me so that I could tell them about the research study. During the first meeting the student participants were given a narrative journal in which they were first asked to complete the self-administered biographical questionnaire (Addendum A). The following biographical information was supplied by the student participants: gender, age, first and second language, first generation, residence, financial aid and balancing of academic and social life (Addendum A). These characteristics were used to build a profile of the second year at-risk students participating in the research. After the students had completed the self-administered biographical questionnaire they were informed about the second data generation method, namely the narratives.

The second method of data generation was a life design narrative approach (Savickas, 2012:14). This method enabled the student participants' voices to be heard so that they could share their experiences of being involved in academic support programmes offered to the at-risk students by the ADS unit. During the second meeting the student participants were given the same narrative journal in which they could write their narratives (Addendum B). The participants were invited to write their narratives according to three phases. In the first phase, two narrative prompts were given (3.5.1), one narrative prompt in the second phase (3.5.2), and one in the last phase (3.5.3). By writing in the narrative journal, the student participants were able to construct, deconstruct and reflect on their narratives and give voice to their experiences at the tertiary institution (Fritz & Beekman, 2007:165).

### **3.5.1 Data collection – Phase 1**

Narrative prompts (Addendum B) were given to the student participants to construct their narratives through their personal experiences of how they had become academically unsuccessful (Nieuwenhuis, 2007c:103). In the first narrative prompt the student participants constructed a narrative about the successes and failures they had experienced at the tertiary institution. Then they wrote a second narrative to deconstruct their first narrative. The purpose of this approach was to get the student participants to reflect on their experiences and make meaning of their first narrative so as to expose the structures within the tertiary institution or factors outside the tertiary institution that they thought might have contributed to their becoming unsuccessful in their academic career. The student participants in this research study were given an opportunity to re-author their narratives to choose their own successful path at the tertiary institution. Re-authoring of narratives is discussed in the next section.

### **3.5.2 Data collection – Phase 2**

A narrative prompt (Addendum B) was given to the student participants for them to re-author their narratives. When the student participants re-authored their narrative they started to develop micronarratives (Savickas, 2012:14). Micronarratives helped the student participants to use their knowledge and make meaning of their experiences at the tertiary institution. From their experiences they could criticise the structures of the tertiary institution and/or the societal structures in which they found themselves. Their experiences enabled them to make meaning of and reflect on their micronarratives and form new ideas on becoming more academically successful (Cochran, 2007:17); they began to transform their own knowledge about their academic situation and to re-author themselves in a new academic career. When they re-authored their narrative they reflected on the narrative to develop an action plan which is discussed in the next section.

### **3.5.3 Data collection – Phase 3**

The last narrative prompt (Addendum B) given required the student participants to develop an action plan for themselves to follow to become academically successful. When they re-authored their narratives, the student participants became more aware of their responsibilities in developing their own academic career paths to become successful (Sliep & Kotze, 2007:142). The student participants used their own knowledge and developed their own plan of success rather than being told to do so by the tertiary institution. After the student participants had completed the narrative journal, I collected the journals and then transcribed the data which was subsequently analysed. The method of data analysis employed is discussed in the next section

### **3.6 Method of data analysis**

Data analysis assists with organising many data sets that are assembled and coded. These data sets can be in the form of field notes, interviews and transcripts. According to McMillian and Schumacher (2001:461), qualitative data analysis is mainly an inductive process of organising data into categories and identifying patterns or relationships amongst the categories. Qualitative analysis is a systematic process of selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting the data to provide explanations of the emerging patterns or categories (McMillian & Schumacher, 2001:462).

By analysing the data qualitatively the researcher is led to answering the research questions by working inductively (Merriam, 2009:176). For the purpose of this research study, critical narrative analysis was employed. Critical narrative analysis elicits the macronarrative and the micronarratives of the individual using the narrative life design methodology (Figure 3.1). The design assisted me in understanding the students' experiences within the tertiary institution as well as the academic support programmes that had been offered to them (Souto-Manning, 2012:161). In this way themes were identified and the student participants themselves developed their own knowledge and understanding about their experiences which would eventually lead them to emancipation and empowerment (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013:135).

The student participants told their narratives after receiving narrative prompts and then wrote their narratives in a narrative journal. The meaning of the narratives was conveyed by the student participants at the different phases in the life design narrative methodology (Savickas, 2012:15).

In phase 1 the student participants constructed and deconstructed their narratives which represented the macronarrative and the micronarratives. I analysed the data to search for the emerging themes of successes and failures that the student participants experienced in the tertiary institution (Phoenix, 2008:72) (3.2.1).

In phase 2 the student participants re-authored their narratives. The micronarrative is the voice of the student participants and the knowledge of their own development to become academically successful. Therefore the data was analysed to find emerging themes of changes in the at-risk student participants' narratives (Squire, 2008:52). Since the student participants are part of the tertiary institution, it was important to analyse the narratives in a social context so as to identify emerging themes or patterns that relate to the tertiary institution (Squire, 2008:62–63) (3.2.2).

In phase 3 the student participants developed an action plan by reflecting on their re-authored narrative. The data analysis from this phase reflected the student participants' emancipation after they were able to make meaning of their experiences. The themes represented new academic career paths for these students at the tertiary institution (Phoenix, 2008:76) (3.2.3).

### **3.7 Validity and trustworthiness**

Validity refers to the degree to which the explanations of the phenomenon in research describe the realities of the world (McMillian & Schumacher, 2001:407). Trustworthiness is a process that checks the validity of the generated data and the interpretation of the data – it is a shared 'truth'. It is evidence of the researcher's accountability which involves both rigor and integrity (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major, 2010:178). For the purpose of this research study member checking, an audit trail, peer briefing, thick descriptions and crystallisation were used to check the validity and trustworthiness of the data.

**Member checking** is a process whereby data are verified by the participants, as well as by other role players in the research study, to enhance the validity of the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2007b:80). Since I would be interpreting the data, I used different words from the ones used by the student participants. After I had interpreted the data I allowed the student participants to check whether I had accurately presented their experiences. By doing this, it was not my voice but the voices of the student participants that were heard (Merriam, 2009:217).

**An audit trail** is used to establish the credibility of the study by bringing an external auditor to check both the process and the product of inquiry and to determine the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2010:128). In the case of this research study the supervisors were consulted to review the method in which the narratives had been collected and to make sure that data was presented in their true form in the transcriptions.

**Peer briefing** takes place when someone who is familiar with the research study challenges the researcher on the research process that is being used (Creswell & Miller, 2010:129). In the course of this research study my supervisors and I discussed the best research methodology, design and techniques to be used to present the data and the research process.

**Thick descriptions** provide as much information as possible about the place where the research takes place and about the participants (Creswell & Miller, 2010:129). When information is described in suitably rich ('thick') detail the readers of the research study can draw their own conclusions from the data presented (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:100). In this research much information was given to contextualise the ADS unit within the tertiary institution and the relationship ADS has with at-risk students.

**Crystallisation** is defined as a combination of multiple forms of data collection analysis. In the process multiple genres are merged to represent a series of text that builds a rich and open account of the data (Ellingson, 2009:4). Crystallisation provides depth in representing, organising and analysing the details within the data, therefore strong themes or patterns emerge from the data (Ellingson, 2009:10). When patterns emerged from the narratives that had been generated from the data I gained a complex and deeper understanding of the at-risk students' unfavourable situation at the tertiary institution. The patterns that emerged from the close analysis of the data crystallised to form themes. According to Nieuwenhuis (2007b:81), crystallisation is credible when others reading the data analysis are able to see the same emerging themes. In the case of my study, this added to the trustworthiness.

Validity and trustworthiness of a study are in order for the research process to be credible, but it is also important for the researcher to act ethically throughout the research process. The ethical considerations related to this study are discussed in the next section.

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

When conducting a research study, ethical issues must be considered and the researcher must build ethical practice into the study (Neuman, 2011:143) since participants are consulted; therefore the researcher must have moral and professional standards to ensure that no harm comes to the participants and that the participants' rights and/or privacy is not violated in any way (Neuman, 2011:143). When data is being generated from the participants, proper research techniques should be used sensitively. Ethics is of the utmost importance when a researcher attempts to find the balance between the knowledge that is required to contribute to the body of scholarship. Furthermore, there should be no interference in the lives of the participants consulted in the research study (Neuman, 2011:145). The following ethical considerations were adhered to in this research study: informed consent from the participants, their right to privacy, and protection from harm and accuracy.

**Informed consent:** Participants should never be coerced into participating in a research study; it must be voluntary. It is not enough to merely obtain the participants' permission; the research study must be explained to them before they give written consent (Neuman, 2011:149). Leedy and Ormrod (2005:101) argue that a small description of the intent must be provided to the student participant in the research study. An explanation of what is expected from the student



participant includes the activities, duration, a statement to guarantee that participation is voluntary, and an assurance that all the narratives by the participants will remain confidential. In the case of this research study, I (as the researcher) and my supervisor are the only people that have access to the narratives. Moreover, the names of the participants were not used in the research study but rather pseudonyms, and I provided contact information to the participants in the event that they needed information.

Before the data was generated from the student participants, ethical clearance needed to be granted. The North-West University ethics committee approved the study in September 2013 and ethical clearance (ethics number NWU-00160-13-A2) was granted to me on 14 November 2013. The form is provided in Addendum D. I informed the student participants that became part of the project about the study; they were told that their participation was voluntary and that they may leave the study at any time if they chose to do so (Stake, 2007:140). The student participants signed a consent form to acknowledge these conditions (Addendum C).

**Right to privacy:** The researcher must protect the participants in the project during the research study and the researcher should write the report using the data generated from the participant in such a way that an outsider does not become aware of who the participants are (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:102). To respect the student participants' right to privacy and protect their identity, the student participants chose pseudonyms to keep their identity confidential and anonymous.

**Protection from harm:** The researcher must be sensitive towards the participant and consider all the potential threats that may cause harm to the participants during the research study (Neuman, 2011:149). Student participants in this research study were at-risk students, therefore I needed to be sensitive towards them and assure them they were not being labelled as at-risk students. It is my responsibility not to cause any embarrassment or psychological trauma in their lives and treat their information that is given to me with sensitivity.

**Accuracy:** According to Stake (2007:140), it is unethical to report on data inaccurately, to fabricate material and to leave out data. When the student participants wrote their narrative I transcribed the data exactly as it was narrated; I did not leave out or add my own narrative to the student participants' narratives. When I reported the narrative data I stayed as close to the narratives as I possibly could in order for the data to be presented in a truthful way.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter highlighted the research design, methodology and processes that were employed in this research study. The critical theory paradigm framed this research study. It was decided that purposive sampling would be the sample technique best suited for this research study. Second year at-risk students comprised the sample. A self-administered biographical questionnaire and a life design narrative methodology were used to obtain data from the student

participants. The data was analysed using a critical narrative analysis approach. The procedure for validity and trustworthiness of the data as well as the ethical considerations were important in ensuring the credibility of the research study.

In the next chapter (Chapter 4) I present the self-administered biographical questionnaire and the written narratives. The narratives were coded to find the themes that emerged from the data and critical narrative analysis was used to analyse the data.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CRITICAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN NARRATIVES**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I discuss the data of four of the proposed seven student participants' narratives which were utilised for analysis. In this research study three student participants dropped out. One of them could not continue taking part because of personal reasons and two participants decided that they felt uncomfortable about sharing their personal narratives. Written narratives were collected from the remaining participants according to the life design narrative methodology. The data collected was analysed and the analysis is presented in this chapter according to critical narrative analysis.

In this chapter, the profiles of each student participant are provided (4.2). Each student was given a self-administered biographical questionnaire (Addendum A), and this biographical data was used to compile a profile of the at-risk students who participated in the research study. Next, the narratives of the student participants are presented in their verbatim form. A life design narrative methodology (Savickas, 2007:2) was adopted in presenting the narratives collected from the four student participants. The student participants' narratives are presented individually according to the three phases in which they were collected, namely orientation, re-authoring and action plan (4.3). Thereafter, the data is coded per phase as the first level of analysis (4.4). This chapter concludes with a discussion on the themes emerging from the data. This discussion emanated from the critical narrative analysis of the data.

#### **4.2 Profile of the student participants**

In this phase of the research the self-administered biographical data was collected from the student participants in an attempt to understand their profiles (Addendum A). The student participants were invited to provide information on their gender, age, language, qualification, first generation, area, current accommodation, finances and whether they were able to balance their academic and social life. Each participant was invited to choose a pseudonym. Participant 1 chose Blake, participant 2 chose Shinji, participant 3 chose Mlilo and participant 4 chose Pepe. These pseudonyms are subsequently used to present the student participants' profiles.

Table 4.1: Biographical information of the four student participants

<b>Biographical information</b>	<b>Blake</b>	<b>Shinji</b>	<b>Mlilo</b>	<b>Pepe</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Male	Female	Male
<b>Age</b>	26-30 years	18-21 years	22-25 years	18-21 years
<b>Language: 1<sup>st</sup> language</b>	Sesotho	Sesotho	IsiZulu	South Sotho
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> language</b>	English	English	English	English
<b>Qualification</b>	BCom Accounting	BSc	BA Humanities	BA in Public Management and Governance
<b>First generation</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Area</b>	Township	Township	Township	Township
<b>Current accommodation</b>	Vanderbijlpark, 2 km from campus Lives with a family member.	Off-campus university residence Travels 15 minutes by bus.	Lakeside region Travels one hour by bus. Lives with family member.	Off-campus university residence. Five minutes' walking distance.
<b>Financial aid</b>	Study loan	Bursary	Parent pays fees	Pays for own studies
<b>Are you able to balance your academic and social life?</b>	No	No (Not a social person)	No (Have to travel back home)	Yes (Part of the soccer team)

The biographical data collected from the participants provided information about the profile of the student participants which may not necessarily appear in the written narrative. The student participants profiled were from a diverse group of students and they were all studying different programmes. All the participants travelled to the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus

on foot, by bus or some other means of transportation. It is interesting to note that it took Mlilo an hour to travel to campus; this was time-consuming for her and she indicated that she could not join in any social activities on campus because she had to travel back home. Clearly, this could hinder peer interaction and be expensive, since she probably needed to pay transport fees. Shinji lived at the residence but he said he is “not a social person”, so it is possible that he isolated himself from the other students in the residence. It is very important for a student to be able to finance his or her studies. Pepe was paying for his studies, and he had the responsibility of working and studying. He considered himself a social person because he played in the soccer team.

### **4.3 Narratives of the student participants**

Each participant's written narrative is presented next according to the three phases of the life design narrative methodology as well as the narrative prompt. The prompts were given to the student participants to deconstruct and reflect on their narratives to be able to write a micronarrative (Savickas, 2012:14). Savickas (2012:15) explains the process as follows:

Then counsellors ask clients to narrate micronarratives, or tell small stories, that demonstrate how they have constructed their self, identity, and career. Life design intervention focuses on narration because stories are construction tools for building identities and careers out of complex social interactions. Storytelling makes the self and crystallizes what clients think of themselves. The more stories they tell, the more clients develop their identities and careers.

Micronarratives are defined as ‘small stories’ in which individuals construct themselves within the narrative. A micronarrative seeks to find the individual's identity and enables them to develop their identity within society and determine their career, in this case an academic career path.

#### **Phase 1: Orientation**

During this phase the participants were given narrative prompts to write their narrative for this study. They described in detail their experience of the tertiary institution, the success and failures that they experienced during their academic career and when they received their warning letter. The two narrative prompts in this phase can be seen in Chapter 3 (3.2.1).

#### **Phase 2: Re-authoring of narratives**

The participants re-wrote their narratives to describe what they would have done differently at a tertiary institution. They were also invited to make meaning of their narrative in terms of the possible benefits of ADS programmes as well as their experience of the difference between school and tertiary education. The narrative prompt can be seen in Chapter 3 (3.2.2).

### Phase 3: Action plan

In this phase the participants formulated an action plan based on their re-authored narrative to devise an action plan to follow in order to be successful in their academic path. The narrative prompt can be seen in Chapter 3 (3.2.3).

When the four participants agreed to participate at the start of the research study, they were each given a narrative journal. Their verbatim narratives are given below.

#### 4.3.1 Blake's narrative

##### Phase 1 (Orientation)

###### Construction

*I have been studying well during my first year although I failed two modules which I am carrying over this semester. It was a tough year as I had to adjust to managing my time. During this year it has been quite difficult as I had family matters which found myself not handling or being unable to accept. But after I got my first warning, the ADS has been very supportive and I was able to pick up my study pace and try to ignore my problem and focus on my studies I have done well thus far. Although my first semester I failed three modules and it was a heavy burden. I was summoned to the ADS and I met a lady there, I explained everything to her as I needed help in order to deal with my situation at home.*

*Since I have been attending SI classes, my marks have improved quite well, compared to last semesters marks.*

###### Deconstruction

*There is a situation at home which I find so hard to disclose but since this journal is confidential I will tell my story. I was living home with my parents both of them are pensioners and we have other siblings. My parents could not take me to university due to financial problems. Then my elder sister took me into her home where she lives with her two boys. She vowed to take me to school and has been standing by her words and promise since last year. Things started changing when she found love. I applied for a NSFAS loan this year (second year) and by the grace of God it was approved. Then this year as she was no longer paying for my fees, I started experiencing inadequate money for transport to school at other times I would have to walk to school a 2-3 km distance. So now that there's a man in her life, she started abandoning her duties as a mother and sister in the house. I had to take care of the running of the house, make sure that the house is cleaned, cook, do laundry, ironing and make sure her youngest son is doing his school work daily. I found it so stressing as she spent most of her time away and she would not even*

*ask if all is well. I saw myself playing a motherly role to her kids of which that was never a problem. The only problem I had was to take care of everything while she is away and at the same time I have my studies to consider. I found this situation very heavy for me to point that I was even considering to go back home and travel to school from home. As my parents don't both work, I did not have much of a choice but to stay. I tried to juggle everything but my strength was never enough. I had failed three modules last semester and now my chances of getting financial aid are slim. I tried to talk to her about this situation but at times she would help me out when she was around.*

*The SI sessions have really helped me in terms of further understanding. Mostly accounting and management accounting. I have developed a better understanding of them in terms of calculations and basic principles needed to be applied.*

#### Phase 2 (Re-authoring of narratives)

*I would consider getting my own place to stay which is a walking distance to school. If I can have that choice I would take it because I find myself in more conflict with my studies. I would like to do much more better I know I can do it and I will. I can get my own place because it would help me to put more hours and effort into my studies. I came to consult with Mrs Johanna (peer mentor co-ordinator) she has been of great help in advising me about the problem which I encountered she was friendly and supportive and since I went to see her I have developed to adjust to my situation at home. She has helped me in realising the importance of my studies and the changes of getting an aid to further my studies.*

#### Phase 3 (Action plan)

*I focus more on my studies and try by all means to ignore or put aside this situation.*

*Attend student support structures to enhance my academic results.*

*Meet with student councillor (Johanna) in order to get more advice on how to deal with this matter*

*I have started spending more of my time in the library after classes, because I know when I get home I won't be able to do much school work*

*I would make more time to form study groups with my fellow mates in order to discuss and do our assigned work.*

### **4.3.2 Shinji's narrative**

#### Phase 1 (Orientation)

## Construction

*My first year was a big success in a way it is to be expected since I was fresh from high school the only thing that was disappointing in that year was that I had to push hard to pass my BMAN 111 since I not used to commerce theory but in the end it was a finished without problems. My second year was a big failure things became more complicated since I could not keep up with the jargon of commerce subjects and the new concepts that were being introduced. The big failure was that I could not manage to pass my Accounting modules which I guess had a lot of impact then I thought since that I could not even manage to pass it with both opportunities that we are given. The year was a disaster to be failed almost all my modules and I could not keep up in class I always felt like I was always behind not being able to quickly grasp an introduced concept and not being able to ask was the thing that always held me back. Second semester things did change but one or two modules still gave me problems. If I had to make a choice to start all over and fix my mistakes I would not for example move to residence. I would stay outside of the residence. May be plan my academic career better for example instead of being surprised when something is introduced but anticipate it expect it maybe things would have been turned out a little different. Living in residence has turned me or made me lazy since everything is bus orientated by the schedule of the bus if you are late you have to miss the class.*

## Deconstruction

*High hopes in staying in residence when I decided to stay in res I thought that things will be easy since my first year I was use to walk a long distance to leave school but it turned out moving to residence was a mistake for me.*

*My first year modules went well in a sense that I did put a lot of effort and my time was not spent worrying about unnecessary stuff like the bus. I passed all my modules and with good results.*

*Time management is bad living at residence since everything that I do should go with the bus schedule so this is one of the failures I see not being able to control my own time and not attending SI class or even missing most of my classes because of missing the bus.*

## Phase 2 (Re-authoring of narratives)

*I would change one thing it would be not living or staying in residence. That is itself could have changed me in a way that is the only regret I have. If possible I would*



*like to get a place a closer to school so that I would be able to attend all of my classes and extra classes (SI).*

### Phase 3 (Action plan)

*Manage time my own way. Since I moved to residence my time is regulated by the bus schedule. It determines when I come to school when I can leave this needs to change.*

*Stop the need to do anything if my time was managed by me I would be able to clearly see the time I dedicated to my books and social life instead of not doing both and being lazy.*

*Remove all distractions, at residence as I found is a noisy place and has many distractions so the removal of them would help.*

*Spend more time studying if I could spend more time studying then being lazy and distracted then I believe I can be successful in my academic career.*

*Change attitude if possible to change the way I approach my academic career and balancing it with all the time I have of the day I believe I will be successful.*

#### **4.3.3 Mlilo's narrative**

##### Phase 1 (Orientation)

##### Construction

*I felt scared other students are more to themselves it was hard to reach them. Adjusting to the campus was hard because I took a gap year of 3 years when I continued with my studies it was hard, the pressure of assignments and tests. I couldn't do the time management for my work. I had a hard time when I wanted to take my assignment to the writing lab. Financially it was difficult it was hard to face my mother with my studies and she's paying from her pocket. She have to sacrifice for me to be here. Then I met Namonde Khumalo my mentor we talked and she have lighted a lot of things for me, she gave me ideas on how to handle the situation that I face. She have an answer whenever I have a problem.*

*I find it difficult when lecturer is just showing slides and not give students a time to ask questions or see if they really get the work they supposed to do.*

##### Deconstruction

*The studies that I started with History and Geography it was hard for to do, I did it because my aim was to do Education so I couldn't do it. Then I had a problem with my KCOM module that when I got connected with Leilani who deal with the BA students. The she advised me to change the modules that I was doing or I will keep failing. That were I started picking up from my modules, the new modules it went well am still going with it and it good. I wanted to go to SI and mentoring because they help me a lot to understand better work I didn't understand in lecturing and discuss other questions I can use to do my work. SI help me to do my summaries in class so that when we meet again I can have notes that we can discuss.*

#### Phase 2 (Re-authoring of narratives)

*Make sure that I socialise a lot with people and go to look for help in place were they provide student with help e.g. administration office*

*I would have done well if I knew were to get help and were I should go if I have a problem. If I knew about ADS I would have, confidence in my studies I would have change the course in time and I would have spent a lot of my time in SI and they helped me from the start.*

#### Phase 3 (Action plan)

*I am putting more energy on my work assignments, activities.*

*The goal that I achieve is having more peers that I can be able to discuss the content of the work with.*

*I want to join the history society.*

*I want to get good marks in all my modules.*

*The SI and mentors they are fine.*

#### **4.3.4 Pepe's narrative**

##### Phase 1 (Orientation)

##### Construction

*My experience do far with the university has been very complex but also very helpful. Helpful in a way that I realised that the institution is not for one to sit around and just wait for someone to come and push you along. That's basically the difference compared to university and secondary schools. That why I decided to take up the SI programmes to help me push myself because I know I am capable and moreover I should be able to reflect on my age. The university offers a variety of*

*help to students regarding their academics of which I didn't take full advantage of resulting in my failure for the previous year, taken responsibility for my academics, attending SI making use of the resources made available to us by the lecturer and the process has been coming around successfully.*

#### Deconstruction

*I had to learn to manage my time. Print and create schedules for my self during the week. Sacrificing and making provision for myself was not difficult but rather something that constantly fail to do. Procrastination.*

#### Phase 2 (Re-authoring of narratives)

*Doing something differently opposed to what you have done, slightly counts as regret not doing any research to what I wanted to, who I want to become. Choosing a career at this age is more complex to when I was just 9 years of age. I think the university should provide more depth to what is offered and how different faculties/ systems operate.*

#### Phase 3 (Action plan)

*I'll be going to the career centre.*

*Getting a mentor*

*Interact in class often than not.*

*Take additional notes with the lecturers, ask for help.*

*Explain the function of SI in depth. It is important for student achievement.*

#### **4.4 Narrative verbatim quotes and coding per phase of the data collection**

Some of the significant codes that emerged from the data and the supporting verbatim quotes that the student participants used are highlighted and presented in Table 4.2 as phases 1, 2 and 3 and they reflect what the student participants wrote in their narrative(s) within each of these phases when the life design narrative methodology was employed during data collection.

Table 4.2: Verbatim quotes and emerging codes within the written narratives

Phase	Student participants	Verbatim quotes	Coding
Phase 1	Blake	<p>“... my <b>first year</b> although I failed two modules ...”</p> <p>“... I had to adjust to <b>managing my time</b>.”</p> <p>“... <b>ADS</b> has been very <b>supportive</b> ...”</p> <p>“I was <b>summoned</b> to ADS ...”</p> <p>“... attending <b>SI classes</b> my marks have improved quite well ...”</p> <p>“... due to <b>financial problems</b> ...”</p> <p>“I applied for a <b>NSFAS loan</b> ...”</p> <p>“... no longer paying for my <b>fees</b> ...”</p> <p>“I failed three modules <b>financial aids</b> are slim ...”</p> <p>“... make sure that the house is cleaned, cook do laundry, ironing and make sure her son is doing his school work daily.”</p> <p>“... I tried to <b>juggle everything but my strength is not enough</b> ...”</p> <p>“... SI sessions have really helped me in terms of further understanding. Mostly <b>accounting and management accounting</b> ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First year experience</li> <li>• Time management skills</li> <li>• Institutional support structure</li> <li>• ADS support programme</li> <li>• Financial problems</li> <li>• Balance between personal life and academic career(not enough support at home)</li> <li>• SI is discipline-specific</li> </ul>
	Shinji	<p>“... first year was a big success in ...”</p> <p>“... <b>could not keep up</b> with the <b>jargon of commerce</b> ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First year experience</li> <li>• Academic text</li> </ul>

		<p><b>subjects</b> and new concepts that were being introduced. The big <b>failure</b> was that I could not manage to <b>pass accounting modules ...</b></p> <p>"I would say <b>stay out of residence ...</b>"</p> <p>"... <b>residence</b> has turned me or made me <b>lazy</b> since everything is bus orientated by the <b>schedule of the bus</b> if you are late <b>you have to miss class.</b>"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggles with commerce modules (numerical)</li> <li>• Residence</li> <li>• Lazy</li> <li>• Time management</li> </ul>
	Miilo	<p>"I felt <b>scared</b> other students are more to themselves it was hard to reach them."</p> <p>"<b>Pressure</b> of assignments and tests. I couldn't do the <b>time management ...</b>"</p> <p>"I had a hard time when I wanted to take my assignments to the <b>writing lab.</b>"</p> <p>"<b>Financially</b> it was <b>difficult ...</b>"</p> <p>"... met [...] my mentor we talked [...] she gave me ideas on how to handle the situation that I face."</p> <p>"I find it <b>difficult when lecturer is just showing slides and not give students a time to ask questions or see if they really get the work they supposed to do.</b>"</p> <p>"I started with History and Geography it was hard ... to do, I did it because my aim was to do Education so I couldn't do it."</p> <p>"SI help me to do summaries so that we can we meet again I can have notes that we can discuss."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic and social integration</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Institutional support structure (writing lab)</li> <li>• Financial aid</li> <li>• Institutional support</li> <li>• Peer mentoring programme at ADS the students</li> <li>• Placement of students</li> <li>• SI assists with learning strategies</li> </ul>
	Pepe	<p>"My <b>experience</b> with the university so far is <b>complex ...</b>"</p> <p>"University offers a <b>variety of help</b> to student ..."</p> <p>"... managing my time ..."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First year experience</li> <li>• Institution support</li> <li>• Time management</li> </ul>

Phase 2	Blake	<p>“... getting my own place to stay ...”</p> <p>“... put more hours and effort into my own studies.”</p> <p>“... (peer mentor co-ordinator) she has been <b>of great help in advising</b> me about the problem which I encountered she was friendly and supportive ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move away from the home environment</li> <li>• Engage more with studies</li> <li>• ADS advisor is seen as supportive</li> </ul>
	Shinji	<p>“... would <b>not</b> be living in <b>res...</b>”</p> <p>“... get a place closer to school ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residence (institutional structure)</li> </ul>
	Milo	<p>“... make sure I socialise a lot with people ...”</p> <p>“... change the course in time ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social integration difficult</li> <li>• Career path</li> </ul>
	Pepe	<p>“Choosing a career at this age is more complex ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career path</li> </ul>
Phase 3	Blake	<p>“... focus more on my studies ...”</p> <p>“Attend student support structures ...”</p> <p>“... spending <b>more of my time</b> in the library after class ...”</p> <p>“... <b>more time to form a study groups</b> ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance studies</li> <li>• Support structures (ADS)</li> <li>• Engage with studies</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Peer learning</li> </ul>
	Shinji	<p>“Manage my own time ...”</p> <p>“... dedicated to books and social life instead of doing both and being lazy ...”</p> <p>“... spend more time studying than being lazy and distracted ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Engage more with studies</li> <li>• Balance between social life and academics</li> </ul>
	Milo	<p>“... more energy on my work assignments, activities.”</p> <p>“having more peers ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement</li> <li>• Social integration</li> </ul>
	Pepe	<p>“... career centre ...”</p> <p>“Getting a mentor...”</p> <p>“Interact in class.”</p> <p>“Take additional notes ...”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career path</li> <li>• ADS peer mentor</li> <li>• Academic integration</li> <li>• Learning strategies</li> </ul>

By coding the data and compiling the data as shown in Table 4.1, I was able to identify emerging themes. In addition, this process assisted me in making meaning of the responses within the phases of data collection. The main trends that I identified while I coded the data were financial aid, institutional support, ADS support, peer learning, engagement, time management, academic integration and social integration.

When reflecting on the above table, it became evident that the student participants used words or vocabulary that reflected what they experienced as constraints within the tertiary institution. The codes indicated that the student participants were able to identify their own gaps in their learning. They were also aware of factors that contributed to their being successful and/or unsuccessful at a tertiary institution. From these codes, themes emerged and these are discussed in the next section.

#### **4.5 Discussion of emerging themes**

The written narratives were analysed according to critical narrative analysis. According to Souto-Manning (2012), critical narrative analysis seeks to understand how people form themselves in constant social interactions at a personal and institutional level, it also seeks to find out how institutional discourses have power over or influence personal narratives. Critical narrative analysis proposes to make sense of the experiences through narratives which bring together the micronarratives (personal) and the macronarrative (influenced by the institution) (Souto-Manning, 2012:163).

The micronarratives (personal) are examined to find the institutional discourse that has become interwoven into the personal narrative. The idea is to break down the social structures of the reality in which the micronarratives are told, to challenge what is commonly accepted and reframe the social interaction within the institution. According to Souto-Manning (2012), critical narrative analysis is seen as a tool to facilitate an understanding of how people interact socially and personally within an environment to overcome their barriers and succeed.

Critical narrative analysis was used for this research study because I sought to break down and understand the micronarratives and to question the influence of society and the influence of the institution's power over the student. The analysis gives the students a voice in a sense that they are able to find themselves within the micronarratives. In this research study a life design narrative methodology was used to form a macronarrative and to deconstruct the narrative in order to find the individual in the micronarratives. The micronarratives assist in understanding the experiences the students go through socially as well as within the institution. The re-authoring phase can give students a way to construct a situation in which they use their own knowledge to change their situation and from this reflection form an action plan. In my research study critical narrative analysis was used to identify and discuss the themes that have emerged from the data, the themes are:

- Financing studies (4.5.1)
- Institutional support (4.5.2)
- ADS support programmes (4.5.3)
- Time management (4.5.4)
- Academic and social integration (within the tertiary institution) (4.5.5)
- Collaboration (learning from peers) (4.5.6)
- Career path planning (4.5.7)
- Developing academic goals (4.5.8)

Each of these themes is subsequently elaborated on.

#### **4.5.1 Financing studies**

Financing studies is a prominent theme that emerged from the narratives. When finances are mentioned, they are often expressed negatively. For example, Blake says, “My parents could not take me to university due to financial problems.” She also mentions that she applied for financial aid for her studies: “I applied for a NSFAS loan this year (second year) and by the grace of God it was approved” (Blake). For her, getting financial aid is important because she relies on the financial support to pay for her studies and she also needs the money for travelling to the institution. She motivates that when she “started experiencing inadequate money for transport to school at other times [she] would have to walk to school a 2-3 km distance” (Blake). She further argues that she has to either rely on her sister to give her transport money or she has to walk to the institution. Mlilo also refers to finances as a problem in her household: “Financially it was difficult, it was hard to face my mother with my studies and she’s paying from her pocket. She have to sacrifice for me to be here” (Mlilo). Mlilo’s mother supports her financially with her studies, and therefore she feels that if she fails her studies then she disappoint her mother. Mlilo does not mention a father at home but only one parent that is running the household. She sees her mother working very hard and supporting her financially with her studies as a difficult task. She also mentions that she does not want to burden her mother because her mother is supporting her financially and taking care of the family.

Finances need to be sustained for students because it assists them with transport, paying for tuition and class fees as well as books or stationary needed to study. The data has shown that for the student participants that come from low-income socioeconomic backgrounds, being financially sustainable is a significant contributor to their academic success. It also proves to be a power struggle that they face because they rely on funding and other sources of financial aid to be able to study and as a result they are often helpless in their situation. The financial support is also often determined by their success so if they are not successful in their studies then the finances will end and they cannot study at the institution any longer. In Blake’s narrative she refers to getting financial aid from the “NSFAS loan” but if she keeps failing her modules then she may not receive financial aid to complete her studies and this worries her. She expresses



this concern as follows, “I had failed three modules last semester and now my chances of getting financial aid are slim” (Blake). What is interesting to note is that in Mlilo’s narrative she is not aware that she can get financial aid at the institution. However, Blake’s narrative does say that financial aid can be obtained from the tertiary institution but it is not guaranteed. Therefore it is clear that financial aid does create a barrier for students who rely on it.

In conclusion: financing of studies is found to be an at-risk ecological factor (2.1.3.4) for both Blake and Mlilo, and insufficient funding causes the student participants to feel negative about their studies. Blake and Mlilo expressed their concern about the hidden costs involved in studying; when a student decides to study, they are often not aware of expenses such as transport fees. They experience the pressure of these hidden costs when they fail their modules. Due to her financial situation Mlilo cannot stay on campus to join in any of the social activities; she cannot be late for her transport. If students are constantly thinking about their studies they will not partake in the social activities on offer at the tertiary institution. This may cause them not to integrate socially into the tertiary institution (2.1.3.5).

#### **4.5.2 Institutional support**

The institution provides support services such as: ADS, the writing lab, financial support and warning students that they need to improve on their academic results (NWU, 2014:7). Pepe agrees when he states, “the university provides a variety of help to student...” Pepe also goes on to say that his relationship at the tertiary institution is “complex”, he finds the institution difficult to navigate but he realises that the academic support structures can assist him. However, he mentions that he does not fully understand how these academic support structures can assist him to improve on his academics. Blake’s experience was somewhat different. Blake says she was “summoned to ADS”. She experienced this as very intimidating because she felt compelled to go to the ADS unit. Perhaps she did not realise that the tertiary institution was actually trying to provide her with academic support for her studies. However, this also highlights that the approach used by the tertiary institution to “summon” the at-risk students could also make them feel threatened, inferior and uncomfortable.

Mlilo’s experience was very different, when she tried to access an academic support structure she had difficulty in doing so. She motivates this when she says, “I had a hard time when I wanted to take my assignments to the writing lab” (Mlilo). Mlilo’s experience was not very encouraging because when the academic support structure could not assist her she did not make use of any other academic support structures that are also available to her on campus. Mlilo also shares an experience, “I started with History and Geography it was hard to do, I did it because my aim was to do Education so I couldn’t do it.” Her experience highlights that when she registered for her programme, she was advised by the tertiary institution not to study the Education programme and therefore she had to choose another course. Although she was advised on her studies, she found it difficult and she felt her voice was lost. She wanted to study

Education and was told she could not. Her experience shows that if she had been given an opportunity to complete the programme she wanted to, she believes that she would have done better academically.

Shinji mentions another component when he shares his experiences on institutional support. Shinji resides at an off campus residence. The residence is 15 minutes away and transport is provided to him. According to Shinji “residence has turned me or made me lazy since everything is bus orientated if you are [late for the bus] you have to miss class”. He has become “lazy” at residence and he finds himself not being on time to catch the bus for classes. Shinji believes if he could make a choice it would be to get a place closer to the tertiary institution “...would not be living in res...” (Shinji). He further motivates that he would rather get a place closer to the institution so that he can be “...closer to school...” (Shinji) by being closer to school he would not miss his classes.

The tertiary institution is viewed as a place for academic support but from the students experiences they do not always view the institutions support structures has helping them with their academics. They often experience the support structures as a place where your voice can be easily lost. The repercussions are students are advised to study courses that they do not apply for, another is when they receive their warning letters it is done so in an intimidating manner and the student may be afraid to come forward for assistance.

The tertiary institution is different from the secondary school according to Pepe (2.1.3.5). The first years accessing the tertiary institution are often underprepared (2.1.2). They are not prepared for the challenges they may face at the tertiary institution (2.1.2.1) such as living at the residence (Shinji) and being advised to study a different programme and not knowing the details of the programme (Mlilo). They are not prepared emotionally for the tertiary environment (2.1.2.3).

#### **4.5.3 Academic Development and Support programmes**

ADS provides academic support programmes to assist students in achieving academically. The support programmes that the student participants used are the SI and the academic peer mentoring programme. The student participants were asked to share their experiences of the academic support programmes in their narratives. First, Blake and Mlilo shared their experiences of SI.

According to Blake, “... SI sessions have really helped [me] in terms of further understanding. Mostly accounting and management accounting ...” (Blake). In fact, Blake benefited so much from the sessions that her “marks have improved quite well ...” (Blake). In Mlilo’s narrative, she says, “SI helps [me] to do summaries so that when we meet again [she] can have notes that we can discuss” (Mlilo). Mlilo also refers to SI as assisting her with note-taking strategies and this is helpful because it helped her to make summaries which she takes to the SI session and then

discusses these with the SI leader. In this way she can get feedback on her understanding of the content. For Mlilo, SI is crucial because she does not feel that she is assisted in the classroom. She motivates this when she says, “I find it difficult when the lecturer is just showing slides and not give students time to ask questions or see if they really get the work they supposed to do” (Mlilo). Therefore, the SI sessions are most useful to Mlilo because they provide her with an opportunity to engage with the module by asking questions. She has time to think about her answers and to understand the content with more insight. From the narratives of the student participants it is evident that SI sessions enable them to engage with discipline-specific concerns that they encounter and this practice gives them more opportunities to clear up misunderstandings about their academic work. In addition, these sessions also provide students with strategies to improve their learning and studying and these have (in Blake’s instance) even led to improved academic results. In the next section the students’ experiences on the academic peer mentoring programme are discussed.

In the theme on institutional support (4.5.2), Blake speaks of being “summoned” to ADS. When she meets with an ADS advisor she says that the peer mentor co-ordinator “... has been of great help in advising me about the problem which I encountered, she was friendly and supportive ...” (Blake). As a result of her involvement in the programme she has a different perception: she describes the ADS advisor as “friendly” and “supportive” (Blake). Blake does not feel threatened or intimidated by the advisor and realises that the ADS advisor can support her at the tertiary institution with her academic career.

Mlilo also shared her experiences of being involved in the academic peer mentoring programme. Although she was in her second year of study she involuntarily joined the academic peer mentoring programme because she was told that it will be beneficial to her. In Mlilo’s narrative she explains that did not want to study the degree advised by the institution; however, if she decided to discontinue the course there would be financial implications at home. The peer mentor advised her to explain the situation and reason behind changing the course to her mother. Her mother told her she would support her but she needed to be sure. Mlilo decided to go to the faculty administrator and was advised to discontinue the modules she was failing and she took new electives for her qualification. The faculty administrator told her that would be the best solution rather than starting to pay fees for a new qualification. Even though the peer mentor gave her confidence to speak to her mother, Mlilo’s situation did not change much. She was only allowed to discontinue the modules she was failing and take new elective modules due to financial constraints at home.

The student participants in this study revealed they had only gone to the ADS unit because they had received a warning letter that forced them to make use of the ADS unit’s academic support programmes or their studies would be terminated. The ADS unit needs to make itself more visible on the campus and explain the value of the academic support programmes to students,

especially those in their first year of study. In this way students might be more willing to attend SI or academic peer mentoring sessions without feeling forced to do so.

Both Blake and Mlilo highlight the fact that the academic support programmes provided by the ADS unit are peer-facilitated. This approach underpins one of the theories of the academic support programme (2.3.1). According to Mlilo, students develop their own learning strategies (2.1.1.3) and they engage more with their studies during the SI and/ or peer mentor sessions (2.4.2; 2.4.3). As the students attend more sessions they become integrated academically and socially into the tertiary institution (2.4.1). Although Mlilo and Blake felt intimidated by ADS when they received their warning letter they took responsibility by attending their SI and or academic peer mentoring sessions (2.4.4).

#### **4.5.4 Time management**

Time management was the most prominent theme and it was found in all four of the student participants' narratives. Each student participant's experiences in this regard are discussed below.

Blake states that she has to take care of household chores and take of her sister's son. She explains this as follows: "... make sure that the house is cleaned, cook, do laundry, ironing and make sure her son is doing his school work daily" (Blake). As a result she finds herself having to balance her time for academics and other responsibilities. It was beginning to affect her studies as she "... tried to juggle everything but [her] strength [was] not enough ..." (Blake). At this point in her life she needed assistance but she was not offered any support from her sister and she found it challenging to set aside time to focus on her studies. Her sister was also not supportive of her studies and would rather have Blake give up her studies to take care of her household and child. Consequently, Blake felt oppressed by her sister and she was unable to "... put more hours and effort into [her] own studies" (Blake).

Mlilo says that she felt the "pressure of assignments and tests [and she] couldn't do the time management ..." There were too many assignments and tests all together and she was not used to the pace of the workload. The "pressure" that resulted from the excessive workload made Mlilo feel overwhelmed and she was unable to manage her time. Mlilo has to travel an hour to the tertiary institution and back home every day. These factors also contribute to her feeling pressured and overwhelmed because when she gets back home she is tired and is unable to keep up with the workload in each of her classes.

Shinji says that he lives in one of the campus residences. Although he lives 15 minutes from the tertiary institution he insists that the bus schedule makes him "miss classes" (Shinji). He motivates that he is unable to control his time due to the schedule and he also does "not have time to attend SI classes"; the bus schedule is also problematic as it does not give him an opportunity to "control" his own time (Shinji). His situation makes him feel powerless because

the bus schedule dictates when he should go to class and when he needs to be back at the off-campus residence.

In Pepe's deconstruction of his narrative his micronarratives focuses on him developing his time management skills when he says that he "had to learn to manage [his] time" (Pepe). As a first year student coming from a secondary school background he was unaware that at a tertiary institution he needed to manage his time. He refers to "procrastination" and describes himself as not being able to start his academic work when he gets back to the off campus residence. In his micronarratives he says that he was learning to "print and create schedules for himself during the week" (Pepe). However, when this was not working he realised on his own that he needed to find alternative ways to develop his time management skills.

It was evident from all the student participants' experiences that they were unaware of the workload at the tertiary institution (2.1.2.1). In addition, it also emerged that they were not aware of the academic support programmes offered on campus to help them develop and apply time management skills. Perhaps one of the shortfalls was that students were not able to bridge the gap between secondary school and the tertiary institution environment (2.1.3.3). They had difficulty in integrating academically and socially into the tertiary institutions (2.1.3.5).

In Blake's narrative she indicates that she is not always supported at home (2.1.2.2). Another factor could be the workload students get at the tertiary institution: Mlilo says there was just too much pressure and she did not put enough time and effort into engaging fully with her learning material. They just learnt what was necessary and were not developing deeper knowledge and understanding of the content (2.1.3.1). In addition when students felt the pressure of the tertiary environment they possibly experienced limitations in their SDL (2.1.3.2) (2.1.1.5; 2.4.4). In Pepe's and Shinji's case they did not understand their responsibility to develop their own time management skills (2.1.3.2).

#### **4.5.5 Academic and social integration within the tertiary institution**

Tinto (2006) suggests that when students integrate academically and socially into the tertiary institution, they are able to make an easy transition from secondary school into tertiary education. Shinji's experience at the off-campus residence made him realise that he needed "to find a balance" between his academic and social life. He found that at the off campus residence he was easily "distracted" by the "social activities" around him (Shinji). This caused him to spend less time on his studies. He also could not understand the "bus schedule" (Shinji) which meant he often missed his classes and he did not have other financial means to find transport to the tertiary institution. This prevented him from integrating academically: he says that he "... could not keep up with the jargon of commerce subjects and new concepts that were being introduced" (Shinji). He was helpless in his situation; he could not find opportunities to engage

in academic discussion with his peers and ask questions to his lecturer after class due to the bus schedule of his residence.

Pepe's felt that to become academically and socially integrated, he had to be more "interactive in class" (Pepe). The reason was that he could discuss concepts with his peers in the classroom and complete group assignments or activities. He could also clear up misunderstandings about the content by asking questions to the lecturer or his peers and getting feedback. The lecturer is responsible for integrating activities into the classroom; in this way students can take a more active role in learning during a lecture. The lecturer needs to give students opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback to support the students' learning.

Mlilo's fear is the social aspect when she explains that her peers in the classroom were intimidating. She motivates this by saying that she "felt scared other students were more to themselves it was hard to reach them" (Mlilo). Mlilo was becoming isolated at the tertiary institution; she could not find peers with whom she could discuss academic work. She was not confident to ask for help from her peers. Mlilo felt that she was being oppressed by her peers at the tertiary institution. She did not trust her own knowledge which caused her to lose her voice within the tertiary institution. She eventually decided not to be discouraged by her situation after she joined the academic peer mentoring programme (4.5.3). She was assisted by the peer mentor to become more confident and not to feel "scared" (Mlilo) any longer. She decided "to make sure [she] socialised with people" and made an effort in "having more peers" to become socially integrated into the tertiary institution (Mlilo). Mlilo decided to join the History Society; she wanted to build her own confidence and prove to her peers that she could also make a valuable contribution with her own knowledge.

It is evident from the narratives of the student participants the academic and social integration can be difficult. The transition from secondary school to the tertiary environment is not an easy one if students are being oppressed by their own peers. For them, to become part of the tertiary institution they had to be accepted socially by their peers in their fields of study. If not, students would not be able to integrate academically. Students would not be able to share their own thoughts or knowledge about the content of their programmes with their peers and may isolate themselves from the classroom. By isolating themselves students may not want to engage with the lecturer or peers in discussions, ask questions or take part in group work in or outside the classroom. If the student is not able to clear up misunderstandings about the content with their peers or the lecturer, their learning may be impeded.

Pepe, Mlilo and Shinji realised the importance of integrating academically and social within the tertiary environment (2.1.1.1) and because of their experience within the tertiary institution they found that it was not easy to do so (2.1.3.5). This difficulty caused them to struggle and they did not have much confidence in themselves to develop their own learning strategies. They had

difficulty engaging with their peers about academic work (2.4.2). Shinji's narratives reveal that he just could not understand the terminology used in the commerce modules – this means that he was struggling with the language (2.1.2).

#### **4.5.6 Collaboration (learning from peers)**

Collaboration, or learning from peers, is described as formal or informal learning activities which include any form of peer interaction (Arendale, 2004:28). For collaboration to occur, students should be given opportunities to work together on projects or assignments that will assist them in understanding the meaning of team work. They can begin to develop skills and have a responsibility towards working in a team.

Blake endorses this approach by saying she would prefer to learn from her peers by “form[ing] a study group”. In this way she can work with a group to solve problems experienced with assignments. It is also a good way to work on old examination questions. The fact that she says she wants to form her own study group could mean that there are not many other opportunities given to her in class or outside class. Mlilo comments that she would like to “have more peers” because she is an introvert and has difficulty integrating socially within the institution. She believes that if she had opportunities to work with her peers in class she would develop skills to communicate and learn to work within a team.

It is evident from the narratives that the student participants want to learn from and work with their peers. Through collaborative learning, students can integrate socially within the tertiary institution. For this to happen, the lecturer also needs to play a meaningful role by finding ways to create activities or assignments that will give students opportunities to work in a team. This approach will help them to develop skills that will assist them in understanding the importance of team work when they leave the tertiary institution. If students are given more opportunities to learn from and work with their peers they can also be exposed to students with different beliefs, cultures, religions and values. They can learn to respect the thoughts of others and not be biased or prejudiced towards their peers. In the world of work today it is important to have skills that will allow the individual to work in a team, be able to collaborate, solve problems and find solutions that are innovative and sustainable. The individual should also value and respect the ideas of others in the team.

In conclusion: Blake's narrative identified a factor of being academically prepared by wanting to collaborate with her peers (2.1.1.1). Mlilo also motivates that she would rather get to know her peers more for in this way she can integrate academically and socially successfully into the tertiary environment (2.1.1.1). In this way they both strive towards developing as self-directed learners by wanting to learn from their peers (2.1.1.5).

#### **4.5.7 Career path planning**

When students decide to study and obtain a qualification at a tertiary institution, they engage with career path planning. According to Pepe, “choosing a career path at the age of 18 years or older is more complex”. Pepe, a soccer player, plays for the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus soccer team. He states that when he arrived at the tertiary institution, he was predominantly interested in playing soccer. Although his interest was in sport, he did not pursue any of the sport qualifications. Instead, he was advised by the tertiary institution to study a Bachelor of Arts in Public Management and Governance. He admits that he began to study towards this degree without doing much research on the programme and therefore he was unaware of the career path he had taken. He explains his career path as “complex” (Pepe), indicating that he is unsure if he has made the right decision.

When Mlilo came to the tertiary institution she had already decided to study towards a qualification in Education. Since the programme was full when she applied, she was advised to study towards another qualification. This led to a change in her career path, as she went on to register for a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities. She was not aware of the module content or the structure of the programme and she believes that her lack of knowledge contributed to her failing her modules. Mlilo believes that if the institution had given her the option to meet with the career centre first or to research the new qualification and determine the electives that suited her, she would have “change[d] the course in time” (Mlilo) and most likely completed her first year successfully.

In conclusion: both Pepe and Mlilo started studying towards certain qualifications without doing much career path planning. They were advised by the tertiary institution to pick a qualification and therefore they did not take accountability for their own career path planning. The tertiary institution also put these students under pressure to choose a qualification. The administrator should advise the students to visit the career centre before registering or the career centre advisor should be available during registration in order for students to be advised on their career path planning.

#### **4.5.8 Developing academic goals**

When pursuing a qualification, students should be able to set attainable goals for themselves which will assist them in completing their qualifications successfully. The student participants in my research study set goals for themselves by creating a plan of action after they had reflected on their narratives. The goals set by each student participant are now drawn on.

Blake was having difficulty balancing her personal and academic life. To overcome this challenge, she decided that she would rather make use of the tertiary institution’s library facilities and “spend more of [her] time in the library after class”. She adds that her studies need to become her first priority, before her responsibilities at home. In addition, Blake has decided to



“attend academic support” programmes provided by the tertiary institution as she believes that this will make her more academically successful.

Milo was placed in a programme that she had not intended to do, but she says that that should not stop her from putting “more energy [into her] work assignments or activities”. She set herself the academic goal of being more engaged in and taking more responsibility for her academic career by striving towards completing her academic work successfully.

Shinji realised there were many “distractions” at the off-campus residence. He was spending more time socialising than actually studying. His academic goal was to “manage [his] time” (Shinji). As a result of this insight he has decided to take responsibility by spending more time on his studies and less time on the social aspects of his life.

Pepe’s academic goal is to be prepared for his classes by “[taking] additional notes...” to class. He wants to take responsibility for his academic career by taking part in academic discussions in class and asking more questions. In this way he believes he can become a more active learner in the classroom.

Within the narratives of the student participants it becomes evident that despite failing their modules, they are taking the responsibility to become academically successful. Common amongst all the student participants is the goal to become more focused on their studies and to set goals to assist them in becoming academically successful. When all the student participants set goals for themselves (2.1.1.4) this is a factor of academic preparedness. By doing this it meant that they were beginning to develop their self-efficacy and self-regulatory skills (2.4.3).

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

First a profile of the student participants was formed from the self-administered biographical questionnaire to understand the background of the student participants. Next, the narratives of the student participants were presented and subsequently coded to find a pattern to determine the themes that emerged from the data gathered from these participants. A life design narrative methodology was employed and it assisted the student participants to reflect on their narratives and to find a deeper understanding of their experience of becoming academically unsuccessful.

To analyse the data from the student participants a critical narrative analysis was employed. This method of data analysis assisted me in breaking down the narratives of the student participants and finding the meaning behind their becoming at-risk students. It also assisted me in understanding the power struggle that the student participants have within the tertiary institution as well as in society. The student participants revealed that they are usually forced to become part of the ADS units academic support programmes because they are labelled as at-risk students. The life design narrative methodology gave the student participants an opportunity to re-author their narrative and to use their knowledge about themselves to become

more academically successful within the tertiary institution. In this way the at-risk students are able to emancipate themselves by developing an action plan when reflecting on the re-authored narrative.

In the final chapter (Chapter 5) of this research study, I interpret the themes that emerged from the data and conclude with the findings and recommendations of this research study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **INTERPRETATION OF THEMES, REVIEW OF RESEARCH STUDY, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter begins with an interpretation of the themes that emerged from the narratives of the student participants. An overview is also given of all the chapters in order to establish whether the research questions were addressed. I then present the significant research findings against the background of the theory and the life design narrative methodology used in this research study. The limitations for this research study are discussed and finally recommendations are made to inform future studies.

This research study sought to determine the factors that contribute to second year students becoming at risk at a tertiary institution and if these narratives can be used to reconceptualise the ADS unit's academic support programmes. The research study was aimed at addressing the research questions stated below.

The primary research question was formulated as follows:

To what extent, if any, can second year at-risk students' narratives assist the Academic Development and Support unit in reconceptualising programmes that academically support at-risk students?

The primary research question was guided by the following secondary questions:

- What are the factors contributing to the profile of at-risk students?
- What is the nature of current support programmes offered by the Academic Development and Support unit to develop the at-risk students academically?
- How can the narratives of at-risk students assist the Academic Development and Support unit in reconceptualising current support programmes?

An overview of the research study is provided in the following section.

#### **5.2 Overview of research study**

In this section a summary is given of each chapter in this research study.

Chapter 1 discussed the origin of the ADS unit at a tertiary institution. The ADS unit was established as a result of the 'Quota Act' (Boughey, 2010:4–5; Scott, 2009:21). This meant that students of colour were given an opportunity to study at a tertiary institution and needed to be supported academically. ADS units are now being established in most tertiary institutions and they currently focus on implementing policies, quality assurance of qualifications and

programmes, offering workshops to develop academic teaching and learning skills to keep up with the latest trends, providing academic support programmes to students and supporting at-risk students academically (Boughey, 2010:13–14; Scott, 2009:22).

The background to the problem was discussed. In the discussion aspects such as the tertiary environment as well as the two academic support programmes that are in place at the ADS unit at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus for at-risk students were explained (the SI and an Academic Peer mentoring programme). When students start to struggle with their academic work they are either identified as underprepared or at-risk students. They are identified because they do not perform well academically. The students are given warning letters by the tertiary institution to improve on their academics or their studies will be terminated. The students are identified as at-risk students and they are told by the tertiary institution to seek academic support from the ADS unit. The ADS unit advisor assist the students by advising them to use academic support programmes. It is not easy to determine the impact that academic support programmes have on at-risk students, hence the intellectual conundrum for this research study was to engage with the narratives of at-risk students and to explore their experiences using the academic support programmes. The articulation of this conundrum was followed by the research questions and the purpose of the research study. The appropriate research design, methodology and research process were identified to suit this research study. The researcher's role was discussed and a short explanation was given on validity, trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The outline of each chapter concluded Chapter 1.

In Chapter 2, a literature review was presented. For the first part of the literature review Conley and French's (2013) model of college preparedness was used to establish factors for academically prepared students. This assisted me in finding factors for underprepared students and lastly finding factors for at-risk students. Then a clear distinction between underprepared and at-risk students was made, which highlighted factors unique to the at-risk students. Once the at-risk factors were established, attention was given to the relevant academic support programmes. The nature of the academic support programmes was discussed and it was noted that academic support programmes are linked to retention theories. In my discussion of the elements of the ADS unit at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus academic support programmes I indicated that I had found that these elements can support the at-risk student in developing academically. However, discrepancies were also found to exist in the academic support programme: at present, technology is not used in the academic support programmes and there is no process to establish the impact of the academic support programme on at-risk students.

In Chapter 3 the research design, methodology and research processes were elaborated on. A detailed explanation was given of the life design narrative methodology and critical theory as my paradigmatic position. The sample was a purposeful selection of second year at-risk students

who had received warning letters and the research environment was the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus. The rationale for this selection was explained as the focus of my research study. The methods of data generation included a self-administered biographical questionnaire and written narratives to generate data from second year at-risk students. Critical narrative analysis was the method of analysis that best suited analysing the written narratives. The validity and trustworthiness of the research study were explained as well as the steps I had taken to ensure that I had adhered to the ethical requirements.

In Chapter 4 I explained how I had established the profile of a second year at-risk student using the biographical data from the self-administered biographical questionnaire. Then the narratives of four participants were presented. A table was used to code the micronarratives of the student participants in order to find emerging themes in the data according to the experiences of the four at-risk students in the tertiary institution. This section was followed by an explanation of critical narrative analysis, which was used to analyse the themes that emerged from the data. The analysis revealed that the students struggled within the tertiary institution as well as in their community. The analysis revealed the reasoning for the students' academic failure and their oppression or experiences within the tertiary institution.

### **5.3 Significant findings**

In this section I discuss the significant findings of my research study against the background of the three research questions.

#### **5.3.1 Contributing factors to at-risk students' profile**

It was found that a differentiation needs to be made between the factors contributing to underprepared and at-risk students' profiles. It is often found in the literature that underprepared and at-risk students are considered to be the same because the profiles share similar factors. I realised that this is not the case as there could be factors that differentiate the two terms. In this research study the first research question concentrated on reconceptualising the factors that contribute to at-risk students' profiles (2.1.3).

Brüssow (2007:143) identified three domains of underpreparedness, namely academic underpreparedness (2.1.2.1), cultural underpreparedness (2.1.2.2) and emotional underpreparedness (2.1.2.3). Within these domains various factors have been identified for underprepared students: limitations of language proficiency, inability to identify their own learning strategies, limitations of self-efficacy and limitations of self-regulation. These factors are often found in at-risk students as well (2.1.3) but I found factors that can be used to determine when students become at risk at a tertiary institution.

At-risk students have low APS scores when they enter a tertiary institution and could potentially drop out of the institution (Lemmens *et al.*, 2011:618). The following factors could possibly be the reason for dropping out in their first year of study or becoming at risk: limitation of critical

thinking skills (2.1.3.1), limitation of SDL (2.1.3.2), the academic gap between secondary school and a tertiary institution (2.1.3.3), ecological factors (2.1.3.4), and difficulty integrating into the tertiary environment (2.1.3.5). In my research study a distinction was made between factors that contributed to the profiles of underprepared and at-risk students. This distinction can assist the ADS academic advisor in gaining greater clarity regarding the distinction between the two profiles and providing support to underprepared or at-risk students.

From the student participants' narratives the following contributing factors were revealed: financing studies, institutional support, time management, academic and social integration within the tertiary institution, and finding a career path.

#### *Financing of studies*

When critical analysis was employed the narratives revealed that the student participants experienced financial difficulty. The student participants explained that their tuition fees are paid, but they also need money for transport, stationery and textbooks. They rely on financial aid to provide them with the necessary resources needed to complete their studies (4.5.1). The literature makes it clear that financial difficulty is associated with ecological factors contributing to the student being at risk (2.1.3.4). When students experience financial difficulties their problems have an adverse effect on their academic progress and this may prompt them to leave the tertiary institution (Leibowitz, 2009:265). The analysis also revealed that the student participants did in fact receive tertiary support but there was a stipulation to the financial support which meant it was not always a guaranteed to students (4.5.1).

#### *Institutional support*

Tertiary institutions have developed academic support programmes to academically support students that have been given access to the tertiary institution. This is due to the academic gap between secondary school and a tertiary institution (2.1.3.3). The narratives revealed that the student participants found the tertiary environment intimidating and at times even unwilling to assist them. When they provide assistance by giving the students a warning letter, the wording of the letter can be intimidating to the students and they might feel threatened (4.5.2).

#### *Time management*

Time management was a very prominent pattern in all four of the student participants' narratives; the student participants revealed that their time management skills had not been developed. This caused them to have difficulty in engaging with their academic work. The analysis revealed that the student participants were not aware of or sufficiently prepared for the workload at the tertiary institution. The literature reveals that this state of affairs is due to the students' limitations in terms of self-efficacy. Students' inability to engage with their academic work may cause them to experience difficulties in understanding their learning strategies and

they may not be able to form links in their discipline (2.1.3.1). If students are unable to understand their work and to process the information they are learning, their critical thinking skills may be limited (2.1.3.1). This is due to the academic gap between secondary school and a tertiary institution and because many students find it difficult to make the transition from secondary school to a tertiary institution (2.1.3.3). These factors all contribute to students becoming at-risk students and being unable to perform well academically.

The inability to manage their time is a major barrier for at-risk students; if they are unable to manage their time they find the transition from secondary school to a tertiary institution difficult. Students need to develop skills that will assist them in becoming more responsible towards their academic work. Students have to learn to balance their personal life and their studies. Some of the narratives revealed that students were being oppressed by their home situation, which could be linked to ecological factors that were identified for at-risk students. These students need to learn to keep up with the pace at a tertiary institution. They need to take responsibility in managing their time when doing their assignments and studying for tests, because an inability to do so will also contribute to the at-risk students' limitations in SDL (2.1.3.2).

#### *Academic and social integration within the tertiary institution*

Students experience difficulty in making a transition to the tertiary education environment. In this environment it is the students' responsibility to balance their own time between academic and social life. According to Nel *et al.* (2009:974), if students cannot cope in the tertiary environment they will isolate themselves and not take part in the social environment (2.2).

Academic and tertiary integration is very important, according to Tinto (2006); however, this aspect has some grey areas. The narratives revealed that the at-risk students were being oppressed by their peers who did not understand the students' social backgrounds (4.5.5). From the student participants' narratives it was evident that peers did not accept their social backgrounds and this led to their becoming isolated. They isolated themselves from their lecturers, peers and academic support programmes for fear of not being accepted into the tertiary institution. If students struggle with integrating into the tertiary institution, they have difficulty finding resources for their tasks and taking responsibility for their own learning; consequently they become negative towards their studies. This causes them to experience limitations in developing SDL (2.1.3.2) and adversely affects their self-confidence.

The narratives also revealed that if students spend too much time on their social life their academic work will suffer. They need to develop skills to balance both academic and social life at a tertiary institution to become well-rounded students. In addition, to be able to integrate academically, students need to participate in academic discussion with peers or lecturers and take a more active role in learning. In this way students can gain opportunities to engage with their studies (4.5.5).

### *Career path*

An interesting theme that emerged from the student participants' micronarratives is related to a student's career path in academia. The literature does not reveal much about this aspect of student life. It is mentioned briefly (2.1.2) that if students are unable to identify a career path, then they are underprepared for life at a tertiary institution. The limited information about this theme could be due to the absence of career path planning in the programme design of ADS units in general. The participants' narratives clearly indicate that if students do not identify a career path they do not choose the correct qualification to study towards. They become demotivated and experience difficulty with their academic work. In some cases the students are advised incorrectly and placed in any programme without any knowledge of the content of the programme (4.5.7).

### **5.3.2 The nature of the Academic Development and Support unit to support at-risk students academically**

The second research question refers to the nature of the ADS unit's academic support programmes to assist at-risk students and to develop them academically. The scholarly review highlighted the following theories on which the academic support programmes are based: peer-facilitated learning (2.3.2.1), cognitive development (2.3.2.2), Vygotsky's theory of social mediated learning (2.3.2.3), social constructivism (2.3.2.4), and self-efficacy theory (2.3.2.5). These theories scaffold the academic support programmes and are designed to provide support to any student. The academic support programmes are voluntary and accessible to every student.

The student narratives revealed collaboration (learning from peers) as a theme (4.5.6). This theme is related to one of the theories that underpins an academic support programme, namely peer-facilitated learning (2.3.2.1). According to this theory, students work collaboratively with their senior peers who assist them in their learning environment at the tertiary institution (Ning & Downing, 2010:922). The narratives revealed that the students would prefer to create their own study groups and learn from the peers of their choice and not necessarily the SI leader or the peer mentor that is chosen by the lecturer or ADS unit. They argued that in such a scenario they can develop communication skills, learn to work in a team, build their self-confidence and understand and respect the individual in the group regardless of their race, gender, cultural background or social economic status.

Further investigation of the literature revealed that the academic support programmes can enhance retention – the tertiary institution's ability to retain its students (2.3.3). The tertiary institution wants to retain its students because the students drop out it means that the institution will lose tuition fees. These retention theories are based on supporting the underprepared students or the at-risk students academically at the tertiary institution (2.3.3). The ADS unit at



the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus (2.4) has elements of the retention theories in the academic support programme design so as to retain the at-risk students within the tertiary institution. In this way the students can keep coming back to pay for their studies because of the academic support programmes that have been provided to them. There is no guarantee that the student will actually develop academically. The ADS unit needs to design academic support programmes that will assist the at-risk students in a more successful way rather than giving them false hope.

### **5.3.3 The voice of the second year at-risk student**

The third research question sought to use the narratives of at-risk students to give voice to their experiences within the tertiary institution and academic support programmes. This question is answered by the narrative data which was collected using a life design narrative methodology because it features less prominently in the scholarly review (3.2). The life design narrative allowed the students to construct their macronarrative which encapsulated their failures and successes at the tertiary institution (3.2.1). Then the student participants broke down or deconstructed (3.2.1) their macronarrative into micronarratives to find themselves – or their voice – within the tertiary institution. The student participants reflected on their deconstructed micronarratives and from their experiences within the tertiary environment they began to re-author their narratives. The re-authoring of their narratives assisted them in using their experiences, transforming their situation and narrating a more successful academic career path (3.2.2). After the re-authoring was complete, students reflected on their narratives and decided on an action plan (3.3.3). The action plan is the goals the students set for themselves to achieve success at the tertiary institution.

From the findings based on the participants' narratives it was evident that at-risk students often have financial problems which affect them because they rely on the finances to study; when they cannot pay, their studies are negatively affected (4.5.1). The tertiary institution provides academic support to students but the students find it a very difficult environment to understand and most of the time they are unaware of the support programmes available to them (4.5.4). The students indicated that the wording used in warning letters is intimidating, which caused them to feel threatened. Consequently they are often unwilling to seek the support they need to improve on their academics. A major problem arises when students are told they cannot study towards the qualification for which they applied. Sometimes they receive incorrect advice on the kinds of programmes they should choose; then they simply pick a qualification they think is suitable without knowing anything about the career path they have chosen. When they start their classes they find they dislike the course and lose interest in the qualification because it will not lead to the career path they chose initially (4.5.7).

From the student participants' narratives I found that there are two academic support programmes currently being implemented by the ADS unit at the North-West University, Vaal

Triangle Campus: SI and the Academic Peer Mentoring programme (2.4). The narratives of the student participants revealed that they only came into contact with the ADS unit after they had received a warning letter from the tertiary institution (1.3; 2.4). Before coming to ADS the at-risk students were not actually sure about the need to attend academic support programmes. They only became aware of the ADS unit after receiving a warning letter and being invited to attend the academic support programmes (4.5.3). It is therefore a cause for concern that at-risk students are sometimes unaware of the academic support programmes until they receive a warning letter. It is suggested that the ADS unit should make their programmes more visible to students in order to assist them before they become academically at risk. The ADS unit should also explain their role in a way that the students understand the need for it. Since such academic support programmes are not commonly found in a secondary school, this is a new concept to the first year student in a tertiary institution. According to Purnell *et al.* (2010:77), one way for a student to academically integrate successfully in the tertiary environment is to seek advice from the ADS advisor to assist them in developing their academic career path (2.1.1.1). This can be done through the five elements of academic support built into their academic support programmes of the ADS unit (2.4): academic social integration (2.4.1), student engagement (2.4.2), self-efficacy and self-regulation (2.4.3), SDL (2.4.4) and critical thinking skills (2.4.5).

Once students have reflected on their narratives they also set goals for themselves. This is an emancipatory action in which the students use the knowledge of their re-authored narratives and set attainable goals for themselves (4.5.8). They create their own academic career path without being told to do so. The literature reveals that students who set their goals when accessing the tertiary institution are academically prepared (2.1.1.4). If students do not take responsibility and set their own goals, their self-regulatory skills are less likely to develop. If their self-regulatory skills are limited they do not complete their tasks and cannot achieve the desired results with their academic study. This creates a barrier for the students' learning and consequently they become at risk (2.2). When the student participants wrote their life design narrative they gave themselves an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and develop attainable goals for themselves (4.5.8).

The findings further revealed that the student participants were aware of the challenges they faced at the tertiary institution and the factors that had caused them to become at-risk students, such as the gap between secondary school and tertiary institution education. The tertiary institution is seen as a place of power in which the student's voice can easily get lost (2.1.3.5). When the students accessed the tertiary institution they did not understand that the ADS unit is an academic support structure. The students were not aware of the function of the ADS unit until they received a warning letter and were invited to meet with the advisor to prevent their studies from being terminated. The ADS advisor's role is to assist the at-risk student by placing

the student in an academic support programme which is discipline-specific (SI) or by offering a peer mentor if the student fails a first year module. There is no way of guaranteeing that the student is actually attending the SI or peer mentor sessions or developing academically. The ADS unit needs to assist students more effectively and efficiently by understanding the experiences of the at-risk students currently involved in the academic support programme.

In this research study a life design narrative methodology was employed to give voice to second year at-risk students. Their voices were used to understand their experiences in their academic career at the tertiary institution and the academic support programme. Based on these main findings, some suggestions are made for consideration by the ADS unit as set out below.

#### **5.4 Suggestions based on the main research findings**

Based on the findings of this research study the following suggestions are made.

##### **5.4.1 First year students' exposure to the ADS unit**

First year students are being exposed to the tertiary institution, but they are underprepared for the tertiary environment because of their disadvantaged schooling backgrounds. The concept of academic support programmes is new to the students. The ADS unit needs to make their academic support programmes more clearly known to first year students because at present these students are not sure about the reason for attending academic support programmes. The students do not see the academic support programmes or the ADS unit as important until they receive a warning letter.

##### **5.4.2 Warning letters and early detection**

Warning letters are given at the end of the two semesters which is often too late to support the at-risk students academically; therefore at-risk students should be identified earlier. A suggestion could be using the student tracking academic readiness survey (STARS). The survey was developed at the University of Pretoria to identify students that need to be supported academically. The ADS unit should be responsible for administering the survey, analysing data to create academic readiness profiles of students. From the profiles an academic support programme should be designed to assist students that are at risk.

##### **5.4.3 Lecturer involvement**

Lecturers should also be involved in the design of the academic support programme because this will be an extension of their curriculum. Lecturers should also have enough information about the academic support programmes in order to decide on an academic support programme suitable for their curriculum. They assist by telling students (especially first years) about the importance of academic support programmes.

#### **5.4.4 Digital age**

The academic support programmes offered by the ADS unit do not employ technology to support the digital age; therefore the ADS unit needs to reconceptualise their programmes to cater for the digital age. The academic support programmes can incorporate training SI leaders or peer mentors to use technology teaching aids in their SI or academic peer mentoring sessions. In the future access into tertiary institutions will increase greatly and there will also be an online component for programmes or qualifications. Therefore online programmes will need to be academically supported in a digital environment.

#### **5.4.5 Academic support programmes for online or distance students**

At present, to my knowledge, there is no suitable academic support programme to support distance or online students. The academic support programmes should be designed to support online or distance students. SI leaders and the peer mentors can be trained to become part of the online classroom to provide academic support to online or distance students in a digital environment.

### **5.5 Limitations of the research study**

This section highlights the limitations that I experienced in the course of my research.

#### **5.5.1 Student participants**

I had planned to have seven participants in the research, one from each school in order to represent the different qualifications. The idea was to explore the experiences of academic support programmes in all disciplines. However, I was only able to collect narrative data from four participants. It was difficult to find at-risk students because the students had already dropped out from the tertiary institution or they did not want to participate in the research study or were not available to participate.

#### **5.5.2 One tertiary institution**

The research study focused on the academic support programmes on one campus of the North-West University. It would have been interesting to find out how academic support programmes are being experienced at the other two campuses (Potchefstroom and Mafikeng). I would also have liked to find information about the academic support programmes at other tertiary institutions.

#### **5.5.3 Oral narratives vs. written narratives**

When the data was being collected, I found that students did not express themselves efficiently because they struggled to write down their experiences. When I prompted the students orally they were able to provide more detail than when they wrote their experiences down. It would have been better to record their oral narratives.

## **5.6 Recommendations for further research**

The recommendations for further research studies are noted below.

### **5.6.1 At-risk students' experiences across all campuses and other tertiary institutions**

My research study explored at-risk students' experiences at one campus, but the North-West University has three campuses. It would be valuable to explore narratives of at-risk students at the Potchefstroom and Mafikeng campuses. There may also be other factors that can be explored at the various South African tertiary institutions by way of a national study.

### **5.6.2 Exploring the possibilities for technology within academic support programmes**

It is suggested that the academic development programmes could explore the idea of blended learning when they train SI leaders or peer mentors. They could encourage the use of technology in the SI or peer mentoring sessions to explore new possibilities of enhancing learning.

### **5.6.3 The peer mentors' perceptions of the academic peer mentoring programme**

A study could be undertaken to explore or understand the perceptions of peer mentors in the academic peer mentoring programme. They can contribute to the understanding of at-risk students being assisted or supported academically in the academic peer mentoring programme.

### **5.6.4 The supplemental instruction co-ordinators' perceptions of the SI programme**

It is suggested that future research might explore the SI co-ordinators' perceptions of the SI programme and their understanding of supporting at-risk students in the academic support programme at the tertiary institution.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

The significant findings were presented in this chapter. The findings answered the three research questions, as briefly discussed in the concluding paragraphs that follow.

The first research question was answered based on the reviewed literature and the narrative data to reveal that there are factors that are similar for both underprepared and at-risk students. There are also factors that differentiate underprepared students from at-risk students. The at-risk students' profile can be reconceptualised based on specific factors that were found to cause students to become at risk at a tertiary institution.

The second research question was answered based on the literature study. The literature revealed the theories that underpin the academic support programme. A link was made with elements of retention theories also applied in the design of the academic support programmes. This informed the nature of academic support programmes found at the ADS unit at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus.

The third research question was answered by the empirical study done through a life design narrative methodology. It became evident in the narratives that students are not aware of the

need to attend an academic support programme. They request that ADS should make their academic support programmes more prominent and easier to understand. The study also revealed that at-risk students need an academic support programme that will assist them in understanding the structure of the tertiary institution's environment. In this way the tertiary institution may become less of a challenge for them to navigate as they are underprepared when they access the tertiary institution.

It becomes evident that the at-risk students' voices are important in understanding their need for assistance when they come to the ADS unit academic advisor for advice on their academic career. The challenges they face within the tertiary institution as well as outside the tertiary institution can inform the academic advisor in supporting the at-risk students.

In concluding this research study, I wish to quote Freire (1970:77):

We must never merely discourse on the present situation, must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes and fears – programs which at times in fact increase the fears of the oppressed consciousness. It is not our role to speak to people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their views and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifests variously in their action, reflects their situation in the world.

As the quote suggests, tertiary institutions should develop academic support programmes to assist at-risk students with their academic career. The academic support programmes should also consider the factors that contributed to the students becoming at risk and the tertiary institution should take responsibility for the part it played in the students becoming at-risk. There should be a way to include the voices of at-risk students when developing a new academic support programme. In this way a mutual understanding can be created between at-risk students and the tertiary institution in order for the at-risk students to experience effective and efficient academic support to assist them in achieving their academic goals and becoming academically successful.

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## **Addendum A**

### **Self-administered biographical questionnaire**

#### **Section A**

This questionnaire consists of three sections. Please answer all the questions.

##### **1. Biographical Information**

The following questions are based on your biographical information. Answer the questions by placing a cross (x) next to the answer of your choice or write in an answer:

###### **1.1 Gender**

Male	
Female	

###### **1.2 Age**

18-21 years old	
22-25 years old	
26-30 years old	
31-35 years old	
35-40 years old	
Other :	

###### **1.3. Language (Fill in)**

Please write your first and second language. The third language is optional.

Home language	
2 <sup>nd</sup> language	
3 <sup>rd</sup> language	

###### **1.4 Where are you from? (Please mark with an x.)**

Suburb	Rural area	Township
--------	------------	----------

**1.5. Are you first generation student, in other words, are you the first to study at a university? (Please mark with an x.)**

Yes	No
-----	----

**1.6. Residence**

<b>Day student? If yes, then where do you stay in the area and how far do you travel every day to and from the Vaal Triangle Campus.</b>
<b>Stay on campus? If yes, in which residence are you?</b>

**1.7. Financial aid**

**Place an X next to the answer of your choice.**

Fees paid by parent or guardian	
Study loan	
Bursary	
Pay for your own studies	

**1.8. Are you able to balance your academic and social life? Give an explanation of how you are able to balance your academic and social life**

--

## **Addendum B**

### **Narrative prompts**

#### **Narrative prompts**

In this section you are required to write your narratives.

#### **2.1. Phase one orientation**

##### **Construction**

Explain, in detail, your tertiary academic career thus far and include how you received a warning letter. Why did you decide to attend SI or peer mentoring sessions? When writing your story, focus on successes and failures you've experienced during your academic career. Explain any differences between tertiary institutions and secondary schools. Were you able to adjust in the tertiary education environment?

Read the narrative prompt carefully and respond to the relevance of this narrative prompt.

##### **Deconstruction**

Can you break down your story so as to identify specific events and/or factors that resulted in these successes and failures? Please explain why you think these events and/or factors were so prominent in your academic career. Focus on the ADS support programmes, and how it assisted or did not assist in your learning. Think about what prompted you to attend the SI and/or academic peer mentoring programme

Read the narrative prompt carefully and respond to the relevance of this narrative prompt.

#### **2.2. Re-authoring narratives (Transformation)**

##### **Reconstruction (making meaning)**

If you could change the circumstances of your academic career, what would you change? What would you have done differently? What would you have liked to be different? Rewrite your tertiary academic career story to illustrate what you would have considered ideal. If you had used the ADS support services earlier would it have had an effect on your academic studies? What would you have liked to know before you came to the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus? What would have made the transition easy from school to tertiary institution?

Read the narrative prompt carefully and respond to the relevance of this narrative prompt.

### **2.3. Action plan**

#### **Emancipatory action (action plan)**

Given your actual academic career story and your ideal idea of an academic career path at a tertiary institution, draw up an action plan (maximum 5 action points) that you can follow to further cultivate your successes and address your weaknesses. Do you have any suggestions to improve the academic support programmes at ADS (in particular the SI and/or the academic peer mentoring)?

Read the narrative prompt carefully and respond to the relevance of this narrative prompt.

## **Addendum C**

### **Informed consent from student participants**



#### **Consent form to participate in research**

**Researcher: Thaiurie Govender**

**Study title: Academic Development and Support at a tertiary institution: narratives of second year at-risk students**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Thaiurie Govender from the School of Education, Faculty of Educational Sciences at the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus. You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you will have the most insight into your experience.

#### **Purpose of the research**

The purpose of the research is to reconceptualise the factors contributing to the dominant profile of an at-risk student in order to determine the nature of the support programme offered by Academic Development and Support to develop at-risk students academically.

#### **Required as a participant**

As a participant you will be required to keep a narrative journal and write your narratives, as well as to fill in the biographical questionnaire.

#### **Participation**

Your participation is voluntary; you can choose to leave the study at any stage. Your narratives will be kept confidential and you will choose a pseudonym. The researcher will be the only person to see your narrative and it will be used for the purpose of this study only. As a participant you will not be harmed in any way.

If there is a question you do not understand, please feel free to contact Ms T Govender on 016 556-4207 or email at [thaiuriegovender@gmail.com](mailto:thaiuriegovender@gmail.com).

Your participation will be highly appreciated.

<b>SIGNATURES OF PARTICIPANT AND RESEARCHER</b>
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I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Name of Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Signature of Participant*

Thaiurie Govender \_\_\_\_\_ *Name of Researcher*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Signature of Researcher*

\_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ /2014 *Date*

## Addendum D

### Ethics form from the North-West University ethics committee



NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY  
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**Ethics Committee**  
Tel: +27 18 299 4852  
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3 December 2013

#### ETHICS APPROVAL OF PROJECT

The North-West University Ethics Committee (NWU-EC) hereby approves your project as indicated below. This implies that the NWU-EC grants its permission that provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the project may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

**Project title:** Academic Development and support at a tertiary institution:  
Narratives of second year at-risk students

**Project Leader:** Prof P du Preez

**Ethics number:**

N	W	U	-	0	0	1	6	0	-	1	3	-	A	2
Institution			Project Number						Year			Status		

  
Significance: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

**Approval date:** 2013/11/14

**Expiry date:** 2018/11/14

Special conditions of the approval (if any): None

#### General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following:

- The project leader (principal investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the NWU-EC:
  - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the project,
  - without any delay in case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project.
- The approval applies strictly to the protocol as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the protocol be deemed necessary during the course of the project, the project leader must apply for approval of these changes at the NWU-EC. Would there be deviation from the project protocol without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date, a new application must be made to the NWU-EC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility the NWU-EC retains the right to:
  - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project;
  - withdraw or postpone approval if:
    - any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected,
    - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the NWU-EC or that information has been false or misrepresented,
    - the required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately,
    - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.

The Ethics Committee would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Committee for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely

**Prof Amanda Lourens**  
(chair NWU Ethics Committee)

## **Addendum E**

Certificate of language editor

Ella Belcher

Language Editor and Translator

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby certify that the Master's dissertation mentioned below has been properly language edited.

## **Title of dissertation**

Academic Development and Support at a tertiary institution:  
narratives of second year at-risk students

## **Candidate**

Ms T Govender



Belcher.

ELLA BELCHER

Somerset West

13 September 2015